



## CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT NATURAL AREAS

### NATURE PLAY SPACE REFERENCE MANUAL

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this manual is to make clear the expectations that are involved with starting and managing a Nature Play Space on park property.

#### Chicago Park District and Nature Play

The Chicago Park District's Environmental Conservation and Engagement unit (ECE) promotes and enhances our diverse Natural Areas and welcomes people to connect with, understand, and enjoy these vital urban spaces. Together we build resilient, healthy ecosystems and communities for future generations.

A Chicago Park District Nature Play Space is defined as an assigned space within a park that is stewarded by an organized group of community members for the purpose of promoting spontaneous free play by children. Each Nature Play Space is a collaborative community effort and is unique to the ecology of the site, assets and culture of the community, and needs of the residents of each neighborhood. Nature Play Spaces are designed for play with "loose parts" or elements of nature that can be manipulated and moved. Designing, planting, building, and caring for a Nature Play Space is an ongoing creative project that can be a rewarding multi-generational, community effort.

For more in-depth information on Nature Play, see Appendix B.

#### Responsibilities of Your Group

Becoming a Registered Nature Play Space Group is required to actively manage a Nature Play Space on park property. In return for your stewardship, the Chicago Park District aims to support your work in ways that uphold the long-term sustainability of your space and Organizing Group.

Residents of Chicago who would like to develop a Nature Play Space in their neighborhood park should organize themselves as an official Group, unless already active Park Advisory Council members. As a public agency, Park District policy requires inclusiveness; anyone interested in joining the Group is to be fairly considered. Each organizing group should have two adult liaisons who serve in a leadership capacity for the group. At least 5 additional community members should also support your group on a regular basis.

Your group is responsible for the care of your Nature Play Space, in both fundraising and in stewardship. At least one annual workday is required, as well as a "re-set" of the space every 30 days. The maintenance of plantings and loose parts will be supported by ECE staff.

We strongly encourage that at least one member of your Group serves as a member of your park's Advisory Council (if one exists) and take care to develop working relationships with the Park Supervisor and Area Manager as well. Including local schools and childcare programs, as well as other potential daily users of the space can also be valuable to the process.

Hands-on learning programs are encouraged in Nature Play Spaces to engage children in the learning process. All liaisons and any volunteers working with children must submit to a background check through the Chicago Park District prior to signing your Letter of Commitment. Any fee-based programs must be approved and permitted by the Chicago Park District.

## **Responsibilities of the Chicago Park District**

The Chicago Park District's Environmental Conservation and Engagement (ECE) unit can support the long-term sustainability of your Nature Play Space by offering technical support, tools for workdays, education and networking opportunities, and promoting overall best practices in programming and land management. The stewardship of your Nature Play Space, however, remains with you and the members of your group. Native plantings will be maintained by the Chicago Park District; the Group should report damage done to plants by trampling. ECE staff will replenish and store materials whenever available; however, this is not a guarantee of supplies.

The Chicago Park District will provide appropriate signage for the Nature Play Space and any adjoining Natural Areas.

Staff may assist in the coordination of a yearly large-group workday for your Group, including marketing, programming, and securing resources. ECE staff and your Park Supervisor are your main contacts for all departments within the Park District and will work with you by sharing information about any activities in the park that may affect your space.

## **The Process: Starting a New Nature Play Space**

Outlined below is the step-by-step process for starting a new Nature Play Space, and what to expect in the years to come. If you still have questions once you've read it through, please contact us at [natureplay@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:natureplay@chicagoparkdistrict.com). Our staff are happy to help guide you through this process and answer any questions you may have along the way.

It will take a minimum of 12 months to get your Nature Play Space up and running. Your timeline will vary and depends on the location you've selected, consensus on the final design, weather, availability of material, your funding plan, and staff capacity.

### **Step 1: Form a Group**

Form a group of neighbors and other community members who will be involved with your Nature Play Space. Each Organizing Group must contain at least 2 adult liaisons who guide the project in a leadership capacity and should also have at least 5 community members who regularly support the project. The 2 adult liaisons will serve as your Group's connection to the Chicago Park District and as representatives to the public.

Including children in this process is important – they are the play experts. You can do so by identifying parent groups, park kids, teen groups, local schools and childcare facilities, scout groups and families that already use the space for play.

