

A HOW-TO GUIDE

NATURE PLAY

EVERYONE
CAN PLAY



Introduction

The Everyone Can Play guideline has transformed the way playspaces are planned, designed and managed. The three core principles of Everyone Can Play encourage thinking that moves from just considering accessibility to planning for true inclusion, by asking the questions:

Can I get there?

Can I play?

Can I stay?

To expand on this thinking, the NSW Government has prepared a resource titled *Place and Play*. It builds on the original Everyone Can Play principles by encouraging people to think about the deeper experiences that play can provide. *Place and Play* demonstrates that by planning and designing playspaces that are firmly rooted in place and informed by meaningful engagement, playspaces become powerful hubs for learning, community connection and celebration.

Expanding on the principles of 'Can I get there? Can I play? Can I stay?' *Place and Play* encourages people to ask themselves:

- **Can I connect?**
- **Can I discover?**
- **Can I celebrate?**

This guide shows how incorporating nature play into your playspaces can create spaces for connection, discovery and celebration. It provides useful tips and advice to help you create your next nature playspace or incorporate nature play into your existing playspace for everyone to enjoy.

The benefits of nature play

Nature play is a great way to connect people with place, and can turn your playspace into a place of connection, discovery and celebration.

Nature stimulates the imagination and encourages exploration, adventure and risk-taking — helping children learn new skills such as adaptability, coordination and resilience. A growing body of research shows being in nature can lower stress hormone levels, enhance immune system function, reduce anxiety, increase self-esteem and improve mood.

However, for too many people access to nature is determined by where they live, their cultural background, socioeconomic factors and ability. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us even more aware of the inequity surrounding access to nature and its necessity to our mental health. By incorporating nature into our playspaces, we can offer

everyone in our community the opportunity to experience the joy and benefits that nature provides — regardless of age, ability, background or postcode.

Nature play makes playspaces more interesting and distinctive by drawing on the unique characteristics of place. When you use local materials, plants and other natural elements in your design, you create playspaces that reflect and celebrate our communities, culture and environment.

And nature is *free*! So incorporating nature into your playspaces can help stretch your budget further! Materials last longer and are cheaper to maintain, and using local materials and makers reduces the environmental impact of importing offshore equipment.



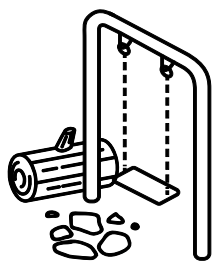


What is nature play?

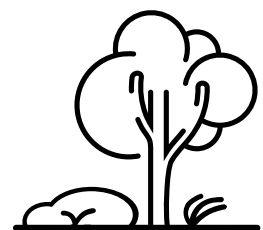
Nature playspaces are predominantly made of natural materials, such as plants, rocks, logs, sand, mulch and water. They are often combined with custom play equipment to provide a variety of experiences for users.

When thinking about the possibilities for nature play, it helps to imagine a sliding scale. This scale includes a broad range of opportunities for design and educational intervention to allow everyone access to nature play. We can experience nature play in completely different environments — from small suburban playspaces to large national parks.

Nature offers a broad range of design opportunities for everyone to access play and educational activities. It can link and enhance both formal playspace designs and unstructured natural spaces.



The nature play sliding scale



Playspace with simple nature play elements

Nature play opportunities

Natural space with minimal formal play elements

Designing so Everyone Can Play

Designing nature playspaces that everyone can enjoy is not hard to do. When planning your playspace, just remember to be guided by the Everyone Can Play principles of:

Can I get there?

Can I play?

Can I stay?

The flexibility and creativity of nature play encourages collaborative social interaction between children by creating together. It also enables multigenerational involvement through the engagement of parents and carers.

Think about providing a range of play experiences so everyone can enjoy engaging with nature.

Consider using flat, level surfaces made from decomposed granite or stone pavers to provide access to natural spaces, and play elements such as 'garden rooms' or raised play tables where loose natural items such as pine cones, twigs and mud can easily be explored and played with.

By using appropriate plants at different heights, you can engage user interest at different levels of access.

Ensure paths are free and clear of loose, natural items through raised and fixed edges and regular maintenance. Paths don't need to be perfectly clean, but they should be free of hazards.

To bring more nature into playspaces, you can also help stage natural processes (such as germination or insect metamorphosis) in locations that are easily visible and accessed by everyone. Consider placement of 'bug hotels' or plants that attract native wildlife, to deepen connections with nature.



HOW TO CREATE NATURE PLAYSPACES

Step one

Identify and understand your site

When planning nature playspaces, it's important to identify and understand your site and local environment.



