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Connecting Children and Families to Nature

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Connecting Children and Families to Nature
An exciting opportunity for park and recreational professionals to connect children and families to nature is through the development and implementation of a natural playscape. A natural playscape is a highly creative, interactive playground made of mostly natural materials like streams, plants, boulders, logs and earth mounds, and it contains as few man-made components as possible. It is designed with the express purpose of encouraging children’s affinity for nature.

Although more municipal recreation agencies and schools have begun to develop and implement natural playscapes in their communities, there is little empirical evidence on the direct impact of this feature and how it has the potential to benefit children over traditional playgrounds. Researchers at the University of Illinois in the Department of Human and Community Development conducted a study to evaluate the Champaign County Forest Preserve’s new Homer Lake Natural Playscape between August and December 2012 using a mixed-methods research design. This entailed an onsite questionnaire (n=152) and one-on-one interviews (n=15) with parents and grandparents, as well as participant observations at the Natural Playscape.

Research findings included the following:

1. **Who used the Homer Lake Natural Playscape?**

   Of the 152 respondents who completed the individual questionnaire, 62.5 percent reported that it was their first time visiting the Natural Playscape, and 14.5 percent indicated that it was their first time ever visiting Homer Lake Forest Preserve. It was clear that the Natural Playscape drew in many new visitors, as 68 percent of first-time visitors indicated that visiting the Natural Playscape was the main reason for their visit.

   The Natural Playscape served a wide variety of populations, as the 557 playscape users that were accounted for in the questionnaires ranged in age from a few months old to mid-70s. Among the children (n=256) who utilized the Natural Playscape, more than 51 percent were between the ages of 6 and 12, and 27 percent were between 19 months and 5 years old. Of the adults (n=133) who visited the Natural Playscape, 46.6 percent were between the ages of 36 and 55, while 30.8 percent were in early adulthood (aged 19 to 35). Men (48 percent) and women (52 percent) were relatively equally represented. The majority of individual survey respondents were Caucasian (88 percent). Fifty percent of survey respondents reported having their graduate degree, 21.7 percent reported an undergraduate degree and 18.1 percent reported some college. More than 79 percent of users came to the Natural Playscape with a group of three or more people. Visitors came from 33 different ZIP codes, ranging from as close as Homer, Illinois, to as far as Las Vegas, Nevada.

2. **Why did participants use the Natural Playscape?**

   Respondents reported that they chose the Homer Lake Natural Playscape over other playgrounds because it provided “access to nature” (61.2 percent), it was “easy to reach” (28.9 percent) and “inexpensive” (28.3 percent). Because the Natural Playscape is one feature in a larger forest preserve, more than 41 percent were there to participate in more than two main activities (e.g., hike, picnic, fish). On average, 55
percent of respondents spent one to two hours at Homer Lake, and 20 percent spent more than two hours.

To get at some of the deeper meanings behind “why” participants used the Natural Playscape, interviewees were asked the following questions, “For what reasons did you visit the Natural Playscape the first time?” and “What brings you back to visit?” Based on their responses, along with coding the ethnographic observations, two themes emerged: increased family interaction and encouraged value sharing.

**Increased Family Interaction**

Parents mentioned that they decided to use the Natural Playscape because there was “something for everyone.” Participants discussed how both their older and younger children of different abilities and interests were served through the playscape and how it was a great place for the whole family because there were many recreational options available, which allowed family members the flexibility to go off and do their own thing and then come back together again. It was a destination they often chose when they wanted to accommodate multiple people (from their immediate family members to their extended family), as well as the family dog. Many interviewees indicated that they chose the Natural Playscape over other playgrounds on days they were spending time with their whole family.

