Small Wonders:

Designing Vibrant, Natural Landscapes for Early Childhood

Toyota Canada Inc. and its Dealerships – Proudly supporting outdoor classrooms in Canadian schools.
Evergreen and Toyota Canada Inc., with its Dealerships, are working together to ensure that children’s school environments are as nurturing as possible. The Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds Program represents a commitment to contribute positively to the health and well-being of future generations by educating children about the importance of restoring and preserving the environment. Teachers, students and community members are invited to participate in a nation-wide effort to reclaim Canada’s school grounds and to create healthy learning environments.

**Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds Charter**

The Evergreen and Toyota Canada Inc. partnership represents a shared commitment to positively contribute to the improvement of school grounds and the natural environment in order to enhance the emotional and physical development of Canada’s children.

We believe that the provision of educational resources and the support of caring citizens will transform school grounds into healthier, more dynamic places for learning.

We believe that by combining Toyota’s commitment to corporate social responsibility with Evergreen’s ecological restoration practices we will enhance our combined reach and the quality of business, community and learning.

We commit our organizations to lead by example, and to provide measurable and meaningful resources and support to Canada’s schools and to the communities in which we work.

It is our sincere intent to foster a new spirit of community involvement and environmental stewardship within the hearts and minds of Canada’s future: children and youth.

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**Published by Evergreen**

Evergreen is a national non-profit environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities through naturalization projects.

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Evergreen is a national non-profit environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities through naturalization projects. Evergreen motivates people to create and sustain healthy, natural outdoor spaces and gives them practical tools to be successful through its three core programs: Learning Grounds (transforming school grounds); Common Grounds (working on publicly accessible land) and Home Grounds (for the home landscape). We believe that local stewardship creates vibrant neighbourhoods, a healthy natural environment and a sustainable society for all.

**Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds Program**

The Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds program brings school communities together to transform barren school grounds into healthy, natural and creative outdoor classrooms. By planting trees, shrubs and vines, and adding shade, seating and heritage vegetable gardens, the learning opportunities come alive. These outdoor classrooms provide students with a healthy and safe place to play, learn and develop a genuine respect for nature and each other.

**Evergreen Resources**

Evergreen’s integrated collection of resources is designed to inspire, educate and guide students, teachers, planners, community groups and individuals through all stages of a school, community or home naturalization project. Our resources include guidebooks, instructional and inspirational videos, fact sheets, case studies, newsletters, research reports and an on-line registry. For the latest information on Evergreen’s resources, check out our web site at www.evergreen.ca.

Evergreen is funded by the generous support of individual Canadians, foundations, businesses and various government agencies.
Imagine creating a space for young children that evokes their sense of wonder and curiosity; a place that offers a rich variety of play opportunities; a place where children can fill their senses, make friends, explore the natural world and try something new every day. This book is about designing such places at the facilities where young children play and are cared for, such as child-care centres and daycare facilities.

If you work with young children — whether as a daycare centre supervisor, a staff member or a parent — this book is for you. It describes Evergreen’s approach to creating vibrant, nurturing and safe outdoor spaces for young children, and it offers a framework for developing your own creative designs that serve children’s needs, as well as the needs of the staff and the community.

Throughout this book you’ll find questions meant to help you assess your own space, see its full potential and imagine the possibilities for a design that’s tailored to your specific site. It’s our hope that it will inspire you to envision, and then undertake, the transformation of your own early childhood play space.
Message from Raffi

Maria Montessori, one of the last century’s most brilliant educators, said that “Play is the child’s work.” When speaking to groups of parents and teachers, I remember that and like to add “and young children are 100% employed, all the time.”

It’s through play that children make sense of things, from their own physical bodies to the web of animals and people in their lives. Lifelong learning and emotional health begin with child’s play, inspiring the imagination and creativity that we all need to become the best we can be.

Outdoor play is particularly important to young bodies and minds, and, I am delighted that my album “Let’s Play” has been instrumental in helping childcare centres and primary schools develop pesticide-free outdoor play spaces. My thanks to Evergreen, Troubadour Music, and Universal Music Canada for their roles in making the “Let’s Play, Canada!” grants—and this Small Wonders Guide—a reality.
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Why change your early childhood landscape? 1

GUIDING PRINCIPLES 2
1. Designing for children’s needs 2
2. Designing for staff needs 5
3. Reflecting the uniqueness of the site 6
4. Designing to enhance site programming 7

A DESIGN FRAMEWORK: Organizing your ideas 8
Activity: What can children do at the site? 9
Space: Making the most of your site 15
Flow: Movement around the site 18
Place: Creating a unique landscape 20
Viability: Making it work in the long term 22

NEXT STEPS: Where to go from here 24
Consulting with young children 24
Consulting with adults 24

RESOURCES 26

BIBLIOGRAPHY 28
INTRODUCTION:
Why change your early childhood landscape?

