

CHURCH EXECUTIVE

A restored connection to the environment is child's play

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Become a better steward by incorporating playgrounds into the natural world.

by: Rachel Beach



Many of us first began to grasp the idea of a world much larger than ourselves as youngsters. We wandered in the woods, stuck our noses into rose blossoms, and gazed at the stars in wonderment. Hundreds of studies have shown that discovering the beauty of nature is necessary for a child's healthy development.

Spending time outdoors often means taking risks such as climbing trees or walking near a cliff, and in turn encourages children to practice good judgment and be alert to their surroundings. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission guidelines for playground safety, "A risk is a challenge we are willing to do." Unstructured play helps develop a child's cognitive thinking skills, the ability to learn, and stimulate one's imagination.

Unfortunately, statistics show that outdoor play has decreased by 75 percent since 1900. But now, some childcare specialists have called upon churches and faith-based organizations to "reclaim nature as a part of the spiritual development of children." Reconnecting children with the outdoors leads to them becoming good stewards of the environment.

A parable example

Consider the parable of the talents. We have a responsibility to improve the world that was given to us and to pass it on in better condition to our children, who will grow up to be the next generation of stewards. Some responsibility lies on the church's shoulders to communicate appreciation for and protection of the beautiful world God has given us.

As an engaged part of any community, churches can find ways to restore the connection between today's children and nature — for their benefit, their communities and the creation they live in. First, a church can start by creating outdoor play environments on church grounds for Sunday school classes as well as surrounding neighborhoods to use. Second, they could consider creating or restoring green play spaces within the community as part of its ministries.

Children spend a majority of their structured time in the classroom and their free time in front of a computer or a television. More children today lack daily contact with natural environments than ever before. In light of this, churches have a great opportunity to give children a safe place and time to play outside while the family attends services. Churches could create play environments incorporating trees, sandboxes and playgrounds. Churches can also include birdhouses to observe wildlife, or perhaps paths and bridges to explore a nearby creek.

It's important for children to receive adult encouragement to explore the outdoors without structured programs. Many adults who have an appreciation for the outdoors or have chosen environmental careers developed their attachment at an early age, usually accompanied and influenced by adults with an infectious love for the outdoors.

Engage communities

Moving beyond the church population, creating green spaces and playgrounds in local

neighborhoods or city lots can be a great way for churches to engage the community and practice their commitment to the well-being of its individuals. The Boston Project is a faith-based ministry that works with Trust for Public Land to renovate vacant lots, turning them into safe play areas in urban neighborhoods. They plant trees, design and install (traditional and non-traditional) playground equipment and recruit volunteers to cut the grass or pick up trash.

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Urban blights such as crime and depression are linked closely with inaccessibility of parks and green spaces. "In some American cities, only one-third of all children live within walking distance of a public park or other open spaces," says Will Rogers, president of the Trust for Public Land.

Dave Queeley, with Parks for People New England, says he "envision[s] churches being partners in neighborhoods advocating for public land allocation, programming at the playgrounds, or energizing young people to get involved in the planning process." This would involve churches recruiting youth from their church body or neighborhoods adjacent to the play areas. Children could help protect and create their own outdoor green spaces: designing playground areas, planting trees and keeping play areas clean. This would give children and teenagers a sense of pride and ownership in their neighborhoods, and a safe place to play and socialize.

By incorporating natural elements into play spaces — grassy areas or landscaping with trees and flowers — nature becomes an everyday part of a child's life. "Any outdoor area where children play needs shade, so why not use natural elements such as trees instead of an artificial shade shelter?," suggests Vicki Stoecklin, of White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group. Areas with more trees provide a greater sense of security, more creative play, engaged adult supervision and higher levels of social interaction among community members.



There are many ways a church can begin creating outdoor play areas: organizing a church clean-up day for a trash-littered vacant lot, a full-scale collaboration of parks departments, businesses, neighborhood families and churches collaborating to develop community play spaces. Examine your own church body. You probably will discover gardeners who would love to share plants and suggestions. You might find willing landscape architects, day-care providers, teachers and many other individuals who will act as resources and volunteers.

Next, look outside the church walls for assistance. Often park departments are willing to provide maintenance of donated green spaces or playground areas. Garden clubs are usually eager to offer time and expertise on landscaping. Organizations such as the Trust for Public Land continually collaborate with other private organizations to fund acquisition of public-access green spaces in urban and suburban neighborhoods and communities around the United States.

Research and plan

Find out what play components are available from the start. "Sales representatives from playground manufacturers, if involved in the process early on, can give planners a good idea of what play items are available so they can be incorporated into designs and budgets," says Rebecca Beach, CFO of Play Mart. Often a planning team will spend months gathering ideas, and then go to a playground manufacturer with a highly customized design and realize they cannot find the items they dreamed up. Sometimes it means starting over or expecting a manufacturer to completely customize systems when there are numerous play components on the market that would function just as well or better.

The key is to find organic, stimulating environments for children to explore. "Create environments that blend the manufactured equipment and the natural world such as bush mazes, boulders, or logs for building," says Stoecklin.

“The church paradigm has been to buy a steel playground and plop it in the ground. But they forget the importance of incorporating nature. Only in the last three years have I begun to see a shift in that paradigm — churches realizing the religious value of incorporating the natural world into children’s play.”

Consider creating green outdoor play environments a priority for your church. In the process you will be building healthier, well-balanced kids by giving them a chance to discover the wonders of nature. You will also be leading your members towards practicing stewardship of God’s creation and engaging the community in a meaningful way.

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