Nature Exploration Area

TOOLKIT

This toolkit has been developed through a collaboration of three leading organizations dedicated to playspace equity and equitable access to nature: **Children & Nature Network, National League of Cities,** and **KABOOM!**

These partners have worked alongside cities nationwide to develop best practices for NEAs that are incorporated into this toolkit. This resource is an outgrowth of the **Nature Everywhere Communities** initiative, a collaborative effort led by Children & Nature Network (C&NN), National League of Cities (NLC), and KABOOM! that has provided technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and research-driven insights to local leaders across the country.

Through this initiative, cities have engaged in deep learning exchanges and direct technical support to advance nature-based play, which has directly shaped the content and recommendations within this toolkit.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Freedom Together Foundation, whose generous funding helped make the Nature Everywhere Communities work possible.

Children & Nature Network

NLC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

KABOOM!

NATURE EVERYWHERE
COMMUNITIES

Table of Contents

01

Introduction:

The Importance of Nature Exploration Areas

As urban populations grow and access to green spaces remains limited for many, cities are seeking innovative ways to provide children and communities with equitable access to nature. Extreme heat is becoming the norm across wide swaths of the country, and its effects are felt unevenly in neighborhoods with fewer resources to cope. **Nature Exploration Areas** (NEAs) offer a solution that not only enhances public spaces but also aligns with broader urban priorities such as child health and wellness, learning, environmental and climate resilience, and building strong communities.

Nature Exploration Areas encourage kids to balance on logs, play in the dirt, and use natural materials and loose parts to create and build. These playspaces inspire lifelong connections with nature while adding ecological benefits such as managing stormwater and improving wildlife habitats. Cities across the country are increasingly recognizing the value of NEAs in addressing disparities in park and nature access, mitigating the effects of urban heat, and improving biodiversity in the built environment.

DEFINITION

Nature Exploration Areas
are designated spaces that encourage children and families to engage with the natural environment through play and exploration. These areas are designed to foster creativity, physical activity, and a connection to nature using local, natural materials.

Purpose

This toolkit is intended to serve as a resource for agencies (state, county, and city), urban planners, nonprofit organizations, policymakers and community advocates looking to implement NEAs in their own communities. By documenting lessons learned from cities who have developed NEAs in a variety of contexts, we provide a roadmap for planning, funding, designing, and maintaining these spaces in a way that ensures long-term sustainability and maximum benefit for kids and communities.

Through case studies, policy insights, and actionable recommendations, this toolkit highlights how cities have successfully integrated NEAs into parks, schoolyards, and early childhood education centers. By prioritizing community engagement, embracing innovative design, aligning with local policies, and securing diverse funding streams, cities can transform spaces into vibrant hubs for play, learning, and environmental stewardship.

The toolkit also draws from an in-depth case study interview process conducted with city leaders, parks and recreation departments, and nonprofit partners engaged in NEA projects. The following sections will explore real-world examples of NEAs in action, provide insights into funding and maintenance strategies, and outline steps cities can take to implement these spaces successfully. By learning from these case studies and best practices, local leaders can take meaningful steps toward creating healthier, more resilient, more equitable neighborhoods.

KEY BENEFITS OF NEAs*

Health and Wellness

- Greater Physical Activity
- Improved Mental Health
- Enhanced Social Development

Learning

- More Engaged Learning
- Rich Sensory Landscapes for Growth

Community

- Supporting Lower Crime Risk
- Economic Development Opportunity
- Stronger Family and Caregiver Connections

Environment

- Equitable Access to Nature
- Equitable, High-Quality Playspaces
- Vibrant Spaces for Belonging
- Heat Mitigation
- Stormwater Management
- Biodiversity and Air Quality
- Early Nature Connections
- Appreciation for Nature

This list is inspired by the Children & Nature Network's research on the benefits of green schoolyards.

CLICK HERE *to learn more.*

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Heron's Head Park

Heron's Head Park was KABOOM!'s first major foray into NEAs, and helped spark an ongoing commitment to nature-based play. Through an early partnership with the local Nature Everywhere Communities cohort, the space demonstrated how play could be integrated into a community's need for greater access to the natural world.

This pairing of complementary goals served as a template for further collaborations with Children & Nature Network and other partners as KABOOM! has worked with cities across the country to incorporate more natural elements into their playspace designs.

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

02

The Benefits of Nature Exploration Areas

Integrating NEAs into public spaces can help address a range of needs across community, health and wellness, environmental, and learning domains. Research demonstrates that NEAs support healthier and more resilient communities by promoting physical and mental health, strengthening social bonds, and creating safe, vibrant public spaces.

They also have the potential to contribute to climate resilience, foster lifelong connections to nature and environmental stewardship, boost local economies, and enhance children's learning and cognitive development through hands-on, nature-rich experiences. Public green spaces like NEAs are vital for child development and serve as valuable community resources.

Health and Wellness Benefits

Green spaces like NEAs provide significant health benefits, particularly for children. NEAs encourage kids to play more and for a longer period of time than conventional playspaces, which leads to a range of benefits like improving physical activity levels, enhancing mental health, and fostering critical social skills. Children who have access to natural play environments have opportunities to engage in active play, develop strong motor skills, and exhibit creativity problem-solving abilities.

