

# Why Outdoor Spaces for Children Matter So Much

by James Wike

Jim Wike is a practicing Landscape Architect and president of Kersey/Wike Associates, P.C. with offices in Memphis and Loudon, Tennessee. The firm has completed numerous designs for learning, play, and health care settings with a wide variety of program activities throughout the United States.



As a landscape architect, I obviously believe that the way outdoor spaces are designed matters; but recently I've become more of a believer than ever before in the power that well-designed outdoor spaces can help young children grow and learn in positive ways. Through a partnership with the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and the National Arbor Day Foundation, I was part of a team that designed a demonstration outdoor classroom in Debras City, Debras, that serves children from ages 5 to 11. The space is a great example of how landscape architects and educators can work together to provide outdoor settings for child care centers and schools that really work well. These are a few of the principles our team followed throughout

this process that might have relevance for anyone wanting to create a better outdoor experience for young children.

The physical design of the outdoor classroom is as important as the physical design of the indoor classroom

When I use the term "outdoor classroom," I'm not talking about a plant-filled area that is only used as a place for children to study flora and fauna. My definition of "outdoor classroom" is a place where all kinds of learning can occur as children interact with various elements in the natural world. For example,



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



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our demonstration classroom has a music area where children can play a marimba made from ipe wood while their friends dance on a small wooden performance stage. It has places for children to build with hardwood blocks; to experience hands-on physics principles as they explore a changeable shallow waterway; and a low "tree house" to climb where they can create rooms and other enclosures using pieces of sturdy see-through fabrics. It has large grassy areas where children can run; a "Nature's Art Area" where natural materials can be used to create mosaics and patterns; and a variety of pathways to explore that are surrounded by interesting vegetation. Children can strengthen skills in mathematics, science, language and literacy, visual-spatial thinking, social interaction, and body competence while having lots of fun and developing a profound sense of wonder about the world of nature.

I have observed that teachers and caregivers who spend great amounts of time making sure the indoor classroom is well designed and stocked with a variety of wonderful materials plan for the design of the outdoor space as an afterthought . . . if at all. As I have visited many cities, I'm struck by how many outdoor spaces in schools or child care centers are stripped of natural vegetation, contain sterile-looking equipment, and don't offer children the opportunity to

learn and grow in just as many ways outdoors as they can indoors. I've become increasingly convinced that if more education and care facilities had thoughtfully designed outdoor spaces, we'd see a decrease in children's behavior problems.

### Natural materials are best

You'll notice that I didn't mention plastic structures and rubberized surfacing when I described our demonstration outdoor classroom. That's because our team believes that it's crucial for today's young children to be given daily chances to interact with materials found in nature . . . like wood, stone, water, grass, and non-poisonous trees and plants. It really isn't the same experience for children who go outdoors to a space filled only with hard plastic and concrete. Even if the outdoor space you have for children right now is heavily on non-natural materials, you can look for places to plant a few trees or add planters to introduce some plant life. The addition of some wooden blocks or other naturally occurring materials for children to explore can make a real difference. Being outdoors and really getting to interact with nature are not always the same thing, unless we adults make an intentional effort to have natural materials in our outdoor classrooms.

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### The design of the outdoor space should “teach” children how to use it

Since our demonstration outdoor classroom is visited by school groups and early education programs throughout a large region, we get to see how well the design of the space helps children know what to do there. It’s fun to watch a kindergarten class arrive at the “gathering space” at the entrance of our classroom, survey the various areas in the space, then naturally spread out to explore. Typically within a matter of minutes, children are all happily engaged in productive activities. Teachers often marvel at how few behavior problems occur as children work. Our space is divided into areas, each of which is arranged so that it supports a different kind of activity. Much field testing helped us determine what areas to include and how to arrange areas in proximity to each other. The important point is that we separate active and quiet play from each other, and use signage and other visual cues to help children intuitively know how to use each space productively.

### Why landscape architects say “form matters”

Every outdoor classroom will be physically different because each one should reflect its location, climate,

and overall mission. So what makes one more successful than another? When I undertook the task of assisting with the Nebraska City project, I listened carefully to all the exciting things the administrators and staff were saying about how their young children were learning. I relied heavily on all their research and the principles upon which they were based. It was a considerable challenge to incorporate those principles, providing adequate separation between activities while molding it all into an exciting place to be.

The largest contribution a landscape architect can make is transforming a space into a place. Think of the last several different coffee shops, public buildings, or residential living rooms you have visited. Each type of space may be very similar in size and function. One will invariably catch your attention more than the others. More than likely it has to do with how the space was arranged, how it was lit, and how skillfully materials were used. Now that space was manipulated by a skilled individual transformed it from being a mere volume into a space that was vibrant and engaging. It was fun to be in. The same happens with exterior classrooms. Just getting all the necessary activities included does not guarantee it will be a successful classroom. The ability a skilled

landscape architect has to understand the site, along with the ability to understand basic tenants of visual composition and perception, can make all the difference. Form, indeed, matters.