Children love the natural world. An outdoor space that’s rich in natural features can powerfully stimulate their sense of wonder and discovery: What’s under that rock in summer and in winter? Why do leaves change colour? How does water feel flowing through my fingers?

Current research makes clear that our earliest experiences — the way we play, learn and interact with people and the world around us as young children — have a profound and formative effect on our health, thinking and behaviour throughout our lives. From a very early age, children start to empathize with nature, and by intimately exploring their own outdoor space, they begin to develop a broader sense of caring for the natural world beyond their playground.

At Evergreen, we believe that natural features play a central role in creating rich and stimulating outdoor experiences for children. But improving a site means going beyond simply planting trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Design is key, as well as finding a balance between natural and built features.

To create a landscape that works, we recommend keeping several integrated goals in mind:
• safeguarding and improving children’s health and well-being
• nurturing early childhood development
• increasing the diversity of natural features and play opportunities
• enhancing the use of the outdoors for children’s programming.

These goals may be similar to what your child-care or early learning centre already aims to achieve. We believe the vision they express is particularly important in today’s urban environment, where the experience of childhood is changing rapidly, and young children have limited opportunities to connect with nature. In this context, child-care centres must strive to provide a rich outdoor experience for all children.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The ideas in this book reflect our vision of great childhood landscapes. These are sites that are diverse in form and ecology, rich in natural features and play opportunities and attentive to social and cultural needs. We envision landscapes that evolve and can be adapted over time, and that are beautiful and fun for children while being practical for program and maintenance staff. Our approach to realizing that vision is guided by four simple principles:

1. Designing for children’s needs
2. Designing for staff needs
3. Reflecting the uniqueness of the site
4. Designing to enhance site programming.

Refer back to these principles and use them as basic criteria for the design of your site. Each one is described in more detail below.

1. DESIGNING FOR CHILDREN’S NEEDS

Outdoor environments for young children should be designed to accommodate the whole spectrum of developmental needs — physical, intellectual, emotional and social.

British researcher Wendy Titman’s 1994 study of children’s experiences in their school grounds concluded that kids have four basic, and integrated, needs in their outdoor play environment: a place for doing, a place for thinking, a place for feeling and a place for being. In fact, they need a place for all of these at once. Although Titman’s study focused on school-aged children, we believe her findings apply equally to toddlers and pre-schoolers. And to these four needs, we’ve added one of our own: a place to be safe and healthy.

A place for doing

How many times have you heard a child call proudly, “Look what I can do!”? Young kids are learning to use and control their bodies, as well as testing the limits of what they can achieve. In many cases, simple design elements can respond to this need to do. For example, a small log at the edge of the sand area can be a prop for toddlers to pull themselves up, a hurdle to climb over and even a balance beam. In the sandbox — a central element of many child-care centres — kids can build, create and transform their environment in new ways every day. And a simple grassy slope can present a real challenge for a two-year-old who’s learning to walk on different surfaces — and a great sense of achievement when she reaches the top, not to mention the fun of rolling back down to try it again!
A site that includes all kinds of play opportunities to develop new skills and meet challenges — from pulling yourself up, to creating a new dance or climbing higher than ever before — is a thrilling and satisfying place for little ones: “Look mom, I did it!”

**A place for thinking**

In the early years, when brain development is at such a crucial and active stage, play is how kids gain new skills and expand their understanding of the world. Natural elements, in all their complexity, interconnectedness and constant state of change, offer tremendous scope for play and discovery. A grassy meadow can be a window into a miniature world of insects, blades of grass, flowers and soil. A flower garden that sprouts, grows, blooms and dies over the course of a season provides different sensory stimuli every day. An outdoor environment that includes natural elements and provides opportunities for independent discovery, active experimentation and quiet contemplation to mull over new knowledge is an intellectually stimulating place for children.

