

NATURAL PLAYSPACES GETTING STARTED



You've made the important decision to redevelop your outdoor space into a natural playspace. But how do you go about it and what do you need to consider?

NPSA believe that with the exception of wild, natural environments, carefully planned constructed natural playspaces provide the best opportunities for play that is unstructured and rich in learning opportunities.

Principles of Natural Playspaces

A natural playspace is a designated area that emulates a natural setting to provide a place where children can engage in creative, unstructured play with natural elements.

Natural playspaces are:-

- dominated by natural elements, vegetation, water, sand, dirt, mud flowers, insects and wildlife and which mirrors the local landscape
- full of sensory stimulation
- alive, diverse and changing all the time
- accessible at all times and in all weather
- places that promote a sense of wonder, ignite the imagination and encourage curiosity and creativity
- opportunities for open-ended interactions, risk taking and spontaneous play
- visually appealing and inspiring

NPSA have developed a set of Principles we believe are critical in the development of any natural playspace. They include: listening to children's voices, capturing a sense of place, stimulating the senses, using natural elements, incorporating seamless connections, offering a range of playspaces, using loose parts and modelling sustainable practice. Review these before designing your space.

Benefits of Natural Playspaces

Not everyone at your school or Centre may be as committed as you to developing a natural playspace, but it's important you can articulate why you believe a natural playspace

is important and the outcomes you want to achieve by developing it. The University of WA has developed a paper, called What makes a good play area for children. It's a great summary of the characteristics children enjoy most in play and the opportunities natural playspaces provide, and worth a read. NPSA can also assist by providing presentations to your parent or governing council bodies to help everyone understand the importance of nature play in children's lives and how natural playspaces benefit their development. This is a fee based service, but contact info@natureplaysa.org.au if you would like a quote or to book in date.

Consultation

A crucial first step, is consulting with those who will be the primary users of the space, the children. Adult-designed spaces cannot hope to capture what children need or want in their playspace, so their input is vital. You can collect this information by observing how children play and what they play with when they are outside. You can also ask them how they like to play and what they like to do when they are outdoors and even Invite children to draw their favourite things to do outside. It may require a little more effort to gather this information, but it will result in a space that better reflects children's play aspirations. It is important to also keep your parent and wider community involved in the process as much as possible. Their advocacy and support of the project can help you achieve the best outcomes for your project, whether in the design, fundraising, sourcing materials or construction phases.

Champions

Build a small team of people together to be part of a working group, who share the same vision and motivation to develop a natural playspace. Make sure you have the right people on board so you don't get bogged down and can get things achieved. Establish good links and communication with the people who your school answers to – governing council, etc and make sure you are fully aware of any requirements you must adhere to. Share your plans with as many people as possible and as you gather momentum provide opportunities for people to contribute to the process. Don't lose sight of who you are building the space for and the things the children have told you they want included.

Research what others have done

More natural playspaces are being developed every day. Visit as many as you can to be inspired and encouraged by what others have done and to see what elements might be incorporated at your site. Visit the [Natural Playspaces](#) page on our website and watch the [documentary](#) we have produced in conjunction with Trinity Gardens Primary School. It documents Trinity's journey to develop their amazing natural playspace, Portrush Forest. It was built with a big budget, but the 20 minutes viewing time, will give you a good background to the planning and commitment involved in building a space that has been carefully integrated into the school's curriculum and play. We can also provide you with a list we have compiled of resources, books, sites and people that can help give you inspiration and direction.

Draw or document your design

You may not be ready to mount a full-scale detailed design, but you can start by documenting a list of ideas for how the space will be used and what should be included. From here you can develop a concept plan for where and how things might go in your space. Consider:

- what things from your current site or local area do you want to retain/incorporate
- how will the NPSA design principles be incorporated and what elements will you include
- have the results from your consultation process been properly incorporated

- what things need to be factored into the plan eg drainage, topography, easements, fixed items etc.
- what plants and materials will you use; how will shade, texture, interest and eye appeal be provided
- how will irrigation and maintenance requirements be met

Draw up a concept plan. It doesn't need to be perfect but it will help others gain perspective, visualise the end goal and provide opportunity for feedback. You may want to engage the services of a professional designer and you can contact [NPSA](#) for names of people we can direct you to.

Prepare a Plan

Preparing a project plan to include stages of development, budget and timeline will help you stay on track. Once you know what you are going to include in your space, prepare an inventory of items, get your community involved and see who they know or what they can provide to help keep your costs down. Use local resources and local tradespeople to build your space. If you need names of construction services, contact [NPSA](#). It's important, you contract people who understand natural playspaces, who know their responsibilities regarding the Australian Playground Standards, who will provide quality work and who won't break the bank to deliver. If you are a DECD site, only contractors who have been prequalified with DPTI are authorised to carry out construction work for you. Contact us for information on which designers and constructors you can approach.

Document your journey

From the outset, documenting the process and keeping a record through photographs and film, will be a valuable learning tool for your own site and as something you can share with others. Keeping a record of the stages, timing, involvement, inspirations, consultations, communications, issues to overcome, and learnings will be a useful historical document. Recording the children's interactions throughout the process and documenting the way they use the space when it is completed and their experiences in the playspace before and after can help you assess the effectiveness of your created space and how you need to modify and evolve it and to consider how you use it for teaching and learning.

At a time when children's access to outdoor playspaces is declining and children's interactions with nature are diminished, your decision to build a natural playspace is not only an investment in the health, wellbeing and development of your children, but a positive step in the long term protection of our natural environment.

Don't forget, we are here to help, so contact us if you need any further assistance or guidance at info@natureplaysa.org.au