- **Greater Physical Activity, Increased Use:** Unlike traditional playgrounds that emphasize structured play, NEAs encourage diverse movements such as climbing, balancing, and jumping, and may lead to greater overall physical exertion. Overall, play and learning in natural environments tend to

Photo credit:
SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

promote increased physical activity, improved motor skills and decreased sedentary time.[1] One study of preschool children found that green, naturalized areas with trees, vegetation, uneven terrain, and loose parts encouraged play for far longer than conventional or paved spaces.[2] The presence of a mature tree has also been found to be the single largest predictor of playground use.[3]

- **Improved Mental Health:** Research points to a link between emotional, behavioral and cognitive performance and time spent in natural settings.[4] One study also showed that recess in outdoor natural environments can be more restorative than recess in an outdoor built environment.[5]
- **Enhanced Social Development:** Studies have found that the presence of green spaces in marginalized neighborhoods leads to reduced stress and aggression levels[6] and increased social interaction and community cohesion.[7]

Learning Benefits

NEAs provide children with nature-based learning opportunities that carry a number of unique advantages over traditional classroom instruction.

- **More Engaged Learning:** Children exposed to outdoor, nature-infused instruction demonstrated higher levels of engagement, curiosity, and motivation as they learned. Hands-on, experiential outdoor education (a core feature of NEAs) is associated with better academic outcomes and increased social-emotional growth.[8]
- **Rich Sensory Landscapes for Growth:** Nature-based education in early childhood is strongly associated with improvements in self-regulation and social skills. NEA-like environments enriched with sensory stimulation, loose play materials, and exposure to varied natural conditions also support cognitive development and executive functioning.[9]

Environmental Benefits

NEAs can play a critical role in .in expanding equitable access to nature by bringing high-quality green spaces to historically underserved communities. In many urban areas, low-income neighborhoods have significantly less access to parks, playspaces, and nature more generally, contributing to disparities in physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life.

- **Equitable Access to Nature:** Research from the Trust for Public Land indicates that children in lower-income communities are twice as likely to lack access to quality green spaces compared to those in wealthier areas.[10] By prioritizing NEAs in these communities,

cities can provide equitable opportunities for nature engagement and outdoor play.

- **Equitable, High-Quality Playspaces:** Lower socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic minority, and rural populations have more limited access to playspaces in neighborhoods, parks, and schools compared to wealthier, white, and urban groups. NEAs can help close this gap if planners use a data- and equity-informed approach.[11]
- **Vibrant Spaces for Belonging:** Many NEA projects involve local residents in the design, development, and maintenance of these spaces, fostering a sense of community pride and long-term engagement. Research shows that when communities take an active role in shaping their public spaces, they are more likely to utilize and protect them, ensuring lasting benefits.[12]

As cities face increasing challenges from climate change, NEAs offer a unique and flexible solution for building community resilience. Thoughtfully designed NEAs integrate features that help mitigate climate-related risks such as extreme heat, poor air quality, and stormwater runoff.

- **Heat Mitigation:** Urban areas experience the heat island effect, where concrete and asphalt retain heat, leading to higher temperatures. NEAs counteract this by incorporating shade structures, tree canopies, and permeable natural surfaces, which cool surrounding areas and provide refuge from extreme heat. NEAs also tend to incorporate materials that retain less heat than conventional metal or plastic equipment.
- **Stormwater Management:** NEAs often include permeable surfaces, rain gardens, and other features, to help absorb and filter stormwater, reducing flooding and improving water quality. Research has found that such green infrastructure solutions can reduce runoff in urban settings.
- **Biodiversity and Air Quality:** By incorporating native plants, pollinator gardens, and natural materials, NEAs can support local ecosystems and improve air quality, tree cover, and green spaces.

Thoughtfully designed NEAs that promote free, sensory-rich, and accessible nature experiences can help children build meaningful lifelong connections to nature that in turn help cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards.

- **Early Nature Connections:** A meta-analysis found that direct nature experiences strongly predict a range of conservation and pro-environmental behaviors later in life.[13]
- **Appreciation for Nature:** A study looking at different types of outdoor activities found that "appreciative" experiences (such as walking and observing wildlife) are associated with both increased connection to nature and environmental citizenship behaviors later in life. This finding suggests that NEAs offering sensory-rich, observational play can be particularly effective.[14]

Community Benefits

In addition to the well-documented benefits for individual children, NEAs can also serve as powerful catalysts for broader community well-being. By bringing nature into everyday contexts, NEAs can help shape safer, healthier, and more connected communities. Research shows that thoughtfully designed, nature-rich spaces support child development while also contributing to lower crime rates, increased property values, and stronger family relationships. The ripple effects of these spaces extend well beyond play, reinforcing their value as essential infrastructure for family-friendly, resilient neighborhoods.

- **More Greenspace = Lower Crime Risk**. A study of more than 301 U.S. cities found a statistically significant association between vegetation like trees and ground cover and lower violent crime risk (including homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery) that held consistent across geographies. Greenspaces designed for regular community interaction such as playgrounds or nature play areas are especially effective.[15] Another study showed a similar pattern when vacant lots were converted to actively maintained greenspaces.[16]
- **Economic Development:** A robust body of U.S.-based studies finds that homes located adjacent to or within 500 feet of passive-use parks and open spaces consistently see property value premiums in the range of 8–10%. Because NEAs often fall into this "passive park" category — specifically by offering natural materials, shade, and unstructured play — they can deliver economic value to surrounding neighborhoods.[17]
- **Family and Caregiver Connections:** Family-based nature activities — such as neighborhood walks, backyard play, and garden routines — have been linked to deeper communication, improved mood, and reduced stress between children and caregivers. Spending time together outdoors was cited as the primary benefit and tended to encourage more open, positive interactions.[18]

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

03

Steps for Planning and Implementing

Creating a successful NEA requires careful planning, community engagement, and long-term sustainability considerations. This section outlines key steps for designing and implementing NEAs in urban and school settings, ensuring they meet local needs — including health, learning, and environmental goals — and foster meaningful play experiences. Although presented sequentially, these steps may not always proceed in a linear way. For example, community engagement and activation can take place across the lifespan of a project or initiative. In fact, some cities have found that doing design, engagement, and programming activities simultaneously can yield significant buy-in and early momentum.

