# Trust, the Earth and Children: Birth to Three

by Mary Helen Young

The thought of playing outside evokes magical memories which include the sights, sounds, scents, textures, and emotions of the moment. My favorite outdoor memories include trees. I got a secure sheltered feeling when under a low canopy of soft green leaves or swishing pine needles. I indulged in the rich fantasy of elves, dwarfs, and fairies as I nestled into the tangled roots of the large trees in the park. Growing up on the coast in southern California I was blessed with abundant natural settings. The Earth and the gifts she offers continue to provide security; I seek trees when my spirit needs to refresh and recreate. These memories inspire me to promote natural outdoor environments for the children I have the honor of serving. I want to inspire an abiding trust of the earth. My goal is to encourage budding environmentalists. How does one encourage such profound respect for the Earth?

We seek to develop comfort, respect, and trust through the provision of a home-like environment in our centers. This succeeds when we sensitively and authentically include the cultures of all the families we serve. How do we create a *home-like* outside environment for the children and their families? Start with consistent, well-paid, educated, experienced, respected, and nurtured teachers. Create a strong foundation with quality teaching staff; they will create environments best suited for the group of children they are teaching in that moment. Next, consider the yards, parks, and outside play area of the children you serve, assuming they have access to such. What non-toxic herbs, spices, vegetables, and flowers are grown by the families you serve? Do the families you serve sit in hammocks, on the stoop, on towels, benches, or other outdoor furniture? Seek to incorporate family culture into the outdoor environment.

Consider the inside spaces that provide comfort and security to children. Trees, bushes, and plants can be used to define spaces and lower the ceiling. Create a quiet area in a circle of trees or bushes. Offer a toileting area under a shady tree with some privacy provided by bushes. Craft a low maze with slow and low growing bushes. Encircle a mud hole with water loving plants, leaving openings for children to merge into and emerge from. This could define a messy/science area where children may explore with water and all of nature's bounty. Add low up-ended logs, containers, and scoops; children will do the rest. Sand play need only be enhanced with the addition of scoops, containers, and sometimes water. There are a variety of ways in which you might construct or plant a definition for this for the sand area.

Logs, stones, and rocks supply a natural variety of gross motor experiences while doubling as seats and visual enrichment. Espalier trees with low branches for children to climb upon, straddle, and incorporate into structures. When you take walks with the children, model your respect for the earth and the community by eliminating garbage as you walk. In one infant/toddler center, the children begin to call the plastic rings that hold six cans of beverages together, "the bird chokes." We regularly picked them up and cut them into pieces with an explanation for our behavior. We took garbage bags and gloves along with us on all of our walks.

Nature is the supreme provider of curriculum. From trees we receive shade, sounds, colors, textures, smells, and edibles. We receive leaves, needles, cones, acorns, nuts, flowers, and bark. For those of us on limited budgets the free *loose parts* are a welcome windfall. Trees shelter and nourish birds, squirrels, and insects while at the same time they endow us with free curriculum inspiration. Thoroughly investigate the toxicity, the allergen potential and the pest drawing and repelling qualities of each plant. It is preferable to plant flora indigenous to your locale.

Let me arouse your imagination with the story of a 15-month-old girl I observed investigating nature in the Infant Garden at the Center for Child and Family Studies of UC-Davis. She spends up to a half an hour collecting acorns, transporting

Mary Helen Young, MA, is the associate director of the Center for Child and Family Studies, Human, and Community Development at the University of California-Davis. She acknowledges past and present staff of the Coastside Infant/Toddler Center, the Palo Alto Infant/Toddler Center, and the Ellen Thacher Children's Center for the influence they have had on her understanding of children and development. One focus of her work at the Study Center is the construction of a preschool yard based on the principles stated in this article!

them to our bamboo area, and nestling the acorns into the cups provided where the bamboo stalks had been cut down. She struggles and succeeds at digging into the cup with her thumb and forefinger to remove the acorns. In a log, covered with deeply pocked bark, she discovers the acorns that scrub jays had embedded into the gaps. She investigates with her fingers for quite a while then deftly removes one acorn and places it into another gap. She creates her own nesting cups as she investigates the textures, shapes, smells, and sounds of nature. She spends time gathering pine cones, investigating under the pine needles, singing, and talking back to the birds. She pulls, pushes, bends, plucks, mouths, and transports the Horsetail plant growing along the chain fence. When she discovers the pineapple guavas on the guava bushes, she heads there every day. She plucks them from the tree, bends, and picks them up from the grass. She mouths, bites, tastes, spits, pokes into, smashes, smears, and transports them. She relates to this small piece of the earth in comfort, security, and trust.

