



BIG Kid **PLAY**

A Guide to the
What, Why and How
of **UNSTRUCTURED**
NATURE PLAY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHAT IS UNSTRUCTURED NATURE PLAY?

JOY, CREATION, AND FREEDOM	1
LOUV, THE MAIN INGREDIENT	1
PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE	2

WHY DO WE NEED IT?

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH	3
DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT	4
CREATING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS	6

HOW DO WE FACILITATE IT?

LOCATION AND MATERIALS	8
TECHNIQUES	8
IDEAS FOR IMPLEMENTATION	9



What is Unstructured Nature Play?

JOY. CREATION. FREEDOM.

When I was little I built forts. I built them on the slope behind our house, in my friend's backyard, in the park at the bottom of our hill on Cherry Hills Lane. I would find a place where I could make a little clearing in between the plants and start to pull any branch I could reach down and somehow tie it to another one to make a roof. That was always the first step, the roof. There was something comforting about always starting in the same way, even though no two forts were anything alike. For me fort building was very calming and gave me an intense sense of security and independence. It was also completely unforgettable.

My mother, raised in the sixties, believed in the power and necessity of outdoor unstructured play. My sisters and I spent hours upon hours making mud pies flavored with herbs we picked from under the kitchen window. Today if you were to ask an average American child between the ages of 4-10 what a mud pie is, you would be greeted with a bewildered stare (Louv). However, ask almost anyone over the age of 30 what a mud pie is and they will smile and recount for you deep seated memories of childhood as fresh as the day they were created. For previous generations unstructured play was a predetermined part of childhood (Louv). Children were allowed to roam far further from home, parents weren't bogged down by fears of kidnapping or sexual predators, and children weren't required to call home and report their activity on their cell phones. You simply went outside, no goals or rules, and let the day take you wherever it may.

LOUV, THE MAIN INGREDIENT

In 2005 Richard Louv published a book entitled *Last child in the Woods* and in doing so "spurred a national dialogue among educators, health professionals, parents, developers and conservationists" (Louv, 2011). His work coined the phrase Nature-Deficit Disorder which has become a framework for discussing the condition of current youth and the symptoms of too much time spent indoors.

Unstructured play has yet to be formally defined. From my research, I have discerned that unstructured play is any play that is child initiated and led, has no adult imposed rules or guidelines, and has no predetermined objectives. Unstructured play includes activities such as fort or den building, dress-up, make-believe, and games children create without



Human beings are a part of nature, but many children and adults have become removed from it.

Nature is often conveniently packaged or sanitized so that we experience it only from inside a car, or on a walkway through a wood.

-Claire Warden

the influence of an adult. On the contrary, structured play includes activities such as sports, board games, and adult led activities with set boundaries and rules.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Past generations had the benefit of unstructured play inherent in their childhood. For the current generations unstructured nature play is reserved for the kids lucky enough to attend schools, have parents, or attend camps that acknowledge its value. In the future it is my hope unstructured play will be something not only parents embrace but schools, camps and day cares add into their programming as well.

I believe in an urban setting where children are not allowed as many opportunities to explore outdoors on their own, an urban summer camp setting can provide the right venue for unstructured play experiences. In a camp setting you have the ability to choose what kind of experience you want to provide for your campers. You can choose to provide a structured format with which the children will be familiar or choose to provide a more unstructured format which will open the children up to experiences in nature they most likely would not get any other way. Parents are busy, kids are overbooked, and schools are overloaded. Informal and non-formal education providers have the opportunity to be the missing puzzle piece and provide a portion of childhood that otherwise may become extinct.

Why is Unstructured Nature Play Important?

