

# NATURE PLAY

Nature play is the ultimate in free play. Unmediated by toys or adult created environments, children find everything they need to learn and play. A stick can be a magic wand, a tool for digging, a home for bugs, or simply a stick. A tree can be a world to explore, a climbing frame, a house. Nature is the perfect place for imagination, exploration, and physical play. Children will learn confidence in themselves, resourcefulness, and love for nature and the world around them.

Research shows that nature play fosters: self-confidence - problem solving - creativity through imagination - independence - a responsible attitude toward risk - respect and awareness for the environment – being calmer and happier.

## TREES AND PLANTS

Provide opportunities for climbing, hiding under, taking shelter, touching, tasting and harvesting food.



Benefits:

- Soothing and calming with mental health benefits
- Encourages curiosity and knowledge about the natural world
- Awareness of sustenance and sustainability
- Facilitates a connection to nature and a love of the earth
- Physical and psychological benefits of climbing and jumping

## WATER

Provides opportunities for paddling, swimming, wading, throwing things in, floating, splashing, containing, channelling, transporting, watching and listening.

Benefits:

- Sensory rich – hear, touch, smell, taste, see
- Soothing and relaxing
- Play with others builds social skills
- Helps children learn to assess risk
- Explores mathematics and science concepts (volumes and solutions)





# LONG GRASS AND WILD AREAS

Provide opportunities for hiding, crawling, and sensory and imaginative play.

Benefits:

- Encourages rolling, crawling and other vestibular activities
- Gives children the sense of being alone
- Encourages bravery
- Provides a sensory rich environment: the way it feels, looks, smells, sounds.
- Develops an awareness of seasonal change



# INSECTS, BIRDS, AND AQUATIC LIFE

Encouraging fauna provides opportunities for observing, questioning, thinking and exploring the local environment.

Benefits:

- Fosters empathy and respect for other life forms
- Helps us to understand habitat and life cycles
- Nurtures environmental stewardship (kaitiakitanga)
- Enables children to learn about biology



# NATURAL LOOSE PARTS

Sticks, branches, pine cones, seed pods, stones etc provide opportunities for observing, classifying, counting, describing, stacking, constructing, imaginative play, hut and shelter building.

Benefits:

- Classifying and counting develop maths and science skills
- Encourages creativity and artistry
- Develops reasoning and problem solving skills
- Building encourages team work
- Hiding places instill a sense of adventure and independence





# LOGS, TREE STUMPS AND BOULDERS

Provide opportunities for climbing, balancing, jumping, and manoeuvring.

Benefits:

- Encourages gross motor development
- Increases upper and lower body strength
- Builds coordination; climbing uses cross patterning
- Encourages children to assess and take risks
- Builds confidence



# SMALL HILLS, BANKS AND PILES OF DIRT

Provide a vantage point, a place to climb, dig, bury treasure, and create a 'work site' with diggers and bulldozers.

Benefits:

- Develops motor skills and depth perception
- Gives a different perspective
- Encourages rolling, crawling and sliding
- Develops spatial awareness - up/down, high/low
- Sense of achievement - getting to the top



# MUD, SAND AND SOIL

Provide opportunities for children to engage in getting messy, creative imaginary play, digging, transporting, and endless ways to play when mixed with water.

Benefits:

- Gives contact with good bacteria – Mud can make us healthy!
- Mud soothes, calms, and relaxes
- Enhances fine motor skills
- Provides opportunity for creative play
- Group play develops social and communication skills





# NATURE PLAYGROUNDS AND DISCOVERY AREAS

Play areas using natural materials can supplement wild spaces. They can provide a gateway to nature play. Within the natural environment, there are many opportunities to weave in space for art, sculpture, music, games, cultural activities, sensory activities, science, and physical play.

Benefits:

- Provide easy access to natural spaces in an urban environment
- Natural playgrounds are often more interesting and appealing to adults
- Children play in natural areas up to twice as long as in conventional playgrounds
- Attracts care-givers who may be new to nature play
- Use interest in nature to encourage interest in art, science, culture and vice versa
- Natural materials are free and can encourage spontaneous creativity
- Provides examples to encourage play in nature
- Opportunities for creating and interacting with art, sculpture and music
- Creativity provides a sense of accomplishment





## Guidance note: creating spaces for nature play

Developing new parks, reserves, or community areas offers multiple opportunities to provide nature play spaces. Some areas could be left 'wild' so that children feel a sense of 'ownership' over them. Managed pockets of natural play spaces could also be designed into pathways. These natural play pockets will offer space for families to play and rest as they navigate the trails by foot or bike. The more time children play in an area the more they come to know and love it, which develops a connection and sense of environmental stewardship.

This table has been put together to help identify the best design ideas for incorporating nature play into development plans. The table identifies five high-level design ideas and some natural and developed examples for each.

Ideal design ideas for nature play	Natural examples	Developed examples
Some areas left 'wild'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grasses not mown/groomed</li> <li>• Dirt paths with puddles</li> <li>• Small hills, and banks</li> <li>• Logs, tree stumps and boulders</li> <li>• Fallen-down trees</li> <li>• Mud, Sand, Soil</li> <li>• Dunes</li> <li>• Long/tall grass</li> <li>• Natural materials available</li> <li>• Bird and insect habitat</li> <li>• Natural loose parts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new 'wild areas'</li> <li>• Plant new forests</li> <li>• Make piles of dirt and sand play areas</li> <li>• Bring in Natural loose parts, tree stumps, boulders etc</li> <li>• Insect hotels</li> <li>• Bird Houses</li> <li>• Interpretive Signs</li> </ul>
Forests, woodlands and clusters of trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leave existing trees that are good for climbing/making huts</li> <li>• Native and fruiting trees</li> <li>• Edible plants</li> <li>• 'Loose parts' available – branches, pine cones, seed pods</li> <li>• Long/tall grass</li> <li>• Leave existing riparian planting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community gardens</li> <li>• Plant new forests</li> <li>• New riparian planting</li> <li>• Willow-houses</li> </ul>
Access to water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gently sloping banks</li> <li>• Rocks to climb on</li> <li>• Stones to throw</li> <li>• Puddles on paths</li> <li>• Streams, rivers and springs</li> <li>• Mahinga kai</li> <li>• Habitat for insects, birds and aquatic life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steps</li> <li>• Jetties, wharves, bridges and boardwalks</li> <li>• Stormwater management swales</li> </ul>
Connectivity by paths, tracks, wayfinding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Wild' places to make your own path</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barefoot path</li> <li>• Meandering cycle and walking tracks</li> </ul>

signs		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Bridges</li> <li>•Street/path signs</li> <li>•Parking</li> <li>•Some fencing</li> </ul>
Places and spaces for gathering and activities and discovery and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Forest areas</li> <li>•Riverbanks</li> <li>•Open spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Nature playgrounds</li> <li>•Toilet facilities</li> <li>•Picnic tables/benches/seats</li> <li>•Sculpture/art</li> <li>•Parking</li> <li>•Urban farms</li> <li>•Interpretive signs and shelters for outdoor classrooms</li> </ul>