



Nurture our natural explorers

Though 81% of children say they want to play outside only 10% are playing in woodlands, parks and countryside, new research has revealed. The Natural England report is part of a growing body of evidence suggesting the importance of natural play provision. **Alexandra Longley** presents practical advice for landscape architects to encourage children and adults to engage in natural play.

The north wind howled across the bleak open space, no place to hide or shelter.

A week later huge the route became more difficult, boulders had been lifted into place and a long brown snake crossed the field. Children were jumping from one to another, shouting instructions, helping each other across the gaps – brains working, imagination running riot.

Like the first explorers in the jungle, the boys climbed down the grassy bank into the bracken searching. ‘What for?’, one might ask. Bones, sticks, leaves, conkers

– the list is endless.

Children were hiding from one another behind trees, lifting stones, watching beetles scuttle, worms wriggle. All these activities allow heightened senses, hone observation skills and develop their muscles.

Take Tasadaq, a nervous child who when we arrived just stood and looked worried for a while saying I have never climbed a “mountain” before, said as we walked back to school “When can we go and climb a mountain again, Miss?”

These are a couple of observations of children interacting with nature on their own terms. There were no

instructions given on how to play but a natural curiosity exploring the challenges at their own pace.

Good design needs no explanation, children react to their environment and the experiences it affords them.

What makes a play space successful?

Exploring the 10 principles from *Design for play*:

1. Bespoke

A play space should be designed for those who use it. This could include children of different ages, different

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this for its intended purpose.

Ward advocated an approach that incorporates the claims of children to be admitted to all aspects of the city, and that the whole environment must be planned with children’s needs in mind.

The location of a play space must also allay the fears of parents and carers. Research shows that increasingly parents think the world is not safe for their children and fear abduction and traffic accidents.

Increasingly children’s lives are being highly organised and structured (Hocking and Thomas, 2003). As children’s lives become privatised there is a reduction in community responsibility as the focus is on family to look after children.

This affects decisions about where children can go to when alone and which places are off-limits.

This is in sharp contrast to Kytta’s vision (2003), ‘A culture of so-called shared responsibility, in which the whole community is responsible for children and promotes social safety. It requires active use of outdoor facilities and a mix of users of various ages, whose mere presence creates feelings of being safe. In many European countries, social fears have already surpassed the actual dangers posed by traffic as reasons for restricting children’s outdoor mobility’.

Government strategies are addressing the reduction in children’s movement by emphasising the transport hierarchy which states that pedestrian movement has precedence over vehicular. The report *Places to go* states

- Children and young people have

the right to feel confident and enjoy walking, cycling and use of public transport to move around their streets and neighbourhoods

- Children and young people should be actively consulted in a sustained manner about the transport planning decisions that affect them
- Restraining traffic speeds and reducing the space prioritised for cars creates child-friendly environments, which are beneficial to all.

This supports Kytta’s research which says ‘independent mobility is more critical, because without possibilities for mobility, active perception of environmental affordances through the use of one’s own body is impossible.’

So, hopefully in the future, Tandy’s findings, (1999) that although ownership of bicycles has significantly increased, there is a drastic reduction in ‘bicycle licence’ – the adult granted permission to ride bikes in the local area, will be reversed.

Recap: What is Natural Play?

Play enables children to develop skills in a non-work environment, through trial and error, to learn by experience and gives them time to think and process ideas.

They are able to create special places, move around, gain independence and develop their natural sense of wonder.

Natural play is when children value and make good use of a varied natural landscape containing elements such as water, sand, vegetation, wildlife, natural colour, diversity and change. Places and features to sit in, on, under, lean against, and provide shelter and shade.

Recap: The letter of the law

In December 2008 the government introduced a new play strategy recognising the value and status of good play in the development of society. The strategy has been backed with £235 million of public funding. The strategy was developed after extensive consultation with children culminating in the report *Fair Play*.

The aim of the strategy is for all children to be able to enjoy a range of safe and exciting places to play close to where they live.

This is also backed up by other current legislation, policy and guidance, such as PPG17, PPS 1, PPS 12, PSA 13 and transport act (2008)

Planning Policy Strategy 1 (PPS1) says that when any land is developed

- ensure the impact of development on the social fabric of communities is considered and taken into account;
- deliver safe, healthy and attractive places to live; and, support the promotion of health and well being by making provision for physical activity.
- only good design should be accepted by planning authorities and bad design should be rejected
- facilities should be accessible on foot

abilities and other members of the community.

To ascertain these criteria a design process or cycle should be followed. Design for play details a comprehensive six stage cycle (Prepare, Design, Construct, Use, Maintain and Review) (see appendix 2) which not only explores the design process but highlights the need for play spaces to be included at strategic planning stages and in future maintenance regimes.

2. Well located

Landscape architects are best placed to advise on where to locate designated play spaces, but to do this they must be involved in the spatial planning process at all levels.

We should also keep in mind when designing landscapes that children are a significant part of the community and may choose to play anywhere. Ward (1978) expressed a concern that simply designating a site on a map as a play space does not guarantee that children will use



Encouraging curiosity - What is affordance?

One idea of how we can encourage or enhance children's play is through the concept of affordance Gibson (1979) which refers to the opportunities that the environment gives or affords to the human who is interacting with it.

So if 'children's play is not ordered and site specific', (Worpole, 2003) we must give children access to both wild and scruffy and formal forms of space. The table below shows the relationships between environmental qualities and the affordance provided.