*By the time children reach age three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults.*

(Shore, 1997 in McCain and Mustard, 1999)
**A place for feeling**

Landscapes for young children are often planned with physical development in mind. But kids also need a place where they can reflect, express emotion and develop sensitivity to others. Children’s emotional development and moral sensibilities are nurtured when they spend time in a caring, supportive community, and when their environment is a place they are proud of, where they feel they belong and where they can build relationships with children and adults. These caring environments are common indoors, but they are equally important outside. Careful site design can create spaces and activities that meet these needs. For example, child-size seating, paths and activity areas give children a feeling of belonging. Activities that engage children in the design and care of the site — planting seeds, building forts, painting signs and watering plants — nurture pride of place. An outdoor environment that’s beautiful and engaging, where children feel connected and at home, sends the message that they are cared for.

**A place for being**

Through play and social interaction with others, children discover their identities, ‘trying on’ versions of themselves to see what fits. An outdoor environment where children are treated as individuals with unique preferences, skills and ideas allows them to be themselves, and to define themselves in relation to others and the world around them. This place for being is often a quiet, private refuge, or a nook or meeting place where two or three children can gather to talk and share their discoveries.

Remember that small children often find special places where adults don’t even think to look: under a chair, on the far side of a tree trunk, in a ‘nest’ of autumn leaves or sheltered between two shrubs. When it comes to creating children’s places for being, a little can go a long way.
A place to be safe and healthy

It’s natural and healthy for children to take risks. After all, risk-taking is a fundamental part of learning. But we do need to protect children from unnecessary harm. What, then, is a safe and healthy outdoor environment?

For starters, the design of the site, including built structures, needs to adhere to all necessary safety and accessibility standards. But that’s just the beginning. The safest environment is one where site design and programming are tailored to children’s needs and sensitive to their vulnerabilities. A space that offers plenty of different play opportunities in various parts of the site, for example, helps alleviate crowding, conflict and behaviour problems. Imagine having the choice to play in the sandbox, run across to the playhouse, climb some steps to the vegetable patch, follow a path to the story nook or join some friends in the music garden. Given all those options, kids will spread out over the site and won’t fight over one activity.

You can also reduce risk by using plenty of soft surfaces, providing adequate shade to protect children’s skin and eyes from harmful UV rays and avoiding potential toxins such as wood preservatives, pesticides and poisonous plants. Finally, a safe and healthy landscape is one where caring adults can easily observe, supervise and participate in children’s activities.

2. DESIGNING FOR STAFF NEEDS

Good site design for children includes creating an environment where adults can thrive. Staff, like kids, need to feel physically safe and comfortable, and stimulated by the outdoor environment.
They also need to work in a landscape that enhances their ability to teach, nurture, facilitate play, supervise and clean up. A site that offers shade and shelter, beauty, places to sit and work with small groups of children, safe surfaces and equipment, practical storage spaces and clear sight lines for supervision is a great place to work. It sends a message to staff that they are valued and respected. A well-designed site also provides endless possibilities for programming through the seasons, and can stimulate creativity and enthusiasm for outdoor activities and interaction with children.

3. REFLECTING THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SITE
Every site has the unique potential to become a vibrant and creative mini-universe of play and development opportunities. You can realize this potential by planting native species that are appropriate to local conditions, incorporating the slope and topography of the site into the design, reflecting local history and culture in art and music activities and giving the garden a special name. Essentially, it’s about creating a place that’s deeply connected to the natural and cultural world around it.
4. DESIGNING TO ENHANCE SITE PROGRAMMING

Though often thought of (and designed) simply as a place for children to blow off steam or take a break, the outdoor environment actually holds rich potential for creative extensions of the programming that goes on indoors. Think of it as a place of discovery, teaching and child-directed learning.

One of the greatest assets of the outdoors — and one of its charms for children — is its potential for direct and spontaneous interaction with the world. Outside, kids can discover and observe real insects scurrying around under a log. They can check each day to see if ladybugs and butterflies are visiting their garden. They can smell the damp, rich earth and wade through puddles after a rain. They can feel the crunch and crinkle of papery fall leaves under their shoes. A site that is designed for hands-on learning takes advantage of all this, and integrates outdoor play with the overall programming at the centre.

“The site needs to be a safe container for children and staff alike to enter the alternate worlds of the imagination. As well as being both physically and emotionally safe, the site needs to be rich with sensory impressions to excite and inspire the spirit.”

