

Self-Initiated Free Play for Children

by Angela Faneuf

What is the importance of self-initiated free play in nature for children? What elements support a child's opportunity for self-initiated play in a natural setting?

Recently a number of multi disciplinary studies have been investigating how self-initiated free play in nature affects children. In a article in the Fall/Winter 2008 edition of *Land + People*, a publication of the Trust for Public Lands, it was stated that, "Research has shown that free play in nature increases children's cognitive flexibility, emotional capacity, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, use of imagination, selfesteem, and self-discipline. It makes them smarter, more cooperative, happier, and healthier."

At the root of all these studies, lies an awareness that play is not only fun but also profoundly important for the holistic health of children. In 2002, the Association for Childhood Education International reported, "Research on the brain demonstrates that play is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means, by which all children practice skills they will need in later life."

In his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv coined the term 'Nature-Deficit Disorder' which describes the affects of a disconnection between humans and nature. These include, "diminished use of senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities." By looking at the adverse effects of a life alienated from the very same elements that make up the human body, we can become more aware of what a blessing it is for our children when we offer them an environment that supports their biological, cognitive, and spiritual development.

An expanding circle of researchers believe that an increasing loss of natural habitat and widening disconnect from nature has devastating effects on human health and child development. In the new field of ecopsychology, researchers are attempting to analyze this recently, discovered phenomena. In his book, *Voice of the Earth*, historian and social critic, Theodore Roszak argues, "modern psychology has split the inner life from the outer life.... we have repressed our 'ecological unconscious' that provides our connection to our evolution on earth." He says, "The Diagnostic and Statistical manual of the American Psychiatric Association, defines 'separation anxiety disorder' as 'excessive anxiety concerning separation from home and from those whom the individual is attached.' But no separation is more pervasive in the Age of Anxiety than our disconnection from the natural world."

A study in the *Environment and Behavior* journal, reported that after engaging in play activities in natural, green settings, children with ADD were better able to focus and concentrate, than those who played indoor or in paved outdoor areas. It appears that more opportunities for free play in nature, in combination with less television and less restrictive educational settings, may have a curative effect on children with attention deficit disorders.

If it's true that 'nature therapy' can reduce the symptom of ADHD, then it stands to reason that the converse may also be true and ADHD symptoms may actually be aggravated by a disconnection of nature.

Working with this premise, programs like the Waldorf Forest Kindergarten in Saratoga Springs New York have been growing in popularity in Europe for years. I had the privilege of visiting the Forest Kindergarten in Saratoga Springs. Here children experience many of the activities already part of a traditional Waldorf Kindergarten, such as circle time, crafts, story, rest, and meal preparation but also engage in a regular morning nature walks/hikes and outdoor trail maintenance and gardening. They are also given time throughout the day for free play, where they travel with their imaginations, to magical lands, on space missions, and safaris though the jungle.

A healthy connection with nature allows for a resonance with cosmic rhythms. To be in harmony with one's environment supports health on all levels. It arouses a connection to the source and cultivates an ability to receive and perceive divine inspiration and memory of life intentions, encouraging a dreamy state in the child, expanding awareness and creativity.

When contemplating the fundamentals that support self-initiated free play in a nature, the first thing that comes to mind is proper attire. This is dependent upon seasonal environmental factors. For example, during the cool months of the year, the importance of warmth should not be understated. In an article titled, 'Why does Waldorf education talk about warmth so much?', Adam Blanning, MD states, "Waldorf teachers and Anthroposophic physicians have been talking about the importance of warmth for almost 100 years, out of the understanding that fostering physical warmth helps a child better integrate on physical, developmental, emotional, and spiritual levels." Warmth is a prerequisite for transformation. Children are in a constant state of growth and adaptation. They are learning to be at home in their own bodies and to express what they are feeling. They are developing an awareness and understanding of the world around them through sensory experience.

To help support our children's need for warmth while playing outdoors, it is best to dress them in layers that can be taken off as needed. Wool or silk long underwear, hats, mittens and socks make excellent layers that are both warm and lightweight. It is well to remember that while warmth is important for the young child, it is also essential that he or she is able to move about freely. Rain pants and rain boots are also a worth while investment. These will keep children warm and dry during the wet months. It goes without saying that hats and sun protective clothing are a must for those hot sunny days.

