



25 Easy Nature Play Ideas for Preschool Yards

Great nature play doesn't require elaborate and expensive play spaces! Even a limited outdoor area can be affordably enhanced for nature play, using common materials and plants to create a young child's heaven chock full of small-scale wonders and magical discoveries.

Try a few of the following ideas, and add more over time. Be sure to mix in your own ideas, too!

Outside Door

Use it — more than you already do, in all safe weather conditions!

Water

Kids love water play! Provide water from multiple sources, if possible: a hose, a faucet, a sprinkler, a rotating sprayer, a rain barrel, a hand pump, or even just spray bottles.

Water Transport

Part of the fun of water play for young children comes from moving it around! Use buckets, watering cans, hollow bamboo poles, plastic pipe (with curves & connectors), plastic gutter sections, pots and pans, recycled milk jugs, etc.

Digging Pit

Just plain dirt, going down. If you have heavy clay soil, you may want to lighten it by mixing in a few bags of sand. *Note:* Digging pits miraculously turn into mud puddles after a rain. Your kids won't mind a bit — but be sure to forewarn their parents! Mulch or pea gravel can also be used for digging pits.

Dirt Pile

Just plain dirt, going up. The larger the pile, the more fun and creative play your kids will have. It will inevitably get muddy and messy — and your kids will have even more fun.

Sand

Lots of it! — contained by shrubs, landscape timbers, old tires used as planters, boardwalks, whatever. The more sand, the better! Avoid small commercial sand boxes, which don't have much magic to them. Have a source of water nearby, or a handy way for kids to take water to the sand — since sand becomes a *really* great, artistic play resource when it's wet! (*Note:* Check with your license inspectors about requirements for covering your sand area at night. Sometimes landscape-scale sand areas don't have the same cover requirements as smaller sand boxes.)

Logs

Just lay one or more large logs on the ground, for balancing, sitting, and hiding. Stake them in place or partially bury them, so they can't roll unexpectedly. Laying several together, end to end and zig-zagging, produces a nice challenge course! (But have a soft fall surface around them, just in case.) Tree care services are a good source for logs from trees they have had to cut. They might be sweet-talked into delivering them for free!

Shrubs

They're often faster growing than trees, and seem almost as giant to preschoolers' eyes! Plant shrubs in groups to create nooks and niches, or in rows along a narrow pathway. Choose some evergreen varieties (if viable in your area), and include species with flowers and berries that will attract insects and birds. Use arching or weeping varieties to create hide-aways under their branches or when planted along a wall or fence.

Rocks and Boulders

Let your kids build with rocks that are small enough to carry around, but too large to throw. Even larger, rounded boulders (beach ball size or bigger) can be great for climbing and pretend play — either singly, or in a jumbled "boulder mountain." If you don't naturally have large rocks on your site, you can buy them and have them delivered — but choose permanent locations!

Leaf Pile

If you're lucky enough to have large deciduous trees nearby, rake the fallen leaves into giant piles and let the kids have at 'em! Better yet, let your kids do the raking — they'll love it! The good memories will last longer than the leaves.

Hills and Berms

Children love small, grassy hills that they can roll down, charge up, sled on, hide behind, or play "king of the mountain" on. If you have such a slope, plant it with a tough, hardy turf grass and keep it clear for uninhibited play. A preschool hill doesn't need to be huge — even just four or five feet high will do — and it can be either a conical "bump" or a longer, serpentine berm. If you don't already have varied topography in your play space, you'll need a lot of soil and heavy equipment to create a good play hill. Ask a builder, garden center, or landscape design firm for help!

Plants — Lots of Plants! — Everywhere!

Grow plants in beds, in giant pots, in window boxes, in old tires, and up trellises and trees. Choose plants for species diversity, various colors, different heights and textures, and fragrances. Have the kids help plant and care for them. Raised garden beds can help protect young or more fragile plants from active preschooler play.

And if you don't have a good shade tree, buy the largest one you can afford and have it planted by the pros. Use a hardy, native species; protect it from harsh play until it is established; and don't compact the soil over the root zone. It will take years to become a great play tree, but the sooner you get it growing

Vegetable Garden

Choose vegies that will ripen during your school season — either rapidly in the spring (like peas, radishes) or ones that will be ready in the autumn. (If your school is year-round, this is no issue.) Good possibilities include berries, potatoes, sugar snap peas, corn, carrots, and cherry tomatoes. Use planting beds, giant pots, or both. You can start vegetable seeds inside during late winter/early spring, if you have a sunny and warm window sill. Transplant them outside after last frost (check with local gardeners for timing). If garden care is needed during the summer when your school is out, try to schedule one returning family to tend the garden each week, until school starts again.