(From the Introduction to the Spiral Garden Resource Book, 2002)
A DESIGN FRAMEWORK: ORGANIZING YOUR IDEAS

This section offers a framework to help you develop new ideas for your site. We explore five important concepts: activity, space, flow, place and viability. A successful site design integrates these concepts, and creates a landscape that is greater than the sum of its parts.
Activity: What can children do at the site?

Children live fully and exuberantly, and will take advantage of all play opportunities they are offered, and then some! Rich play environments encourage this sense of adventure and discovery by offering children many fun choices. Anne Gillain Mauffette, in her comprehensive guide, *Revisiting children’s outdoor environments*, suggests as many as 18 different kinds of play that should be made available to children in their outdoor space. As you envision your site, consider this shorter selection of activities adapted from Mauffette’s list:

- high-mobility play, both with and without loose parts and/or equipment
- loose-parts play with blocks or other building materials, toys, balls and containers
- creating and appreciating art and music
- sand and water play that can be experienced together and separately
- exploration, discovery and stewardship of the natural world
- fantasy and role-play
- building and construction
- cleaning up and storing loose parts.

A Note on Safety

Canadian Standards Association guidelines apply to all play equipment for children from 18 months to 12 years old. You can purchase these standards online at www.csa-intl.org. In addition, you should consult with a certified playground inspector, designer or landscape architect, who has a professional responsibility to adhere to these standards as well as those described in your provincial child-care legislation (e.g., the Day Nurseries Act in Ontario).
To kick-start your creativity, make a list of all the outdoor activities that already take place at your site. This would include programmed play such as group games or tricycling, as well as impromptu activities like resting, chatting or playing house. Next, think of other activities that could happen outside. Would you like the children to be able to sleep, eat and read or be read to outside? Could they paint and play instruments outside? Could they grow their own vegetables to add to the lunch menu? Perhaps you’d like to be able to change diapers outdoors in the summer, or host open houses and events for parents and the community.

As you compile this master list of activities, consider these questions:

- Does your list include opportunities for child-directed and staff-led activities?
- Would children be able to fill their senses at your site, experiencing a range of sounds, tastes, textures, colours and smells?
- Does your list embrace seasonal changes? What kinds of play options would children have when it’s snowy, when there are leaves on the ground or when it’s very hot?
- Does your list support safe challenges for children?
This naturalized fish pond at the Hospitals & Community Daycare Association site in Edmonton acts as a unique focal point for the children’s involvement with the site. Children help feed the fish, observe seasonal changes in the pond’s aquatic habitat and watch the weather closely so they know when to bring the fish inside. A supervision policy, integrated into programming, ensures children’s safety around the pond. Kids learn to look but not touch, approach only as far as the stones or the fence and quietly observe wildlife.

A kid-sized table in dappled shade creates a special place where play and imagination come alive!

Having well-designed places for storage is one of the most important ways to make your site a great place for staff.
Making the most of slopes and differences in elevation can maximize interest and the use of space at your site. Each level becomes a distinct space, with different activities that can happen there.

This table and chairs, made of sanded-down log sections, creates an inviting spot, away from the noise and distractions of more active play areas, and shaded by trees and shrubs.

When many different options and materials are available, children will come up with their own ways to use them.

Creativity and practicality combine in this unique water feature at the Ryerson University Early Learning Centre in Toronto. Water streaming down from holes in copper piping cools these ecstatic kids on a hot summer afternoon. Eventually, vines in an adjacent planter will climb up and over to provide shade.
Special places are created when kids have a hand in creating and caring for them.

Temporary structures can be added to a space to give it focus, and to set the stage for children to make it their own.

The path formed by these stepping stones at the Iiyus Stluiqul School in Duncan, British Columbia is an activity unto itself, engaging children in the game of jumping from stone to stone, and leading them to a shady resting spot.

Gentle undulations in this trike track at the Ryerson University Early Learning Centre in Toronto add an element of challenge and fun. The slightly raised edge defines the path clearly, and discourages children from riding onto the grass.

Special places are created when kids have a hand in creating and caring for them.
Before (January, 2003): The outdoor space at Ryerson University’s Early Learning Centre in Toronto featured a traditional play structure at the centre. Challenges included intense heat in the upper area in summer; a play structure that was no longer up to safety standards; poor walkways between the upper and lower areas; and challenges with soil compaction and erosion.

After (September, 2004):
Discussions with teaching staff, administrators, facility staff, and parents were central to the design process.

