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# You Can Do It!

## Improving Constrained Outdoor Spaces

by Jim Wike

"I'd love to create a more nature-friendly outdoor space, but I don't think I can because. . . ." Sound familiar? There are many reasons people give for not being able to make changes to constrained spaces, but actually there are solutions to almost any challenge. Let's explore these together in this article.

In recent years there has been increased interest in nature-based play and learning at early childhood facilities. Research is showing many benefits when children are able to connect with nature on a daily basis. But what if



With more than 30 years of professional landscape architectural practice, Jim has assembled a wide variety of land planning and site design experience. As Nature Explore Classroom Design Director, Jim is responsible for the site planning of early

childhood centers, schools, parks, hospitals, and various public works projects. He is on the Leadership Team of the World Forum Foundation's Nature Action Collaborative for Children.

your outdoor environment is one that doesn't allow for considerable redesign or transformation? Perhaps you lease space and the owner will not agree to things you'd like to do, like removing pavement, permanently installing plant materials, or adjusting fence lines? Or perhaps your outdoor space has a newer play structure that dominates the area you have to work with and cannot be removed for a variety of reasons. Maybe it's just that your outdoor space isn't working the way you thought it could and you don't have much of a budget to use for making changes. What are some of the steps you could take if you cannot do a major transformation of your outdoor space?

### Remember the Basics

Much research has been done surrounding the reasons why natural

outdoor classrooms function well or poorly. Most well-functioning classrooms have common attributes, which are reflected in the "Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature" developed by the World Forum Foundation's Nature Action Collaborative for Children leadership team. These principles address design attributes for children, design professionals, educators. A natural outdoor classroom will:

- respect and celebrate the site's natural assets, local culture, climate and history.
- use local indigenous plants, animals, natural materials, and community contributions as much as possible.
- provide multi-functionality / multiple possibilities.

- stimulate all the senses.
- be accessible to all abilities.
- inspire wonder and discovery.
- be sustainable and develop over time.

In my personal experience a few corollary principles are very important to remember:

- Define spaces clearly enough so that a child's work is less likely to be interrupted by another child inadvertently running through the space. Defined spaces also add an element of consistency that comforts children.
- Provide a variety of areas so that no one area is overwhelmed, adding potential for needless conflict.
- Provide an adequate number of mixed loose parts for exploration. What is an adequate number? If you observe children frequently combing the entire yard for other objects and becoming frustrated when they can't find what they want to use in their exploration, then you need to supply more.

Okay, so how do you begin? Let's take it one step at a time.

## Think Dimensionally

I'm guessing most of us are pretty comfortable working in two dimensions. We think two-dimensionally when we plan how to position furniture in the place we live, consider how to lay out an indoor classroom, or draw a simple map for a friend illustrating how to get to our home. We think about basic length and width.

Let's start out thinking two-dimensionally about your outdoor play space. If you have an existing play structure, first become familiar with use zones and their dimensional requirements. In the

United States, a use zone of 6 feet of clear space is recommended or required (with a few exceptions that require more generous clear areas). In other parts of the world there are most likely different standards. Check with your licensing specialist to become familiar with the requirements for your location. In my experience, use zones are often designed around commercial play structures more generously than the minimum requirement. If you find this is the case when you measure the use zone around your commercial play structure, you've just found a great opportunity:

- That extra space may become a place to plant a small garden, or to place a container garden.
- It might be where you build low, almost ground level platforms where children can build with blocks. (These don't have to be permanently installed; they can just sit on top of the already existing surface.)
- Or it might become a place where you add a storage bin for loose parts.

Look at the ground plane of your outdoor space (think floor) and see if there are some places that could become 'something' with the addition of creative touches. Changes of materials or colors may be possible. This kind of alteration can often be done for little expense and its reversible if you ever have to return the space to its original condition (if you lease space, for example). Here's an example to get you started:

- Add a few pillows covered with appropriate outdoor fabric and you have a great area for gathering or socialization.
- Add a pot with flowers next to it for a touch of nature.

- If there is room for a low table or shelf, you can even turn it into an area for art exploration.

