

Natural Playgrounds for Infants and Toddlers

By Anita Van Asperdt, January 2010

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Infants and toddlers have different developmental needs than older kids. Yet traditional playground design in the US only focuses on the obvious difference in physical size between older and younger kids. Commonplace tot-lots have similar play equipment as a playground for older kids. Susan Herrington (1997) observes in her article *The Received View of Play and the Subculture of Infants* “...in the place for younger children, the height of the play structure is lowered, the slide and the tunnel are shorter, and the swing is lower.” Herrington attributes this simple reduction of size to the emphasis on gross-motor action in all playground design. However, for very young children constructive play and social play is far more important than active play. Jay Beckwith (1998) author of “Vanishing Play” recommends for the 2-5 age group to allocate only 25% of the budget on play equipment that encourages active play, which for this age group would mostly be climbing, swinging and sliding, 75% of the budget should be planned to create an environment that stimulates constructive, social and imaginary play. For infants who are just starting to crawl the world is mainly about sensory discovery, touching, smelling, hearing and seeing. There is however very little to touch, smell, hear and see on a playground with a reduced sized slide placed on a rubber surface.

Natural play environments can enrich play time for infants and toddler by providing ample sensory experiences. Trees can provide various patterns of light when the wind blows through them, falling blossoms and leaves can be an absolute delight for the very young child. Touching the smooth textures of river rocks and the softness of plants such as Lambs Ears are important ways for young children to discover the world. With sand and water a toddler can endlessly create and shape his or her own environment.

While providing our very youngest with a playscape that includes natural elements safety should not be neglected. Lambs Ears are a sensory delight but are also known to be very attractive to bees, so planting large areas with Lambs Ears might not be a good idea in a small tot-lot. For a 1,300 square feet Early Head Start natural play environment in central California, we as designers at LandCurrent choose a variety of Lambs Ear that doesn't bloom and thus does not attract bees. Avoiding bees altogether should however not be the goal, that would mean having no flowering planting at all. As with any safety precautions they should be applied in a reasonable manner.** Besides safety aspects that need to be considered in all playgrounds such as falling, entrapment, crushing and protrusion hazards** an infant-toddler area brings additional considerations. Drowning, choking and poisoning hazards are real for infants and toddlers . At LandCurrent we therefore strictly avoid any poisonous plants listed on the University of North Carolina *Poisonous Plant Resource Sheet for Child Care Provides* and listed in *Plants for Play* by Robin C. Moore 2007, in addition we cross reference these plant lists with our general plant species resources. We also avoid trees that drop nuts and fruits that can form an easy choking hazard when laying on the ground. While nut and small fruit bearing trees are just fine and even wonderful in a play environment with kindergarten or school age kids extra

caution should be taken in small scale infant-toddler natural play gardens. Similarly standing water is a delight in almost any natural playground as long as they drain out in about twenty-four hours to prevent the breeding of insects and other unwanted organic growth. However, infants and toddlers have been known to drown in just half an inch of standing water, it is therefore important to create so called zero-depth water play opportunities for these very young children.

Eighty percent of the brain has been developed by age three. Clearly, we can not ignore the developmental needs for this group. Creating natural play environments in day care and other early childhood settings is very important because of the developmental benefits that play in these environments bring and because a large number of kids spend a lot of time at these facilities. (The NACCRRRA 2009 report estimates that 45% of referral requests is for infant/toddler care). Although safety concerns can be a challenge, as Landscape Architects and Natural Playground experts we have been trained and have the ambition to let these aspects not stand in the way to create sensory rich and stimulating environments for the very youngest members of our society.

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** For a more thorough description of potential playground hazards consult the current version of the CPSC Handbook for Public Playground Safety, ASTM F1487-05 Standard Consumer Safety Performance Specification for Playground Equipment for Public Use, ASTM F2373-08 Standard Consumer Safety for Public Use Play Equipment for Children 6 Months through 23 Months. These safety standards are not designed to prevent all injuries but are intended “to minimize the likelihood of life-threatening or debilitating injuries...”. (Introduction ASTM F 1487-05).

Sources:

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Alexander Krings, Herbarium Department of Botany, NC State University *Poisonous Plant Sheet for Child Care Providers*