

Nature Wins Playground Battle

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Summary: The long-standing battle between the multibillion dollar playground equipment industry and the significantly cheaper, safer, and more beautiful alternative of natural playgrounds is heating up, and children and parents are benefitting big time!

For Immediate Release

CONCORD, NH. In an unprecedented move, the Natural Playgrounds Company announced a "win" in its battle with the mammoth playground industry. At stake, is the physical and mental well-being of kids everywhere, and the company says it's found the silver bullet.

"The 3000 K-6 children we interviewed don't like equipment," said Ron King, President of the Natural Playgrounds Company. The interview process began over two years ago when a parent followed King to 26 classes, recording every word spoken by 513 students.

"What we learned was eye-opening," said King. "We've been so used to hearing about how great manufactured equipment is, but come to find out, the kids don't like most of it!"

Playground injury statistics bear this out. Here in the US, 500,000 playground injuries are reported every year, and King says experts think the same number go unreported. "In the year 2000, playground injuries cost the US over \$8 billion in medical, legal and liability, pain and suffering, and work-loss, a fact that the playground industry has trouble dealing with.

"Every year, equipment manufacturers work hard to meet new safety regulations issued by ASTM International, but equipment is inherently unsafe," says King. "The vast majority of playground injuries are caused by kids interacting with equipment, mostly when they're bored."

King contends that kids are easily bored by equipment because it can't hold their attention for long periods. The thrill of going up and down a ladder, or sliding down a pole, or walking across a wobbly bridge, or even climbing on a net dies out after a few times, and that's when kids use the equipment in ways for which it wasn't intended. That's when they get hurt.

The answer, King says, is not to give them more equipment, but to give them play opportunities that hold interest.

"A nature path is a perfect example. Along the path can be hundreds of little things that can be touched, observed, charted, or used. Natural things grow and change, so there is always something new to see, and as the seasons change, even boulders take on a new look surrounded by fall colors or covered by snow. In northern winters, a small hill becomes a sliding area, and in the summer, a place for kids to roll down. There's just so much more to do, and so many more ways to have different kinds of fun and to learn something along the way!"

It's this variety of opportunity that is the essence of natural playground design.

As part of his slide show, King asks kids where they'd rather be: here or here, and he gives them a choice of place for an activity. For instance, would they rather spend their day climbing on a jungle gym or in an amphitheater in the woods full tiers of boulders?

"Invariably they pick the natural setting," says King. "It's almost like they're drawn to it. One of the questions is where they'd rather talk to friends, and the choice is between a typical playground gazebo and a beautiful stone wall circle in the woods, and they always shout out 'There, there!' when they see the stone circle."

Asked if there were really a battle going on between equipment and nature, King is clear about the line in the sand.

"Kids see things in different ways than adults. Their bodies are generally smaller, their eye-hand coordination is developing, they have time to notice, and be affected by, small things, and they interact to things that are in their scale. A large piece of equipment made up of large, uniform parts, is way out of scale for most kids, so they can't relate to it.

"Then the equipment is set in a area filled with either rubber or woodchips which is flat and completely devoid of character. This kind of background for a play setting is so boring, and so 'not-in-keeping' with what the outdoors is all about, that the kids might as well stay inside."

King contends that playing outdoors should be enticing to kids of all ages, interests, abilities, skills, and playing and learning styles. A child who loves to read should have a comfortable, quiet, beautiful place to read. A child who likes to run should have many different, fun destinations, or one who is just plain active should be able to choose among all kinds of interesting, challenging activities. Kids who want to garden, talk with friends, play board games, play with water, dig in the sand, study the weather, play with the sun, watch bugs, and relax in the shade, should all be able to do these things on a playground.

According to King, this is what a natural playground is all about: helping kids and adults interact with and learn from nature and the natural environment while they're having fun.

"It's really very simple," says King. "Equipment is the focus in manufactured playgrounds, nature is the focus in natural playgrounds. In terms of what the kids prefer, nature wins every time."