In addition, each of the following steps is important at both the project level and the system-wide level. For example, a system-wide community-informed needs assessment is critical for prioritizing projects for investment to meet the greatest need, while project-level community engagement is essential for creating nature-infused public spaces that are responsive to the unique needs and representative of the unique character of each community.

Cultivating an Ecosystem of NEA Partners

NEAs are interventions in the built environment, so successful projects depend on collaboration with stakeholders who use, own, design, and support those spaces. Equally important are partners who bring health, equity, and climate expertise to ensure NEAs meet broader community goals. Forging partnerships across public and private sectors, with community at the center, is essential to create high-quality NEAs.

Consider these examples when cultivating your ecosystem of NEA partners and stakeholders.

Landholding and Infrastructure Partners

These partners control the spaces where NEAs can be built and often have significant resources, connections, and ability to set the agenda.

- **Municipal and County Agencies:** Parks and recreation departments, libraries, public works, forestry, and housing or community development offices.
- **Educational Institutions and Child Care Providers:** School districts (K-12, early learning centers), colleges/universities
- **Cultural Centers and Community Facilities**: Museums, zoos, nature centers
- **Library Systems:** Public libraries including nature-informed programming

Community Groups, Stakeholders, and Political Leadership

These partners support NEAs by ensuring community voice is represented, that the NEA reflects community needs and priorities, and keeping momentum and alignment with broader policy agenda.

- **Political Leadership:** Mayors, city council members, state legislators, federal elected officials, and others.
- **Community-Based Organizations and Nonprofits:** Environmental justice coalitions, public health networks, early childhood advocates
- **Community Stakeholders:** Parent groups, neighborhood associations, volunteer networks, local artists
- **Outdoor & Environmental Educators:** Nature centers, botanical gardens, wildlife agencies

Funding, Design, and Stewardship Partners

These partners are essential for implementation and sustainability. They bring resources, technical skill, and the potential for scaling efforts to reach more residents.

- **Philanthropic Organizations and Foundations:** Funders supporting green infrastructure, child development, equity, and neighborhood revitalization
- **Corporate and Utility Partners:** Local businesses, landscape firms, and utility companies partnering on green initiatives
- **Professional and Technical Experts:** Landscape architects, nature play designers, environmental engineers, and climate resiliency advisors
- **Local, State, and Federal Funding Sources:** Public-sector partners such as departments of health, education, natural resources, and environmental protection can provide funding, technical assistance, or policy alignment

By aligning these three categories, NEAs become not only engaging playspaces but also integrated solutions for climate resilience, public health, and community empowerment.

Community Engagement and Needs Assessment

With the right partners now at the table, a well-designed NEA begins with understanding community priorities and preferences. Engaging local residents, educators, and stakeholders in the planning process ensures that the space reflects the cultural and play needs of the community, as well as the environmental context of the space.

Processes to Consider:

- Conduct focus groups, surveys, nature play programming, and community events to gather input from children, families, educators, and local organizations and organize stakeholders to accelerate the process.
- Ensure translation in common languages and outreach by trusted community partners.
- Utilize geospatial mapping tools and other data sources to identify communities with limited access to nature and prioritize investments.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Walker County, TX: KABOOM! led a participatory design process where residents helped shape playspace features to reflect local cultural and environmental themes. This model ensures community buy-in and long-term stewardship.

Providence, RI: Used GIS data overlays to identify neighborhoods with the lowest green space per capita and prioritized engagement efforts in those areas.

Pictured: Tenderloin Playground Engagement Event (San Francisco, CA)

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

Site Selection and Environmental Considerations

Selecting the right location for an NEA is essential to its success. The site should be accessible and aligned with local infrastructure priorities.

Site Evaluation

- Consider proximity to residential areas, schools, and community hubs and factors like transit access, walkability, and traffic to maximize accessibility.
- Evaluate environmental conditions such as sun exposure, drainage, soil quality, and existing vegetation.
- Understand safety concerns, local historical context, and cultural preferences in the communities immediately surrounding a particular site.
- Identify areas that already have natural features (e.g., trees, hills, streams) to enhance the NEA with minimal disruption.
- Account for maintenance considerations inherent to a particular site, such as limitations for equipment storage, access to the site for maintenance activities, and legal obligations associated with the landowner.

Environmental Impact

- Prioritize locations with underutilized land that can be revitalized.
- Use native and resilient plants and sustainable landscaping techniques to minimize maintenance needs.
- Incorporate stormwater management features, such as rain gardens or bioswales, to mitigate runoff.

Designing for Nature-Based Play

NEAs are most effective when they provide diverse opportunities for open-ended, sensory-rich play. The design should encourage children to explore, create, and interact with natural materials. Planners should avoid universal or one-size-fits-all thinking when designing NEA features. A solution in one community may not fit in another, depending on a range of factors specific to the site in question. Design decisions should also take into account ongoing maintenance capacity and incorporate a thoughtful evaluation of potential risks, balancing safety with opportunities for challenging and engaging play.

Natural Elements

- Logs, boulders, and stumps for sitting, climbing, balancing, and imaginative play.
- Sand, water, and loose parts such as sticks and seed pods for sensory engagement and construction play.
- Trees, shrubs, and pollinator gardens to create dynamic, evolving landscapes.

