

It's time for our children to again grow up a little dirtier but a lot happier.

Outdoor Spaces

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“Once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, many children left the adult world on a daily basis and entered an outdoor world filled with fantasy and improvisation. Using sticks, branches, logs, sand, dirt, water and other natural materials, they built castles, houses, ships, rockets. As they ran, jumped, dug, climbed, slid, twirled and whirled, their imaginations took them across the prairie in covered

wagons, up the tallest mountain, into outer space, and on high sea adventures. At the end of the day, they returned indoors dirty and tired but feeling happy and confident, competent and full of stories.”

Those words were written by our colleagues at Nature Explore as the prologue to a paper outlining their research on the benefits of creating intentionally designed spaces that inspire children to connect with the wonders of nature on a daily basis.

A few generations ago, it wasn't necessary to design those kinds of spaces. Most children lived close to fields or forests they could explore at their leisure. Some children still enjoy this luxury; sadly, most no longer do. Many of the wild places in our towns are gone, replaced by sprawling malls and other signs of “progress.” The bells and whistles of technology keep children indoors staring at screens. Even when they do go outdoors in centers or schools, children play on sterile “safety” surfacing and plastic structures. In our well-meaning attempts to keep children from harm, we have removed much of what could bring them joy.

It doesn't have to stay this way. In fact, many are working hard for change. The World Forum Foundation's Nature Action Collaborative for Children (an international group of educators, environmentalists, and designers) developed a set of principles to support ever-growing efforts to build nature-based outdoor spaces for children. We believe those spaces should:

- celebrate the site's natural assets, local culture, climate, and history.
- use indigenous plants, natural materials, and community contributions.
- provide multi-functionality and multiple possibilities.
- stimulate all the senses.
- be accessible to all abilities.
- be sustainable and able to develop over time.
- inspire wonder and discovery.

We have seen first-hand the powerful transformation of bodies, minds, and spirits when daily connections with nature's wisdom are possible. It's time for our children to again grow up a little dirtier but a lot happier. We hope you will join us in making it so. 