New features on the site include vegetation and seating throughout; a shade structure and water feature in the upper area; large sand play areas with water access; decking for play and protection of tree roots; and a gentle slope to connect the upper and lower areas of the site.
Space: Making the most of your site

Once you’ve assembled a list of what you’d like kids to be able to do at your site, the next step is to think about organizing your space to accommodate those activities. Your site might not look like a large area to you, but to a child, even a small space can contain entire worlds to discover and explore. A well-conceived use of space provides a wealth of experiences for children, while also serving the needs of the staff, program and day-to-day functioning of your site.

Start by doing a brief inventory. Which spaces at your site already work well for you, for staff and for children, and which do not? Observe which areas are busy, and whether there are spaces that don’t get used very often.

As you think how the site is used, consider these questions:

- Are there large spaces for gathering and instructing a group of children, as well as small spaces for one, two or three children to play and rest?
- Is there an appropriate surface for riding tricycles?
- Are there soft surfaces that allow water to permeate, and that can be used for games, seating and digging?
- Is there appropriate accessibility to each space (e.g., some spaces need to be accessible to babies, toddlers and children with special needs; others may need to be accessible only to older children or adults)?
- Does the use of space vary with the seasons? Where do leaves collect in the fall? Where does snow drift in winter? Which spaces are protected or exposed on windy days?
- Is there shade and shelter to get out of the sun or rain?

Next, take a look at your master list of current and potential activities for your site, and start looking for compatibility. Some activities can happen close to each other or even in the same place, while others need to be separate in order for the site to work. For example, an open area is good for playing tag and making lots of noise, and it may also be a great place for dancing or for putting on plays, but it probably needs to be separate from where children are resting quietly, sleeping or reading stories in small groups.
Many areas at your site, whether by chance or by design, will have multiple functions. Planning some areas with the built-in flexibility to be used in several ways helps make the most of limited space. Other areas may be planned for a particular activity, but allow for multiple uses. An amphitheatre can be a great active play area that focuses on music and performance. The tiers may also be fun to climb up and down, or they could be an ideal place to sit and watch others play.

This cluster of wooden posts at the Ryerson University Early Learning Centre in Toronto is a space where themes come and go. In summer, the poles can be ‘tented’ with sheets to become an instant playhouse (above). In winter, they make perfect supports for a big snow fort (right). The possibilities are endless!
When you think about improving the spaces at your site, think about the best surface(s) for particular activities, the age groups of children who will be playing there, how spaces next to each other can be defined, whether they need universal or restricted access and what feel they could have — cozy, natural, open, creative, contemplative or exciting. For example, an area for climbing and jumping will probably need safety surfacing, as well as a defined no-encroachment zone that offers a safe place for these activities. A quiet area could have protective trees or a shade sail to create a feeling of coziness and safety. A space for infants and toddlers will need to be separated from other areas by a fence, but could be improved by growing a climbing plant such as beans or ivy through the fence to create a sense of privacy while also providing shade.
**Flow: Movement around the site**

Children are almost constantly in motion — running from area to area, using tricycles to follow a path, walking with friends or crawling towards a toy. Given the intensive use of outdoor areas at most child-care centres, it’s crucial to examine these patterns of movement. Creating pathways, archways and stepping stones, and using topography in creative ways, can help manage and direct children’s natural desire to move around, while inviting exploration. The results can include a better overall use of space, a safer site, reduced trampling of plants and individual children enjoying a greater variety of play opportunities.

Rather than thinking of pathways as simply a means for children to get from place to place, imagine them as journeys in and of themselves. Paths that invite and engage children will direct flow more effectively by suggesting appropriate routes, speeds and modes of travel. Children can be encouraged to move from area to area, discover activities along the way, and stay on the paths rather than running through gardens or into dangerous areas around play equipment.

The layout of paths is an important factor here, but so are other elements such as width, surfacing, slope and edging. These combine to send a message to kids about how to use paths and the areas beside them. Consider, for example, the message sent by a wide, smooth path with small undulations and gentle curves — perfect for a tricycle or wheelchair!

Avoid long runways, dead-ends and right-angle turns in the layout of paths. A path that simply ends at a garden is likely to result in trampled vegetable plants; a sharp turn to direct flow around the play structure might be ignored in favour of running straight ahead. On the other hand, a path edged in painted stones or low shrubs can communicate the importance of staying on the trail, while gentle meanders and bends in the path tend to slow traffic and prevent children from building up too much momentum.

