



FortWhyte Alive
HUMAN. NATURE.

Naturescape for Educators

bringing biodiversity into the schoolyard

Creating Natural Playspaces In Your Schoolyard

Imagine students rolling in the grassy hills of the playground.

Envision students laughing and playing with the newly fallen twigs and leaves of aged trees then splashing through a thin creek to gather stones to heighten the look of their makeshift fort. Natural playspaces allow students to engage and immerse themselves in the natural world. How better to foster environmental stewardship than to have students grow, explore and create within nature's embrace?



Creating Natural Playspaces

What is a Natural Playspace?

The options are limitless. Simply put, a natural playspace is an area with natural landscape. This could include trees, bushes, rocks, stumps, water features, hills, tunnels, open grass areas or anything else found in the environment naturally that students can interact with.



Why use a Natural Playspace?

Manmade objects are uniform, precise and consistent. Although this makes man-made objects more reliable, it often limits the imagination and creativity of the child to the creativity of the manufacturer. Natural objects are unique, dynamic and often tell a story of how they came to be. For example, a tree branch may have signs of bugs burrowing through the bark or a rock may have minerals crystallized within it. The way in which a child can play and interact with a natural object can only come from the child and is therefore as limitless as the child's imagination. Natural playspaces then foster creativity and engage students in their own set of discoveries.

Theory of Loose Parts

One great advantage to having natural areas for play is based on the *Theory of Loose Parts*, a term coined by architect Simon Nicholson. There are two sections to this theory:

1. Children learn best when they can create using pieces of their environment
2. Parts can be used in a multitude of ways - only limited by the imagination of the child
3. Using parts promotes open-ended, on-going learning

For example, a student may pick up a rock and use it to build a fort, an inukshuk, a home for an insect or any other purpose that he or she can envision. The rock is then a loose part.



Loose Parts in a Natural Playspace:

Water, snow, rocks, dirt, sand, twigs, leaves, pine needles, cones, fallen bark, grass, shells and feathers

Consider allowing students access to "loose parts" in the schoolyard!

Landscaping the Playspace



Plant bushes. Avoid thorned bushes or bushes with inedible berries.

If placing multiple **climbing rocks**, ensure they are far enough apart to prevent students from getting wedged between the two.

Plant Coniferous and Deciduous Trees.

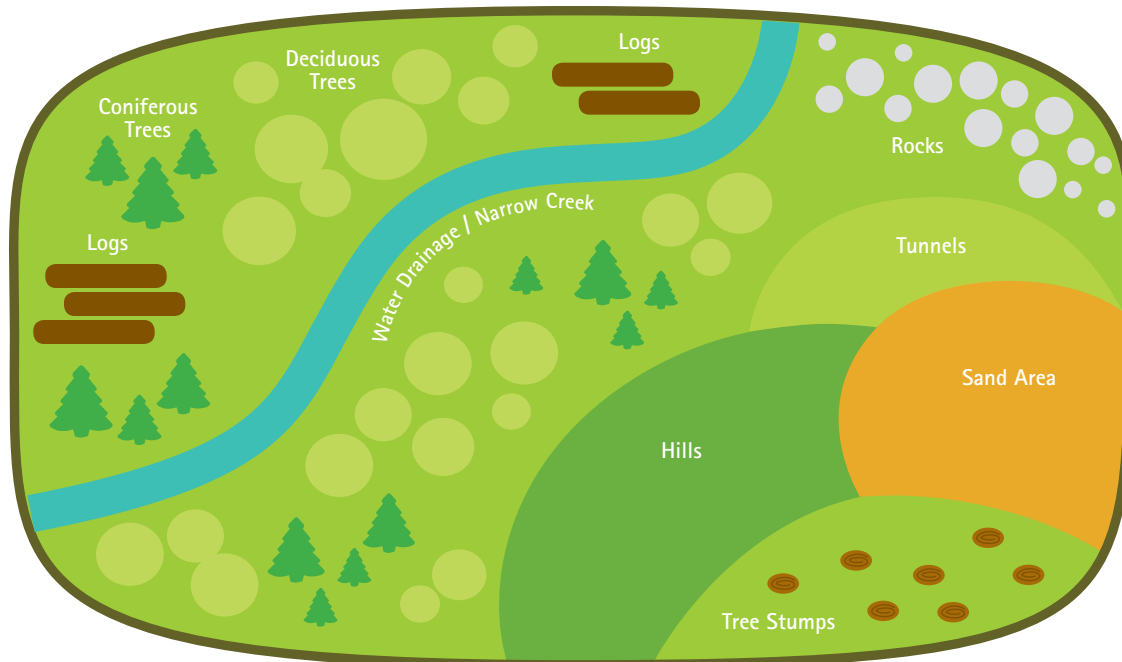
Place barriers around young trees to prevent climbing.

