

Natural play in school grounds

Overview

Children's drive to play is instinctive and in addition they also exhibit strong attachments towards the natural world. Over the last 30 years there has been increasing evidence that play in 'natural environments' has a multitude of benefits. The aim of this project was to develop a natural play area within a primary school ground allowing school pupils to reconnect with the natural environment. It is hoped that this will also allow the pupils to create their own play, increase levels of physical activity and develop social and interpersonal skills. Baseline data was gathered prior to the play space being developed and this will be followed up in 2010 to assess the impact that the natural play space has had on the children.

Background

Natural play within school grounds was piloted by Forestry Commission Scotland at Merrylee primary school in partnership with Glasgow City Council (GCC) as part of its efforts to allow children to play and interact with trees and the natural environment on a daily basis.

Evidence is growing that indicates the benefits of outdoor play and the positive influence that this can have on children's physical, mental and emotional development.

The importance of play has been recognised by the Scottish Government as an important part of how children learn and develop along with contributing to their overall health and wellbeing.

The project engaged with the whole school community and a variety of Glasgow City Council departments to deliver a natural play space that covers 1,700 square metres of the school playground. This area incorporates hills and valleys, trees and shrubs, dead wood, a rope bridge and seating. Forestry Commission Scotland hopes to use this site as an example of what can be delivered within school grounds and encourage similar developments.

Objectives

- Identify an appropriate primary school site with grounds for potential development of a natural play area.
- To design and develop a natural play environment in conjunction with school pupils.



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- To expose pupils to situations that involve an element of risk and allow them to develop risk assessment skills.
- Re-connect pupils with the natural environment.
- Provide a playground that promotes free play and encourages the pupils to be active.
- To establish an area to encourage more outdoor learning.
- To encourage children to visit local woodlands and greenspace out with school hours as this is an important predictor of how often they will visit woodlands as adults.

Actions

- A partnership was set up including GCC Education Services, GCC Development & Regeneration Services (DRS), Merrylee Primary School, Parent Council, Pupil Council and Forestry Commission Scotland.
- The new build Merrylee primary school was identified as the preferred site for natural play development. This new build offered the chance to incorporate a natural place space within the new school.
- A steering group was established including members from all the partners. In addition a pupil council design team was formed.
- A tour of natural play sites developed by Stirling Council was organised for all partners in order to bring to life the concept of natural play.
- Pupils decided on a name for the new natural play area. It becomes "Merrylee Urban Jungle".



Quotes

"It feels like a dream come true now seeing the playground start to happen for real and not just on paper." Morgan 11

"It's usually adults who design things but sometimes what we want is the opposite to what they want." Kirsty 10

"In the old playground there wasn't really anywhere to hide. Now we can play hide-and-seek in the long grass and use the rocks to hide behind." Rob 12

Achievements

- Match funding was secured from GCC education services and further funding secured from the local area committee and Renewable Energy Systems.
- Initial design concept developed with pupils, erz ltd and members of the parent council which included a landscape architect and civil engineer.
- Baseline information about play and the playground environment in the old school site gathered from pupils, teaching staff and parents. An initial report detailing these results was produced.
- Official opening of Merrylee Urban Jungle on the 8th October 2009 by the leader of GCC, Councillor Steven Purcell.

Partners

Forestry Commission Scotland
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Merrylee Primary School
DRS Project Management and Design
Renewable Energy Systems

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