

# Let's Play Outside

## The Importance of Pretend Play in Natural Settings

by Marisa Lark Wallin

"Come sit  
with me  
and wait  
for the  
squirrels!  
Let's make  
a song  
to call to  
them."

"First we  
need to get  
more acorns.  
They won't  
want to come  
to our house if  
we don't have  
dinner ready  
for them."

"You're  
right. Let's  
fill the whole  
bag up, then  
we can cook  
and wait for  
them at the  
tree in our  
house."

"I have a  
long stick and I  
am the Grandpa.  
You have to find  
a tree that's nice  
and cozy so we  
can put down the  
blanket and fall to  
sleep for bedtime—  
but first it's  
bath time!"

"Pick this up  
and put the  
acorn in here  
and watch it  
go down. We  
are building a  
robot to feed  
the squirrels!"

These are the sounds of children at work and at play. Collaboration, creativity, imagination, inventiveness, problem-solving, coordination, physical strength—when children are given the space and time to freely play outdoors, truly the whole child is able to grow.

Even outside of the school setting, open, natural outdoor space is a treasured

and limited commodity, especially in urban areas. Of course, there is a range of environments that can be referred to as "natural," from untamed forests and grasslands to nature preserves to designed and constructed public parks. Many children only have access to more structured outdoor areas, such as playgrounds, ball courts, and running tracks, which are less flexible spaces for imaginative play.

### Pretend Play

Studies have shown play is crucial for many areas of children's development—from physical strength to cognitive and linguistic growth. One 2008 study found that play contributes greatly to physical health—using more calories than

comparable organized physical activities (Mackett & Paskins, 2008).

There is a growing amount of research showing that children who participate in complex, collaborative, pretend play are better able to regulate their emotions and implement creative problem-solving (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). High-level, complex pretend play can significantly facilitate children's capacities for perspective taking, which can facilitate abstract thought (Bergen, 2002). According to a study done in early 2016, the more complex and detailed a young child's pretend play is, the more advanced their cognitive processing needs to be—as their play stretches and grows, so do their brains (Li, Hestenes & Wang, 2016). The same goes for social skills—when preschool-aged children



With over a decade of experience as a preschool classroom teacher and program director, Marisa Wallin firmly believes in the power of education as a tool for social justice, even with our youngest of learners. In addition to working in education, Wallin is an artist, writer, and performer in New York City and

finds her passions for art and education feed each other. She holds a bachelor's of fine arts in drama from New York University and a master's in education in early childhood education from Brooklyn College.



participate in pretend play that requires more complicated interactions with their peers (cooperation, collaboration, sharing, negotiating) they are practicing and strengthening their abilities to connect to other people in healthy, productive ways.

## Setting the Stage for Play

Just as we deeply consider what materials we make available to our children in the classroom (open-ended, inclusive, differentiated), we ought to also be thoughtful about the space and supplies we provide for our students in their outdoor play and learning experiences. When looking at what children play with outside, think about the materials in natural settings: pine cones, sticks, leaves, trees, and rocks—as opposed to more fixed materials like slides, chin-up bars, and swings. These objects, like open-ended materials in the classroom (fabric scraps, blank paper, blocks) have more affordance. Affordance refers to the different functions each material can serve, or, afford (Fjørtoft, 2001).

For example, a stick can have a large affordance, and be used in pretend play as a wand, a ladle, or a cane. It can also be used in more game-based play as a baseball bat, or an obstacle in a course. When allowed more flexibility with materials in spaces with more affordance (i.e. in natural outdoor spaces), children tend to engage in more complex pretend play. It is worth considering that the play that occurs in greener, more “natural” spaces can be different, and possibly more complex and developmentally beneficial for young children. When natural, outdoor play areas are not available to you and your students, consider bringing some open-ended, natural materials to the children in the space you do have (fabric scraps, rocks, seashells, ribbon, leaves, tote bags). You will be amazed by how different their play can become with these organic and/or undefined props.

## Outdoor Pretend Play

According to the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, the learning environment is the “third teacher” in early childhood education, after the two classroom teachers (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). This environment should include not only the indoor early childhood classroom, but also the outdoor environment. The environments where children play have an effect on them and the quality of their play.

A study of a Forest School, a school facilitated completely outdoors in England’s Mersey Forest, found that it helped children connect with and learn not only about their natural environment, but also grow in “social skill development, confidence when interacting with the natural world, understanding, interest, motor skills, and leadership skills,” (Ridger, Knowles & Sayers, 2012).

Having taught for many years at an urban preschool with very close access to nature (Prospect Park in Brooklyn), I was able to see firsthand the social-emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits of unstructured play in a natural setting for the children I worked with. When taken to the more open, natural setting in the park, the children’s pretend play was dramatically more complex and sustained than when they were taken to the nearby playground. Children’s conversations were richer, the groups of children playing together were larger, play scenarios were more sophisticated and were sustained over multiple days. The children collaborated, negotiated, and created complex scenarios and characters together.

In New York City, many early childhood centers rely on contained yards or nearby constructed playgrounds for outdoor physical activity, if they are provided the regular opportunity to be outdoors at all. Very few New York public school students have access to actual natural

settings (i.e., uncontained spaces with trees, grass, or wildlife). In some schools, children may go days or weeks without spending any time outdoors at all, much less within natural elements. Disparate access to nature while in school is just another example of broader inequalities in our education system and our society at large. However, with the right resources, all children in urban areas can have opportunities to interact with nature (taking field trips to forest preserves, large parks, or similar sites)—investments that will shape the future of our city and the promise of its youngest citizens.

Pretend play is a sacred part of childhood. Furthermore, it has been proven to aid in children’s development in many areas. Outdoor play, a scarce opportunity for many children living in urban areas, can provide even more benefits for children’s development—physically, socially, and emotionally. With all that hangs in tenuous balance in our country, we as educators, caregivers, and parents must be even more vigilant about every child’s human right to play in the great outdoors.

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*Children playing in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.*



Photo by Marisa Lark Wallin