What do you want this playspace to be and where will it be located?

What is currently available in the local playspace network and what need are you trying to meet?

Will it attract visitors from the surrounding areas, or is it a small upgrade to an existing local playspace?



What Country is the site on?

Who lives here and what does this place mean to them?

What is the history of the site?

Are there any stories that can be told through nature?

Local Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal Land Councils and recognised knowledge-holders have deep cultural connections to nature. By engaging with Traditional Custodians, Aboriginal Elders and leaders, we can gain a better understanding of the Country we work on, and the significance of specific natural elements in the site environment.



What are the features of the existing site?

What existing natural features can be integrated in nature play design? (Trees, planting, rocks etc.)



What is the local environmental context and how will it impact design?

What is the local climate?

What native vegetation can connect with place and minimise maintenance?

What are the prevailing winds?

What is the natural shade?

Are there any native animals on site?



Are there any topographical issues to consider? (Such as flooding.)

Does the site offer opportunities such as potential viewpoints, natural changes in levels for play, or existing waterways?

Chatting with your maintenance team

Nature play maintenance is completely different to traditional playspace maintenance — in fact, it often requires less work!

It's OK to let some nature spaces overgrow. Twigs and rocks that aren't cleaned up can become play opportunities. Have a chat with your maintenance team to explain the purpose of nature play and gain support in appropriately maintaining the space.



Photo by Bec Ho

Suggestions

- Consider uses that align with microclimatic conditions on site. A natural, shaded clearing can be an ideal location for hut building, a quiet space for socialising, or a retreat.
- Working with the existing grading and site features can mean placing seats in locations that allow distant views, working carefully around existing trees, or developing a dry creek bed along an existing natural drainage line through the playspace.
- By choosing local rocks, timbers and plant materials for landscaping, wayfinding and play elements, we can create playspaces that prosper in our native environments — reducing ongoing maintenance costs and celebrating deeper connections with nature. Planting is also an opportunity to showcase what is unique and special to the local area.

Creepy crawlies

Some people — especially recent arrivals to Australia — may not want to enter natural areas or engage in nature play for concerns about Australian wildlife. While nature play does occur across varied settings, many parks and playspaces in residential areas aren't home to dangerous wildlife.

Signage, education programs, adjacent natural areas and built features (such as paths) are just some ways to encourage people to visit and interact with nature. In situations where there is wildlife on site, educate the community on what to do and which areas to avoid. Some animals will only be active during particular times of the day or year.

Best practice case studies

Keep materials natural

THE MAGIC FOREST, BRADBURY PARK, QLD

We can reduce maintenance costs and create playspaces that prosper in our native environments by selecting local rocks, timbers and plant materials for landscaping, wayfinding and play elements. Natural elements facilitate a deeper connection with nature and have multiple functions. For example, rocks can define

boundaries *and* be play pieces. The Magic Forest in Bradbury Park uses natural rocks, logs and stones to connect and define a unique natural playspace within an area of existing trees. The timber carved archway and stepping stones invite exploration while blending into natural surroundings.



Photo by Yan Chen, Form Landscape Architects

Use your site's assets

OATLEY BUSH PARK PLAYGROUND, OATLEY, NSW

Each site is unique and offers its own opportunities through topography and existing features. When analysing your site, consider how these features can be used as an asset. In Oatley Bush Park Playground, mature existing trees were integrated into the playspace design and now stand proudly among it, creating a unique and characterful space. These trees provide natural shade, as well as intrigue and exploration opportunities as users scale the timber climbing structure to get a closer look at the canopy.



Photo by Liane Peixoto

HOW TO CREATE NATURE PLAYSPACES

Step two

Get creative

Time to get creative and think about the possibilities for different nature play elements in your playspace! In this stage, focus on the experiences your playspace could offer, rather than just equipment.



Are there opportunities for discovery and adventure?

What wayfinding techniques will guide users to explore different areas and elements in the playspace?

How can gentle cues encourage different activities?
(For example, a collection of sticks next to a frame for hut building.)

Think about how paths and surfaces take users on a journey through different experiences and spaces.



What loose parts can be used to enable creative and imaginative play?

How can different sized materials cater to different users?
(Small twigs and branches can easily be moved by younger children, while large sticks and logs challenge strength and allow for bigger creations.)



What sensory and temporal experiences will deepen connections with nature?

What smells, textures, sights and sounds can be incorporated from the local environment?

How can changing seasons be showcased?



Are there educational opportunities for learning about Country, the environment and ecological processes?

What storytelling elements, such as stone trails and wood carvings, will lead users on an adventure of discovery?

