

Natural Play Area – Cudworth Parkway

Introduction

Natural play refers to play experiences that are shaped by the landscape itself rather than by fixed, manufactured equipment. Instead of swings, slides, and climbing frames, natural play spaces use elements such as landform, planting, rocks and logs to encourage children to explore, imagine, and interact with their surroundings. These spaces are typically less prescriptive in how they are used, allowing children to create their own play narratives and engage with the environment in a more open-ended way.

Benefits

One of the key benefits of natural play compared to a formal playground is the richness of sensory and development experiences it offers. Uneven terrain, varied textures, and changing seasonal conditions help children develop balance, coordination, and physical confidence in a more holistic way than standardised play equipment. Natural settings also stimulate creativity and problem-solving, as children are not guided toward a single “correct” use of a feature but instead invent their own games and challenges.

Natural play environments also support emotional wellbeing. Being surrounded by greenery and natural elements has been shown to reduce stress and improve mood, while the less structured nature of the space encourages independence, risk assessment, and resilience. Socially, these environments often promote more cooperative and imaginative group play, rather than the “turn-takings” patterns commonly seen with fixed equipment.

From a design and long-term value perspective, natural play spaces integrate more seamlessly into the wider landscape, enhancing biodiversity and contributing to a sense of place. They often age more gracefully than traditional playgrounds, which can become outdated or require frequent replacement as they deteriorate with age. While formal playgrounds provide clear, accessible, and familiar play opportunities, natural play offers a complementary approach that prioritises adaptability, environmental connection, and a broader range of development benefits.

Design Features

Designing a natural play space requires freedom to work with the landscape itself as the primary “play equipment.” The most successful schemes combine landform, materials, and planting to create a layered, exploratory environment rather than a single focal feature.

The main element is the landform. Subtle mounding, shallow valleys, and hills create opportunities for running, rolling, climbing, and informal seating. Incorporating terraces or embankments also double as social spaces while adding topographical interest. Changes in level are one of the simplest ways to introduce challenge and movement without relying on built structures.

Materials

Natural materials are central to the experience. Features such as logs, boulders, and stepping stones arranged to encourage balancing, scrambling, and jumping. These elements can be fixed or partially movable, depending on how much flexibility is sought. Loose materials, like sand,

gravel, bark mulch, or even sticks and branches, are particularly valuable because they support open-ended, creative play which is constantly reinterpreted by children.

Planting design is important both as a functional and overall experience within the area.

Grasses, wildflowers, and low shrubs create immersive, sensory-rich areas for den-building, hide-and-seek, and exploration. Trees are included to provide shade and a sense of enclosure, balanced with open sightlines for safety. Seasonal variation, through flowering, colour, and texture, adds an extra layer of engagement over time.

Some informal structures that feel integrated into the landscape including timber balance beams, stepping logs, boulder seats and even tunnels, offer some more formal play elements to bridge the gap between fully natural and traditional play, offering recognisable challenges while maintaining the overall natural character.

Spaces for imagination and retreat are just as important as active play. Features such as willow screens, or small earth hollows create places for quieter, social, or solitary play. These elements help cater to a wider range of ages and personalities amongst the users.

Finally, it is important to consider how the space connects to its surroundings. Paths, edges, and thresholds are there to invite children in while allowing for informal supervision. Integrating seating, picnic areas, or natural gathering spots encourages longer stays and wider use.

Conclusion

A well-designed natural play space isn't about replacing a playground with different materials, it's about creating a dynamic landscape that invites discovery, supports varied types of play, and evolves over time as it matures with age.