



*Boroughs can provide young residents  
with outdoor connections*

# THE NATURAL ALTERNATIVE

By **Nicole Faraguna**, Director of Outreach and Education, PALTA

**M**ost adults today have memories of spending time outdoors as a child. Until a few decades ago, children played outside every day, regardless of weather, exploring the natural world. Imagination and appropriate attire was all that was required and the children defined the rules of nature play.

Today, nature play is essentially gone, and it's likely impossible to replace the cognitive growth benefits of frequent, spontaneous, nature-based childhood play. There are also benefits of nature play in terms of conservation. Playing outdoors fosters an emotional connection to the outdoors and a lifelong appreciation of nature.

Boroughs have a unique opportunity to provide safe, natural areas in which children may explore the outdoors and foster an appreciation of nature. These areas do not have to be costly nor complicated; they simply should offer a hands-on, nature experience. To spark an awareness of the value of nature play and stimulate a conversation about what groups and individuals can do to foster and expand opportunities for connecting young children to the outdoors, the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association (PALTA) released the publication, *Nurturing Children and Strengthening Conservation through Connections to the Land*. Visit [conservationtools.org](http://conservationtools.org) to download this resource.

#### What is Nature Play?

Nature Play is simply defined as unstructured outdoor play. It is the opportunity for children to explore the wonders of nature in a safe environment without any distractions.

Ken Finch, author of the publication, is a long time advocate

Photo courtesy of AWNC



**LITTLE WOODS PLAY AREA** The Asbury Woods Nature Center in Erie provides youth with the opportunity to connect with the outdoors

for nature play. Inspired by Richard Louv and his writings on nature-deficit disorder, he founded the organization Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood, which is focused on making child-nature interactions meaningful.

“Nature play is primarily about the formation of an emotional bond between the child and nature,” says Finch. His views are based on research that indicate human values and behaviors are driven more by the heart than the mind. This means a child must find some emotional connection with nature to truly appreciate its vastness and wonder. This bond, Finch affirms, comes from frequent and genuine, hands-on experiences with the natural world.

The experiences most adults recall fondly as a child, climbing trees, building forts from branches and leaves, and digging in the soil, are all examples of nature play.

#### Why is Nature Play Important?

Outdoor play is important for children in nurturing a variety of

cognitive and emotional skills that contribute to holistic development. As Finch notes in *Nature Play*, “holistic development refers to children growing up with strong and effective stimulation of all the developmental domains: cognitive (intellectual), creative, physical, social and emotional, and spiritual.”

These skills are enhanced by frequent outdoor play as noted below:

- **Cognitive.** Outdoor play allows children to explore new and familiar elements of nature through sight, sound, touch (and even sometimes taste, much to the discomfort of adults). Children enhance their senses and cognitive abilities when left to discover on their own.
- **Creative.** Nature sparks creativity that lends to imaginative play, artistic development and even engineering skills.
- **Physical.** Outdoor play



Photo courtesy of AWSP

**DISCOVER GROUND** The nature play area in Fox Chapel, which is supported by the Audubon Society of Western PA

gets children moving and contributes to healthier lifestyles.

- **Social and emotional.** The value of allowing children to explore nature on their own builds curiosity, initiative and a desire to discover new things.
- **Spiritual.** This is simply a child's realization and, eventually, an appreciation, of the incredible world that exists.

But these experiences reach beyond just the development of cognitive skills; nature play nurtures an appreciation of nature that carries on well beyond childhood.

Finch frequently says, "children need nature, and nature needs children." His point is that children benefit from being outdoors and all the experiences that nature provides; in turn nature benefits from children who grow up to become stewards of the natural world.

**What are Boroughs Doing?**

Boroughs can play a vital role in providing safe nature play areas in their communities, and that can be seen in Mechanicsburg Borough, Cumberland County where a

nature play area is being developed through its environmental advisory council (EAC).

One champion for the project has been Heidi Biggs, an EAC volunteer, an environmental biologist for the Department of Environmental Protection, and a new mother. She feels a nature play area will be a tremendous asset to the community.

"I was excited about the idea of a nature play area even before I became a mother," she explains. "Having a child of my own is an extra reason for getting it done."

She and the EAC have been working with borough staff and officials on the project. Koser Park, the identified area, is owned by the school district and has a shaded wooded area that would provide a suitable backdrop for the nature play area. Both the borough council and the school board are excited about the initiative.