THE RESEARCH

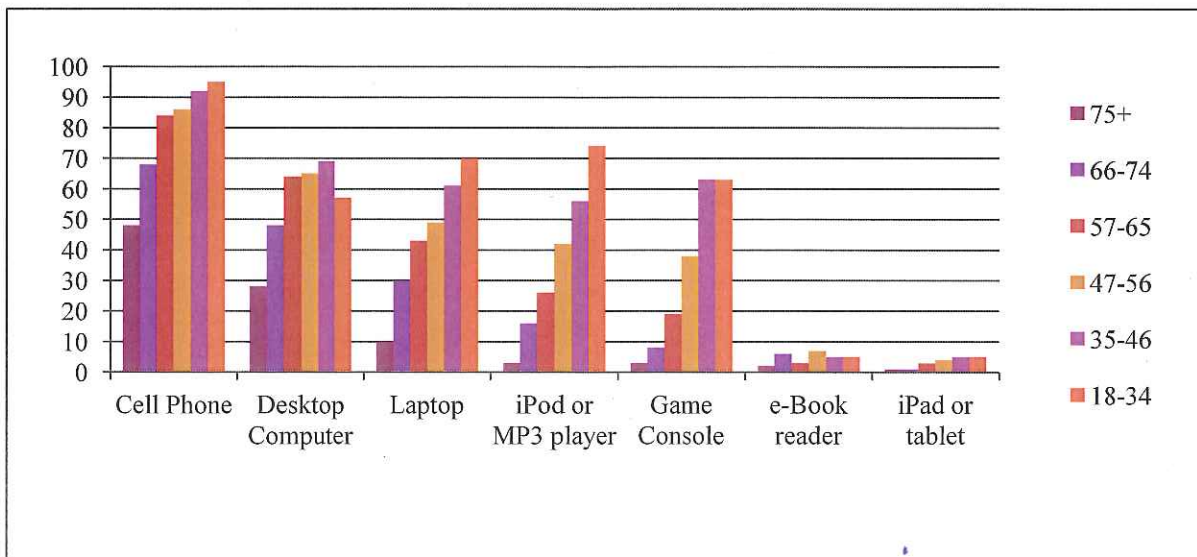
I was born in 1984 and according to Richard Louv and the Kaiser Family Foundation, am a member of what could potentially be the last generation to have true exposure to unstructured nature play as a child. During the upbringing of my generation, known as the Millennials, those born between 1981 and 2000, there has been a vast shift in the nature of play (Pew Research Center, 2010). "Childhood has moved indoors" says Louv, and fort building, fishing and biking have been replaced with video games, television and the internet. There are a variety of reasons this shift has occurred from fear of abduction and trespassing, to fear of getting dirty. Due to perceived increases in crime and loss of access to natural space, whatever their reasons parents now tend to keep their children indoors for a greater portion of the day than any generation before (Louv, 2005).

Instead of playing outside these new generations of children are growing up spending more time in front of a variety of screens than their parents spend at their full time jobs, according to a study done by the Kaiser Family Foundation. They found that the average 8-18 year old will spend 44.5 hours per week, in front of a computer, television, phone or game screen. The trend towards media and away from the natural world isn't about to slow down anytime soon, in fact it is speeding up.

At what age do you think most children have a cell phone? According to a study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, cell phone ownership in children ages 12-17 has shot up from 45% in 2004 to 63% in 2006 and 71% in 2008. Our gadget addiction just begins with phones; the possibilities for interaction with media grow more plentiful every day. The chart below shows a breakdown of popular electronics owned by each generation based on data collected in the same Pew Center study.

In general, children ages 8 to 18 spend more time (44.5 hours per week) in front of computers, televisions and game screens than any other activity in their lives except sleeping.

Kaiser Family Foundation



We have created an entire generation of people that spend the majority of their time entertained by digital media, listening to sound effects, and playing video games instead of looking at clouds, listening to the wind and playing outdoors. Simultaneously there have been significant increases in childhood obesity, ADD, ADHD, and childhood depression (Center for Disease Control).

Past generations had the experience of growing up in a time when going “outside to play” was the most prized portion of a child’s day. Today, fishing, biking, and swimming are all on the decline dropping 33% since 1995. Recess has been eliminated from most schools in reaction to drooping math and science performance (American Academy of Pediatrics). As the opportunities for unstructured play dwindle the impacts on our health and our environment continue to expand and become more noticeable.

DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT

On a broad scale unstructured nature play promotes:

- Motor skills (fine and gross)
- Balance
- Spatial Awareness
- Coordination
- Cross Body Connections
- Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Self Esteem and Independence
- Teamwork
- Social Skills
- Environmental Sensitivity
- And plays into Math, Science, Language and Engineering Skills

(Brain Insights, Dimensions Educational Research, Claire Warden, Louv)

First and foremost, motor skills. Motor skills are the most obvious benefit to unstructured play with all the climbing, running, crawling, building, and rolling that can take place. Since the children are not told how to do what it is they are trying to do they experiment more with how their body can accomplish certain tasks, like climbing trees for instance. When you add in loose parts such as rope and fabric that can be tied, looped, hung, spun, the possibilities for movement become unlimited. Children can hang, swing, and sway to

A 1989 survey taken by the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that 96% of surveyed school systems had at least 1 recess period. Another survey a decade later found that only 70% of even kindergarten classrooms had a recess period.

American Academy of Pediatrics

their hearts content building muscles, increasing coordination and balance and improving eyesight as well as eye hand coordination (Schlitz Audubon).

Spatial awareness, coordination, and balance all are increased during unstructured play in a way you couldn't duplicate in a structured activity. In a structured sport like soccer little changes from game to game. The playing field is always the same size as well as the ball. The body movement is usually the same, dribble, kick, and block. When you allow the child to make up their own games they may be similar but rarely the same. The area of play can change as well as the type of movement suited for play. They may involve throwing, spinning and jumping all at once. The variety allows their body to build on its vocabulary. The children have to be able to judge new distances and have the freedom to challenge themselves with more difficult movements that they invent, testing the boundaries of their own coordination.

Since unstructured play allows for so much free movement, more cross body connections can be made (Brain Insights). A cross body connection is when the body moves across its center plane. If you imagine drawing a line down the center of your body starting at your forehead going in between your eyes, down to your belly button and down to the floor, that is your center plane. Any movement you do that crosses that plane, say taking your right hand to your left knee forms a connection from right brain to left. In a classroom cross body movements are only occasionally made because we sit facing forward with everything either to one side or the other. In nature nothing is conveniently placed and no person, chair or desk is directing your movement making it much more likely that you will move across that center plane and by doing so form more connections in your brain.

According to Cal Tech's jet propulsion lab, interviews of all potential candidates include questions about their play experiences as children, because they have found a direct correlation between hands-on play and superior problem solving skills

Problem solving and critical thinking are two of the most key abilities gained in unstructured play. When a child builds a castle out of a Lego kit they usually have some sort of instructions or manual to guide them. Insert a two by four white block into a two by four red block to make base for drawbridge. However in life there is no manual. Unstructured play allows children to build and play in whatever way they can think up. There are no instructions, no blueprints, just the images and ideas in their minds to draw from. When a child builds a fort they will engage in a great deal of trial and error. They will undoubtedly run into problems they didn't foresee and have to think of creative ways to solve them.

For instance, when you push a stick or branch into the soil how far down does it need to go before it will stand up straight? If you are trying to put a large branch down in the soil to make a framework for your fort you will find the answer. At the same time your body will be experiencing what soil and bark feel like all while unconsciously learning about physics and engineering; all this, just from trying to make a base for your fort.

A new report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact - essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient

In her book *Let Kids be Kids*, recuing childhood, pediatric nursing specialist Dr. Mary Muscari identifies unstructured play as one of 14 essential aspects of childhood that are often ignored or threatened by today's society.

Unstructured play also gives students the opportunity to lead that may not be afforded in school or at home. By learning to lead, as well as follow one another, children boost their self esteem and ability to work as part of a team. When designing a made-up game the rules and roles of the game are determined by what the children decide works best for them. Tag has predetermined rules. While there aren't many all children know the rules of tag and what it means to break them. By making their own rules and building their own structure you allow them to feel independent and by working together to facilitate the game they learn important social skills.

It seems so natural to allow children the time outdoors to experiment and play and build in their own way, but with the intense pressure from society to structure every minute of a child's day opportunities for children to develop in this way are becoming few and far between. The experiences they gain from outdoor unstructured play can't be replicated in a classroom. Best of all, the nature of having unstructured time means that the child can take as long as he/she wants to process all of the new things they just learned because they aren't waiting for a bell to tell them that it's time to move on to the next activity.

CREATING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS

"When people who demonstrate a commitment to protect the natural world reflect on the sources of their actions, they most frequently mention positive experiences of nature in childhood and parents or other role models who show nature's value" (Chawla, 1998). By facilitating unstructured play we become those role models who show nature's value and we do it through positive experiences in nature. We nurture a child's sense of wonder about the natural world and allow them to develop their environmental sensitivity.

