



**MOVE  
MORE  
NORTH CAROLINA:**

*A Guide to Creating  
Active Outdoor Play Spaces*



# Move More North Carolina:

## A Guide to Creating Active Outdoor Play Spaces

**P**laying outdoors is a great way for young people to move more. Outdoors, children can easily engage in a mix of moderate to vigorous activities. They can run, hop, skip, jump, climb, roll, chase each other, lift objects, dig soil, splash in water and just play.

Young people should engage in 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day.<sup>1</sup> Providing an outdoor space that is dedicated and designed to offer engaging play experiences and opportunities for children to move their bodies can help them be physically active.

Best-practice play area design integrates manufactured play equipment with natural features such as shade trees, flowering shrubs, logs, stones, water features, sand, hardy ground covers, vines (on fences, arbors and pergolas) and decorative grasses.<sup>2</sup> Mixing manufactured equipment with natural features creates an engaging play environment.

This guide provides examples of active outdoor play spaces and best-practice tips for designing them. Use this guide to learn more about creating outdoor spaces that encourage more active play.

Young children tend to naturally engage in activity that is a mix of moderate and vigorous activity with periods of rest in between. Outdoors, children are even more active.



**Moderate Activity:** A level of activity that makes young people's hearts beat faster than normal and makes them breathe harder than normal; for example, riding a bike or brisk walking.

**Vigorous Activity:** A level of activity that makes young people's hearts beat much faster than normal and makes them breathe much harder than normal; for example running or jumping rope.<sup>1</sup>

### Successful Play Areas

- Are located where children and their caregivers have easy access to them.
- Contain a varied mix of natural and manufactured elements, fixed features and loose parts to attract and satisfy the needs of diverse populations of youth.
- Are equally attractive to children and adults.
- Are shady in summer.
- Are visually complex so that children are intrigued and motivated to explore.
- Are easily navigated with curvy main pathways that encourage chase games and continuously lead children "around the next corner."
- Are "bounded," bordered or fenced so that children cannot stray too far and caregivers will feel secure.
- Have shady places where adults can sit and relax alone or in groups.
- Offer soft, multi-use lawn areas for group games.



These preschool children are climbing two feet up in a low-growing fig tree. They are having fun and engaging in a muscle-strengthening activity. Photo: NLI

### Playing Outdoors in Natural Surroundings

- Reduces stress.
- Improves attention functioning.
- Reduces attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms.
- Reduces sickness rates at school and childcare.
- Supports reasoning, thinking and problem-solving abilities.
- Produces peaceful feelings.
- Promotes positive social relations between children.





A log, “loose part,” prompts these schoolgirls to collaborate in a self-initiated project and engage in a muscle-strengthening activity during lunchtime recess. Photo: NLI

## Play Elements

- Having a variety of play elements offers a range of challenge levels and different play options for children with varied abilities.
- Present-day, well-designed manufactured play equipment supports a wide range of play activity to improve upper body strength, balancing skills and agility.
- To-and-fro swings and tire swings, which children love, provide essential stimulation for the development of balance and awareness of the body through space.
- Hard-surface areas and courts support group games that spur running and jumping.
- Permanent natural objects such as smooth rocks and logs increase physical play opportunities, including chase games like hide-and-go-seek.

## Layout of terrain

- Curvy pathways encourage chase games and higher physical activity levels.
- Landscape design that partly obscures sightlines makes the space seem larger and more intriguing, exciting and attractive to children.
- If the landscape is too dense and sightlines too blocked, parents will become anxious about letting their children play “free range.”
- Larger, open multi-purpose grassy areas spur informal group games and higher levels of physical activity.

- Rolling landscapes, slopes, mounds and hillocks encourage children to actively explore, run up and down, roll, leapfrog, slide and cartwheel.

## Shade

- In North Carolina, shade is a key factor for comfort and health, especially during summer.
- Deciduous shade-tree canopies that lose their leaves in the fall should cover approximately 50% of play spaces, particularly pathways.
- “Shade sails” can be used as shading devices (with pale, translucent fabric). They can be combined with trees until the trees grow to an effective size.

**Pergola:** A covered walk usually formed by a double row of posts or pillars with beams above, and covered by climbing plants.

**Sightline:** The “line of sight” between the observer and what is observed.

## Play Areas as Community Resources

- Welcoming entrances send a positive message to users.
- Comfortable, shady sitting areas with picnic tables attract adults and increase the length of their stay. Parents can spend a quiet, social time together, read the paper and chat while children play.



This curvy, naturalized, hard-surfaced pathway plus wheeled toys, “loose parts,” motivates preschool children’s physical activity. Photo: NLI

- Sitting walls increase opportunities for social interaction.
- Small-scale, enclosed natural areas attract families with young children.
- Artwork can add visual identity and playfulness.



This naturalized playground access ramp prompts children’s chase games by providing natural “cover” for hide-and-go-seek. Photo: NLI

## Accessibility

- Play areas should be usable by children and adults of all abilities.
- An “accessible route” connecting the entrance, primary play locations and play elements is essential.
- Asphalt, concrete or compacted, decomposed granite are acceptable, accessible route surfaces.
- Railings and handholds can be provided for children and adults with motor disabilities.
- Manipulative play elements such as water and sand should be elevated above the ground for wheelchair access.<sup>3</sup>

## Safety

- Anchored, manufactured play equipment must be designed and installed to meet the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) standards and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) Playground Safety Guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

PICTURED ON FRONT COVER

Left: Changes in landscape such as small mounds encourage “chase games” and higher levels of physical activity. Photo: NLI.

Middle: Play props stimulate active, imaginative play. These children have built a boat of blocks and hockey sticks and are actively “rowing down the river” (pathway). Photo: NLI

## References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
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4. American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) Standard F1487-07ae1. *Standard Safety Performance Specification for Playground Equipment for Public Use*. West Conshohocken, PA: ASTM International; *Public Playground Safety Handbook*. 2008. Washington, DC: United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPS).

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