# Outdoor Magic for Family Child Care Providers

FAMILY CHILD CARE

by Hazel A. Osborn

"Let's play outside!" — magical words to any child. Even if you have no yard and use a nearby playground, you can still double your play space by using the outdoors well. Think beyond active play! Almost any indoor activity can also work outdoors.

## Play Equipment for Maximum Fun

Have plenty of elbow room outdoors, with permanent structures using less than 10% of your space. Don't overload with too many riding toys or playhouses. Each season, customize the space to the ages and personalities of your children.

A large bin on wheels, or even an old double stroller, can store and transport materials to a yard or playground.

**Here's what to include:**

- Cell or (remote) phone and emergency numbers
- First aid kit and emergency diapering supplies
- Small pop-up tent with lawn-chair cushions and stuffed animals for shaded cuddling and reading
- A few favorite books (changed periodically)
- Picnic ware for outdoor meals and dramatic play — let the children help you wash them
- Snacks and water
- A few dress-ups and props (changed periodically)
- Art materials like sidewalk chalk, water buckets, and paintbrushes
- Musical instruments (they'll seem so much quieter outdoors!)
- Gardening tools, measuring cups, scoops, magnifiers, sorting cups, butterfly nets, and a scale for exploring nature
- Balls, hoops, jump-ropes, a parachute

If you tidy up your outdoor kit every day at nap time, it will always be ready for more fun.

## Make It Happen — Every Day

Spend at least an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon outside. Time your outings for maximum comfort depending on the weather and season.

**Too much sun?** Awnings, tents, tarps, shade plants, latticework, trellises, gazebos, porches, and playhouses all can work to control light.

**Hard concrete patio?** Pad with climbing mats or resurface with interlocking outdoor rubber tiles from a hardware store.

**Too hot?** Take a tip from Arizona providers and use a fine mist spray to cool down safely. Have plenty of shade. Sprinklers and water pistols are safer and less germ-y than pools. And have plenty of drinking water available. How about installing an outdoor drinking fountain? — great for water play, too!

**Too cold?** Don't use temperature as an excuse to stay inside. Alaskan children play outdoors until it's –10°F! For children who can crawl or walk, 20°F (including wind chill), is still warm enough to enjoy outdoor play if they are warmly dressed. Babies, bundled warmly and set in a wind-protected,

Hazel A. Osborn, MA, was a family child care provider for ten years before becoming a work and family consultant and child care trainer. She is the author of *Room for Living, Room for Loving: finding the space you need in your family child care home* (Redleaf Press, 1994). She holds degrees in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and interdisciplinary studies, and has served on the Board of the National Association for Family Child Care. She lives outside of Washington, DC, and is married with three children.

sunny corner of porch or patio will enjoy the outdoors, too. Have a stash of spare outerwear (including boots) neatly stored near the entry area. And invest in plenty of warm, comfortable clothing for yourself so you aren't tempted to cut play time short.

**Oddly-shaped play space?** Convex mirrors placed strategically let you see all of the property from one position.

**No fence?** Festival fencing (the orange plastic stuff) is inexpensive and temporary, and will remind children where to play (but is not escape-proof). Storm fencing (vertical wooden slats wired together) is also inexpensive but splintery. Chain-link fence and garden fencing are climbable. Try picket or board-on-board fencing for privacy with peeking views. Don't count on any fence to contain active children; you need to be outside with them.

**Scattered toys a headache?** A storage shed is perfect for storing riding toys, out-of-season items, and other toys; it doubles as a play space when the toys are in use in the yard. Use a large keg or drum to store balls outdoors; empty and turn on side for hideout fun.