I want today's child to have the same chances I had

As a landscape architect, I know that I chose the work I do in large part because of the chances I had as a child to explore outdoors. Whether I was working my way through a hemlock grove after a fresh snow or watching my twig "boats" race down a ditch after a hard rain, I was learning about spatial volumes and basic physics. I'm concerned that many young children today just aren't getting to do those kinds of things as much. Research shows a significant decline in the amount of time today's children spend in the outdoors. Sandra Loffert and John Landberg cite the following statistics: Between 1981 and 1997, the amount of time U.S. children aged 6 to 8 spent playing outdoors decreased by four hours per week, while the amount of time they spent indoors in school increased by almost 4 hours per week.

I believe that if landscape architects like me and early childhood educators really work together, we can help reverse that trend. One opportunity we'll all have to meet together on an international scale will come in October, 2000 when the World Forum Foundation presents the Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children at the Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska. I plan to attend this wonderful gathering and am excited about the positive changes we might be able to bring about together. In their book, *The Geography of Childhood*, Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Dimble say:

"It is quite possible for today's child to grow up without ever having taken a solitary walk beside a stream, or spent the hours we used to foraging for pine cones, leaves, feathers, and rocks —treasures more precious than storebought ones. Today it is difficult to tear children away from the virtual world of the mall to introduce them to the real one."

Children benefit in so many ways from increased contact with the natural world. Let's give them the gift of well-designed outdoor spaces that help them discover the true treasures of our world.

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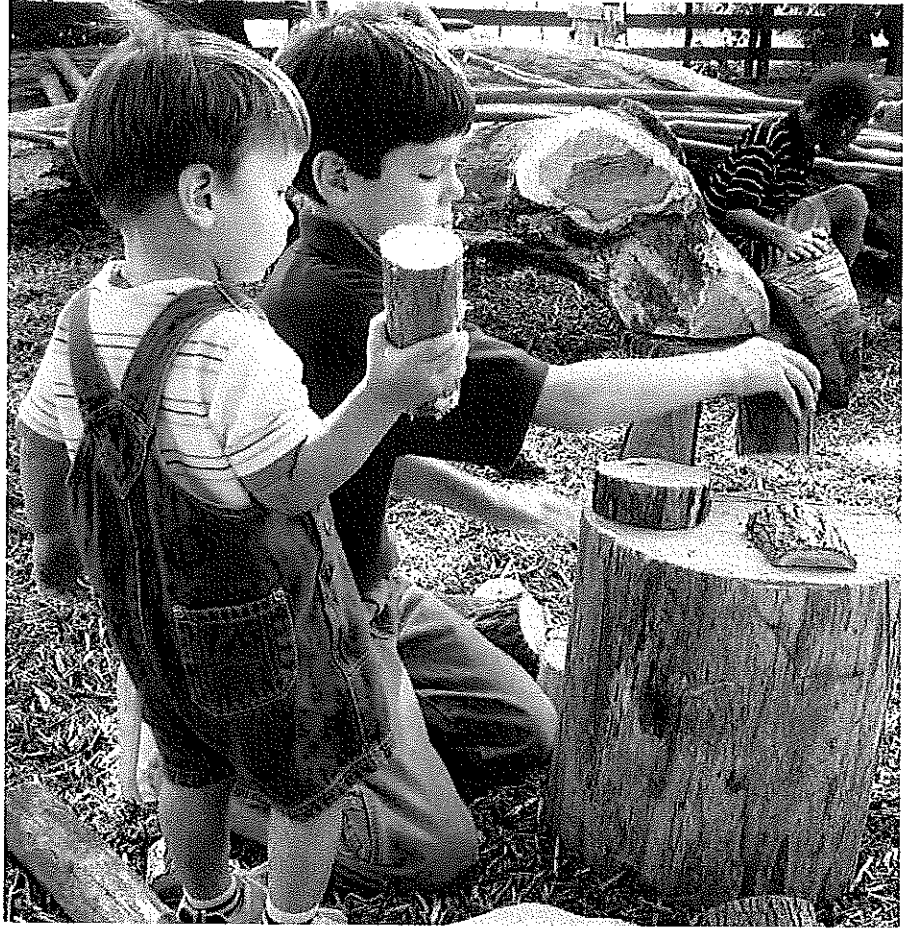
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[www.ArborDay.org](http://www.ArborDay.org)

[www.dimensionsfoundation.org](http://www.dimensionsfoundation.org)



## Ideas for Teacher Training by Kay Albrecht

**A picture is worth a thousand words:** This article has a wealth of wonderful ideas in the photographs! To use them effectively, take photographs of your outdoor classroom. Notice the new terminology. Then ask teachers to ponder the photographs. Lead a summary discussion of the impact of the photos from each source. Discuss ways to add more natural, engaging, open-ended materials such as those in the article's photographs. Assign small groups of teachers to develop a plan to collect and organize new collections of natural and engaging items.

**Does your outdoor classroom teach?:** This challenges us to make sure we give the same attention to the outdoor classroom as to the indoor classroom. Help teachers consider this perspective. Analyzing what your outdoor classroom teaches children. After the analysis, debrief what teachers found out and what they would like to see changed or amended or redesigned completely.

**Reflection:** Ask teachers to imagine children whose experiences are described. Then ask teachers to imagine ways to ensure that children have such activities. Brainstorm ways to include families with parks, green spaces, and the outdoor classroom to make sure the nature deficit of children doesn't prevent them from the wonderful experience of being outdoors in the natural world.