

# Working with nature to create experiences for life

**Annie Davy** offers simple guidelines or starting points for developing your outdoor area.

Give me a spark of Nature's fire. That's all the learning I desire.

**Robert Burns**

**I**t is exciting that there is currently a great deal of interest in designing and creating natural play environments for children.

I am sure this is a response to the growing recognition of the threat of 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv 2005) for many young children today. Increased urbanization, traffic, more forms of electronic media and parents' and educators' fears about risks to children are leading to increasingly indoor, sedentary, sanitized and sense-deprived lifestyles for many young children and families.

What follows are some ideas which can make a whole world possible – regardless of how big or small your outdoor space.

## Create zones

Whatever the size of your garden or outdoor area, dividing it into a small number of zones that offer contrasting experiences can be very effective in enhancing the quality of play. You can separate 'active' and 'calm' zones by using raised beds or other planting features to direct the flow of movement around the space and, if you have wheeled toys, to create circuits where they can go. The plants in the beds will stimulate and become part of the play that takes place. Growing bamboo might evoke a jungle theme and growing herbs and salad could provide materials for healthy snacks. In a fully hard-surfaced area, use several planters clustered together to make a soft, planted area. Children will be able to sit on the container edges (especially if they are tyres) and move amongst the meandering pathways and spaces between them.

## Earth, Air, Fire and Water

Think about using all elements – earth, air, fire and water. The beauty of using natural materials is that so many of them are free! Make friends with a local tree surgeon and ask for a few logs for informal seating and climbing. Recycle terracotta pots and metal pipes to make musical instruments. Gather stones and shells with holes to create wind-chimes or patterns, or they can be transported in trucks or hidden as treasure. If at all possible let children experience what it is like to sit by a fire and learn about its properties, its benefits and its risks.

## Appeal to all senses

Use plants wherever you can to provide shade, shelter and boundaries with places for play, day dreaming and conversation. Include plants you can smell and eat:

- Herbs such as mint and lemon balm that you can chew
- Fruit bushes or strawberry plants to



*Pictured top and bottom left: use plants to provide shade, shelter and boundaries for play.*

- harvest and make into ice-cream
- Rose petals and lavender that can be made into perfume
- Plants that children can play amongst, such as tall grasses that rustle in the wind.

Colourful, fragrant or tactile planting will create a relaxing sensory area. Places for relaxation, being together and nattering or daydreaming are just



as important outdoors as places to run and be boisterous. Provide seating amongst plants with soft toys, blankets and books. Grow climbers over a pergola and use plants to shelter windy or sunny places

### Mud, glorious mud

Even the smallest outside space can be adapted to include an area where children can explore this mini world. If you don't have a suitable ground area, improvise by filling an old tractor tyre with soil, constructing an earth area from logs or planks (make sure the wood is tar and splinter-free) or use free-standing planters. To avoid having seedlings enthusiastically dug up, provide a separate well-defined area for endless digging. If children can stand in this area to use long-handled tools they will be using all their body rather than just arms and hands.

Support children's efforts and widen their experiences by providing further resources in this area. Here are some ideas:

- tools for digging: short and long-handled,
- child-sized spades, rakes, trowels,
- dibbers (metal tools work better than plastic)
- unwanted kitchen utensils: spoons, scoops, sieves, colanders, baking trays etc.
- a variety of containers: boxes, tins and pots
- small pieces of natural materials: wood, sticks, twigs, leaves
- aggregates: rocks, pebbles, gravel and shingle
- items to bury: treasure, play vegetables, broken pottery, plastic insects
- small world resources: dinosaurs, people, farm animals, vehicles
- transporters: trucks, tractors and trailers, wheelbarrows, buckets and baskets
- watering cans – to support mud pie making!

### Attract wild creatures

Children are fascinated by the secret lives of insects, wriggling worms, curled woodlice, spotted ladybirds or scurrying millipedes. Use piles of sticks and stones and dead wood piles and planting to attract wildlife. Everything from spiders to bees, butterflies, snails and slugs will all be immensely interesting to young children and have the potential to deliver many of the aims and goals we have for their learning. What better way to prompt



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curiosity, encourage language and thinking, stimulate creative expression and motivate the use of books and ICT? Hopefully, we can lay the foundations for a caring approach to the environment.

### Share nature with children

As with many things in the world, sharing interests with an adult is much better than simply being told what something is called, so don't feel that you need to be experts about the natural world in order to include this in your curriculum or to develop your outdoor area for play and learning. Watching the behaviour of living

things and admiring their colour and form is worth more than knowing what they are called, and will generate far more learning. By observing children and being ready to join in when the right moments arise you can develop some sustained shared thinking about what you have observed together which in turn might lead to follow up work in the book corner or the computer to discover the names or interesting facts about particular plants or animals. ■

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*This article is adapted from an Early Years Outdoors membership resource produced by Learning through Landscapes.*

*To find out more about the Early Years Outdoors membership service from Learning through Landscapes call - 01962 845811 or visit [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk).*

### Books and other publications

Learning through Landscapes will be publishing in April 2009 a complete guide to developing your outdoor space for early years. PlayOut will be available from the LTL website, and will cost £60 – however, pre-orders placed by 31st March will save £20. Call 01962 845811 for details.

*Creating a Space to Grow*, Gail Ryder-Richardson. David Fulton 2006

*Grow it, Eat it – Simple gardening projects and delicious recipes*. RHS and Dorling Kindersley 2008.

*Gardening with young children*, Beatrys Lockie. Hawthorne Press 2007

For books, ideas and a range of equipment for outdoor play including growing things visit [www.mindstretchers.co.uk](http://www.mindstretchers.co.uk) and/or telephone 01764 664409.