The surfacing of paths can also make them more or less appealing to children: consider the scent of wood mulch, the visual allure of coloured tiles or marbles pressed into cement or the joy of jumping along stepping stones.
You can assess the patterns of movement at your site through careful observation. Do children linger in one place, or are they drawn from area to area? Check for informal pathways. The paths created by children’s habitual routes are worn into the landscape, and may be different from the designated and installed paths. Try experiencing your site from a child’s point of view (that is, while sitting on the ground, or by crawling along the paths on your hands and knees). After all, small children play and travel close to the ground. Their stride is much shorter than an adult’s, and they see, touch and smell things along the way from a different perspective.

**Consider these questions as you assess current flow patterns at your site:**

- Can children see what their play options are, and how to get to a different area?
- Are paths and stepping stones child-sized?
- Do paths include meanders, loop-backs, crossroads and small undulations or slopes to provide interest, challenge and decision-making points?
- Can children ‘shop’ for play opportunities as they travel along the main path?
- Are there pathways at your site that are accessible to children in wheelchairs, and those with other disabilities?
Place: Creating a unique landscape

Creating special places is about making sure that the children's outdoor environment is not just safe and functional, but distinctive and beautiful as well. It should be a place where children and staff feel a strong sense of identity, belonging and pride. This is the magic of a site, and it tends to arise less from program, planning or design than from the imaginative worlds of children themselves.

Children are expert at creating special places. By talking to the kids who use your site and watching them play, you will likely discover a number of special spots that have been claimed, and perhaps named, by the kids. You'll also discover the stories and scenarios they invent and play out anew each day as they turn a rock into a sailing ship, a pile of leaves into a bird's nest or a hedge into an enchanted forest. This process of place-making is dynamic and ongoing, driven by children's limitless imaginations; it is rarely achieved by good design alone. Rather, thoughtful design elements and creative connections to programming can subtly enhance the possibility of spaces becoming places. Ultimately, the key is to leave room in the design for the organic and creative process of place-making — the constant interplay among program, imagination and the physical site.

In practical terms, leaving room for place-making means taking advantage of design elements and program ideas that are as dynamic as the imagination itself. Storytelling, music-making, using temporary accessories (such as tents, tables, drums or chimes) and involving children in the ongoing transformation of the site are all ways to set the stage for place-making. For example, creating play and imagination-inspiring hide-outs such as bean-plant tents or tunnels of overhanging sunflowers and climbing vines provides children with places to claim as their own.

Children's own stories about their play can be celebrated and dramatized using costumes, moveable instruments such as drums and useable art such as clay figures or masks. Other stories of the site — who lived there before the area was built up into a city or town, how the place is transformed when the seasons change or what happens as the garden grows — can be similarly integrated into the program.

Places also become special when we have a hand in creating them and caring for them. When children help look after a garden, paint a mural, create a sculpture or put a hand-print in a stepping-stone, they feel connected to a place.
These questions and suggestions may help you brainstorm some creative ideas for making your site special:

• What are the children’s stories of the site? Find out about their special places, and what makes them important.
• What kind of ecosystem existed in your area before it was built into a town or city? What native plants would have grown there?
• Does your current program respond to seasonal changes at your site?
• How could children be more actively and continually involved in making the site beautiful and special?
• Do you remember the special places and landscapes of your childhood? What was your favorite play experience as a child? Draw on these memories for inspiration.
• Consider your site’s local climate, flora and fauna, history, culture and community identity, and let these elements inspire your design ideas.
Viability: Making it work in the long term

Your vision for a transformed site may now be starting to take shape. But will this new design still work for children and staff after two, five or even ten years? Who will look after it after the initial changes are made? How will it be cared for? To ensure long-term viability, maintenance needs to be part of your plan from the earliest stages. It can be built into the very design and layout of the site, as well as being an integral part of the program and the budget. Keep in mind that long-term viability can’t be achieved by an individual or only a few people, no matter how energetic they may be! At an early stage, you may want to establish a steering or advisory committee to oversee design, construction and ongoing maintenance.

Too often, a concern about maintenance and liability at child-care centres means that play value takes a back seat to practicality. This doesn’t need to be the case. Choosing hardy plants that are well adapted to your site, for example, can cut down on the frequency of watering and the need for fertilizing. Placing water sources close to gardens and flowerbeds — as well as water-play areas — makes watering easier for both children and maintenance staff. Using pathways to direct children around gardens keeps the plants from being trampled, and creating storage areas at various locations around the site reduces the need to lift and carry equipment over long distances.