So if everybody is inside listening to their iPod or playing video games while text messaging, who is outside appreciating and protecting what little nature we have left? Where will the environmental stewards of the future come from? It is a concern that should not be limited to environmental scientists. Our planet has supported life for millions of years without humans, but can humans survive without all the resources our planet offers? Some would say yes, technology will make it possible, but then the question becomes would we want to?

Environmental Sensitivity is empathy and a connection to nature that allows for an emotional attachment to the natural world. In order to have a desire to protect something you must have an understanding of its value. A child cannot fully understand the value of the natural world by watching Planet Earth or seeing pictures of a whale or a prairie. It is the experiences that we

*They were
staggered by the
size of the huge
buildings with
walls and walls of
windows looming
up on every side,
and the broad
layers of hard,
flat crust
covering the
earth which felt
strangely cold to
their feet. There
was no sign of
any tree or tuft of
grass. Even the
sky was gone.
And the Wumps
wondered if there
was anything left
for them. At least
they must find
out.*

*-Bill Peet, The
Wump World*

gain when immersed in nature that truly show us the value of our planet (Chawla, 1998).

In 1980 when Tanner did his study on significant life experiences, “he stressed the importance of knowing the kinds of experiences that produce an active and informed citizenry, working to achieve the ultimate aim of environmental education: to maintain a resource rich planet for future generations” (Bustam, 2003). What Tanner found was that 98% of the conservation staff he interviewed cited outdoor experiences in their youth in relatively pristine environments as the reason they developed an interest in conservation (Tanner, 1980).

*Because we don't think about future generations,
they will never forget us.*

~Henrik Tikkanen

How to Facilitate Unstructured Nature Play

LOCATION AND MATERIALS

So what exactly do you need to facilitate unstructured play? Is it necessary to have a national park in your backyard, expensive camping equipment or a PH.D in ecology? Would you believe that you simply need an upbeat attitude, a curious nature, and a light touch?

Unstructured play is only limited by your own creativity. If you have a large open space with lots of trees and shrubs or a small patch of grass, it doesn't matter either way. The importance of unstructured outdoor play is that you explore the potential of the space you have available be it quaint or vast. Clair warden states that everything has potential, and the more open ended your materials, the more creativity they will promote (2007).

A drawing of a leaf is just that, a leaf. However, a real leaf that could appear to have the shape of a duck can also become a hat, a fan or a bowling alley for ants. The beauty of an outdoor space is the overwhelming amount of potential that it holds. We often over-stimulate our children with bright plastic objects and cartoons. Their brain is overwhelmed by fast paced images and manufactured sounds. Cartoon producers take advantage of children's ability to be captured by a constantly changing image. It is the facilitator's job to provide loose parts that activate the imagination and observe the infinite ways in which the children will transform them and change those ideas on their own. (Warden, 2007)

TECHNIQUES

Facilitating unstructured play has no perfect method. In other words there are lots of ways to be successful! There is really only one rule, do not interfere with the child's natural process. This means:

- Do not make rules
- Do not try to guide the activity toward any particular objective

(Ex. Student will create three representations of a butterfly using paper mache)

- Do not take control away from the children, you are there to facilitate not control
- Most important do not let a negative attitude on your part affect the children's activity

The key to unstructured play is to back off and allow that child to share their learning process with you in their own way. You are there to support and encourage but not to provide structure. If you prepare yourself to be in the child's world for an extended period of time, than you will be successful, just dress appropriate for the weather and be willing to expand your range of comfort. There are a few techniques to help ensure success:

Dress appropriately for the weather! If you are uncomfortable you will discourage extended activity consciously or subconsciously. Even if you are providing verbal support, your body language and demeanor might tell a different story that children will read loud and clear. Keep asking yourself, "Who is uncomfortable right now the children or myself?"

Narrate! As the child engages in play help to build language skills and comprehension by making observations out loud to the children (for example, "I really like how you put that red block on top of the blue block, it makes it very high!")