"The trees create a sense of place," Biggs says, "plus the location itself is close enough to the rest of the community, which makes it a walkable destination for many residents."

This year the EAC will focus on research by focusing on

groups within the community to help identify key elements to incorporate into the park. The borough plans to apply for funding from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) during the next application cycle of the Community Conservation Partnerships Program and hopes to complete the park by 2018.

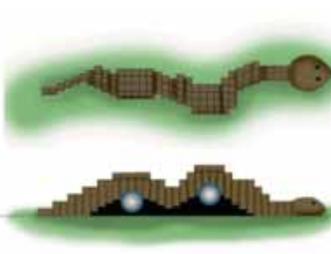
Fox Chapel Borough in Allegheny County has incorporated natural elements to its community park. Jim Pashek, the chairman of the borough's park commission and an engineer with Pashek Associates, supported the efforts of the borough to incorporate natural materials into the existing park. These elements include animals carved from trees, including a long serpent and tree stumps, which children can climb onto or walk along.

The biggest challenge he says with nature play areas is incorporating durable materials; in many cases purely natural elements can deteriorate which can lead the municipality to have to replace key components of the park every five years or so. Pashek says there are examples of play areas that are built durably using natural materials, such as the DiscoverGround Nature Play Area, which is managed by the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania (AWSP).

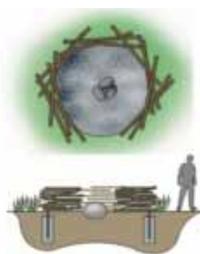
DiscoverGround, located in Fox Chapel, is a one-acre natural play area set in the woodlands of AWSP's Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve. The play area includes a sandpit with water, two vegetated tunnels, a muddy play creek, a tree house, climbing trunk and serpentine walls. The sandpit is surrounded by plantings and the serpentine walls are set into a wildflower meadow.



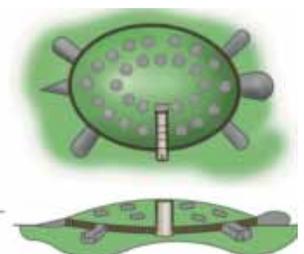
SITE LAYOUT



SNAKE CLIMB



WATERFOWL NEST



TURTLE HILL



**THE CONCEPT** This map shows the concept for the nature play area that the LVHA anticipates will be completed in June

Photo courtesy of LVHA

Brian Shema, the operations director for AWSP, says the play area has been exceptionally popular among families throughout the region. “We have families from Pittsburgh that visit on a nearly weekly basis,” he explains. “And one mother in particular is in love with this space and writes about it frequently in her ‘mommy’ blog.”

DiscoverGround was designed to accommodate all ages of children. AWSP used materials that meet playground industry as well as American Disability Act requirements and, when possible, certified forested products.

Although there has been no wear and tear after three years of heavy use; Shema admits that the area does require intensive maintenance. The large sand play area, for example, must be replenished with sand on an annual basis. A water trough system, mimicking a dry/wet streambed, allows children to control water flow by manually

pumping water and building dams. A popular feature of the park, the trough area requires constant upkeep by staff.

“This nature play area is all about connecting children to nature through play while making it as safe as possible for them,” says Shema.

The Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (LHVA) is also working on a nature play area that could be a model for municipalities.

Linda Mlodzienski, LHVA’s director of operations is excited about the project, which began to formulate when the organization decided to add some interactive features along its 70-mile trail system to encourage additional physical activity and engagement. The City of Scranton granted LHVA with a permanent easement on a one-acre property that is adjacent to the trailhead as well as in close proximity to elementary schools.

The natural play area is designed to appear as a beaver dam/pond; it will encompass a

turtle shaped area created from mounded earth with a slide attachment, a wooden snake for climbing, an oversized bird’s nest surrounded by ornamental grasses, and an elevated berm climbing area. Special attractions will include a fishing shack with a slide and an adjacent rain barrel, as well as a lily pad stage for cultural and educational programming, using the hillside as a natural seating area. With the assistance of a \$150,000 American Water grant and a \$100,000 DCNR grant, the project is scheduled for completion in June.

Developed nature play areas can offer a great deal of interest and intrigue for young visitors; however, Finch notes that simple natural areas can also do the trick. He advocates for small natural pocket parks within communities that are inviting to the public and offer opportunities for children to engage one-on-one with nature. **(B)**