Benefits for Children of Play in Nature

By Randy White

The children's play gardens (naturalized playgrounds) that our company designs for clients emphasize a rich natural environment as the play setting and nature as the play element. Our designs are based upon an extensive body of research and literature on:

- the significant benefits for children of regular play experiences in nature,
- children's play preferences, and
- the most effective designs to support children's development.

Following is a summary of the many benefits that regular play in nature has for children:

- Children with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are better able to concentrate after contact with nature (Taylor et al. 2001).
- Children with views of and contact with nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. The greener, the better the scores (Wells 2000, Taylor et al. 2002).
- Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Grahn, et al. 1997, Fjortoft & Sageie 2001).
- When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Moore & Wong 1997, Taylor, et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2000).
- Exposure to natural environments improves children's cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills (Pyle 2002).
- Nature buffers the impact of life's stresses on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (Wells & Evans 2003).
- Play in a diverse natural environment reduces or eliminates bullying (Malone & Tranter 2003).
- Nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity and instills a sense of peace and being at one with the world (Crain 2001).
- Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder (Cobb 1977, Louv 1991). Wonder is an important motivator for life long learning (Wilson 1997).
- Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other (Moore 1996).
- Natural environments stimulate social interaction between children (Moore 1986, Bixler et al. 2002).
- Outdoor environments are important to children's development of independence and autonomy (Bartlett 1996).
- Play in outdoor environments stimulates all aspects of children development more readily than indoor environments (Moore & Wong 1997).
- An affinity to and love of nature, along with a positive environmental ethic, grow out of regular contact with and play in the natural world during early childhood. Children's loss of regular contact with the natural world can result in a biophobic future generation not interested in preserving nature and its diversity (Bunting & Cousins 1985; Chawla 1988; Wilson 1993; Pyle 1993; Chipeniuk 1994; Sobel 1996, 2002 & 2004; Hart 1997; Wilson 1997, Kals et al. 1999;
"There's no way that we can help children to learn to love and preserve this planet, if we don't give them direct experiences with the miracles and blessings of nature."

Anita Olds

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*Mailing Address:* White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group, 4036 Baltimore Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri 64111, USA  
*Telephone:* + (816) 931 - 1040, *Fax:* + (816) 756 - 5058  
*E-mail:* Please direct all messages for Leisure, Entertainment and Recreation Projects to Randy@whitehutchinson.com; and all messages for Children's Learning and Play Projects to Vicki@whitehutchinson.com.

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