Provide open ended materials! Loose parts play a huge role in unstructured play. (Examples include: sticks, logs, shovels, rope, sheets, fabric pieces, tubing, blocks of wood, buckets) Loose parts are movable objects that the children can manipulate in any way they wish, they are not tied to anything nor do they have a predetermined use.

Be observant! Notice what content knowledge the child is demonstrating and what skills are being employed and challenged so you are able to evaluate their learning as they play.

Ask open ended questions! When your children come across something that sparks their interest try to avoid questions that have clear cut answers like "what color is it?" Instead ask things that require them to activate higher level thinking for example "how did this get here?" or "What do you think it eats?" By asking these probing questions you open the opportunity to exploration and allow the children to guide their own learning.

Utilize obstacles! Trees, hills, puddles are all essential to unstructured play. The climbing in and around, on and under a variety of surfaces provides opportunity for the development of not only gross motor skills but tactile vocabulary as well. All the different surfaces allow for the children to store information about things they feel other than plastic and metal for a change.

IDEAS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

When facilitating unstructured play people often have concerns that the children will feel overwhelmed or bored not sure what you expect them do to. Most of the time this fear

will go invalidated. If you are worried about getting started you can take several approaches to ensure success.

Claire Warden developed the use of "Talking Boxes."

A talking box is a box you fill with items that your children would naturally relate to whatever topic you choose to focus on. The trick with the talking boxes is that while remaining age appropriate it is important to add surprises that will elevate the children's thinking. For example, a talking box about water for a group of 4 to 6 year olds could include a tiny doll umbrella, an empty shampoo bottle, a lofa, a pair of rain boots with holes cut in them, a piece of a garden hose, a spray bottle, etc. You want to include items that stimulate questions as well as activating prior knowledge. When you address the rain boots the kids will wonder about how the holes got there and whether the boots will still work. They will wonder who would use such a tiny umbrella, is it for a squirrel? The idea is not to simply identify the objects but to think deeper and question the connections between each object and the theme. Try to think of the ways in which a child would encounter the topic in everyday life, like rain, and then give it a twist to push them to think about it in a new way.

As you pull the items out of the box place them around and try to write connections to the theme on slips of paper going from the object to the box, similar to a web. Once the wheels are turning and connections are being made the children will continue to explore those connections once outside. The talking box provides a jumping off point for unstructured play by jump starting the children with an interest instead of going outside and waiting for something to catch their interest, which can lead to boredom and frustration.

I developed the Kaleidoscope approach:

Think of a microscope first. Your **focus is the object you are studying** and is placed on the slide. Your **adjustments are the things that help you see that object clearer**. In a kaleidoscope you have a group of similar objects say beads trapped inside, so your focus would be the beads. Now instead of adjustment knobs you have mirrors that line the scope and reflect your focus, the beads, back to your eye in many different ways.

In unstructured play your focus could be rain, dirt or animals that live in a tree. That focus is what goes inside the kaleidoscope to be viewed. The mirrors represent the children's viewpoints whether it is their prior knowledge or questions they ask, the mirrors are the children reflecting the focus back to you. As the kaleidoscope turns and tumbles the image of the focus in the mirrors changes. You begin to see parts of your focus you couldn't see before say a blue bead that had been trapped at the bottom and is now in the middle. The turning and changing is all of the questions and exploration that happens during the unstructured time and at the end the image you see reflected back at you will not be the same one you started with. The children's viewpoint of that focus will have changed. They will know more about it, will have corrected some misconceptions, and will have plenty more questions.

When facilitating unstructured play you can choose what you want to fill the kaleidoscope with be it birds, bees or pond water you pick as your focus. As the children

explore and question, their understanding of that focus shifts and slides into new territory. They may discover that a squirrel makes a nest as well as birds and adjust their concept of a nest. They may find a new beetle with bright colors and adjust their concept of what lives in the dirt. Whatever discoveries they make the image they reflect back to you of the focus at the end will be transformed from what it was at the beginning.

It is possible to provide the first few adjustments such as asking probing questions or telling a story that changes their understanding of the focus. Once you have the ball rolling the kids will be able to make their own adjustments by asking their own questions and making their own discoveries.

*If a child is to keep alive his
inborn sense of wonder, they
need the companionship of at
least one adult who can share it,
rediscovering with him the joy,
excitement and mystery of the
world we live in.*

-Rachel Carson

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