Suggestions

- Incorporating boulders of different heights — in alignment along a path or to define a play area — is a simple way we can create opportunities to discover the textural qualities of stones, step and climb over rocks, or provide informal seating.
- Logs or timber rounds can provide climbing challenges at different heights, help guide users through different spaces, or create boundaries for play areas. For example, timber rounds can be cut and used vertically as stepping stones or climbing poles, or laid on their sides and carved with motifs as part of a trail. When placed adjacent to an accessible path, logs can provide a tactile edge for users in wheelchairs or be used for climbing and sitting.
- Planting can be used to create different scales of spaces, such as smaller 'garden rooms' for quiet, imaginative play, tunnels of small trees, and sensory trails using aromatic plants. Make sure paths allow everyone to access these spaces.
- Loose play aids creativity and learning. For example, placing sticks next to a steel framework for building huts teaches children to balance sticks and helps them learn how to create structures.
- Wet and dry elements can be highlighted through a feature such as a creek bed for users to learn about changing weather and seasons. Flowering or fruiting plants are another great way to highlight changes in seasons.
- 'Bug hotels' in accessible spaces can teach users about natural ecological processes.
- The layout of nature spaces can enable varied play. Consider which uses work well together and which need to be separated. Thinking about how the space works on the whole will create opportunities for users to discover diverse environments.

No-mow zones

If there are existing native trees and vegetation on site, consider defining adjacent spaces and areas below trees as 'no-mow' areas. Watch the natural process unfold as seedlings, grasses and plants develop.

This is a great low-cost option if you can't afford planting! Informal paths can be mown in, and seedlings can be thinned out later to define boundaries. As the space develops, more permanent paths and spaces can be created.



GET CREATIVE

Best practice case studies

Think of plants as play

THE IAN POTTER CHILDREN'S WILD PLAY
GARDEN, CENTENNIAL PARK, NSW

Plants are an important element of a nature playspace, offering different textures, forms, spaces and experiences. Paths within The Ian Potter Children's WILD PLAY Garden are lined by plants of different heights, shapes and

sizes that are all safe to engage with. This type of planting enables everyone to observe, smell and feel a range of vegetation as they are passing through, no matter their size.



Encourage imagination with loose parts

THE IAN POTTER CHILDREN'S WILD PLAY GARDEN, CENTENNIAL PARK, NSW

Providing loose parts, such as twigs and sticks, is a low-cost way to give users freedom to create and lead their own play experiences, while catering to different age groups and abilities. Level cleared areas with piles of sticks and rocks of varied sizes and textures allow for hut building and imaginative play at The Ian Potter Children's WILD PLAY Garden. This type of play boosts personal development by encouraging people to work together — building patience, listening and learning skills.



Photos by The Ian Potter Children's WILD PLAY Garden, Centennial Park

Consider layouts for endless play

THE MAGIC FOREST, BRADBURY PARK, QLD

At The Magic Forest in Bradbury Park, a creative open arrangement of logs provides opportunities for children to join in, play and perform together. Elsewhere, more enclosed paths weave through dense existing trees, creating trails and spaces for exploration and discovery. By investigating different types of nature play layouts, and considering

which play features work well together and which need to be separated, you can create nature spaces that give users room to decide how they want to play. Although it's important to plan a layout and suggest expected types of play, trust that users will make their own decisions. That's the beauty of nature play!



Photo by Yan Chen, Form Landscape Architects



Photo by The Ian Potter Children's WILD PLAY Garden, Centennial Park

Incorporate rocks and boulders

THE IAN POTTER CHILDREN'S WILD PLAY GARDEN, CENTENNIAL PARK, NSW

Embedded natural rocks and boulders provide opportunities for jumping, balancing, imaginative play, exploration and discovery, and also provide impromptu seating for carers and parents. At The Ian Potter Children's WILD PLAY Garden, boulders are placed in an open clearing as a

simple multi-use play feature, with surrounding soft fall and mulch to create a safer play experience. Boulders are also placed in spots that receive both sun and shade, teaching users about heating and cooling as they jump or sit on different stones.

HOW TO CREATE NATURE PLAYSPACES

Step three

Delivering and maintaining

Nature play is a broad concept. Decide what you want your nature playspace's scope to be based on your site, budget, resources and goals. It doesn't need to be costly or difficult. Remember: nature is free!



Drawing from the outcomes of steps one and two, what is the scope of your playspace?

What nature play elements do you want to include?



What resources do you need to deliver the playspace?

You might have internal council resources or local community resources, such as men's sheds, community garden networks, or local creators and makers that you can include.