3. Make use of natural elements

Nature is made of many parts and instantly presents children with a wealth of sensory experiences to explore.

Research shows that children like and want to spend time outdoors and that they love to play with natural elements. 'They have biological predispositions that impel them to interact with the physical world.' Lester and Maudsley (2007) p21.

Through their work on design of outdoor play settings, White and Stoeklin (1998) identify the elements children like in their play environments, including:

- Water
- Vegetation, including trees, bushes, flowers and long grasses
- Animals, creatures in ponds, and other living things
- Sand, best if it can be mixed with water
- Natural colour, diversity and change
- Places and features to sit in, on, under, lean against, and provide shelter and shade
- Different levels and nooks and crannies, places that offer privacy and views
- Structures, equipment and materials that can be changed, actually or in their imaginations, including plentiful loose parts

4. Provide a wide range of play experiences

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) identified components in developing environmental preference:

Complexity where there is richness, intricacy and diversity. The potential for exploration is enhanced in environments of favourable complexity.

Coherence a factor that provides a sense of order and directs attention. 'Coherence is enhanced by anything that helps organise the patterns of brightness, size, texture in the scene into a few major units' (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989:54). Coherence requires little inference, it is readily apparent, but having order does not necessarily reduce the complexity of an environment.

Legibility a legible space is one that is easy to understand and remember, easy to find one's way through and to find a way back to the starting point.

Mystery a promise of things to come and things to do.

5. Are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children

Flexibility is the key to providing play experiences to disabled and non-disabled children as it is to meeting the needs of differing age

groups or abilities within an age group.

6. Meet community needs

Cooper Marcus and Francis (1998) state that there is a 'need for relaxed, unmanaged recreation places for adults and children' echoed by Thompson and Philo's (2004) research which indicates that what children and young people want is spaces less for doing and more for being.

7. Allow children of different ages to play together

Again flexibility of design elements allows children to play together or use the same resources at different times eg sand allows a wide range of interaction between generations.

8. Build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge

Children and young people recognise that knowing about risks and how to manage them is an essential part of growing up and so we must acknowledge the benefits of challenging play experiences. (For more information see *Managing risk in play provision* DCMS guide)



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building some slack space into the layout potential for change and evolution is introduced. Play areas that have every corner defined can become dull very quickly especially as children get older.

In conclusion

Landscape architects have a unique ability to place curiosity into the heart of landscape design and encourage both children and adults to engage in natural play whatever the project.

- Get involved in the early stage of the design/development process ensuring land and money is allocated appropriately for play rather than being an afterthought.
- Engage with children at the consultation/design stage on all projects (not just playspace) wherever possible. Remember that children are members of society who are hardwired to play. The key to creating spaces for play is to make an environment that affords a variety of opportunities and allows scope for children to take risks that they choose rather than those that are enforced upon them.
- Use guidance and good design practice (See appendix 1) to create informed designs which include natural elements and afford plenty of opportunities to interact with the environment. Specify appropriate management regimes to extend exploration long after the initial development.

I believe that every landscape architect recognises the value of play and is able to create spaces which allow exploration to challenge each person.

We have been given a fantastic opportunity to allow our imaginations to run riot and embrace the potential given by the play strategy to design creative places for children and adults alike to play together. Let's embrace it!

9. Are sustainable and appropriately maintained

There are a growing number of playground planners who are transforming the traditional playground into more naturalised spaces.

Worpole (2003) gives some examples from the UK where local playgrounds and community spaces have been transformed by working with local children and adults.

Frost (2006) contrasts the high cost and maintenance associated with 'mammoth, multi-tiered structures that have little play value' and the reduced expenditure associated with play spaces that use natural materials, plentiful loose parts and 'wisely selected built or purchased equipment'.

There are multiple benefits: child-centred, diverse and flexible play opportunities, cheaper capital costs, more sustainable materials and attractive to wildlife. The success is visible with many children using the newly created natural play spaces and they are attracting international attention (Gill, 2005).

10. Allow for change and evolution

Design for play states that play spaces benefit from a process of ongoing change and refurbishment. Using seasonal variation and by

Key guidance

Government strategy

The Play Strategy
www.dcsf.gov.uk/play/

Play England

- Design for play: A guide to creating successful play spaces
- Managing risk in play provision: implementation guide for providers of play facilities DCMS
- Play, naturally: Lester and Maudsley (2007)
An examination of academic literature against two strands: children's play as a natural, instinctive behaviour and children's preference for playing in natural sites.
- Final Report Places to go highlights the need to ensure children can move around their neighbourhood safely and confidently.
www.playengland.org.uk

CABE

Designing and planning for play: public space lessons (2008)
Start with the Park (CABE, 2005)
www.cabe.org.uk/360 (2008) <http://www.cabe.org.uk/AssetLibrary/12309.pdf>

Forestry commission

• Nature Play
www.forestry.gov.uk

English Partnerships

Urban design compendium

Key Industry Players

- English Nature
www.english-nature.org.uk
- Forest Schools
www.foresteducation.org
- Groundwork
www.groundwork.org.uk
- International play association
www.ipa-ewni.org.uk
- Landscape Institute
www.landscapeinstitute.org
- Learning though for Landscapes
www.ltl.org.uk
- Mersey Basin
www.merseyvalley.org.uk
- Playwork
www.playwork.co.uk/wildaboutplay
- ROSPA
www.rospace.com
- RUDI
www.rudi.net
- Woodland Trust
www.woodland-trust.org.uk