EXAMPLES OF SITE SELECTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Providence, RI: Converted an underutilized parking lot into a thriving green play space with bioswales to manage stormwater.

San Francisco, CA: Focused NEA development in Environmental Justice Communities, ensuring green spaces were prioritized in historically underserved neighborhoods by using equity mapping.

Austin, TX: Used the Healthy Parks Plan Map and Nature Equity Map to select high-priority areas where the benefits of NEAs would have the greatest impact.

Climate Adaptation Features

- Shade structures, tree canopies, and permeable surfaces to reduce heat.
- Windbreaks and rain-absorbing landscapes to enhance resilience to extreme weather.
- Elevated or permeable play surfaces to improve drainage and flood mitigation.

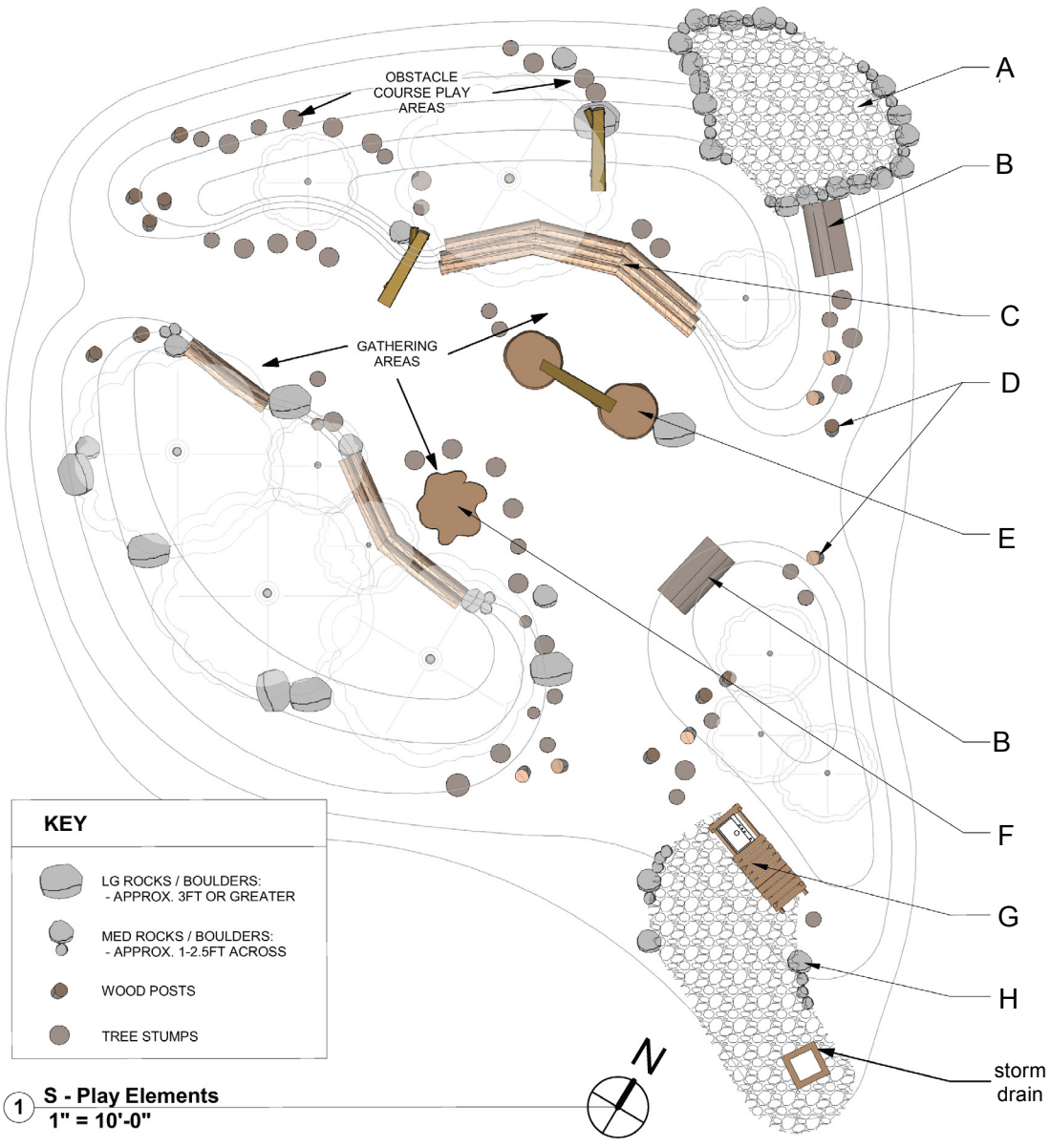
Design Partnerships

- Collaborate with landscape architects and nature-play specialists to ensure high-quality, safe installations.
- Learn from existing models championed by experts in nature-based design.

OAKLAND, CA

Stonehurst Elementary

Below is a site plan showing how a variety of nature-based elements such as logs, boulders, native plantings, and sensory features were thoughtfully selected for community review and feedback. This early design process, grounded in community input, helps ensure that the final NEA offers an engaging, place-based play experience that reflects the local ecology and strengthens residents' connection to their natural surroundings.



