

# Nature Play

“Children still need a childhood with dirt, mud, puddles, trees, sticks, and tadpoles.” –Brooke Hampton

## Background Information:

### Bin Information

This activity is the first in a series of outdoor recreation activities designed to foster empathy with nature, a connection to local landscapes, and future positive environmental behaviors. In this activity, students engage in nature play behaviors with the goal of forming early connections. It is followed by “Construction and Cartography” which focuses on building a connection to place by mapping and manipulating local environments, and finishes with an activity for older students to evaluate proper use for different public lands.

### Information for Instructors

#### What is nature play?

*“Natural Play challenges and fascinates children and teaches them about the wonders and intricacies of the natural world while they explore and play within it. It is intuitive and unstructured, constructive (or deconstructive), and timeless, encouraging interaction with natural materials, features, indigenous vegetation, and creative landforms. Natural Play is often a blend of materials and experiences to create purposely complex interplays of natural and environmental objects.”*

-working definition from Oregon Natural Play Initiative

Nature play combines three key elements that are key for child development; risk, play, and nature.

**Risk:** Modern society tends to be very risk adverse, especially when it comes to children. This can lead to attempts to remove all possible risks in childhood and anything that could lead to potential injury, which in turn, prevents children from the valuable opportunity to learn how to assess risk. Children who are exposed to low to moderate levels of risk gain important ‘grit’ characteristics, learn how to assess risk properly, learn their own limits, and are less likely to grow into risk adverse adults. Nature play features risk in the exploration aspects and access to natural materials.

**Play:** Play is a form of leisure that is characterized by spontaneity, self-expression, and non-seriousness. Because of the focus on spontaneity, play is the hardest for of leisure to program for. However, play is very

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#### Themes:

Nature Play, Empathy, Risk, Outdoor Recreation

#### Estimated Duration:

60-90 minutes

#### Audience Identified:

PreK-1<sup>st</sup> grade

#### Location:

Outdoors, natural area preferred

#### Goal:

Students will enjoy unstructured play time with natural materials to foster empathy with nature.

#### Objectives:

There are no specific objectives for this lesson.

important developmentally to children, and child directed play has benefits correlated to increased physical activity, positive affect, and creative problem solving.

**Nature:** In terms of nature play, 'nature' covers a wide spectrum. It could mean anything from bring natural materials into an indoor space, or playing out in a completely wild area.

## Materials and Set-Up:

This kit includes:

- 20 tree cookies
- Chalk wall and chalk
- Loose parts basket
  - Acorns
  - Pinecones
  - River Rock

Set-Up:

- Mark boundaries in an outdoor area if desired.
- Choose the nature play elements from the bin to set up. Place them around the designated area. If play will occur inside, consider laying down a tarp from the Construction and Cartography lesson under the loose parts bin or for any other materials you may choose to gather and bring indoors.
- If playing outdoors, be sure to walk the area to be aware of any environmental hazards.

## Introduction:

Estimated Duration: 5 minutes

### Risk Management

Before going out, reiterate any site rules with children and set boundaries for where play can occur. Boundaries may be physically marked or may be along the lines of 'stay within sight of a teacher.' Help mitigate risk as a facilitator by being familiar with the area beforehand and aware of any hazards.

While having reasonable levels of risk is a positive for children, the acceptable level will vary based on group and program. Determine what guidelines and instructions you will give your students and make sure that they are consistent across staff if possible.

### Attention Getter

In nature play, it is typical for children to be separated into small pockets, and preoccupied and not focused on the teacher. In addition to setting clear boundaries as a part of risk management, it can be helpful to set up two signals. One signal is for a 5 minute warning for play to be done, and the other is a "come back to me now" signal. That one will be used to gather the children at the end of the lesson, and also in case of any emergency or unexpected event. Whistles work well over distances; for example, two short blasts for a warning, one long for come back, but are not necessary, especially depending on the site.

## Facilitation Guidelines:

Estimated Duration: 45-60 minutes

Play is, by definition, unstructured. The following is not a structure for the activity, but rather guidelines for the role of the facilitator during child-directed play. Roughly an hour is recommended as the duration because there are benefits associated with children having extended time to immerse themselves in play.

### Types of Facilitation

**Onlooker:** In an onlooker role, the teacher will observe, but is not actively involved in play. In this role, the teacher may still ask children questions about what they are doing, or give directions related to safety. The teacher may be approached by children or invited into the play.