### **Step 2: Location Approval**

When seeking a location for your Nature Play Space, look for any underutilized sections of the park which will not interfere with park aesthetics or existing recreational uses. Consider activity in and around the space. Will the proposed area conflict with overall park usage? Is it a reasonable distance to restroom

facilities? Are there existing boundaries (natural or otherwise)? Please keep in mind that not all parks are well suited for Nature Play Spaces, and when possible, our staff will try to guide you through this site selection process.

Consider sun exposure and shade from buildings, trees, etc. (no existing healthy trees will be removed to accommodate a Nature Play Space). Shady locations are ideal for siting any temporary structures, council rings, mulched circles, staging areas, or other built feature of the Nature Play Space.

Take note of any existing opportunities for play and use of these spaces by children. Muddy splashing puddles, topography, and wandering thickets of brush are natural invitations for children to play. Any such space that welcomes children is an ideal starting point for building a Nature Play Space.

When you have identified a location that you think would be well suited for your Nature Play Space, please take the following steps to ensure its availability:

1. First, check with the Park Supervisor to ensure the land you seek is on park property, and does not interfere with other park activities. If there is no field house near the location you are considering you may call 312-742-PLAY (7529) to get this information or search the Chicago Park District website at [chicagoparkdistrict.com](http://chicagoparkdistrict.com).
2. Submit your Initial Application (for Location Approval). Once you have identified a suitable space for your proposed nature play space, the [Application for Starting a Nature Play Space](#) (available on the Chicago Park District website) should be submitted by your Group, along with photos and an overhead map identifying the proposed area to: [natureplay@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:natureplay@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

or by mail to:

**Sean Shaffer**  
Chicago Park District  
Department of Cultural and Natural Resources  
5801 N Pulaski Road - Building C  
Chicago, IL 60646

Requests will be reviewed as soon as possible. The Group's liaison will then receive either an Application Approval Letter directing you to proceed to Step 3 **OR** a request for more information. In some circumstances, the requested location may be denied.

### **Step 3: Prepare a Final Proposal**

Community consent and support is vital in obtaining Park District approval for a successful Nature Play Space, as is your plan for funding the establishment and upkeep of the space. After your location has been approved, you should begin to prepare a final proposal. This proposal should provide evidence of community and financial support, your management plan, and other related items. This proposal must include all the elements listed below. Please wait until all elements are complete and submit your proposal in its entirety.

**3.1. Site & Usage Surveys.** Using the [Nature Play Space Site & Usage Survey](#) form, three separate site visits are to be conducted over a period of one to two weeks. Survey visits determine what is going on in and around your proposed Nature Play Space by identifying who is there, times of heaviest usage, any type of nearby sporting activities, etc. The Park Supervisor must accompany you on your first visit. Your remaining visits should occur during peak usage times, once on a weekday and once on a weekend. Your Park Supervisor can help you determine when to schedule your visits to satisfy this requirement.

**3.2. Design and Funding Plan.** One of most critical steps is to locate funds to develop the Nature Play Space. Please note that your group will need to cover the cost of any built elements in the space, as well as costs associated with the long-term maintenance. The funds required for starting and maintaining a Nature Play Space can be minimal; however, some improvements such as rocks, pathways, transportation of large materials, and fencing options may be cost prohibitive. If you have an organized group that is committed to the work but are challenged with finding the right funding, contact us or refer to the Appendix for ideas.

ECE staff will work with your Group and other community members in helping to design a Nature Play Space that best suits your budget, your park, and its users. To begin the design process, ECE staff will work with your Group to schedule a series of events aimed at gathering stakeholder input, promoting the space and community support:

**Design Workshop** - ECE staff will help your Group facilitate a Design Workshop with your local community, to help capture the goals and vision for the space on paper as well with scale modeling and gathering feedback from participants. More than one meeting may be helpful in gathering robust community input.

**Pop-Up Nature Play** – Following your Design Workshop(s), ECE staff will assist (when possible) in delivering full scale play pieces such as logs, sticks, slabs, burlap, wooden discs, etc. to the proposed Nature Play site, where participants can use them to imagine, play, and design. This session works best in the intended space and as part of an existing event to best promote the project and generate new stakeholders.

When considering the design of your Nature Play Space, we encourage best practices through the inclusion of five distinct nodes of play: contemplative/quiet space, fine motor activity, gross motor activity, creative expression, and open space. ECE staff can assist in meeting these ideals while also ensuring that safety recommendations for built elements are being met. It is encouraged that the Organizing Group visit existing Nature Play Spaces in Chicago parks to generate ideas and see the spaces in action.