1 S - Play Elements
1" = 10'-0"


A. SMALL RIVER ROCK LOOSE PARTS PLAY


B. REDWOOD LOG BENCHES

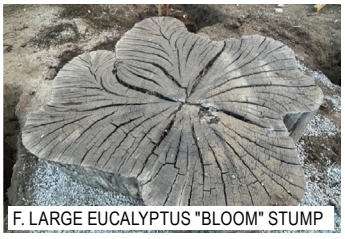

C. STACKED LOG SEATING


D. VERTICAL POST ENTRY


E. LOG AND STUMP BALANCE BEAM


H. MEDIUM AND LARGE ROCK EXAMPLES


G. PLAY KITCHEN


F. LARGE EUCALYPTUS "BLOOM" STUMP

children at play NETWORK
A BERNHEIM INITIATIVE

Created by Bernheim's Children at Play Network

- Partner with arborists to prioritize high quality, climate-resilient species and better understand the maintenance implications of specific plantings.
- Incorporate universal design principles to ensure accessibility for children with a range of abilities.

Community Participatory Design

- Host hands-on events where children and families co-create design concepts using art materials and natural objects.
- Invite children to express their ideas through building with natural loose parts, sketches, models, and storytelling. These ideas can be translated into design features and educational programming.
- Facilitate sessions where community members identify cultural and environmental themes that should be reflected in the playspace.
- Tour existing NEAs or similar greenspaces with local residents to gather place-based insight about what works and what's missing.
- Engage families in mapping neighborhood assets or creating public art or other elements that become part of the NEA.

EXAMPLES OF DESIGNING FOR NATURE-BASED PLAY

Boulder, CO: Integrated tree logs and climbing structures sourced from local forest restoration projects.

Austin, TX: Developed Nature Play Guidelines to standardize the inclusion of natural elements in all new park designs.

San Francisco, CA: For the Heron's Head Park project, planners held five design jams, interactive design events that captured input from children, families, educators, and naturalists to design a play space rooted in ecological and community values.

Pictured: Two girls smiling at the East Oakland Pride "Design Jam" event with their "nature house" made of tree cookies, twigs, and shells. (Oakland, CA)

Sourcing and Using Sustainable Materials

Utilizing locally sourced and recycled materials not only reduces costs but also aligns NEAs with environmental sustainability goals. Planners and implementers should consider not only the maintenance needs of a particular design, but also future changes in climate over the lifecycle of the project when selecting materials and plantings so that any solutions will be able to adapt to future climate realities.

Locally Sourced and Recycled Materials

- Salvaged wood, tree stumps, and logs from urban forestry programs.
- Recycled stone and permeable surfacing materials for pathways and play areas.
- Native plantings that require minimal water and maintenance.

Examples of Sustainable Materials:

- Reclaimed wood for climbing structures and seating.
- Natural fibers (e.g., hemp, straw) for sensory play elements.
- Engineered wood fiber or mulch for safety surfacing.
- Repurposed industrial materials (e.g., concrete remnants, metal sculptures) to create unique play features.

EXAMPLES OF SOURCING AND USING SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS

San Francisco, CA: Used repurposed logs from fallen trees within the park system to create interactive playspaces.

Providence, RI: Incorporated recycled granite curbs as seating elements in community parks.

Pictured: Heron's Head Park NEA materials (San Francisco, CA)

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

Implementation and Community Activation

A hands-on community-build model fosters local ownership and ensures cost-effective implementation.