You can also build the care of the site into your programming. Involving children in looking after the site is a wonderful way to nurture a sense of caring and responsibility for the place. This involvement can also extend to the broader community of people who are associated with the centre. Creative programming can help you involve parents and neighbours in the care and maintenance of the site over the long term. For example, inviting parents to regular events in the garden area — Musical Mondays, Weedy Wednesdays or Theatre Thursdays — can cultivate interest in the site’s new design, and presents an opportunity to talk to new parents about how they might become involved. With both design and program supporting the care of the site, you will be able to plan a regular, seasonal and annual maintenance schedule that is reasonable for all involved.

Remember, too, that site improvement is an ongoing process. The needs of any child-care centre change over time, whether because of a shift in the age profile of the children, changes in staffing, updates to standards for play equipment and safety, or revisions to program and curriculum. Periodic review of the site with staff and comments from the children themselves may also reveal that some elements are just not working as planned, or that there are new opportunities to make the site even better.
This fine-tuning is a natural part of the evolution of a site, and it needs to be planned for. Consider phasing the transformation of your site by setting aside an annual budget allocation for site improvement, and incorporating the possibility of future changes into your contract with any builders you engage. Remember to set aside funds for planned changes (perhaps you intend to plant a new garden or construct raised flower beds in the second year of transformation), maintenance (such as adding more sand to the sand-play area and topping up mulch) and other ongoing improvements. For example, after using your new site for a year, you may find that you’d like to add or replace plants, create new pathways or stepping stones to help direct foot traffic, or build more child-sized seating.

The building materials you select for your site can also make this fine-tuning process easier. Materials that are locally sourced and relatively easy to replace allow for greater flexibility in the long term. These may include hardwood logs that are free of disease and rot, locally quarried rock or recycled tires.

Here are a few final questions to help generate ideas for better site viability:

- Can children, staff and parents all be involved in the care of your new site?
- Are planned natural features compatible with children’s activities in each area?
- Are there maintenance or clean-up tasks that often don’t get done because they’re inconvenient or difficult for staff? How could these tasks be made more manageable on your future site?
- What’s the life span of the materials currently used at your site? Do you know where they came from, and how to replace them? Are there local sources for materials to include in your future site?
**NEXT STEPS: Where to go from here**

This book is meant to stimulate some creative thinking about how to design a great play environment for young children. The next step is to take the ideas that most inspire you and to move towards the improvement of your own site. Consulting with the people who use and care for the site — including kids — is a great way to start.

**Consulting with young children**

Children’s ideas about their play environment may be the most important and enlightening advice you can receive about site design. Even young children can share ideas about what they want to do, see and experience in their play spaces. Questions to ask might include: What are your favorite things to do outside? What don’t you like about the playground? Where are your favourite outside places? and What do those places look like?

Using drama, storytelling and role-playing may prompt children to share even more suggestions. Listen carefully to the ideas that come out of this process, take them seriously and use them to spark your own creativity.

**Consulting with adults**

Once you have started assembling some exciting design ideas, a survey of staff, administrators, groundskeepers, parents, neighbours and other community members can help you refine the concept. You may want to use some of the questions included throughout this book, as well as the following ones:

- **What features of the existing playground do you like, and why?** These are things that you will likely want to retain or enhance as you imagine a transformed site.
- **What are the biggest challenges/problems with the existing site?** Staff, maintenance crews and parents may all have different answers to this question.
- **How could the outdoor environment enhance or complement the program?** Take a close look at your programs. Which learning goals could be achieved in an outdoor setting? How would the outdoor environment have to change in order for that to be realistic?
- **What features could be introduced to the site to make it more valuable to the staff?** Ask your staff about their needs vis-à-vis storage, set-up and take-down routines, and seating and supervision. Find out how staff feel about the aesthetics and atmosphere of the current site.
- **What do you imagine to be the biggest challenges you’ll face when making changes to the site?** Get your concerns, and those of everyone involved, out in the open. Odds are good that you’ll be to find ways to overcome the challenges if you’re aware of them at the outset.
In fact, this question may lead to some of the most innovative ideas you’ll come across.

- **When, how often and by whom is the site maintained?** Maintenance is a crucial issue for site sustainability. Find out about current maintenance requirements and routines, what the current challenges are and what things already work well.

- **Who might use your site after hours?** To be realistic, your vision for the site needs to be compatible with the full range of ways that it’s used, both during the day and after hours. For example, if older children use your site after hours, you may want to consider installing garbage cans and lighting. You could also invite them to participate in the design process.