Items allowed in Nature Play Spaces include mulch, wood chips, pea gravel, pinecones, acorns, sticks smaller than 3-inch diameter, stones, leaves, pots, pans and other kitchen utensils, stumps less than 36 inches in height, and other related items. Material not allowed in nature play spaces include pallets, tires, bricks, chain, cinderblocks, Christmas trees and other objects not commonly found in nature.

ECE staff will advise on plant selection for the space as you develop your design.

As you plan your Design and Play sessions, please consider the following suggestions:

- Schedule design sessions to take place in the space if weather permits, and alongside existing events when you know there will be larger crowds and the greatest variety of stakeholders (those who will use the space).
- Consider what the future users of the space may want to do there rather than what will be there.
- Designate a volunteer from your group to collect feedback from participants and take notes on play observations during your pop-up play program. Try to collect as many forms of input as possible: drawings, photos of models, pop up constructions, interviews, maps, etc.
- Nature Play kits (small scale versions of the loose parts pieces, like log slabs, discs, stumps, etc.) are available upon request to make scale models of the Nature Play Space.
- Coordination with ECE staff is necessary when scheduling a pop-up play event. Please provide as much lead time as possible for our team to respond, the minimum being three months. Capacity is limited based on schedule and demand.
- Avoid discussing budget or the using the term “playground” as both can hamper creativity.

- Recognize the children as the play experts and allow them to lead.

Upon finalization, your Nature Play Space Design should be detailed and to scale, and include:

- The dimensions of the space as whole as well as any water sources, nearby streets, buildings, topography and trees.
- A list of plants to be used in the Nature Play Space. Installation, labor & supply plan: The Chicago Park District will oversee the installation of the Nature Play Space. In some cases, your group may be able to participate in the build and creation of loose parts. Please note that the design should not be considered a blueprint, but a plan that can adjust and evolve as the non-standard natural material is collected and delivered (there is no hollow log factory!).

For help in assembling your budget, please contact us for a suggested cost sheet. Please note, all costs listed are estimates and subject to change

**3.3. Letter of Support.** Your Group must meet with your Park Advisory Council to share your plan AND obtain a letter of support. If your park does not have an advisory council, continue to maintain communication with your Park Supervisor and seek a letter of support from a neighborhood association or your Alderman.

**3.4. Public Meeting.** A public meeting is required and serves to ensure any concerns from neighbors or other community members are heard and addressed. This meeting can be held in conjunction with a Park Advisory Council, CAPS or Neighborhood Association meeting, so long as the gathering is open to the public. Both the Park Supervisor and an ECE staff member should be notified one month in advance of the time, date and location of this meeting. Your final proposal should describe any questions or concerns raised and how they were addressed. ECE staff may be available to provide background on Nature Play and its benefits.

**3.5. Petition.** A [New Nature Play Space Petition Form](#) must be circulated within the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site. It is recommended petitioning at least 3 blocks in each direction. A minimum of 15 signatures are needed, with only one signature per household allowed. Members of the Organizing Group and members of their household are not permitted to sign.

**3.6. Membership/Group Information.** Your Group must have a stated plan for welcoming interested new members. Provide a roster of current group members, public contact information, and information on how future members will be included.

**3.7. Stewardship Plan.** Provide a detailed stewardship plan, including a schedule for the coming year, indicating how the Nature Play Space will be cared for on a regular basis. Please consider plant care, any loose part resupply, litter pick up and reporting any play node issues. A "re-set" of the Nature Play Space every 30 days should also be included.

#### **Step 4: Submit your Final Proposal**

After you have received the initial approval for your Nature Play Space's location, and have gained the necessary community and financial support, you should create and submit your final proposal. Please refer to the [Checklist](#) to ensure all items have been included.

## Registration Acceptance

After the Park District has received and reviewed all the required documents, your liaison will be notified of your registration status. Please allow at least 30 days for final approval notification. If your Group is approved to proceed, two members of your group will be asked to sign a [Letter of Commitment](#), acknowledging responsibility for the stewardship of the Nature Play Space.

**All group members must submit signed [Liability Waivers](#) accompanying this form, and all group members must pass a Background Check. Background checks should be arranged with your Park Supervisor.**

**IMPORTANT:** Your Group is required to renew its Nature Play Space registration **every three years**. You will be asked for a short progress report on your space, current membership details, and a budget plan for the next three years. Your Group will also be required to submit a renewed [Letter of Commitment](#).