**Sea of mud?** Large porous mats or planks can keep children from sinking into mud.

**Rainy day?** A roofed porch, garage with open door, or even a large tent can rescue outdoor play.

**Cranky family?** Your own family needs the outdoors, too. Make sure to have adult-size picnic space, protect their gardening areas, and keep their recreational equipment convenient, but safe. Make sure your child care children pick their playthings.

# A Play Yard With Action and Adventure

by Deb Curtis

SCHOOL-AGE

A number of years ago I was involved with training the staff in an after school program located in a small shopping mall. The program had no outdoor play area of their own, but they were able to take the children to a park right around the corner. One sunny autumn afternoon I was with the group at the park when we discovered a tree with a massive trunk and large bare branches that had been blown over by a dramatic wind storm the night before. The children who lived in the local neighborhood were there in full force, enthusiastically immersed in exploring the tree. They were running and jumping off the trunk, climbing the branches, dismantling the broken limbs, and cooperatively using them to build forts and create exciting adventures. In contrast, the teachers I was with decided these activities were unsafe and spent the entire time we were there keeping their group of children away from that amazing tree. It was no easy task as there was a strong force drawing the children to investigate this powerful phenomenon of nature.

This experience has had a profound impact on my work with children. I continually question and reflect on the limits I put on children's experiences. What are they missing when their childhood is spent in fenced-in, often sterile or commercial outdoor environments away from the ongoing changes of the natural world and the events of everyday life in a neighborhood? Are the rules we make to keep children safe also keeping them from rich experiences that are vital for their self confidence and growth and development? If we eliminate all of the risk from children's lives, how will they learn to keep themselves safe? Because safety is our utmost concern, offering children opportunities for these physical challenges and adventures requires planning and ongoing negotiations.

## Provisioning the Outdoor Play Area

To provide children ongoing experiences with the natural world and its cycles, the program where I work uses simple and accessible strategies. With a grant from our local native plant society we planted a natural garden with flowers, bushes, and trees to take care of and to observe their change and growth. We intentionally let the grass grow tall in a sec-

Deb Curtis has been an educator and advocate in the early childhood profession for over 30 years and has come to understand the profound importance and incredible learning that occurs within an adventurous and nourishing childhood. She is a child care provider at the Burlington Little School in Burlington, Washington, and co-author with Margie Carter of a number of books for early childhood professionals. Deb is dedicated to providing rich experiences for children and helping grown-ups remember special moments from their own childhoods so they will encourage them for children.

tion of the playground and then mow paths through it so the children can run and hide in it. We let grapevines, berry bushes, and apple trees grow against the fence of our yard so early fall becomes foraging time with children trying to figure out how to pick the fruit from the tallest branches and not get poked by the thorns. In the dark days of winter we buy inexpensive flashlights and explore the night and darkness together.

We have provisioned our play yard with loose parts and natural materials for building and cooperative hauling with such items as boulders, driftwood, large tree branches, plywood, plastic bins and boxes, and moveable slides and ramps. We have designated a portion of the yard for a digging area where the children use small industrial shovels to dig, pile, bury, and rearrange the earth over and over again. The staff and children have identified trees in the yard that are safe for climbing and rules for supervising climbers and protecting the trees. We've added new equipment to the outdoor environment with the goal of providing satisfying, yet safe challenges for the children's increasing confidence and physical skills. A group of staff and families built a tire wall from recycled tires, added rock climbing posts to the back of a playhouse for scaling the incline to the roof, and created a concrete path with a natural slope for going fast on a bike or roller skates.

**Tire Wall** — We have found that the children mediate their own climbing and do a good job of keeping themselves safe. Most children practice a long time before they can get to the top of this wall. There is always a big celebration when they finally gain the confidence and skills to make it. (PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR)

## Negotiating Rules and Risks

Because we have a wonderful playground designed for action and adventure, the entire community of children, staff, and many parents are continually involved with reflecting on the activities that take place and negotiating the rules and risks. We believe this active process helps our playground to be safer than a playground that has established rules without discussions or negotiations.