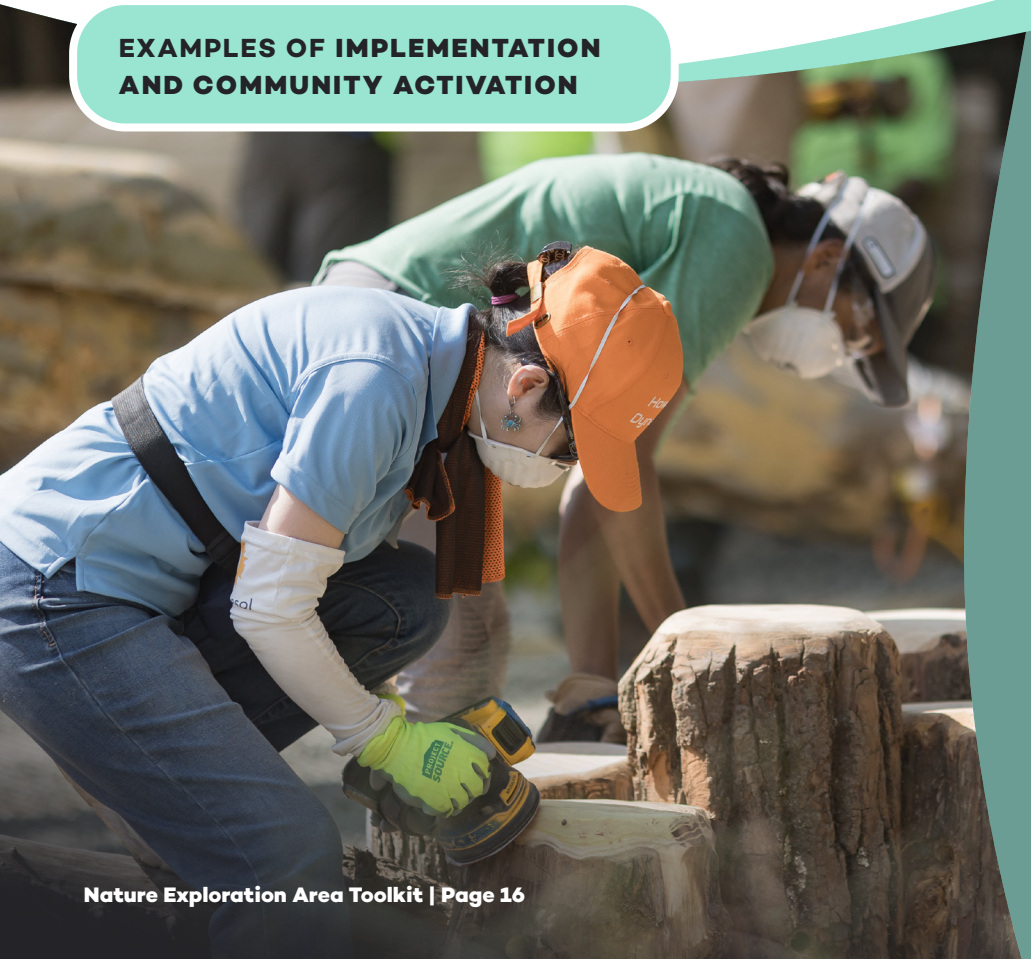
Community-Build Model

- Engage volunteers from schools, local businesses, and neighborhood groups in building the NEA, prioritizing volunteer safety.
- Organize community build days to construct play features, plant greenery, and install interactive elements.
- Offer skill-building workshops so residents, educators, and city staff can learn to fully utilize, maintain, and enhance the space over time.

Project Management

- Develop a clear timeline and assign project leads to oversee installation and safety compliance.
- Coordinate with city agencies for necessary permits and site approvals.
- Ensure proper training and supervision during build days to maintain safety standards, including partnering with contractors, sub-contractors, and designers for pre-installation training.

EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION AND COMMUNITY ACTIVATION



Oakland, CA: Each project is shaped through a collaborative process engaging families, children, and educators from initial "design day" kickoff events through implementation, with partners like TPL, CalFire, KABOOM!, and Eat.Learn.Play. ensuring each site reflects the unique vision and needs of its community.

Providence, RI: Engaged neighborhood groups and local artists in a collaborative build day, integrating nature play features and community-designed art pieces into the NEA that reflect local assets and culture.

Pictured: Volunteer build event at Randall Farm (Prince George's County, MD)

Maintenance and Long-Term Care

A well-maintained NEA remains an asset to the community for years to come. Cities should integrate long-term care strategies to ensure sustainability.

Maintenance Plan

- Schedule regular inspections for structural integrity, plant health, and overall site safety.
- Implement seasonal maintenance activities, such as mulching, tree pruning, and surface repairs and replacements.
- Incorporate NEA maintenance into existing maintenance plans for city facilities and playgrounds
- Establish funding mechanisms for ongoing upkeep, including city budget allocations, grants, partnerships with local funders and collaboratives..

Community Stewardship

- Designate local “play stewards” or neighborhood ambassadors responsible for monitoring and maintaining the site.
- Partner with local schools and organizations for regular nature-based programming.
- Develop educational signage to encourage responsible use and foster a sense of shared responsibility among visitors.

EXAMPLES OF MAINTENANCE AND LONG-TERM CARE

Providence, RI: Trains city parks staff and volunteers through Parks Academy workshops to support the design, development, installing, and maintaining of NEAs.

San Francisco, CA: Established Greenagers, an SF Rec & Park youth initiative that empowers teens to lead community projects, improve green spaces, and build leadership skills through hands-on service and local events.

Oakland, CA: Developed a mentorship program where older students train younger peers on nature playspace care, fostering long-term community investment.

By following these steps, cities and organizations can create Nature Exploration Areas that are inclusive, resilient, and deeply connected to community needs. A thoughtful approach to planning, design, and maintenance ensures that these spaces will continue to provide rich nature-based experiences for generations to come.

04

Funding and Policy Support

Local leaders often aim to address multiple issues like health, safety, education, and climate resilience when investing in civic infrastructure. Nature-based recreational spaces can help meet these overlapping goals in a cost-effective manner. When thoughtfully designed, natural elements like logs, boulders, and native plantings can provide as much enjoyment and developmental benefit as traditional playground equipment.

Costs can be reduced even further by securing locally sourced or reclaimed materials, involving volunteers or community-based build days, and starting with pop-up or pilot installations before scaling up to fully fledged NEAs. Using flexible, modular designs also allows communities to start small and grow their NEAs over time, making them accessible even for municipalities with limited capital budgets.

Funding Sources for NEAs

Funders, including government agencies, philanthropic institutions, and corporate partners are increasingly recognizing green spaces like NEAs and leveraging them as a means of advancing health, environmental, and equity goals through meaningful community assets.

Public and Private Funding Sources Supporting NEAs

NEA projects have successfully leveraged a mix of funding sources, including:

- **Public Grants:** Federal,state, and local agencies may provide funding for green infrastructure and outdoor recreation projects.

- **Local Government Budgets:** City and county capital improvement funds, park dedication fees, and municipal sustainability programs often allocate funds for NEAs as part of broader park investments.
- **Philanthropy and Foundations:** National philanthropies and local community foundations may support NEA initiatives as part of their environmental justice and youth development funding.
- **Corporate Partnerships:** Companies focused on environmental sustainability, outdoor recreation, and health have funded NEAs as part of corporate social responsibility initiatives.
- **Nonprofit and Community-Based Funding Models:** NEAs have been supported through crowdfunding campaigns, community benefit agreements, and participatory budgeting processes.

EXAMPLES OF FUNDING SOURCES

Austin, TX: Leveraged capital improvement funds and nonprofit partnerships to embed NEAs into park redevelopment plans, ensuring sustainable funding and long-term viability. All future parks are required to include NEA spaces/components..

San Francisco, CA: Secured corporate sponsorships, philanthropic, city and state funding to support NEAs in parks and early childhood sites.

Providence, RI: Used federal climate resilience funding and local capital funds to support NEAs as part of its urban greening and environmental justice initiatives.

