



25 Easy Nature Play Ideas for Preschool Yards

1. Outside Door

Use it — more than you already do, and in all safe weather conditions!

2. Water

Kids love water play! Provide water from multiple sources, if possible: a hose, a faucet, a sprinkler, a rotating sprayer, a rain barrel, a hand pump, or even just spray bottles.

3. Water Transport

Part of the fun of water play for young children comes from moving it around! Use buckets, watering cans, hollow bamboo poles, plastic pipe (with curves & connectors), plastic gutter sections, pots and pans, recycled milk jugs, etc.

4. Sand

Lots of it, contained by shrubs, landscape timbers, old tires used as planters, boardwalks, whatever — the more sand, the better! Avoid small commercial sand boxes, which don't have much magic to them. Have a source of water nearby, or a handy way for kids to take water to the sand — since sand becomes a *really* great, artistic play resource when it's wet! (*Note:* Check with your license inspectors about requirements for covering your sand area at night. In some locations, large, open sand areas — i.e., as landscape features — don't have the same cover restrictions as small sand boxes.)

5. Dirt Pile

Just plain dirt, going up. The larger the pile, the more fun and creative play your kids will have. It will inevitably get muddy and messy — and your kids will have even more fun.

6. Digging Pit

Just plain dirt, going down. If you have heavy clay soil, you may want to lighten it by mixing in a few bags of sand. *Note:* Dirt digging pits miraculously turn into mud puddles after a rain. Your kids won't mind a bit — but it's probably best to forewarn their parents! Mulch or pea gravel can also be used for digging pits.

7. Logs

Just lay one or more large logs on the ground, for balancing, sitting, and hiding. Stake them in place or partially bury them, so they can't roll unexpectedly. Laying several together, end to end and zig-zagging, produces a nice challenge course! (But have a soft fall surface around them, just in case.) Tree care companies are a good source for logs from trees they have had to cut. They can sometimes be sweet-talked into delivering them for free!

8. Leaf Pile

If you're lucky enough to have large deciduous trees nearby, rake the fallen leaves into giant piles and let the kids have at 'em! Better yet, let your kids do the raking — they'll love it! The good memories will last longer than the leaves.

9. Shrubs

They're usually faster growing than trees, and can seem almost as giant to a preschooler's eyes! Plant shrubs in groups to create nooks and niches, or in parallel rows to frame a narrow pathway. Choose some evergreen varieties (if possible in your climate zone), and be sure to include species with flowers and berries that will attract insects and birds. Look for arching or weeping varieties that can create hide-aways under their branches or when planted along a wall or fence.

10. Rocks and Boulders

Let your kids build with rocks that are small enough to carry around, but too large to throw. Even larger, rounded boulders (beach ball size or bigger) can be great for climbing and pretend play — either singly, or in a jumbled "boulder mountain." If you don't naturally have large rocks on your site, you can buy them and have them delivered — but choose your exact site(s) first, as you won't want to move them again!

11. Plants — Lots of Plants! — Everywhere!

Grow plants in beds, in giant pots, in window boxes, in old tires, and up trellises and trees. Choose plants for species diversity, various colors, different heights and textures, and fragrances. Have the kids help plant and care for them. Raised garden beds can help protect young or more fragile plants from active preschooler play.

And if you don't already have a shade tree, buy the largest one you can afford and have it planted by the pros. Protect it from harsh play until it is well-established, and don't compact the soil over the root zone. Use a hardy species that is native to your area. It will take years to become a great play tree, but the sooner you get it growing

12. Hills and Berms

Children love small, grassy hills that they can roll down, charge up, sled on, hide behind, or play "king of the mountain" on. If you have such a slope, plant it with a tough, hardy turf grass and keep it clear for uninhibited play. A preschool hill doesn't need to be huge — even just four or five feet high will do — and it can be either a conical "bump" or a longer, serpentine berm. Unfortunately, if you don't already have varied topography in your play space, you'll need a large supply of soil and heavy equipment to create a good play hill.

13. Vegetable Garden

Choose vegies that will ripen during your school season — either rapidly in the spring (like peas, radishes) or ones that will be ready in the autumn. (If yours is a year-round school, then this is no issue.) Good possibilities include berries, potatoes, carrots, sugar snap peas, and cherry tomatoes. Use planting beds, giant pots, or both. Start vegetable plants inside from seeds during late winter/early spring, if you have a sunny and warm window sill. Then transplant them outside (check with local gardeners for timing). If garden care is needed during summer months when your school is out, try to schedule one returning family each week to do garden care and watering, until school starts again.

14. Pumpkin Patch

Pumpkins are unique enough to merit their own category! They are not hard to grow, but they benefit from lots of rich compost or fertilizer, and they won't mature until fall. Pumpkin vines need some room to run, but you only need two or three plants. (No need to grow a separate pumpkin for each child; maybe one per class.)

