



# Cities Connecting Children to Nature

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## ADDING NATURE PLAY INTO PUBLIC SPACES: A PATHWAY

### THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIES

City parks and public spaces--those close-to-home spaces where children and families gather to relax, play, and connect--are also places where children, including infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, can experience and enjoy nature. By incorporating vegetation, gardens, and natural play elements such as boulders, stumps, and logs, cities can bring nature to children's daily outdoor play and learning environments. Enhancing nature play spaces for young children in parks and playgrounds also promotes city priorities including green space enhancement, climate resilience, and health and wellness initiatives.

Through its 2021 landscape scan, CCCN identified several actions cities are taking to enhance nature play spaces for their youngest residents:

**Create natural play spaces in parks and public spaces.** Cities can move away from turf, paved surfaces, and conventional playground equipment to (re)design public spaces to include diverse vegetation, community gardens, and permanent and loose structures that encourage play and exploration. City and park comprehensive plans serve as key policy documents that codify and lead to funding of these design aspirations. Cities can engage children and families in the design of these spaces to ensure that the spaces reflect community members' visions. Plan development and resident engagement processes also provide an opportunity to prioritize adding nature play spaces to parts of the city where residents have the least access to nature.

**Enhance utilization of natural play spaces in parks by young children and their families.** Cities can creatively encourage use of park and green spaces by engaging children, parents, and caregivers in design processes on the front end. Cities can ensure that families, especially those who have the fewest opportunities to access nature, know about these spaces through marketing, direct outreach, and partnerships with local organizations and early learning programs that serve these families. And, cities and their leaders can highlight the significant value inherent in natural spaces to ensure their acceptance alongside or in lieu of more traditional plastic and metal playground equipment, and promote measurement of usership.

## CITY EXAMPLES

**Austin:** In 2021, Austin opened the [Alliance Children's Garden](#), a children's park with natural elements and nature play features within Butler Metro Park. Funded through motor vehicle rental tax, the garden is divided into four thematic rooms that reflect Austin's unique culture and environment: the hill country garden; the skyline garden; the art and culture garden; and the rock and slide valley garden. The city also codified nature play spaces in the development of its [Austin Nature Play Guidelines](#) which provides best practices on the design, installation, maintenance, and management of nature play in City parks.

**Baltimore:** The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) [Nature Play Space](#) workgroup has nurtured several nature play space installations in Baltimore City. The Recreation and Parks Department received funding from Arbor Day Foundation and National Recreation and Parks Association to fund outdoor nature play spaces and programs, with a focus on creating spaces in underserved communities including vacant lots, using the input of community and families. DNR ensures funding and resources for nature play spaces go to underserved communities.

**Chicago:** The Chicago Park District's Environmental Conservation and Engagement team (ECE) works in partnership with [community groups](#) to develop and maintain nature play spaces in their neighborhood parks. These spaces are designed with community input that recognize the expertise kids have in play. They reflect the personality of the community with unique elements, beyond logs and rocks, like a human sundial, a river monster, and fairy villages. The Chicago Park District has a [Reference Manual](#) that outlines the process and responsibilities for partnering groups seeking to develop nature play spaces in their parks. The ECE supports the long-term sustainability of nature play spaces by offering materials, technical support, tools for workdays, educational opportunities, and promoting overall best practices.

**Madison:** The City of Madison Parks Department and Public Health Madison & Dane County collaborated to establish a Nature Nook in [Brittingham Park](#). The city engaged youth and communities that lack access to nature in co-designing the nature play spaces to take into consideration cultural and generational preferences. Key partners included the Bayview Community Center, Madison Department of Civil Rights, and the Madison Parks Foundation.

**San Francisco:** San Francisco has developed Nature Exploration Areas, where kids are encouraged to touch and climb, balance on tree trunks, create and explore with all of their senses. Located in parks and playgrounds across the city, these efforts include substantial community input in design through "[design jams](#)." In November 2021, the city opened its [largest Nature Exploration Area](#) to date, a 12,000 square foot play space at Heron's Head Park. The initiative is a collaboration between the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, the Port of San Francisco, Kaiser Permanente, San Francisco Children and Nature, Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds, and KABOOM!.

## STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Cities interested in implementing nature play spaces for young children in parks and public spaces can take a number of steps:

- **Inventory existing city parks and playgrounds.** Identify parks and playgrounds and inventory their current natural features, accessibility, and usage as well as opportunities to add or enhance natural play spaces.
- **Survey families and community members to identify barriers to use of existing city parks, playgrounds, and nature play spaces.** Community input will help identify barriers such as accessibility, play space offerings, and safety concerns and litter abatement. Cities should conduct a comprehensive community engagement process, including translations in common languages and outreach by trusted community partners.
- **Consider ways to enhance spaces for young children.** Consider how existing infrastructure can be added to or replaced with naturalized elements including plant materials, logs, loose parts. Some cities have enlisted the help of landscape architects or landscape design programs to design and implement nature play spaces. Cities can add nature exploration areas to [irrigation improvement projects](#).
- **Address city policies to promote naturalized spaces.** In some cities, local policies and regulations may have restrictions on what constitutes natural items or prohibit the development of nature play spaces on public lands. Cities can work to identify and address these challenges. In addition, cities can incorporate nature play space requirements in city policies and plans, such as including nature play spaces in comprehensive plans or requiring nature play spaces to be built in all new parks.
- **Develop nature play design guidelines.** Establish local standards to inform outdoor childhood spaces within the city. [Denver](#), [Austin](#), [San Francisco](#), and [Tualatin Hills, Oregon](#) have all developed design books or guidelines for nature play spaces. Cities must ensure spaces are designed for infants, toddlers, and preschool age children and their families.
- **Engage with the community to co-create nature play spaces.** Engage families with young children to get input on the design and uses of the nature play spaces. For example San Francisco hosted [nature play design jams](#) at community centers to get input on the design of Heron's Head Nature Exploration area. The City of Boulder also worked with [Growing Up Boulder](#), the Boulder's child- and youth-friendly city initiative, to incorporate youth voice into the design of "Civic Area", a 26 acre downtown park focused on nature play. The recently complete playground was designed with input from 225 Boulder children. The Civic Area includes native flowers, fast-growing trees, water play, and sand.
- **Raise awareness of nature play spaces and increase access.** Cities can consider creating an online resource hub which includes information like [location of nature play spaces](#), how to access nature play spaces through public transportation, and information on how to connect young children with nature at home.

## PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSIDER

Cities wanting to expand their nature-based programs for young children at public facilities can tap into many local, state/regional, and national resources and partners:

**Local:** In addition to Parks and Recreation Departments, public agency partners can also include housing authorities, community development agencies, transportation agencies, public works or forestry departments (for loose parts), watershed protection, health departments, and the Office on Disability Rights. Local neighborhood and community associations can help with early design processes and in later maintenance and upkeep.

**National:** Several national organizations support nature play space development, including but not limited to those listed below.

- [National Recreation and Parks Association](#)
- [The Association of Zoos & Aquariums Nature Play initiative](#)
- [KABOOM!](#)
- [MIG](#)
- [Nature Explore](#)
- [National Wildlife Federal ECHO Program](#)
- [Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds](#)
- [Valerian](#)
- [Earthscape](#)
- [Playcore](#)