Additionally, time spent together at the Playscape encouraged a sense of togetherness as parents and children interacted and explored the features together. It was very common for parents and grandparents to follow their children from feature to feature. With younger kids, they would walk behind them with hands outspread as a cushion in case they should fall when balancing on rocks or climbing logs. Taking family portraits was also very common. During one participant observation, seven families came in a two-hour period to take photos of their family together. On more than one occasion, extended family members of up to three different generations were observed meeting at the Natural Playscape to have their photo taken, some even wearing matching outfits. The ethnographic observations also revealed family members bonding over the development of new skills (learning to skip rocks or work the stream) and engaging in environmental learning. One powerful example of a conversation between a mom and son playing at the birdhouse went as follows:

Mom: Are you a bird that eats worms?
Son: No.
Mom: What do you eat?
Son: I eat flowers.
Mom: Oh, then you must be a hummingbird, because hummingbirds love…flowers, because that is where they get nectar from.

Finally, visiting the Natural Playscape helped increase social interaction among family members by giving them the opportunity to engage with their whole family and get away from the stressors of daily life.

“I like climbing on the trees. It brought me back to when I was a kid, and that was my favorite thing to do.”

— 42-year-old mother of two children aged 7 and 5
**Value Sharing**

Another reason why families visited the Natural Playscape was to pass on their nature values. Using the Natural Playscape as a family encouraged some participants to reflect on their own childhood experiences in nature. Analyzing the interview data revealed that the Natural Playscape was not only beneficial for children but parents as well. When asked, “What is your favorite part of the Playscape?” many interviewees commented how using the Natural Playscape allowed them to relive some of their own childhood memories.

Many interviewees also indicated that going to the Natural Playscape together as a family was purposeful with the goal of exposing their children to nature in the same ways they experienced the natural environment as a child.

**Self-Perceived Benefits of Using the Natural Playscape**

More than 88 percent of survey respondents indicated that the Natural Playscape is better than most other outdoor parks or play areas in promoting a connection with nature. Additionally, more than 69 percent of survey respondents also rated it as better than most in promoting fun, imaginary play, and quiet reflection.

The Natural Playscape is a unique outdoor environment that fosters children’s development in a different way than they are exposed to at home, school and traditional playgrounds.

Interviewees reported that compared to other playgrounds, the Playscape promoted imaginary play, exploration, creativity, physical activity, learning and socialization with new friends.

**Barriers to Using the Natural Playscape**

Although participants indicated that spending time at the Natural Playscape was important for their family, there were also barriers many families experienced that limited how often they could visit. Most interviewees indicated that weather, travel time and distance were important factors in deciding whether or not to visit the Natural Playscape.

Because of these barriers, some families chose to reserve visiting the Natural Playscape for special occasions when the whole family could go.

These findings illustrate how the Natural Playscape is more than just a park — it’s also a tool to get families excited about nature. It’s clear that the Natural Playscape has the potential to be an effective vehicle to help bridge the nature-deficit gap.

For newcomers and regulars alike, the Natural Playscape meets people halfway between an experience in a completely natural space and a familiar play environment. For some visitors, this is as much nature as they will ever feel comfortable experiencing, while others will use it as a stepping stone to embrace other wilderness adventures. It is important to also address the limitations of the study. The data suggests a selection effect: Most of the respondents were Caucasian, highly educated and relatively affluent. Visiting the Natural Playscape takes a concerted effort. Because of this, it is clear from the data that getting children outside and involved in nature is important to this specific demographic of users. Although the data highlights how the Forest Preserve is filling a need for those who already have high motivation to seek outdoor opportunities, it does not yet provide information that supports attracting different types of people or a “new generation” of parents who are not already motivated and interested.

Overall, it’s clear that the Natural Playscape is a place that allows kids to be kids. It’s a place where they can manipulate the environment, create dams, skip rocks, change the direction of a stream, play in the sand, and feel the texture of logs beneath their bare feet and the hard surface of a boulder on their chests. It’s a place where it’s actually OK to get dirty and manipulate their world. It is also a place for parents to get respite and relax — to be able to enjoy seeing their kids having fun from a distance. It fulfills their need to engage in family experiences that they value and hope will be a legacy for their children. One man from a participant observation sums it up best in saying, “It’s amazing how such a simple idea can be so successful.”

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