Now let's think three-dimensionally, as you consider vertical elements in your space. Review the perimeter of your yard. If it has a fence or wall, consider the possibility of affixing plantings or display panels to it. Some creative over-the-fence storage solutions (sturdy canvas with pockets, for example) are also available. Look up. Where are the tall things? If there is nothing overhead anywhere on site, you will most likely feel uncomfortable; ditto for your children. The inclusion of shade cloth or a simple (very affordable) arbor will define a space, contribute to its thermal comfort, and provide places to hang fabric and other objects. It also provides contrast of light and shade and a reason for a developing child to consider multiple perspectives. This type of addition does not have to be permanent — only sturdy.

Think about the passage of time, a fourth dimension. A child's concept of time will be different from an adult's. Different cultures have varying senses of time. Time is an ally in an outdoor space. Child-initiated exploration should be allowed adequate time. If you are observing children having difficulty engaging in activities in meaningful ways, perhaps they are not allowed enough time to do so. If a child understands they will be called to go back inside within a short period of time, where is the incentive to do anything other than just run around aimlessly?

Time can also be an ally if the space is confined. Consider how you access the outdoor space. Is it simply through a door in mass exodus? If so, it is unlikely that any purpose will be associated with going outside. If, however there is a bit of ritual attached to the transitioning from interior to exterior space, more

meaningful activity will occur in the outside space:

Take an indirect route and notice observations made by the children — or solicit some.

### Vary the Route from Time to Time

Consider a brief pause along the way or at the entry to the outdoor space to ask children for their intentions of how they will spend their time outside.

Perhaps offer a provocation that may be associated with what you are trying to achieve in the indoor classroom. I have observed more purposeful play and calmer behavior when educators help children focus in such a way. Calmer, more purposeful behavior makes spaces that may be confined or difficult to

transform more impactful and pleasurable to experience for all.

### Add the Fun Stuff

Listed are some ideas to get you started:

- Let time be visible by creating simple displays of seasonal objects such as garden produce, flowers, and leaves. Just find a place to add a small table and invite children to continually change the objects on display.
- Think about weather or climate-related prompts. Thermometers placed in shade and sun throughout your site can elicit a discussion about why they may read differently in various locations. Rain gauges can be added to your outside area with little monetary or space demands, and are

a great way to bring math and science into conversations with children.

- Adding bird feeders to your space is another great way to spark valuable discussions. Documenting bird sightings has widespread possibilities for science and math discoveries, as well as conversations about the passage of time, bird flight paths, colors, and even rhythm and melody in bird song.
- Experimenting with solar printing, ice sculpture, or painting rocks with water can offer opportunities for awe and wonder while having very modest space requirements.
- Introduce larger cardboard boxes for temporary, but wide-ranging experimentation.



## Don't Forget the Plants

Plant materials transform spaces and they don't have to take up a lot of room:

- If you cannot plant in the ground, work with various types and sizes of containers. A few large pots with multiple trunked shrubs or ornamental grasses can provide an activity area that takes up not much more room than a bedroom closet. Wonderful experiences with care-taking and understanding lifecycles can occur with simple container plantings.
- Raised garden beds can produce abundance in small areas and can work wonders as dividers between boisterous and quieter areas. (For example, they can serve as a barrier that keeps running children from inadvertently knocking over another child's carefully constructed block creation.) Unplanted containers or raised planter boxes can provide a place for dirt digging or sand play.
- Look at options for vertical gardening to take advantage of walls or fences.

## The Child's Voice

As with all planning, don't forget to focus on the brilliance of the child. It is easy to get excited and think we have the greatest idea and yet be too prescriptive. Quiz yourself on who is doing the thinking. Are you providing opportunity or are you providing the answer? For example, consult with your children about what types of vegetables or flowers they would like to plant. Look at photos of plants that do well in your area, and encourage children to plan your in-ground or container garden each year.

## Really, You Can!

I encourage you to choose some ideas from this article and begin implementing a few at a time. By making one small change after another, you can turn an outdoor space that felt like a difficult challenge into one that is truly a pleasure to be in. Even very limited spaces can be brought to that point. You really can do it.

