

Recently, we received a question regarding space allocation and the difference between natural playgrounds and traditional playgrounds:

Decades ago, playground stakeholders, which I'm sure included child care specialists and playground industry representatives, arbitrarily decided that a 75 ft.² of flat land, either of which is about the size of two sheets of plywood side-by-side, was all the room a child needed to run around, explore, discover, and do things outdoors.

This was during an era that offered no other option but manufactured playground equipment, but even then, if you think about the way children learn - constantly moving, exploring, discovering things - an area the size of two sheets of plywood, with a portion of that area allocated to the mandatory playground equipment, is clearly insufficient for discovery-oriented play and learning activities.

To address this insufficiency, the natural playgrounds industry suggests that 200 ft.² per child provides more opportunities for exploration, discovery-oriented learning, and free play, and for incorporating play and learning elements that meet the curriculum.

Learning institutions and childcare centers can always schedule children to limit the total number outside, but even then, there are two questions that need to be addressed: do the children have room for the necessary variety of play and learning elements, and to explore and make their own play and learning experiences? And can the natural playground sustain the intensity of use?

Whether you schedule children to be on-site all at once or at various times during the day, the total impact on the site is the same. Many people don't appreciate that natural playgrounds are living things that need to be cared for, so heavy, intensive use can wear things out pretty quickly. Obviously, the smaller the area the more prevalent this issue, which is another reason for having a site much larger than the 50 to 75 ft.².

In terms of wear and tear, that square footage requirement is probably okay when the playground is covered with wood chips or rubber mulch, but it certainly is not okay if the playground is covered with living things.

Though 200 ft.² is ideal, it's not often possible, but keep in mind the following:

An outdoor playground is usually located on land left over from building construction, and is a last consideration noted on plans with a rectangle labeled "playground."

If the design team understood that more and better learning takes place outside than in, the playground and the building would have equal importance during the design process. This would result in a larger, more thoughtful and well designed outdoor space, with leftover areas being used for lighting, storage, walkways, parking, incidental landscaping, and other elements not directly related to the curriculum.