

naturally fun

The surprising thrills of a swing-set-less playground

by Jody Mace

One afternoon last spring, I took my kids to the new playground near us. We'd been anticipating this for some time, because we, along with other families in our area, had given input into what would be built. When we arrived, we found a small boy leaning bamboo poles against a wooden post to make a fort. Another child was standing at a low table spread with yarn and art materials, tying pinecones and twigs together to make a necklace, and a few kids were taking turns swinging from a grapevine.

My own son, who's 12, might be on the verge of abandoning playgrounds, but he got busy creating an elaborate, impressive hammock system between two of the many trees that dot the play area. If this doesn't sound like a typical playground, that's because it isn't.

a new, old-fashioned kind of play space

The Nature Explorer Zone at the Reedy Creek Nature Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, is a natural play area, which means it makes use of items like logs, sand, hills, and boulders in its design. There isn't much plastic, and you might think kids would miss those nifty fake steering wheels. But from what I've seen, they don't. They're too busy to.

Kids play differently in a natural playground. On a traditional play structure, they climb up a ladder and slide down a pole. There are only one or two things to do with any particular element. But the activity in natural areas is more open-



ended. "They'll come out to the fort-building area, and there'll be posts in the ground but no instructions," says Bridget Strong, northeast district nature preserve manager in Mecklenberg County, where the Nature Explorer Zone is. "You're encouraging them to be creative by not making the connections so easy."

from brainstorming to building

Concerned that too many kids don't have enough contact with nature these days, parents and community leaders are building natural playgrounds not just in Charlotte, but all over the country, in



your turn

How can you bring a natural playground to your community?

- 1 Look for a location.** Is there an empty lot or an existing playground that's seen better days? Find out who owns it by calling your parks department or town hall.
- 2 Reach out.** Gather other parents in your area and share what you know about the importance of kids playing in nature. (For resources, check out No Child Left Inside at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's website: cbf.org.) Use these benefits to pitch the school, city, or landowner on your idea. Then, find out what it would take to get a new playground in place (money, zoning clearance, builders).
- 3 Find people who can help.** You might be surprised at how many people are willing to pitch in. The local parks department or schools might have a staff member with experience applying for grants. A neighborhood homeowner's association might have access to great carpenters. The Boy Scouts might be looking for a new project.
- 4 Make a plan.** The Arbor Day Foundation can be a great resource for creating a design and a time line. Check out their Natural Play Area Sourcebook (arborday.org/shopping/sourcebook).



A breath of fresh air: At the Nature Explorer Zone in Charlotte, North Carolina, children get to climb, swing, and play in their own creative ways.

dozens of other cities and towns.

For our play area, the staff at Reedy Creek gathered children and parents for a focus group. While the adults talked about what

we wanted our kids to get out of the new playground, kids got to draw the play areas of their dreams. Next, consultants from the Arbor Day Foundation and the Dimensions Education Research Foundation (groups dedicated to connecting kids with nature) created a working design that could be used to actually get the play area built. It incorporated kid requests, like a whimsical child-size birdhouse system connected by a wooden bridge.

Local landscape and construction businesses built the play area, offering steep discounts and often waiving labor charges. Volunteers also helped with tedious work like weeding. Thanks to a local nonprofit group, Partners for Parks, as well as grants and donations, the project was completed, in about a year, with no public funding.

the ever-evolving natural playground

The play area we're now able visit is full of enticing elements: Logs to turn over to examine what's underneath, blocks made from pieces of tree trunk sections, a tun-



nel made from grapevines, and a sandpit. There's yarn to combine with whatever else kids can find (like feathers, leaves, or sticks), and musical instruments made of natural or recycled materials.

The Nature Explorer Zone has already become a popular field trip destination for schools as well as a spot for family outings. It's also shaping up to be a great spot for homeschoolers (like my family) on weekdays, possibly because it appeals to so many age groups. I've seen teenage girls make a section of the grapevine tunnel into their own personal chat room; other teens venture out from the play area to hike on trails in the woods; 7- and 8-year-old kids create a song and dance routine using the xylophones and a wooden stage; and the tiniest of children follow a giant beetle that crawled out from under a leaf. The kids even spotted a massive black snake (which seemed to delight them more than it did their parents). Our visits have left no doubt that dirt, and all of nature, doesn't need a fancy structure on it to be fun. It just needs kids. ●