Most schools use plastic waterslide tubing as a structure to **create tunnels**. Cement or culverts may also be effective. Consider covering the tunnel with sod to create a hill and tunnel combination.



Sand pits have great potential for open-ended play. Ensure there are barriers around the sand to prevent the pit from expanding.

An Example of a Natural Playspace



Add an interactive **water play feature** such as an area where students can pour water and watch it flow down a rocky channel into a pond or rain garden.

Direct drain spouts towards a channel to create a **small stream** in the school yard.

Create a **pond** surrounded with native vegetation such as cattails or reeds. Either allow an inflow and outflow or install an aeration pump, and stock the pond with native minnows to prevent algae and mosquito problems.

Bury a portion of a **fallen log** to prevent it from rolling while students walk on it, or simply make it small enough to be a "loose part".



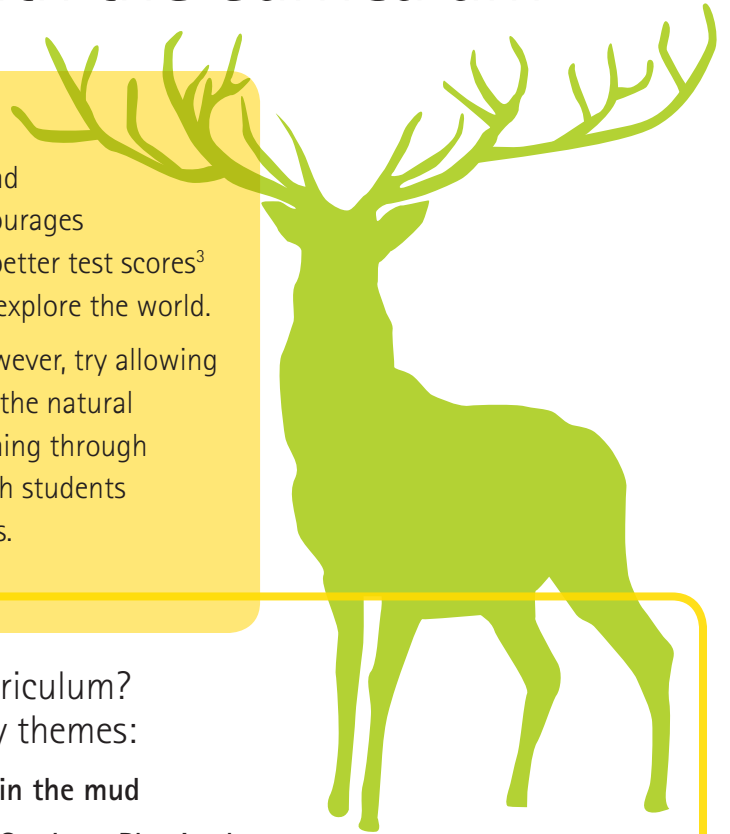
Easy to find and cost effective, **tree stumps** can be placed in lines or zigzags to promote jumping from one to the other. They can also be placed in a circle or semi-circle to act as an outdoor classroom area.

Hills add texture to the landscape. Consider drainage options for the schoolyard to prevent flooding.

Naturally Playing with the Curriculum

Studies have shown that interaction with the environment has positive benefits beyond simply promoting fitness. Natural play encourages engagement¹, creativity² and even leads to better test scores³ for students. Play is a fundamental way to explore the world.

Rules and boundaries are still applicable however, try allowing your students unstructured time for play in the natural playspace. Open-ended, inquiry-based learning through curiosity and exploration are bound to enrich students as they engage in their natural surroundings.



Still feel bound to the curriculum?
Consider trying these play themes:

Kindergarten–Preschool: Play in the mud

Grade 1: Play in the sand

Grade 2: Play in the water

Grade 3: Play in the dirt

Grade 4: Play with the trees

Grade 5: Play on the hills

Grade 6: Play in the forest

“Natural Playgrounds should be the standard for all our playgrounds. They truly connect children with nature through play and are a sort of classroom for the next generation of environmental stewards.”

Dr. David Suzuki

References:

¹(Faber and Kuo, 2009)

²(Burdette, 2005)

³(Bartosh, 2003; Lieberman and Hoody, 1998)

