

# Softening Your Playground

by Ron King

Each year we get requests from center directors asking for ideas on how to “soften” their playgrounds with more natural play elements.

It’s safe to say that most of the 330,000 licensed child care centers and family child care homes in the United States (2004 statistics from the National Child Care Information Center) use plastic and metal equipment on their playgrounds. The ground beneath this equipment is usually covered with woodchips to prevent injury from possible falls, a concrete pad or path may provide connecting links and a place for children to play with wheeled toys, and typically there is not enough shade. This all adds up to a pretty harsh outdoor play environment which does, indeed, need “softening.”

Directors are rightfully concerned and wonder whether anything can be done to address the problem. Though our company’s designs are equipment-free, we have also found ways of incorporating more natural play experiences in manufactured play environments.

Here’s how you can do it, too.

## Step 1: The assessment (Getting the “lay of the land”)

The first step is to assess what you have. The easiest way to do this is to make an accurate map of your site using graph paper, a 100’ tape, and a direction compass. Measure accurately, and use the graph paper to record it.

Make sure you show all your existing features: boundaries, fences, buildings, trees, concrete or macadam paths, fixed playground equipment, light poles, large shrubs, streams, ponds, drainage ditches, and so on. To determine exact locations of items in the middle, triangulate using the corners of buildings or fences. At this point, don’t include anything that can be easily moved, such as sheds, play equipment that sits on the ground, and small shrubs.

If your land has a varied terrain, try finding a way to show the size, shape, and location of the little hills and valleys, and indicate with arrows the general slope of the land. This will come in handy later.

Now use your compass to orient your map, and then draw a big arrow pointing North. The noontime sun will

be opposite that on the south end of the arrow. We find it helpful to draw a big red circle on the south edge of the map to remind us that in the late spring, all summer, and early fall, it’s hot on the playground, and that we need to do something about it. We’ll talk about this later.

## Step 2: Highlighting the negative spaces

Find a piece of tracing paper and staple/tape it to the front of your map. Use a black marker to trace over all boundaries, light poles, large sheds, and buildings. Fill in the sheds and buildings with solid black.

Ron King, Natural Playgrounds, Architect, AIA, is president of the Natural Playgrounds Company in Concord, NH. His firm works throughout the US designing innovative, environmentally sensitive, sustainable, and easy-to-license natural playgrounds, natural playground elements, play parks, and outdoor classrooms for child care centers, K-12 schools, and communities. Based on his interviews with over 4,000 children, King continues to write articles describing their fascination with natural environments, and lectures throughout the country on ways to incorporate these findings into designs for natural playgrounds. This research, together with a wealth of other resources about natural play, can be found on [www.naturalplaygrounds.com](http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com).



Using a red marker, outline in red all the areas taken up by playground equipment and the fall zone around it, and outline in red all the paved and concrete pathways and pads. Fill in these outlines with solid red.

If you have any water or wet areas on your property, use a blue marker to outline and fill these in. This area should include intermittent water flow such as from roofs after rains, as well as low areas that remain wet or muddy.

Use a yellow marker to circle and fill in all large trees, large shrubs, and well-established gardens.

All the left over space that's around — and between — the above colored-in areas — is called "negative space." Outline and fill in all this space with a solid green marker. This is the space available to "soften" your playground using the ideas below.

### Step 3:

#### What do you want children to learn?

The third step is to get a good sense of your curriculum goals — what is it you're trying to teach children about their outdoor environment, and what is it that you want them to learn? For instance, on your "thematic units" list may be items like spiders, snow, farming, apples, birds, rocks and minerals, water, weather, wild animals, simple machines, and probably many other subjects that are better taught outside than in. But also on your list may be things you want your children to be able to do.

For instance, we are continually amazed at how many children don't know how to jump. Knowing how to handle your body's momentum after a running jump, or what to do with your knees after jumping off a height, is something

children should learn early, so creative jumping might be one of those activities you'd like your children to be able to do when they're outside.

