

# Softening Your Playground

By Ron King, Natural Playground Architect

President, The Natural Playgrounds Company LLC [www.naturalplaygrounds.com](http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com)

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 US (2004 stats 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.

Directors are rightfully concerned and wonder whether anything can be done to address the problem. Though our company’s Natural Playground 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 One: 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 Two: Highlighting the Negative Spaces**

1. Find a piece of tracing paper and staple/tape it to the front of your map.
2. Use a black Sharpie to trace over all boundaries, light poles, large sheds, and buildings. Fill in the sheds and buildings with black.
3. Using a red Sharpie, 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 red.
4. If you have any water or wet areas on your property, use a blue Sharpie 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 muddy.
5. Use a yellow Sharpie 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 (1-5) is called "negative space." Outline and fill in all this space with a green Sharpie. This is the space available to "soften" your playground using the ideas below.

### **Step Three: What Do You Want Children to Learn?**

The third step is to get a good sense of your curriculum goals -- what it is you're trying to teach children about their outdoor environment, and what it is 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, and 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 (two feet or more, and drained well), free-form sand pit with lots of small shovels, hoes, spoons, trowels, cups, and buckets;
- water supply near the sand
- pile of 4' long saplings for making tee-pees, lean-to's, corrals;
- 2" and 3" diameter saplings or branches cut into 6", 12", 18", and 24" lengths for building things;
- 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;
- anagrammatic sundial;
- labyrinth
- and so on!

### **Step 5: Designing the Softer Green Space**

As tempting as it might be to randomly place in the green area your list from Step 4, here are some design guidelines and ideas that will make optimum use of the space.

1. Sit on the ground in various places to see what things look like from a child's perspective. Start making decisions based on how *they* experience the site.
2. If your site is covered with woodchips, remove what you don't absolutely need, and in their place:
3. Create berms (single or linear mounds of earth. See [www.naturalplaygrounds.com](http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com) for construction guidelines) of varying heights (up to 4') and shapes everywhere you can. These will give your playground a much-needed third dimension while providing visual interest, surprise, shadows, private spaces, and rolling and sliding opportunities.
4. New paths that are narrow (18"), winding, and exciting help organize spaces and activities, so use them to tie areas together.
5. Plant fast-growing trees, tall shrubs, or living willow structures in the hottest parts of the green space, and use these areas for quieter activities. Keep in mind that the shade will always be on the north side

of the plants. Use an occasional evergreen to provide visual texture and interest.

6. Use Kid-Friendly treated lumber (you can't buy the bad stuff anymore) to build stairs, jumping places, climbing walls in berms, and other elements built into the earth.
7. If you want to protect an area, or to direct movement, build raised containers or beds which will encourage children to find other, more desirable routes.
8. Lastly, to "fill in" dead areas, plant low maintenance tall grasses, wildflowers, ground covers, berry bushes, and other shrubs. In making your selection, think about fall and winter colors and textures.

A simple, inexpensive irrigation system will protect your investment and keep the softer parts of your playground looking great forever.

### **Sidebar:**

Ron King, 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 childcare centers, K-12 schools, and communities. Based on his interviews with over 5,000 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)