Pumpkin Patch

Pumpkins are unique enough to merit their own category! They are not hard to grow, but they benefit from lots of rich compost or fertilizer, and they won't mature until fall. Pumpkin vines need some room to run, but you only need two or three plants. (No need to grow a separate pumpkin for each child.)

Butterfly Garden

Plant a jumbled selection of insect-attracting flowers, both annuals and perennials. Ask your local garden center for help in choosing good plants, or research this on the internet. Don't forget food plants for the caterpillar life stage, like ones from the parsley family. (*Note:* your local Extension Service is also an excellent source for advice regarding any plantings. Their Master Gardeners may even help you establish your gardens, since they are required to do volunteer community service. Ask!)

Milkweed Patch

Milkweed inevitably attracts Monarch butterfly caterpillars, as it is the only thing that they eat! The caterpillars (easy to identify with a field guide or the internet) can be collected by cutting a branch they're on, and then placing them (with the branch) into a screened box (about the size of a ten-ream paper box). Keep the box supplied with fresh milkweed leaves until the caterpillars turn into chrysalises (usually in less than a week). There must be a bare stick or two standing in the box, from which the chrysalises can hang in open air.

After 9 to 14 days, an adult butterfly will break out of the now-transparent chrysalis. Be sure there is enough room in the box for the butterfly's wings to fully open, so they won't be deformed, and then release the adult within a few hours. This is a *truly* magical process for children to see! (*Note:* Swamp milkweed from a nursery is prettier than the Common milkweed that grows wild everywhere, and it works just as well.)

Seating

Kids use small seats for talking with a friend, daydreaming, looking at books, or just plain resting. Use a variety: benches, bench swings, kid-size Adirondack chairs, hammocks, hammock chairs, rockers, boulders, stumps, logs, etc. Put at least some of them in intimate, sheltered spots, ideally with overhead shade.

Play Stream

A good approach for preschools is to create a shallow stream that flows only when children turn on the water. Dig a very shallow, sloping stream bed, and fit a heavy pond liner (available at most garden centers) into it. Cover the bed with gravel and larger cobblestones, which kids can use to create dams and channels. Put a water source at the top that uses a spring-loaded, child-activated valve (ask a plumber for help with this).

Since re-circulating or standing water is usually a no-no with licensing, have your stream drain into a rain garden. If you can't (or don't want to) use real water, make a dry "stream" out of a twisting gravel and stone. Either way, include a small bridge and add plants along the stream's edge for more interest.

Adventure Paths

Create very narrow, meandering routes through tall grass, between boulders, or just connecting two activity areas. Use small stepping stones, tree cookies, planks, etc. — or just dirt or mulch. If the path leads into a "secret" nook, all the better!

Discovery Board

Lay a piece of scrap plywood, roughly 2 feet square, on the ground in a quiet, vegetated corner of your play area. Leave it for a couple of days, and then periodically check to see what's moved into the micro-habitat underneath — like pill bugs, ants, slugs, millipedes, and other mini-beasts with kid appeal! Always put the board back in the same spot. (*Note:* It's best to skip this idea if poisonous snakes are common in your area, as they might choose to rest under the board on hot days.)

Tunnels

You can make a simple tunnel by burying a culvert pipe under dirt; put a layer of sand inside, for comfort. You can also create tunnels by growing gourds, beans, or other vines over a row of store-bought trellis arches. For a different sort of living tunnel, plant willow "whips" (cut, straight stems) in parallel lines, and tie the tops together as they grow. Most species of willows will grow well from stems that are cut during their dormant winter months, stuck firmly into soil (cut end down), and kept moist until they start growing. Willow stems are flexible when young, so it's easy to shape them with twine, wire, or posts

Loose Parts for Outdoor Construction Play

Use small logs, large wooden blocks, boards, and "tree cookies" (log slices). Sand the edges and corners of these to avoid splinters. Also use sticks, milk crates, tarps, sheets of cardboard, blankets, etc. Do not use chemically-treated lumber.

Bird Houses

Kids like to watch nest building activity, and then see (and hear) the babies. Not all bird houses are alike, though; swallow, wren, or bluebird nest boxes are generally good choices. Get building instructions and advice from a nature center or internet sources, including where to mount them and how high. Site them thoughtfully, as they can produce messy droppings below.

Tools and Toys

Keep handy a variety of tools and toys to help explore and play with nature — e.g., insect nets, bug houses, magnifiers, binoculars, spades, scoopers, sieves, colanders, buckets, rakes, small plastic containers, pots and pans, watering cans, etc.

A Change of Clothes

Good nature play means that kids will occasionally get muddy and wet! Keep a change of clothes handy for each child.

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

Green Hearts is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to restoring and strengthening the bonds between children and nature.

We speak, write, teach, and consult about the power of nature play, and how it can be returned to childhood. We are also currently planning our first unique facility — a children's nature center in the Omaha suburb of Papillion.

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