

# Nature Play: An Outdoor Learning Environment for Head Start

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At Nature Play a 1.5-acre field has been transformed into a nature-based outdoor learning environment for the 300 preschool children at Head Start. Beyond simply getting children to play outside, we are taking play, which is culturally thought of as a recess time for teachers, into a learning environment. The central area of Nature Play is a large certified outdoor classroom called the Habitat Hub. It has room for two classes and acts as the starting point for the children's outdoor adventures. This timber frame structure is made of diseased ash trees re-harvested, milled down, with hand cut mortise and tenon joints to form an undulating tree like canopy under which the children learn.

Habitat Hub leads to other less-structured play areas with names like Fort Fun, Timber Time and Hideaway Hill that are constructed within four Indiana habitats: prairie, meadow, wetlands, and woodlands. The children learn through play with natural elements, native plantings, and traditional building materials in an unstructured, creative, and innovative way as their gross physical motor skills, fine motor skills, and cognitive and social learning skills are developed. The benefits of providing a high-quality, natural outdoor play and learning environment for Head Start preschoolers are particularly important because research links socioeconomic disadvantage with compromised physical health and wellness.

Regular physical activity in natural environments can lead to reduce childhood obesity, fewer health concerns, increased energy, and gains in children's cognitive development.

Co-Creative design processes using simulations and prototyping of activities and components was instrumental in testing ideas of children's scale, safety, and use and responding to changes needed as actual construction evolved. While the children interacted with the full-scale mock-ups, the students had to observe, take notes, and document the play while identifying the successes, problems, and insights from these activities, and make appropriate design changes.

The Habitat Hub is a timber frame structure that uses ash trees as well as oak and hickory as framing members. Additionally, these diseased trees reveal the effect of the ash borer to children by debarking and then using the trees as uprights in the construction of Melody Meadows and Crazy Climbers. Whether using local stone from a cemetery for a crawl-through tunnel, salvaged timbers for a series of small bridges in the wetlands, or re-harvested wood for the bird and butterfly blind, sustainable construction and environmental education is the goal of this nature-based preschool environment.



# GRAND OPENING

## Head Start's Nature Playscape

**DESIGN INTENT** Beyond simply getting children outside, we are taking a 1.5-acre field to the north of the existing classroom building and traditional playground of Head Start into a learning environment. The benefits of providing a natural outdoor play and learning environment for Head Start is essential because research links socioeconomic disadvantage with compromised physical health and wellness.

**THE SITE** A 1.5-acre field to the north of the existing classroom building and traditional playground of Head Start is transformed into an ecologically rich, nature-based learning environment that set a new benchmark of design for educating a creative, healthy, socio-economically disadvantaged generation of children.

**THE PROGRAM** With our community partner we created a nature-based play and learning environment for 300 preschool-aged children at Head Start. Our primary goal was to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature-based education an enriching and sustainable part of their daily lives.

**CHILDREN AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** Use of design simulations and prototype testing allowed students to interact with children, teachers, and staff in meaningful ways and to see what possibilities emerge out of the creative encounters between the community of users and designers as students observed, took notes, and documented the learning opportunities. Community build days were instrumental in the project.



HABITAT HUB: RENDERINGS TO REALITY



PHYSICAL PLAY: CHILDREN RUN AROUND TYANNE'S TUNNEL



CREATIVE PLAY: CHILDREN PLAYING IN MELODY MEADOWS



1 HABITAT HUB 2 FORT FUN 3 CRAZY CLIMBERS 4 MELODY MEADOWS



5 NATURE ART 6 SUNNY SANDS 7 CHILDREN ENTRY 8 COMMUNITY ENTRY