While exploring the various elements that support self-initiated free play in a natural environment, I encountered Simon Nicholson's 'loose parts' theory, which states, "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it." Nicholson defines a 'loose-parts' toy as "being open-ended: children may use it in many ways and combine it with other loose parts through imagination and creativity. A typical list of loose parts for a natural play area might include, water, trees, bushes, flowers, and long grasses: a pond and the creatures within it, along with other living things; sand(best if it can be mixed with water); places to sit in, on, under; structures that offer privacy and views. Go beyond that play area, to woods, fields, and streams, and the parts become looser and even more potent to the imagination."

Nicholson's 'loose parts' theory became a driving force behind an inspiration to create an outdoor community playscape design. Building on a foundation of the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, and spirit), I have attempted to implement all the major themes previously stated while also integrating a community aspect to the scape.

In the center of the scape, a pavilion housing a cob/brick oven will provide a space where parents can connect in community, hosting weekly 'pizza nights', crafting circles, meeting space, etc., while the children will be safe to freely explore and play in the surrounding area. The pavilion will be fitted with a rain catch system that will help irrigate several raised beds and an edible forest garden.

A seven layer, double 'u' shaped, edible forest garden containing multifunctioning fruit, nut, and nitrogen fixing trees, insectary shrubs, berry bushes, perennial herbs, flowers, and greens, groundcover supplying weed prevention and soil nutrients, annual vegetables including shallow root plants such as onion, garlic, and daikon radish, will be established in a south facing direction.

Forest gardens offer some very attractive advantages. In *Gaia's Garden A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture*, Toby Hemenway explains, "Once established, forest garden are low maintenance, since thick vegetation cover reduces water needs, smothers weeds, and renews soil through self-mulching and natural soil building. Because the forest garden holds mostly perennial and self-seeding plants, it also needs no tilling and little seasonal replanting." Not only does a forest garden supply people with a lush variety of nutritious food

but also offers an excellent example of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature for children to explore.

After researching an intuitive desire to include a labyrinth in the design, I discovered that labyrinths are found all over in the world in many different, seemingly unrelated cultures, dating all the way back to Neolithic times. Not only are labyrinths used for meditation and accessing altered states of reality but have also been found to have a very therapeutic effect on children, especially those with attention difficulties. An opportunity to “walk the labyrinth” can help calm a child under stress and help to cultivate a peaceful state of mind.

A natural water feature in conjunction with a free-form sand play area will allow for infinite possibilities of imaginative play, while also providing opportunities for children to learn about the different properties of each element and how they relate to one another.

I have included a simple design for a natural amphitheater consisting of a three tiered, half moon shape etched into a hillside, overlooking a small covered stage. This can accommodate a comfortable gathering area, with an intention of encouraging an expression of performing arts. Local artists, musicians, puppeteers, theatre group etc. will be invited to imbue the space with their creativity, for the enjoyment of the entire community.

It is my hope to establish a space that will welcome and nurture a community, family atmosphere, a place where families can come together and enjoy each others company and creativity while embraced by a beautiful natural environment, a space that will not only support our children’s essential need to play, explore, and learn but will also cultivate lifelong bonds between parents, children, community, and nature.

In the current time in which we live, as the Dali Lama describes, “ We have bigger houses but smaller families: We have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgment; more experts but more problems; more medicines, but less healthiness. We’ve been all the way to the moon and back, but we have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor. We build more computers to hold more information, to produce more copies than ever, but we have less communication. We have become long on quantity but short on quality. These are times of fast foods, but slow digestion; tall men, but short character; steep profits, but shallow relationships. It is time when there is much in the window but nothing in the room”, it has never been more imperative that we, as a society, recognize our human need to live a life of right relation, in harmony with the world around us, not just the health of our children but the health of the whole human race and all life on planet Earth are dependant upon it.

As caregivers of our children and stewards of our planet, we are blessed with an opportunity to facilitate this connection. Bringing awareness to the greater community and creating/recreating space for these relationships to develop is not only a blessing but a responsibility. We know, now, that the ramifications of a disassociation from nature extend far beyond the individual development. If as children, we never make that connection and form a healthy relationship with nature, if we never experience the awe, beauty, and wonder that it holds, then as we grow in to adulthood we may find this absence affects us on a multitude of levels; biologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. How will we collectively care for nature and the Earth if collectively we lack a healthy, loving relationship with her? The answer is... We will not. For “In the end” as Baba Dioum states, “we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught.”

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