## Appendix A: Details from the Letter of Commitment

The most important aspect of successful projects is long-term community support and communication between the community and the Chicago Park District. Listed below are the responsibilities and guidelines the Group must follow:

### GROUP MANAGEMENT

ECE staff will work to help your group start your Nature Play Space, and help you sustain a positive and productive presence in your park. Maintaining communication with the Park District regarding upkeep of the Nature Play Space is expected. Information about changes in leadership, or events that are hosted in the space should be shared with ECE staff. If problems occur with the operation or patrons of the Nature Play Space, the Park Supervisor should be informed and involved in the resolution of any issues. In the event the group leader needs to step down, they are responsible for recruiting and facilitating new organizational leadership.

The Group shall inform any new volunteers of the Nature Play Space Guidelines, stressing the importance of ongoing stewardship. The Group must follow a transparent membership process open to all. As a public agency, Park District policy requires inclusiveness; anyone interested in joining the Group is to be fairly considered.

### NATURE PLAY SPACE STEWARDSHIP

The Group is responsible for the stewardship of the Nature Play Space nodes of play and for reporting damaged or trampled plants. Volunteers should “re-set” the space every 30 days. ECE crews and contractors may assist with periodically scheduled plantings and maintenance. Keep in mind that the space allocated is on public land and upkeep is important. The Group must follow the Stewardship plan, outlined in Step 3.7 of your Written Proposal.

### WORKDAYS

Each Group must schedule one or more workday events per calendar year. Examples of workday tasks include resetting play nodes, supplying loose parts, removal of litter, mulching trails and assessing the site for other needs. Workday tasks for all ages are encouraged. Pairing your workday with additional play events is also recommended.

### PLAY SPACE BORDERS

The Nature Play Space boundaries must remain as submitted on the original design plans. Any proposed modification or expansion requests must be approved by the Chicago Park District BEFORE any changes are made. Please contact ECE staff for further guidance and instructions.

## **VANDALISM**

Weather, wear, misuse, theft, and vandalism are among the assumed risks of operating a Nature Play Space in the park. All spaces within parks are and will continue to be public property. While the Nature Play Program continues to support efforts to reduce unnecessary vandalism or theft, we cannot guarantee that any space is free from the risk.

## **LIABILITY**

Each member of the Group MUST sign a [Waiver of Liability](#).

## **SIGNAGE**

Each Nature Play Space will be provided with signage by the Park District. Any additional signage, permanent or temporary, needs to be approved by the Chicago Park District.

## **VEHICLES**

Park patrons are permitted to use motorized vehicles within a park **ONLY** on designated roadways, driveways and parking facilities. The parking or driving of motorized vehicles by any park patron on walkways, restricted-access drives, lawn areas, under trees, or within landscaped areas is strictly forbidden.

## **PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES IN THE NATURE PLAY SPACE**

- **Littering, dumping, grilling, alcohol consumption**, and any otherwise unlawful activities.
- **Amplified sound.**
- **Pets** are not allowed in the space per the Code of the Chicago Park District.
- **Ball playing** or other forms of active recreation.

## **PLAY SPACE TERMINATION**

If the Group decides to no longer maintain their space, they must immediately notify the Park District. The Group will be responsible for proposing a plan to restore the Nature Play Space to parkland to the satisfaction of the Park District's Department of Cultural & Natural Resources (DCNR).

While unlikely, the Chicago Park District reserves the right to remove the Nature Play Space at any time and will make every effort to provide notification prior to removal.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

A Chicago Park District representative is available to attend a neighborhood association and/or Park Advisory Council meeting to review the successes or challenges experienced by the Nature Play Space Group. The Park District will take appropriate action based on that assessment. Failure by the Group to provide the required operational and financial support will result in the removal of the space by the Park District.

## Appendix B: Additional Information and Resources

Studies show that when children play in natural environments, they are more imaginative and cooperate better with other children, have increased immunity, improved school performance, and have fewer symptoms of ADHD, obesity, and depression. They have increased balance, core strength and resilience. With frequent and repeated visits, habitats designated or created for nature play can become safe spaces for children to develop motor skills, friendships, creativity, and a sense of place in the environment of their city. The variety of experiences available to children through nature play, including risk-taking activities, is a necessary component of youth development and the development of conservation-minded adults. The earlier children learn the consequences and rewards of risk taking, the better decisions they make through their lives.

