

Natural playgrounds more beneficial to children, inspire more play

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Children who play on playgrounds that incorporate natural elements like logs and flowers tend to be more active than those who play on traditional playgrounds with metal and brightly colored equipment, according to a recent study from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

They also appear to use their imagination more, according to the report.

The study, which examined changes in [physical activity levels](#) and patterns in young children exposed to both traditional and natural playgrounds, is among the first of its kind in the United States, according to Dawn Coe, UT assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport Studies.

"Natural playgrounds have been popping up around the country but there was nothing conclusive on if they work," she said. "Now, we know."

For the study, Coe observed children at UT's Early Learning Center. She began in June 2011 by observing the children while the center still had traditional wood and plastic equipment. She logged how often they used the slides and other apparatuses, the intensity of their activity and how much time they spent in a porch area to get shade from the sun.

The Early Learning Center staff then began renovations of the playground and over several months added a gazebo and slides that were built into a hill. They planted dwarf trees, built a creek and landscaped it with rocks and flowers. They also added logs and tree stumps. They turned it into what Coe called a "natural playscape."

Coe, working with Cary Springer, a [statistician](#) with the Office of Information Technology, returned for follow-up observations this year and found significant differences between usage of the

traditional and natural playground.

The children more than doubled the time they spent playing, from jumping off the logs to watering the plants around the creek. They were engaging in more aerobic and bone- and muscle-strengthening activities.

"This utilized motor skills, too," Coe said.

She also found that the children were less sedentary and used the porch area less after the renovation.

Coe is preparing a manuscript of the study to submit for publication.

"Natural playscapes appear to be a viable alternative to traditional [playgrounds](#) for school and community settings," Coe said. "Future studies should look at these changes long-term as well as the nature of the [children's](#) play."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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