A great example of this process occurred when we first built the tire wall. There was a big difference of opinion about the rules that should be established to keep the children safe as they climbed. We began by wrapping a caution tape around the climber and only opening it for climbing during planned times of close supervision and observation. We invited the children and adults to participate in a study to determine the safest way to climb the wall. Each day we opened the wall and observed the children as they climbed. Adults tried climbing as well. Following each session we had discussions about the best routes, the safest ways to climb, and how high to go. This process helped us establish effective guidelines and collaborative agreements, and best of all the children really learned how to climb the wall safely.

Mini versions of this process take place almost every day on our playground. The adults and children call attention to activities that may push safety boundaries. Together we try things out, observe, discuss, and get a variety of opinions before changing or establishing a rule. The children in our program work on assessing their own abilities and take up the challenges that match their comfort level and physical skills. They are able to be fully engaged in their bodies and imaginations while also learning to keep themselves safe, even when adults are not around!

# Beyond Ramps: Outdoor Environments to Welcome All Children

by Kirsten Haugen

Children typically spend outdoor time unselfconsciously engaged in key developmental tasks. They burn off steam, process new experiences and emotions, and negotiate imaginative worlds with peers and playground *stuff*. However, many outdoor environments unintentionally exclude children with physical, sensory, developmental, or behavioral challenges. While accessibility standards emphasize safe *physical* access, it takes a more personal approach to make a space *welcoming* to all children. Catherine Curry-Williams, co-founder of Shane's Inspiration, remarks, "I believe it is the birthright of every child to simply play in the park. Can a child in a wheelchair actually play? A ramp to where he can play just one thing while kids are jumping for joy somewhere else only brings isolation."

## From the Ground up

**Ground surfaces** are one of the first things to impact access. Gina Fritz, a preschool teacher and parent who uses a wheelchair says, "If a playground is surrounded by sand, I can't get in there to push my daughter on the swing or get to her on the climber, so even if it's a great park, we just don't go there." A resilient unitary surface may be more costly upfront than loose fill, but it's highly accessible and typically requires less upkeep and expense in the long run.

A **paved access path** can double as a tricycle circuit and happily lead to your playhouse, sand area, climbing structure, and storage *garage*. Highly contrasting colors safely mark **transitions** from pathways and platforms to steps, slides, bridges, or sand. Ramps and elevated play tables allow children to play without leaving their wheelchair or walker. Wagons with seating inserts and tricycles for two become buses, trucks, and taxis, enriching physical and dramatic play for all kids, including those with physical and visual impairments.

Depending on the moods and needs of the children, **sandboxes** make a versatile base for boisterous, dramatic, social, scientific, or self-soothing play. An accessible sand table can bridge the area between your sandbox and access path. Include sand toys with a variety of shapes and handles. Dig out a supportive seat in the sand for children who have difficulty sitting. Notice how some children love to be partly buried in the sand. The gentle pressure can be particularly calming for some children with autism.

**Sound elements** like bells, chimes, and waterfalls delight children with or without visual impairments. And whether or not children have hearing difficulties, they'll excitedly explore the range of vibrations and rhythms you can make on buckets, railings, wood, and other *found* instruments.

> *"We're going to have to build a ramp for Thomas to get down here to play. It'll have to be big and metal and strong, and we can use it for match box cars, too!" — a kindergartener*

Label your playground with **words and icons** for playground structures, activities, rules, and moods. Signs support communication and early literacy, especially for those who are deaf or learning a new language. Use textures (such as grooves made with a router) and contrasting colors, so children with visual challenges can use them to navigate and make confident choices. You'll find children of all abilities tracing their fingers through the words and shapes, often naming them as they go.

Kirsten Haugen is a consultant for educational and assistive technology, promoting inclusive strategies for early learning, literacy, and play. She has contributed to previous Beginnings Workshops and has participated in three World Forums. (See you in Acapulco!) She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with her husband and two sons.

**Painting** outdoors can be both messy and inspiring. Clear lexan panels or painting easels make it easy. Some children enjoy painting what they see on the other side! Photograph or make *prints* of any masterpieces, and hose it all down when you're done.