We've developed a very comprehensive questionnaire for teachers that gives them a chance to explain what kinds of play and learning opportunities they need to effectively teach children what they want them to know.

You might want to develop a similar tool that gets teachers thinking about the outside play environment in a different light. One benefit of doing this is, that with a written preface to the questionnaire, you have a wonderful opportunity to introduce teachers to the idea of using the outdoors as a classroom, and to inspire them to think of creative ways to provide learning opportunities for children when they're outside playing.

One caution when you're talking or writing about this project: don't use the word "playground." For instance, don't say, "What kinds of things would you like to see on your playground?" Children and adults have only one frame of reference for playgrounds — those filled with equipment. An open-ended question will result in lists of equipment they've seen elsewhere and will not generate the information you want.

Try "outdoor play and learning area," or "outdoor classroom," or "play park," or "green play area," all of which convey a more inclusive concept.

### Step 4:

#### Responding to the information

If you find that teachers want their children to learn about birds, squirrels, chipmunks, butterflies, bees, inch worms, earth worms, and earwigs in their natural habitats, then clearly you need to find ways to include more wildlife habitat such as shrubs, trees,

brush piles, flowers, compost piles, and so on in the play yard.

Or suppose teachers say they need more shade. If you're trying to make a softer, more natural play space, then the answer to too much sun is not another gazebo or shade tent, but is instead a living willow hut, or a sunflower house, or a vine-covered arbor, or a cave, or shade trees.

One last example: suppose everyone feels that children should have more opportunities to make things, build things, play with loose parts, develop eye-hand coordination, be creative, and discover things on their own.

The response to this is a list of very creative solutions that will go a long way to softening a play space. Here are just a few ideas:

- large, deep (2' or more, and drained well), free-form sand pit with lots of small shovels, hoes, spoons, trowels, cups, and buckets (use a lightweight, nylon mesh to cover when not in use)
- water supply near the sand
- pile of 4' long saplings for making tee-pees, lean-tos, corrals
- 2" and 3" diameter saplings or branches cut into 6", 12", 18", 24", and 48" lengths for building things
- large, half-buried boulders to climb on
- small boulder piles to climb up
- barefoot path
- finders trail
- pile of fairy house materials
- patches of tall grasses
- brush piles to crawl in
- pile of fall leaves to jump in
- scent garden
- analemmatic sundial
- labyrinth
- and so on!

# Directory of Playground and Outdoor Equipment

This directory represents a first step toward locating playground and outdoor equipment providers. To request free information from these institutions, visit [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or circle the number for each institution of interest on the Product Inquiry Card located between pages 64 and 65.

**Circle 7**

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*Play Power LT (formerly known as Little Tikes Commercial) is the industry's leading manufacturer of commercial-grade early childhood playground equipment. Play Power offers a wide variety of durable playground equipment, independent components, and amenities to complement your playground area, all of which meets the ASTM, CPSC, and CSA guidelines and standards.*

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[www.playgroundssafety.org](http://www.playgroundssafety.org)  
Donna Thompson

*Online training for inspectors of child care playgrounds; Online training for supervision and maintenance for child care and one for schools; Playground safety, workshops; S.A.F.E. play areas: Creation, maintenance, and renovation book; Supervision kit; School assessment kit; Child care assessment kit, videos, DVDs, lesson plans and S.A.F.E. playground handbook.*

**Circle 24**

**Natural Playground Company**  
(888) 290-8405  
[www.naturalplaygrounds.com](http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com)  
Ron King  
[ron@naturalplaygrounds.com](mailto:ron@naturalplaygrounds.com)

*The Natural Playground Company is the leading expert in the design of cost-effective, beautiful, and exciting alternatives to manufactured playgrounds in child care centers. Our innovative play environments blend natural elements with creative landforms to offer unique and inspiring combinations of challenging play and exercise opportunities in safe, natural learning environments.*

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