**Stage Manager:** In this role, the teacher is still not involved in the play itself, but will have an active role through preparing materials or props and presenting theme ideas to start off play. Teachers may also help to resolve conflicts between children in this role, or answer questions about materials.

**Co-player:** As a co-player, the teacher is directly involved in play with children, but will take a more minor role to keep the play child-directed. For example, in a pretend restaurant, the teacher may pretend to be a customer, following the lead of the children who are pretending to cook and serve.

**Play leader:** The role of play leader combines elements of stage manager and co-player. The play will still be primarily child-directed, but the teacher will suggest new ideas and twists. This can be used to extend play by adding new interest, encourage the involvement of other children, or to introduce specific ideas and vocabulary to the group.

**Director:** When the teacher takes the role of director, the play shifts from child-directed to teacher directed. When acting as the director, the teacher may be overinvolved and limiting ideas and choice of the children.

**Redirector:** In the role of redirector, the teacher may interrupt the play in an attempt to shift the attention of the children, sometimes to academic concepts. However, this will sometimes interrupt the flow of play, and the children will not return to the original plot or activity.

Typically, when facilitating play, a teacher will shift between several different facilitator roles. For the purpose of this activity, the facilitator should aim to shift between the first three or four types. In setting up the materials provided, the teacher naturally takes the role of stage manager. The other roles will be determined by the needs of the group. A general rule of thumb is to start as an onlooker but position yourself to be easily accessible and clearly open to questions and invitations to play from children.

## Conclusion:

Estimated Duration: 10 minutes

As stated in the introduction, give a warning signal when there is five minutes left to play so that children have a chance to ease themselves out of play, and for the facilitator to start to gather back children who might be further off to a more centralized location.

After the last five minutes are done, have the children gather up the materials used in the bin and if needed, scatter any structures that were built if they are not in a place where they can remain.

Please note that the duration of the conclusion will vary based on the group. You may need to allocate more time for children to clean themselves up as well.

## Reflection and Evaluation:

Estimated Duration: N/A

There is no evaluation for this activity. Play should be child led without influence by facilitators to meet specific objectives. There are multiple benefits to nature play, including, but not limited to,

- Improved physical activity (Akpinar, 2019)
- Greater levels of focus (Natural Learning Initiative, 2012)
- Reduced symptoms of ADD (Natural Learning Initiative, 2012)
- Reduced levels of biophobia (Louv, 2006)
- Creative problem solving (Casey & Scott-McKie, 2017)

However, these benefits are best received when the play is spontaneous and child-led, and therefore, trying to evaluate for specific targets is more likely to reduce the integrity of the play by leading to teachers taking too much control in the play environment, and so there is not measurement directly attached to the activity.

For groups that will be engaging in regular nature play over time, notes can be taken when the facilitator is in an onlooker role to track trends over time.

## Extensions:

### Accessibility and Accommodation

**Indoor and loose material options:** While outdoor, natural areas are ideal for nature play, if there are reasons this is not possible, due to accessibility, severe weather, or any other reasons, there are many ways to bring in elements of nature play indoors. Loose materials, like sticks, leaves, rocks, etc. as well as larger materials included in the bin can be brought indoors to play with. Tarps can be put down to contain messes and make for easier clean ups. Loose materials can also be placed along sidewalks or similar structures for students who may need them for accessibility, such as students who use wheelchairs.

**Disinfecting Natural Materials:** The natural materials included in this kit are not as easy to wipe down or sanitize as many man-made materials, and so to in addition to sanitation efforts, the materials will need to be set aside for 48 hours between groups.

### Nature Play Sites

If after this introduction for nature play, the group would like to establish some permanent or semi-permanent nature play sites, the following elements are popular and can be sought out or added to an environment include

- Logs and dead trees. These can be placed on the ground for climbing and balancing on, or hollow logs for exploring or hiding.

- Shallow water features. Shallow streams with small rocks are ideal. Play can include manipulating the flow of water with dams and chutes.
- Digging pits and dirt mounds. Small shovels can also be provided.
- Narrow paths. Thin paths provide a balance between adventure and structure. Cutting narrow paths through tall grass is a good way to implement.
- Thickets to hide in and explore.
- Exploration tools. Things like magnifying glasses, easy to use field guides, binoculars, measuring tapes, insect nets, etc. can be great ways to encourage exploration.

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