The playground may be a saving grace for *active children* who need to blow off steam. Children with *social difficulties*, however, often face their greatest challenges during less structured play. Carol Gray offers specific strategies for such children in her short book, *Taming the Recess Jungle.* In addition, giving some children special outdoor time to roam, regroup, or retreat can help them attempt more social play during regular outdoor (and indoor) time.

When you consider ways to welcome children with special needs, you'll build in elements to benefit all children. You'll also expand recruiting for both staff and volunteers. A welcoming outdoor space enables caregivers, grandparents, and others with special needs to safely supervise and engage children in play, by providing shade, seating, accessible storage for tricycles, and other stuff, and ways to easily watch and reach children at play.

## Plan for the Future

Plan for your ideal environment now whether or not you have the funding you think you'll need to build it. It's easier to lay out a thoughtful design now and add features as you go, than to move pathways, landscaping, and structures later. Jean Schappet, of Boundless Playgrounds, suggests that whether your budget is large or small, "Think with the end in mind . . . 'How can we provide the very most play options within our space and budget?'" In smaller areas, this may mean foregoing space-hungry swings for a sandbox, playhouse, and climber where several children can play together. While a list of desirable equipment and critical regulations may seem like a logical starting point, Schappet suggests that we instead begin the way children typically approach outdoor play, with questions like "What can I *do* here?" Schappet points out we can also gain insight from our own favorite play memories.

Inviting key players in your community to share in your dream from the outset may help that dream happen sooner rather than later. Service club members may see an accessible play space as a worthy service project and fundraiser. Firefighters or police will offer practical input on first aid and rescue. Librarians, therapists, and others may offer creative ways to get kids playing. Above all, solicit the ideas of children through discussions and drawings.

Schappet recommends, "Go visit other playgrounds and talk to the adults who supervise, and ask what works and what doesn't. Observing the kids will also tell you a huge amount. Make this a thoughtful process." Once you've gathered ideas, work out a *bubble map*, using large circles to work out where to place different play zones. This will help prioritize which elements you'll include now and in the future.

## Beyond the Playground

Outdoor experiences don't end at the playground. When you go on nature walks or community outings, plan ahead to creatively include children with disabilities. Call to inquire about accessibility of buses, paths, parks, and buildings. Offer specific feedback in writing if the environment or service is not truly accessible. Preview the experience with children, using maps, photos, and stories to highlight what the children can expect and what you expect of them. You may find a three-wheeled jogger or all-terrain wagon equipped with a strap-in seat will work better for some children than a conventional wheelchair or walker (check first with the child's parents and therapist).

*Four-year-old Sam calls to his teacher from the climbing structure, "Hey, Gina! Come onto my space ship! It has a RAMP!" His teacher wheels her chair over and joins him on his travels "to infinity and beyond!"*

## A Ripple Effect . . .

A welcoming environment goes beyond providing physical access and including children with disabilities. It also requires building awareness among all children and caregivers. Children deserve an opportunity to thoughtfully discuss why a peer cannot speak, why their classmate with autism gets longer turns on the swing, or why the child with Down Syndrome "is mean because he sticks his tongue out at everyone!" These sometimes-difficult questions offer unique opportunities to raise awareness and empathy, and to

problem solve with children. Children and families who grow up in your welcoming environment will take these ideas and expectations with them when they leave your program, creating a ripple effect across your community and beyond.

***A Very Special Thanks***
*to Jean Schappet (Boundless Playgrounds), Catherine Curry-Williams (Shane's Inspiration), and Gina Fritz (Educational Environments, Inc.) for their contributions to this article.*

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

### ■ Trust, the Earth and Children: Birth to Three by Mary Helen Young

**Nature as curriculum:** What a wonderful way to focus teachers' attention on creating magical outdoor explorations. Have teachers take a walk (or crawl) around your outdoor environment, noting as they move around all of the natural plants, dirt, trees, etc. that have the potential to be experiential curriculum for very young children. Take the teachers' lists and find ways to add these experiences to curriculum planning in the future.