Oakland, CA: Combined school district capital improvement funds with EPA grants to develop green schoolyards featuring NEAs, demonstrating a multi-agency funding approach.

Pictured: Play day event at Barack and Michelle Obama Academy (Atlanta, GA)

Policy and Advocacy

Advancing NEAs at scale requires strong policy support at the local, state, and federal levels. Policymakers play a key role in prioritizing NEAs as part of broader parks and recreation, health and wellness, economic development, schools and learning, green infrastructure, climate resilience, and environmental justice initiatives.

Strategies for Engaging Policymakers in NEA Advocacy:

- **Integrate NEAs into Citywide Sustainability and Equity Plans:** Encourage municipal leaders to include NEAs in urban greening, public health, and park equity strategies.
- **Inform Stakeholders and Decision Makers:** Build awareness of NEAs and the benefits of nature play through trainings, public events, and direct engagement.
- **Leverage Existing Climate and Infrastructure Policies:** Align NEA projects with policies focused on heat mitigation, stormwater management, and active transportation to unlock funding and regulatory support.
- **Demonstrate Economic and Public Health Benefits**: Use data on cost savings from green infrastructure (e.g., flood mitigation, urban cooling) and improved health outcomes to build a strong case for NEA investment.
- **Champion NEA Pilot Projects and Demonstration Sites:** Engage city councils, park boards, and state agencies in site visits to existing NEAs to illustrate their value and encourage policy adoption.
- **Foster Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Connect with departments of public health, transportation, sustainability, and planning to ensure NEAs are included in comprehensive urban strategies.

EXAMPLES OF POLICY AND ADVOCACY

San Francisco, CA: Advanced the development of NEAs through the city's Environmental Justice Communities Plan, prioritizing green playspaces in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Providence, RI: Leveraged citywide climate adaptation policies to secure funding for NEAs as part of its urban resilience efforts.

Austin, TX: Embedded NEAs into its Parks and Recreation Department's Nature Play Guidelines, making nature play a standard requirement in park redevelopment projects. The city also brought together a number of partners for training on nature-infused projects. This included landscape architects, office staff, city leadership, and others.

05

Conclusion

NEAs have the power to transform urban spaces, helping to create neighborhoods where kids are more likely to grow up happy, healthy, and connected to nature. By integrating NEAs into parks, schoolyards, and public spaces, cities can address a wide range of priorities across health, education, environment, and community well-being.

As cities continue to face challenges related to climate change, public health, and social equity, NEAs represent a flexible, high-impact, potentially cost-effective solution that aligns with existing municipal priorities and funding mechanisms.

The momentum behind NEAs is growing, but achieving widespread adoption requires careful planning, robust advocacy, and broad partnerships. City leaders, community organizations, and funders all have a role to play in expanding access to nature-based play.

We encourage cities to:

- Prioritize NEAs in urban planning by embedding them into environmental sustainability, parks, and public health initiatives.
- Leverage funding opportunities by aligning NEAs with climate resilience, green infrastructure, and early childhood education grants.
- Engage communities in the design and stewardship of NEAs, ensuring they reflect local needs and cultural identities.
- Advocate for policy support that integrates NEAs into city zoning codes, park redevelopment standards, and school district plans.

Children & Nature Network, National League of Cities, and KABOOM! are ready to support cities looking to implement NEAs effectively and sustainably. By committing to NEAs, towns and cities can foster stronger, healthier, and more resilient communities, ensuring that all children have access to the joys and benefits of nature-based play.

Now is the time to act. Let's work together to make spaces where kids can explore and play in nature a core element of our community landscapes.

06

Appendix

Austin, TX

As one of the pilot cities in the Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) initiative, Austin aims to expand equitable nature access across city parks, schoolyards, and early childhood sites. City leaders have identified NEAs as a strategy to address disparities in access to green space, particularly for young children and families in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Project Scope & Timeline

Since 2017, Austin has developed NEAs in 24 city parks, 16 Green School Parks, and 4 early childhood centers. The city currently has 13 parks in the works that incorporate nature play in their designs. Individual projects have varied in their timelines, as some are linked to park redevelopment and others to school improvement projects. Site selection was informed by equity data and environmental mapping tools like CCCN's Nature Equity Map, St. David's Foundation's Healthy Parks planning tool, the City's Healthy Parks Plan, and others.

Key Partners & Collaboration

Key collaborators include Austin Parks and Recreation, Austin ISD, the Austin Parks Foundation, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Texas Children in Nature Network (Austin chapter), and Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds.

Community Engagement & Design Process

Community input is gathered through public meetings and surveys. From a design standpoint, NEAs are often sited adjacent to, but distinct from, traditional playgrounds. The city implemented standard operating procedures and broad-based training across agencies to embed nature play into future park and schoolyard designs.

Funding & Sustainability

Funding sources include local capital improvement dollars, foundation support, and general operating budgets. Funding is supplemented with parkland dedication funds, a specialized Tree Development Fund, grants, and nonprofit partnerships. Some NEAs are also incorporated into the budgets of larger projects within other departments.

Lessons Learned & Impact

Austin demonstrates the value of policy-level alignment and institutional integration. Demand for NEAs has grown, with families now requesting nature play over traditional playgrounds.

San Francisco, CA

San Francisco's experience with NEAs predated their participation in Nature Everywhere. In 2014, the city adopted a Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, making a visible cross-sector commitment to nature-rich childhoods for all. Many of the NEA sites now across the city are in service to Environmental Justice Communities who have had historically limited access to nature.