15. Loose Parts for Outdoor Construction Play

Use small logs, large wooden blocks, boards, and "tree cookies" (log slices). Sand the edges and corners of these to avoid splinters. Also use sticks, milk crates, small tarps, sheets of cardboard, blankets, etc. Do not use chemically-treated lumber.

16. Butterfly Garden

Plant a jumbled selection of insect-attracting flowers, both annuals and perennials. Ask your local garden center for help in choosing good plants, or research this on the internet. Don't forget food plants for the caterpillar life stage, like ones from the parsley family. (*Note:* your local Extension Service is also an excellent source for advice regarding any plantings. Their Master Gardeners may even help you establish your gardens, since they are required to do volunteer community service. Ask!)

17. Tunnels

You can make a simple tunnel by burying a culvert pipe under dirt (cover the inside with sand, for comfort). But you can create more interesting tunnels by linking several store-bought trellis arches in a line and growing gourds, beans, or other vines over them. You can also plant willow whips (straight stems) during late winter, in two parallel lines, and tie the tops together as they grow tall. Most species of willows will grow well from cut stems, as long as they are cut during their dormant winter months, stuck firmly into soil (vertically, cut end in the soil), and kept moist while they get established and start growing. Willow stems are flexible when young, so it's easy to shape them with twine, wire, or posts.

18. Play Stream

The best approach for preschools is probably to create a shallow stream running on a slight slope over cobblestones, which kids can use to create dams and channels. Dig the stream bed, and then line the bottom of the channel (beneath the cobbles) with a heavy pond liner (available at most garden centers). Use a water source with a spring-loaded, child-activated valve so there's no water left running after play (ask a plumber for help with this). Since re-circulating or standing water is usually a no-no with license inspectors, have your stream drain into a rain garden. If you can't (or don't want to) use real water, make a dry "stream" out of a twisting gravel bed (use rounded gravel, for better play). Either way, be sure to include a small bridge! Plants along part of the stream's edge will add more interest, too.

19. Discovery Board

This is just a piece of scrap plywood, roughly 2 feet square. Place it on the ground in a quiet corner area amidst plantings, and leave it there. Periodically check to see what's moved into the micro-habitat underneath the board — like pill bugs, ants, slugs, millipedes, and other mini-beasts with kid appeal! Be sure the board gets placed back down in the same spot. (*Note:* if you are in an area where poisonous snakes are common, be careful with this. During hot weather, snakes seek out cool, hidden places like this to curl up during the day.)

20. Bird Houses

It's wonderful for kids to watch nest building activity, and then see (and hear) the babies. Not all bird houses are alike, though; swallow, wren, or bluebird nest boxes are generally good choices. Get building instructions and advice from a nature center or internet sources — including about where to mount them and how high. Site them thoughtfully, as they can produce messy droppings below.

21. Seating

Kids like small, comfortable seats for looking at books, daydreaming, playing or talking with a friend, or just plain resting. Use a variety of types: small benches, bench swings, kid-size Adirondack chairs, hammocks, hammock chairs, rockers, boulders, stumps, logs, etc. Put at least some of them in intimate, sheltered spots, ideally with overhead shade.

22. Milkweed Patch

Milkweed unfailingly attracts Monarch butterflies, as it is the only thing that Monarch caterpillars normally eat. The caterpillars (easy to identify; use a field guide or the internet) can be collected by cutting a branch they're on, and then placing them (branch included) into a screened box (about the size of a ten-ream paper box). Keep the box supplied with fresh milkweed leaves until the caterpillars turn into chrysalises ("cocoons;" usually in less than a week). There must be a bare stick or two standing in the box, from which the chrysalises can hang in open air. After 9 to 14 days, the chrysalis' contents will transform into a new adult Monarch — you can clearly see this inside the chrysalis, which gradually becomes transparent. The Monarch will break out as a fully formed adult, but be sure there is enough room in the box for its wings to completely open, or else they will be permanently deformed. You should release the adult within a few hours. This is a *truly* magical process for children to see! (*Note:* Swamp milkweed from a nursery is prettier than the Common milkweed that grows wild everywhere, and it works just as well.)

23. Adventure Paths

Create very narrow, meandering routes through tall grass, between boulders, or just connecting two activity areas. Use small stepping stones, tree cookies, planks, etc. — or just dirt or mulch. If the path leads into a "secret" nook, all the better!

24. Tools and Toys

Keep handy a variety of tools and toys to help explore and play with nature — e.g., insect nets, bug houses, magnifiers, binoculars, spades, scoopers, sieves, colanders, buckets, rakes, small plastic containers, pots and pans, watering cans, etc.

25. A Change of Clothes

You can't have good nature play without kids getting muddy and wet, at least sometimes! Keep a change of clothes handy for each child.

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