

The Outdoor Classroom: An Attitude, Not a Place[©]

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1. Assess what you have:
 - Is what you're doing, working?
 - Do you have natural features now? (grass, trees, dirt, rocks, hills, etc.)
 - Are you able to maintain the natural features you have?
 - Do you have suitable equipment now?
 - Does it meet the developmental needs of the user group?
 - Do you have adequate space?
 - Is there enough variety?
 - Do you have quality equipment, whatever it is?
 - Is there a reason to eliminate equipment in your playground to have a natural environment? If so, how do you replicate functions you might lose?

2. Discuss your goals for the play environment:
 - More natural materials?
 - Nature or things that look like nature but avoid natural tendencies (like splinters)?
 - More experience with natural events... (planting, mud play, etc.?)
 - More developmentally appropriate activities?
 - Specific curricular objectives? (discovery or more organized activities?)
 - Different, better or more effective use of space?
 - Meet licensing requirements or NAEYC accreditation or other?
 - Meet ADA requirements?
 - Are parents on board with the anticipated changes and their roles/responsibilities?

3. Determine what can remain and what should be replaced:
 - Can equipment be used as is?
 - Can equipment be modified to meet new goals?
 - Can it be modified to meet developmental needs of the user group?
 - Does the manufacturer have any warranty obligations?
 - Are natural areas appropriately situated and sized right?
 - Do you have room to add on or do you need to start anew?

4. Determine your "appetite for maintenance" as you consider material and plant selection
 - Do you have a fulltime maintenance person who can address maintenance of natural materials?
 - Will water restrictions make establishing new vegetation or maintaining vegetation difficult?
 - Is habitat creation a concern? (what critters could you attract?)
 - Assess maintenance program capability as it might relate to safety

5. Develop a master plan:
 - Work with professionals who know children and children's spaces
 - Work with landscape professionals in cooperation with above
 - Survey your playground area for all salient features (fences, sprinklers, existing trees, etc.)
 - Plan the entire space, not just where equipment goes
 - Make sure age-segregated playgrounds meet minimum square footage requirements
 - Include indigenous plants from local sources
 - Get approval of proposed changes by the agency responsible for licensing

6. Determine funding resources available for the project:
 - PTA/PTO
 - Targeted fund raisers
 - District funds
 - Community donations (businesses) and resources (Scouts, gardening club,)
 - Grants and foundations

7. Implement the plan:
 - All at once
 - In phases
 - As a service project and/or with volunteers
 - Document the installation and keep all records of purchase on file

7. Review the playground at each stage of completion
 - Is it working the way you anticipated?
 - What needs to be changed about planned additions?
 - What needs to be removed?
 - What needs to be added (props, loose items, etc.)
 - Are staff members involved and enthusiastic about changes?
 - Are parents supportive of new changes?

For help in planning or implementing a more natural outdoor play space:
please contact Eric Strickland: cell 817-793-1606 drplaytxs@att.net.