Project Scope & Timeline

12 public park sites feature NEAs, with 7 as standalone installations and 5 integrated with traditional play equipment. NEAs are also incorporated in 21 child care sites. In addition, temporary "pop-up" NEAs were tested in high-need areas. Timelines ranged from a few months for pop-ups to two years for permanent installations. Site selection was informed by the city's Environmental Justice Communities map overlaid with public parks, early childhood spaces, and other relevant data.

Key Partners & Collaboration

Efforts are coordinated by SF Children & Nature and have involved multiple city agencies (Rec & Park, Department of Early Childhood, Public Utilities Commission, Planning, Public Works), the Presidio Trust, and the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF). Early learning providers have also been key partners.

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

Photo credit: SF Children & Nature, Maria Durana

Community Engagement & Design Process

City agencies and partners engage residents, educators, and families through hands-on design workshops, surveys, and pilot installations. A central component of this strategy is the use of temporary "pop-up" NEAs, which invite the public to explore nature play concepts and provide real-time feedback. These pop-ups serve as both community engagement tools and proof-of-concept demonstrations that inform more permanent installations.

Funding & Sustainability

Diverse mix of city, philanthropic, and state-level funding sources. NEAs are primarily funded through LIIF in partnership with the Department of Early Childhood with allocations for child care using funding from the city's Commercial Rent Tax (Baby Prop C). City park-based NEAs typically rely on capital improvement budgets, often supplemented by external grants.

Lessons Learned & Impact

The NEA pop-up approach and deep community engagement helped foster a strong sense of ownership and grow the movement for nature play. Temporary pop-ups also helped generate interest and proof-of-concept for longer-term investments.

Providence, RI

As a CCCN pilot site, Providence launched its efforts with a focus on leveraging public parks to increase nature exposure and overall park quality. Leaders aim to bring nature access to dense urban neighborhoods and advance climate adaptation goals. A key component of the approach is the development of an in-house design team, including landscape architects, graphic designers, and MEP system specialists, to create nature-based play areas, gathering spaces, and outdoor learning environments

Project Scope & Timeline

97% of Providence's city parks have been renovated with NEA elements. Sites include rain gardens, nature trails, and natural loose parts play. Large-scale projects can take up to five years due to community engagement and planning requirements.

Key Partners & Collaboration

The Providence Parks Department has partnered with more than 50 local and national organizations, including the Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon, and numerous community-based groups to advance park and resilience strategies across the city. Elements supported by the NEA approach have been thoughtfully integrated into these broader efforts, including through strategic plans.

Community Engagement & Design Process

Community engagement occurs through neighborhood park planning sessions and design workshops. The city also uses GIS mapping and community health data to prioritize high-need areas.

Funding & Sustainability

NEAs are funded through a mix of federal resilience funding, State Environmental Management funds (RIDEM), city capital funds, enterprise funds, and philanthropic support. Parks Academy, a city-run initiative, trains staff on NEA maintenance and community stewardship. Investment in Certified Playground Safety Inspections (CPSI) training ensures that all areas of the NEAs meet national safety standards.

Lessons Learned & Impact

Citywide integration of NEAs has helped normalize nature play as a standard part of park development. The work has also elevated the role of parks in climate adaptation and neighborhood health strategies.

Oakland, CA

Oakland's approach is centered around converting traditional asphalt-covered schoolyards into vibrant Living Schoolyards. These spaces, which incorporate NEA concepts and features, support outdoor learning, affirm cultural identity, and enhance climate resilience in historically under-resourced communities.

Project Scope & Timeline

In the last three years, 20 NEAs have been installed on school campuses, with plans to build 25 more. These projects are part of a broader initiative to transform schoolyards into multi-use green spaces. Partners used a robust rubric looking at demographics, schoolyard quality, tree cover, and more. This led to the transformation of the most historically underserved sites first.

Key Partners & Collaboration

Key players include Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the Trust for Public Land, KABOOM!, Growing Together, and Bernheim's Children at Play Network. Internally, OUSD established the Garden Council, an interdepartmental committee with representatives from facilities, sustainability, risk management, and educational departments. This collaborative approach ensures cohesive planning, implementation, and maintenance of Living Schoolyards across the district.

Community Engagement & Design Process

OUSD's Living Schoolyard Guidelines emphasize participatory design, involving students, educators, families, and community members in the planning process. Through workshops and design sessions, stakeholders contribute to creating spaces that reflect the cultural and ecological values of their communities. The guidelines provide a comprehensive framework, detailing design principles, material selections, and maintenance strategies to ensure the longevity and relevance of each project.

Funding & Sustainability

Funding includes school district bond funds, EPA grants, and support from private foundations. Long-term maintenance is shared between school site teams and district operations staff. OUSD developed Living Schoolyard Guidelines to establish a framework for community co-creation. Students, teachers, and families are invited into a participatory design process that includes school-based workshops, mapping exercises, and cultural storytelling.

Lessons Learned & Impact

NEAs on school campuses help reframe outdoor space as central to student wellness and learning. The participatory design process builds strong buy-in from school communities and sustains long-term use.

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Children & Nature Network is an organization with a vision to create a world in which children have access to the benefits of nature everywhere they live, learn, and play. C&NN provides a wide range of resources designed to help localities connect children with nearby nature.

CLICK HERE to learn more.

National League of Cities is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people across the country. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

KABOOM! is the national nonprofit focused on ending playspace inequity by building innovative and inclusive playgrounds in historically underserved communities.

CLICK HERE for more resources.

Through the Nature Everywhere Community initiative, Children & Nature Network, National League of Cities, and KABOOM! partnered to increase equitable access to nature everywhere children live, learn, and play in 100 U.S. communities by 2025.

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