**Teachers as models:** Young gives the example of teachers being models for environmentally sound behavior by picking up plastic six pack holders and cutting them apart before discarding them to avoid choking birds and other small animals. Ask teachers to consider the ways they can model responsible behavior related to the outdoor environment with their children. Make a list to remind teachers of the important ways they *teach* by showing children what to do and explaining why.

### ■ Outdoor Magic for Family Child Care Providers by Hazel Osborn

**'Tis the season:** Osborn suggests that outdoor space should be customized for the season. Explore this idea and try it out.

**Making it happen:** Wonderful ideas for implementation are considered in this article. Take a look at them and decide which ones are a perfect match for your environment. Then, try them out!

### ■ A Play Yard With Action and Adventure by Deb Curtis

**Rethinking limits:** The poignant story about the fallen tree (see p. 53) certainly brings up the issue of fenced in and limited childhoods. Use this article as a springboard to reflect with teachers about their limits and whether they are limiting children's experiences in the process of protecting them. Facilitate a discussion about keeping this issue in balance by reconsidering rules regularly.

**Negotiating rules and risks:** Curtis explores the dynamic nature of rules with young children, giving a marvelous example of child-initiated negotiation of the rules. Explore this idea of sharing the rulemaking with children and parents. Ask for volunteers to work in small groups of children, parents, and teachers to review one rule, discuss alternatives and modifications, and negotiate new expectations. If it works, expand the idea to additional rules.

### ■ Beyond Ramps: Outdoor Environments to Welcome All Children by Kristen Haugen

**"Think with the end in mind!":** Consider the possibility of beginning by visualizing the perfect playground for your program — one that incorporates all of the elements Haugen identifies as important for all children, not just for children with special needs.

**Thoughtful discussions:** The idea that some children get different treatment is a difficult thing for many teachers to handle with young children. Consider the idea of embracing these questions as opportunities to raise awareness and empathy and to problem solve with children about differences. Ask teachers to generate some of the difficult questions children ask. Divide teachers into pairs and have them role-play the situations, focusing on raising awareness and empathy and problem solving.

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## Resources for Kirsten Haugen's article

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## Additional Resources on Outdoor Environments from Article Archives on www.ChildCareExchange.com:

**Environments With Families in Mind**. 9/02
From Borders to Bridges: Transforming Our Relationships With Parents by Ann Pelo • Supporting Multicultural, Multilingual Families by Julie Garrett • Making Families Welcome by Deadru Hilliard • Changes in the Environment Through Collaboration by Jane Cecil, Kimberly Cothan, and Lynn White • Home-like Environments by Roberta Bergman and Sue Gainer

**Environments**. 11/01
What Kind of Place for Child Care in the 21st Century? by Jim Greenman • Strategies for Enhancing Children's Use of the Environment by Deb Curtis • Designing the Family Child Care Environment by Hazel A. Osborn • Imagine! Child Care — A Great Place for Teachers, Too by Peggy Haack, Angie Roberson, and Rosemarie Vardell

Thinking About the Aesthetics of Children's Environments by Jim Greenman. 11/87
Learning Environments for the 1990s — Part One by Jim Greenman. 6/89
Learning Environments for the 1990s — Part Two by Jim Greenman. 8/89
Creating Environments Where Teachers, Like Children, Learn Through Play by Elizabeth Jones. 4/80 (#7)
Rethinking Our Environments by Margie Carter. 11/01
Places for ALL Children: Building Environments for Differing Needs by Diane Trister Dodge. 9/93
Environments for Special Needs. 3/97
Getting to the Heart of the Matter by Rochelle Bunnett and Nancy Leigh Davis. 3/97
Enhancing the Environment for ALL Children by Victoria Youcha and Karren Wood. 3/97
Using Your Senses to Adapt Environments by Kirsti Haugen. 3/97
More Than a Playground: Accessible Outdoor Learning Centers by A. Phoebe Meyer. 3/97
Interest Areas Support Individual Learning by Lisa Adams, Whit Hayslip, and Trudi Norman-Murch. 3/97
Creating Environments That Intrigue and Delight Children and Adults by Wendy Shepherd and Jennifer Eaton. 9/97