Nature Play Spaces are not permanent and not playgrounds, and do not contain manufactured, playground style equipment. Nature Play Spaces evolve and change with use over time by children and the community members who steward the site. Components within the site such as nodes of play, borders, trees, and other physical features depend on the qualities of each site and the decision-making process of the children and adults who use it. Nature Play Spaces may contain native plants, downed and living trees, hills, gravel, climbing opportunities, and – perhaps most importantly, a chance for children to change their surroundings. These elements represent the larger natural environment in a way that feels safe and manageable to young visitors.

“Loose parts” are unique to Nature Play Spaces. In nature play, loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and manipulated in multiple ways to facilitate open-ended play. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other objects. Nature provides the essentials: sticks, leaves, stones, and snow.

Nodes of play are zones within a Nature Play Space that honor different types of play – defined here as contemplative, fine motor, gross motor, creative expression, and open space. While not every Nature Play Space can accommodate each of these types of play, it should be a goal to support the contemplative, fine motor and gross motor in your design. Buffers in between these nodes such as borders or other transitions - especially around your quiet, contemplative space, should also be considered.

Nature Play is child created, directed and fueled by their imagination. It can be active or passive, social or solitary, creative or deconstructive. It can be called “unstructured”, but this does not mean that there are no rules or structure. These formations are often invisible to adults. They are agreed upon by the play participants and evolve with the play. The elements may appear different in the eyes of each player: a stick can become a shelter, a fishing rod, a magic wand, or anything else imagined. Throughout each season and with the actions of all those that have played before, the Nature Play Space will continuously change and evolve. Ideally, adults will allow permission for the child to direct their own play. Adults may remove obstacles (physical or social) to allow for the most potential, so long as the child’s right to make choices remains.

An important element of nature play is risk: to make choices that challenge oneself. Risky play involves kids experimenting and pushing themselves to figure out what will happen, without knowing the exact outcome. Risk is different than hazards. For example, a puddle offers a risky challenge: can you jump across? A child can knowingly accept this challenge and its repercussions. A hazard is an unknown challenge, like a broken bottle in the puddle. A risk offers a reward, where a hazard does not. Children can learn from their efforts, as well as from their mistakes. Nature Play Spaces should offer many opportunities for taking risks for kids of all ages, sizes and experiences.

For the purposes of this manual, Nature Play Spaces:

**Are:**

- Habitat for plants, insects, birds, fungi, and other species endemic to the region.
- Disturbed or ruderal areas with dead and living trees, climbing opportunities, and chances for children to change the environment.
- Directed by children, therefore can appear messy and disorganized.
- Spaces that provide opportunities for solitary rest and reflection by children away from screens and imposed rules.
- Able to accommodate programming from volunteer groups and environmental educators.

**Are not:**

- Playgrounds with fixed equipment or structures built or sold by playground designers.
- Rule-based.
- Directed by adults.
- Within the fall zone of an existing playground, road, or bike path.
- Permanent.
- Built solely on lawns or artificial turf.
- Pristine natural areas with endangered, threatened, or sensitive species on-site.

**May Contain:**

- Loose parts, such as tree cookies, branches, gravel, stones, mulch, dirt, and mud that children can manipulate.
- Nodes of play (see definition).
- Opportunities for all types of play such as exploratory, group, solitary, constructive, locomotive or dramatic play.
- Muddy or dirty areas, varied topography, and hiding places.
- Opportunities for children to choose or create their challenge based on their skill, age and experience
- Differences at every visit due to weather, seasons and previous users.

**Fundraising:**

- Your **Park Advisory Council** may be able to work with your Group to hold fundraising events.
- **Local businesses** may be interested in donating materials or may have funds available to support your project.
- **Local officials**, including your Alderman may have funds available to support such a community improvement project.

**Education and Design:**

- [Children and Nature Network](#) has over 800 articles and studies about the positive effects of Nature Play and outdoor experiences on children and adults.
- **Penny Wilson**, an adventure play expert, shares best practices for overseeing play in a Nature Play Space in her article, "[The Playwork Primer](#)".
- [NeighborSpace](#) supports a number of community-led Nature Play Gardens.
- [Kilbourn Park Organic Greenhouse](#) offers workshops and lectures, as well as their annual plant sale and Harvest Festival.
- [Garfield Park Conservatory](#) hosts the Play and Grow Garden, a Nature Play Space with materials from the surrounding environment and from within the conservatory.
- [Chicago Botanic Garden](#) has an extensive line of lectures, classes and workshops available, as well as a Nature Preschool, camps, and teacher programs.