









# At Home With Nature

Creating Nature Explore  
Playscapes for Families



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# Introduction

## A Message from Nature Explore Designers

Welcome to the invigorating world of Nature Explore! In the past, we have been busy developing engaging places for teachers and children to interact with nature on a daily basis, primarily in educational settings. One component of our program is the welcoming of parents into their child's experiences. While that has been a successful endeavor, we are frequently asked: Can we do this at home and do you have any ideas how? The purpose of this book is to answer those basic questions.

Homeowners everywhere face the challenge of how to design the outdoor space associated with their dwellings. What purpose will the yard have and how will it enhance the quality of life for those who spend time in it? If children are a part of the family, will there be accommodations for their needs and what will those be? A common concern about children is the lack of time they spend outdoors. Articles and newscasts are filled with facts on too much screen time, chronic health and behavior issues and "stranger danger." Children's time is often over-scheduled to such a point that there is little opportunity for self-directed play. All of this adds up to young lives that are over-managed and under-emancipated. Creating an intentionally designed Nature Explore Playscape will not simply provide a venue for your children to play independently outdoors, but will give you an opportunity to connect with your children and, as a family, connect with nature.

So, you might ask, how can a home yard become a catalyst for nature-based play and learning? What aspects or elements does it contain and what might it look like? Through observation, research and field testing at early educational facilities, we discovered consistent patterns that have emerged in outdoor play settings. These patterns have evolved into a series of guiding principles. We believe most of the guiding principles appropriate to educational settings are relevant to home settings as well. While the configuration, size and appearance of residential spaces will vary greatly, the guiding principles remain the same. In this book, we will outline those principles

for you, give background as to why they are important and provide information for you to use in developing a conceptual plan for your outdoor playscape.

### DID YOU KNOW?

This book has been developed as a companion piece to our hands-on workshop: *At Home With Nature*.

For more information:

- visit [natureexplore.org](http://natureexplore.org) and click on workshops
- call 1-888-908-8733

We will also introduce you to activity areas that we have found useful in a home play environment and offer insight on how and where the areas could be located, which ones work well with each other and which can benefit from separation. In addition, we'll offer some thoughts on selection of materials and ways to get your play environment built. Some stories will be shared from other families who have shaped natural residential play environments and what it has meant to their children.

We believe you will find the design and implementation of your space an engaging family experience. Like all home projects there will be much discussion throughout the process. While this may present challenges at times, it can also be great fun. We are convinced you will be amazed at the sense of wonder and discovery exhibited by all who delight in the collective magic we call Nature Explore.

### Nature Explore Design Team

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## A Message from Nature Explore Educators

*“Parents are like shuttles on a loom. They join the threads of the past with threads of the future and leave their own bright patterns as they go.” —Fred Rogers*

The decisions families make every day help “weave” the future for children. By creating a Nature Explore Playscape at home you can decide to carve out space and time to nurture your family and the Earth. This can be a space for all ages; we can all become our best selves when we are fully connected with the world around us. When we see ourselves as part of the natural world we are healthier, happier, and continually learning. With nature we are able to create our own experiences, adventures, investigations, and explorations. Nature-based playscapes provide meaningful, long-lasting, and special places for families to thrive.

When you begin to see the value of learning in your Nature Explore Playscape, and how it can grow with your family over time, you can also become an advocate for nature in your community. What would the world be like if we all had more nature in the places we live, work, and attend school? It is often said that Mother Nature needs an agent to give voice to her value over the roar of commercial consumerism. Your family can become her agent to create real, positive change. Your own home with a nature-based playscape outside your door will serve as all the inspiration you need.

### Nature Explore Educator Team

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## Why Children Need Nature Connections

Many children no longer spend long, unstructured hours playing outdoors creating positive bonds with nature. Families must now provide intentional experiences and create spaces that give children the opportunity to better understand and appreciate the natural world. Dimensions' teacher-researchers have documented much evidence of valuable skill development occurring across all learning domains as children spend daily time in well-designed outdoor spaces with nurturing adults (Miller, 2007). This is especially true for children with sensory integration challenges (Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). We hope this book will inspire you to bring these kinds of life-changing experiences to children as together you and your family reconnect with the joys of the natural world.

### From Dimensions Foundation Research

Excerpts from *This never would have happened indoors: Supporting preschool-age children's learning in a Nature Explore classroom in Minnesota* by Vicki Bohling, Cindy Saarela, and Dana L. Miller, 2011.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

- Provide opportunities for children to experience nature outside every day in their home and childcare environments.
- Dress children for outdoor play so they will be comfortable in a range of seasons, temperatures, weather and activities, and recognize that children's clothing may get dirty outdoors.
- Provide a variety of simple, open-ended natural materials that children can explore, manipulate, and incorporate into their imaginative play.
- Accompany children outdoors, observing their actions and choices closely to learn about existing and emerging skill development.
- Allow children to initiate and "write the script" for their play outdoors, using an occasional question or suggestion to help children expand their own ideas.
- Advocate for children to have quality time outdoors during the school day in well-designed environments that are rich in nature's "loose parts."

Excerpts from *The seeds of learning: Young children develop important skills through their gardening activities at a Midwestern Early Education Program* by Dana L. Miller, PhD. In *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 6:49-66, 2007.

- Experiential learning gives them (children) opportunities to "feel" more connected to nature and to process their emotions. Often, through experience and teacher support, children learn to take risks, develop self-confidence, and gain mastery over their fears.
- With teacher support the outdoors also becomes a safe place to express positive emotions and learn to process and manage negative emotions. Children learn courage and confidence and how to successfully interact with others as they explore the wonders of nature together.

Read more research highlights throughout the book and visit the research section of [natureexplore.org](http://natureexplore.org) for full articles.

"The symptoms of children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) are relieved after contact with nature. The greener the setting, the more the relief. Children actually perform better on schoolwork after those experiences. By comparison, activities indoors such as watching TV, or outdoors in paved, non-green areas leave children with ADD functioning worse."  
(Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001)





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