The final step is to start making your ideas a reality. For some, this will mean planning a phased approach to site transformation as the resources and expertise become available. For others, it will involve talking to a landscape design professional who can help you and your committee articulate your new vision. Try to find someone who has an interest, or some experience, in designing spaces for young children. Talk to him or her about the ideas that you’ve already come up with for your site, the examples of designs that really excite you, and the feedback you’ve received from children, parents, staff and maintenance teams. Whatever your process, the fundamental principles of great site design — making it work for children and for staff, creating a unique place and designing with children’s programming in mind — will provide a firm foundation for your new vision. We invite you to take the ideas presented here, adapt them to your situation and use them to spark further brainstorming and creative design. We hope this book serves as a starting point as you move towards creating a stimulating, vibrant and healthy place for young children to learn and play.
RESOURCES


Toni and Robin Christie, founders of the Childspace Early Childhood Institute in New Zealand, have created a beautiful design sourcebook for indoor and outdoor early childhood environments. It features colour photographs of tiles, gardens, murals, gates, storage containers and many other elements used in the Childspace Early Learning Centres in Wellington NZ. Order copies through the Childspace Early Childhood Institute at (email) childspace@xtra.co.nz, or by visiting the web site at www.childspace.co.nz.


Inspired by the children’s outdoor programs at Toronto’s Bloorview MacMillan Children’s Centre, this source book is packed with creative ideas for children’s activities and programming. Focused around the themes of garden, story, art, play and ceremony, the activities are explained step by step, and are accompanied with photos, anecdotes and illustrations. A truly inspiring read. Order copies through the Bloorview MacMillan Children’s Centre, Spiral Garden at (email) spiral_cosic@bloorviewmacmillan.on.ca, or call (416) 425-6220, ext. 3317 or 3498.


Evergreen’s collection of six schools’ stories have been woven together with photographs, quotes and quick facts to inform and inspire others. This insightful resource focuses on school grounds; however, much of the discussion and many of the ideas will also be relevant to the design of early childhood landscapes. Order copies through Evergreen’s web site at www.evergreen.ca, and check out our other Learning Grounds resources.


This delightful anthology of reflections, poems and children’s activities is full of ideas for creating children’s gardens and drawing inspiration from nature.


Mauffette’s comprehensive guide to the design, safety and play-value of children’s outdoor environments is an immensely valuable resource book for early childhood educators and site designers.


An essential guide to planning landscapes for all children, with a focus on designing accessible play spaces for children with disabilities. This book is filled with information, ideas and safety specifications as well as examples of actual site designs and a final section on programming and risk management.

This inspiring and accessible booklet reminds us of the central importance of play in children’s learning and development. Written in clear, concise language, the book identifies key elements of children’s play environments, and suggests a 10-step process for developing your own children’s landscape. Order copies through the Society for Children and Youth of BC at (email) scy@portal.ca or by calling (604) 433-4180.


Reporting on Wendy Titman’s research on children’s experiences of their school grounds in the U.K., Special Places; Special People is a fascinating look at the impact of landscapes on children’s play, health and learning.

WEB SITES

EcoSchool Design: www.ecoschools.com

EcoSchool Design provides schools with design consultation and advice, as well as publications and resources for transforming paved schoolyards into vibrant ecosystems for outdoor learning. Most of the resources available on this site are also applicable to early childhood landscapes. The site contains links to resources on participatory design, ecological building materials, gardens, energy, water, wildlife, waste and creative play.

The Natural Learning Initiative: www.naturalearning.org

The Natural Learning Initiative is a research and extension program of the College of Design at North Carolina State University. The site promotes the importance of the natural environment in the daily experience of all children. A great resource for publications, project ideas and links to other organizations concerned with environmental design, outdoor education and children’s environments.

Planet Earth Playscapes: www.earthplay.net

An inspiring place to find resources and design ideas for children’s play environments. Rusty Keeler is the man behind Planet Earth Playscapes, a design and build company based in Ithaca New York that engages communities in a participatory process for site transformation. Keelor also runs an online discussion group on natural play environments.

White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group: www.whitehutchinson.com

The White Hutchinson Group, based in Kansas City, Missouri, designs and builds children’s play gardens, and offers training and support to childcare facilities. The site offers links and resources, as well as monthly newsletters, on all aspects of children’s development, learning and play environments.