Do you need an expert to assist?

If you don't have internal or community resources, or your project scale needs an expert to assist, think about engaging a landscape architect. They can work with you and the community through a co-design process by conducting a site analysis, identifying opportunities, and creating a design that works for your needs and budget.



Photo by Tash Mohring

Suggestions

- Your playspace scope will determine your design. If it's a small local playspace, it may only include simple additions — such as stones and logs for seating, balancing and climbing. Neighbourhood playspaces may include more additions, such as connections to adjacent bushland areas, with clearances for loose parts play. Large regional playspaces may have new planted areas and trails with outdoor classrooms, water, rock and timber elements in the form of a dry creek bed, or discovery stations to explore and play with different materials.
- Head to the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) website for a list of registered landscape architects and other resources.
www.aila.org.au
- Centennial Parklands has a list of nature play education activities and resources for programming inspiration.
www.centennialparklands.com.au/learn/nature-play

Become a nature play champion!

There are lots of ways to champion nature play.

Share your experience by hosting an opening event that celebrates nature play and educates others about the benefits. You can also engage with nature play educators or interested community groups to explore ongoing educational opportunities through your nature playspace — such as a weekly nature-based playgroup.

Best practice case studies

Learn from nature in playspaces of any size

CAPTAIN OLDREY NATURE TRAIL,
BROULEE, NSW

Opportunities to learn from nature can be incorporated into any nature playspace and adapted based on scope. At the Captain Oldrey Nature Trail, trails connect the playspace to a nature reserve and a clearing for an

outdoor classroom — providing opportunities to explore and learn. Users can connect with the site and nature on their own through interpretative elements along the trail and education programs that can be adapted for all needs.



Photo by Eurobodalla Shire Council

Find the right scale

LIZARD LOG PLAYGROUND, WESTERN SYDNEY PARKLANDS, NSW

Scale is key in determining the right fit for your site. Different sized parks are suitable for different elements. Lizard Log Playground in Western Sydney Parklands is a large regional playspace that supports the growing community of Western Sydney. It offers a broad selection of play opportunities, from tracts of vegetation, to a dry creek bed, to natural play pieces for climbing, digging and discovery. Elements of playspaces this size can provide great inspiration for smaller playspaces. Not all playspaces need to include everything!

Every park exists within its own context and can offer a unique nature play experience on its own scale.



Photos by Western Sydney Parklands



Applying Australian Standards

AS 4685.0:2017 defines nature play as: **“The elements of a playground consisting of natural, non-manufactured items that are incorporated into the playground, including items such as logs, boulders, plant materials and surfaces, changes of level and other landscape elements.”**

The Standard also encourages the incorporation of natural materials within playgrounds: **“Playgrounds can comprise any combination of playground equipment and natural/landscape features, and should ideally include a variety of textures and materials, spatial characteristics and surfaces. They should offer opportunities for physical movement and challenge; for creative/sensory expression;**

for cognitive and imaginative play; and for social interaction, role-play and fantasy. The availability of some loose materials for play is important. The landscape itself provides many valuable play opportunities and adds value to the equipment. Natural features of a site, such as trees, rocks, logs and sloping banks, can be incorporated into the design.”

As this statement applies to all playspace elements, we should design nature playspaces with consideration of the Standards.

Though the Standards acknowledge the benefits of natural materials and elements often outweigh the risks, a risk assessment may be required to determine likely risk and how to manage it. Agencies like KidSafe have prepared helpful guides on how to manage and identify these risks.

Nature play maintenance

Despite the benefits of nature play, it's normal to have concerns about ongoing maintenance. With a little thought and smart selection of materials, we can minimise these doubts.

Choose elements that require less maintenance.

Rocks, pebbles and logs are all good examples. Well-selected plants also require little to no maintenance once established. Look for timber that doesn't require staining and is resistant to splitting and insect damage.

Use sand in small areas.

Sand can be used and managed effectively in small areas, such as raised troughs. This reduces sand

displacement and enhances accessibility. Ask maintenance staff to add simple checks to existing routine inspections so there are no unexpected surprises.

Recognise that nature is always changing.

Councils place a lot of pride on well-maintained parks and gardens, and nature play and natural processes can sometimes look messy — but that's OK. Nature play activities are open-ended and can change day by day and with

the seasons. By providing signage and boundaries through paths or edges, you can define the play area and help users understand the intent and benefits of nature play.

Deliver a maintenance plan.

Prepare a maintenance plan in collaboration with the designers and maintenance team, so the space continues to provide the best possible play outcomes.

