

# NATURAL PLAY



# What is natural play?

- Natural play spaces are designed to adapt to the particular place where they are implemented. They provide a space and a setting for play (rather than an over-emphasis on equipment for children to play with); are located close to where children live, with the emphasis on natural play spaces; which focus on the type of play that is most important to younger children.
- Natural play spaces incorporate an element of risk (or replicate natural experiences) and encourage contact with nature. The play spaces tend to be small pockets located within a larger open space, at a scale easily relatable to children and encourage social interaction by accompanying adults. Highly manicured and defined open space discourages play that children can create themselves.

## What is natural play?

- Natural play spaces add to the attractiveness of the areas in which they are placed; they are robust; being made of mostly naturally-found material, earth mounding etc. and are thus less susceptible to vandalism.
- The play space programme is different to the traditional playground provision: it aims to provide opportunities to play. These playspaces are instantly recognisable to people who were brought up when access to formal playgrounds was not as available and children made their own play based on what was available and adaptable in their environment e.g. a mound of gravel became a mountain for children to scale or a muddy pond was an ocean to sail on. This type of play allows children to develop their imagination, challenge their abilities, deal with risk and, critically, adapt their own environment.

# Why is natural play important?

- A Play Space programme was established from 2014-2018 in SDCC following the identification of a deficit of play areas for children in this county. This was documented in the policy document 'Developing Play in South Dublin 2006-2009' adopted by the Council in June 2006. However the development of play areas / playgrounds did not result in the immediate aftermath, due to the economic downturn and lack of development generally.
- In recent years there has been an emphasis on the physical and mental well-being of children. Over the past 20 years there has been a significant rise in levels of obesity\* childhood diabetes, high levels of stress and increasing sedentary lifestyles. A report\*\* by the National Taskforce on Obesity estimates that 300,000 children in Ireland are now obese.
- Due to a variety of factors children are less likely to wander far from their own homes. A study in the UK \*\*\*documented the distance children travelled from home for play; the results showed that the distance children roam from home on their own has shrunk by 90% since the 70s; 43% of adults think a child shouldn't play outdoors unsupervised until the age of 14. So children are increasingly confined to the immediate environs of their homes. This results in children's activity being dependant on the immediate environment of their homes being conducive to a wide variety of play opportunities and social interaction; which is not so readily available in sterile landscapes of mown grass.

\* <https://health.gov.ie/healthy-ireland/obesity/>

\*\* <https://health.gov.ie/healthy-ireland/obesity/>

\*\*\* <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/16/children-nature-outside-play-health>

# Why is natural play important?

- The recent increased access to sedentary activities compounds the problems of inactivity and a recent report from the Kaiser Family Foundation in the US found that the average eight-to-18-year-old American now spends more than 53 hours a week "using entertainment media".
- The physical environments in which children grow up have a significant impact on their health, their enjoyment of childhood and their levels of activity. Recent advice from the NHS in the UK advocates 3 -4 hours per day of strenuous activity for children under 5, and 60 minutes of strenuous activity per day per child over the age of 8. For that to be sustainable; activity needs to be readily available and easily incorporated into the child's lifestyle; ideally it should be self-directed; (i.e. not dependant on an adult bringing a child to an activity). High levels of play and activity as a child translates nearly directly into higher academic achievement, lower levels of stress, more robust mental health and transmits to healthier activity patterns as an adult.
- Creating better play environments will incur benefits for the physical and mental health of children as they grow up. In addition these spaces also confer benefits on communities, parents interact with each other through their children's friendship with other children. In residential areas it leads to less social isolation and more social cohesion
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people/>



# Imaginative Play



# Constructive Play



Age 6 and over: A good balance of challenge and risk



Replicating natural experiences



Contact with Nature



Avonbeg, Tallaght



**Avonbeg, Tallaght**



Knockmitter, Clondalkin





# Riversdale, Palmerstown



**Sarsfield Park, Lucan**





Beechfield Park, Walkinstown



**Tymon Park**, pig sculptures and  
playing in mud



# Griffeen Avenue



**Griffeen Avenue**