

Play is a vital part of childhood and growing up. Through play, children learn to develop social, physical and emotional skills. Providing children with an environment that incorporates areas for quiet, natural, creative, active and exploratory play will stimulate children's imaginations and learning. By developing a sense of self within the child, they will gain self-imposed thinking skills, that are not guided by an adult or carer.

Designed playspaces can offer lots of interesting and enjoyable places for children and carers to spend time. Natural playspaces accommodate activities including:

- connecting with nature and elements of nature
- playing with water and sand
- playing with loose equipment/parts/found items ☐ climbing
- rolling down hills
- growing plants for smelling and tasting
- observing insects, animals and birds
- nurturing and observing worm farms and compost areas
- digging patches
- exploring
- gravel pits for older children
- talking in quiet social areas
- moving around on interesting pathways
- riding a bike over bumps
- growing and exploring arbours and tee pees

## Creek Beds

Natural slopes make great places for creek beds. Strappy leaf plants can be added into these areas to imitate a natural dry creek bed environment. Including a tap on high ground can change the creek bed into a watercourse. Ensure adequate drainage is provided to prevent pooling of water. Select pebbles and stones appropriate to the children's age e.g. avoid small pebbles for children under 3 years of age.

## Digging Patches

Digging patches give children another medium to explore and encourage imaginative and constructive, physical play. These can be designed into a corner and integrated with plantings and/or vegetable patches. Ensure that the site is free of contamination prior to constructing the digging patch. It is recommended that an adequate cover is provided for digging patches. The most suitable type of soil for digging patches is a 50:50 sand soil blend.



## Rocks and Boulders

Creative placement of rocks and boulders throughout a playspace can provide users with easy to challenging "routes". Rocks and boulders can be great for surrounding sandpits and digging patches, learning climbing skills or just good old-fashioned fun. Children almost always gravitate towards rocks and boulders, and they become the immediate favourite place for children of all ages to explore and challenge themselves. Incorporated into a mound or embankment, climbing rocks and boulders are excellent for building upper and lower body strength, and are a must-have in any natural playspace.

## Unstructured Play Areas

These include open grassed areas for running and informal ball games, as well as sloped areas for rolling. These open spaces encourage spontaneous play and are important to give children a sense of freedom. Games such as tag or ball games often appeal to older age groups.

## Planting

Trees, shrubs, groundcovers and other plants, play a number of roles in a playspace. Trees and shrubs can be used as wind breaks, to provide shade and control the temperature, reduce glare, define play zones and can be used as an education tool. Deciduous trees can block out summer sun but allow the warmth of winter sun. Plant cover can also create private, hidden spaces that children can personally connect with.

## Imaginative, Creative and Exploratory Play

These areas are often the most neglected part of children's playspaces, but can play a valuable role in fostering growth and development in children. They can be inexpensive to create, requiring some imagination and enthusiasm on your part.

Planting can provide scents, textures, forms, colours and play props whilst also encouraging birds and wildlife to the playspace. Incorporating sounds, using wind chimes, wind socks or musical instruments, can offer further stimulation to the senses.

## Inspection and Maintenance

A natural environment will attract wildlife. Ensure that a daily inspection of the playspace is conducted before children enter to identify any potential hazards. Maintain the playspace on a regular basis to ensure all natural play elements are in working condition and safe for use.

## Quiet Areas

Quiet areas allow children to have some time away from others and connect with nature, which encourages calmness and supports emotional development.

## Natural Shade

Shade is essential for all playspaces. If an area feels uncomfortably hot or glary it will not be utilised. Trees provide the best shade quality, filtering sunlight and lowering summer temperature by an average of 8-10°C. If possible, playspaces should be positioned in areas that best utilise shade from trees, particularly in the warmest period of the day.



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Need more help? Kidsafe SA provides a playground inspection service. Contact us for a quote to organise an inspector to visit your playspace and provide specific advice.