TSTI’s Newest NatureScape Playground

“Let’s see if we can find a space for the 3’s to have their very own outdoor playspace!?”

Part question, part assignment, all dream. This dream, like so many of Carol Paster’s ideas, came to fruition because of her wonderful vision of a preschool with its myriad moving parts that stimulates and nurtures the whole child. With a grand plan for “less screen time and more green time”, hatched about 5 years ago, Carol has been actively finding and allocating the resources and manpower to bring her vision to life. The 3’s NatureScape Playground began as a drawing on paper with a few pictures of natural playground elements from around the world and ideas from the 3’s teachers of what they and their students would want in a playground space. With Leslie Sporn’s blessing to commandeer the far edge of the property for the project and Carol’s go ahead, this past summer and early fall was spent planning, dreaming, drawing, revising, digging, and building. Working with Dan Maus, contractor and co-dreamer and designer, we brought together the seeds of this idea, set in motion the plan, and created the NatureScape Playground especially for our 3’s. While in the throws of construction, ankle deep in mulch, with a scrim of sweat from adjusting rough hewn planks and giant boulders, Dan Maus’s words echoed our thoughts perfectly: “I think it’s always better for a child to stand on top of a giant rock than on top of a big piece of plastic.”
Educators and psychologists are in agreement that playing outdoors improves:
- imagination and creativity - developing individual and social games with natural resources
- motor skills both fine and gross - requiring balance, encouraging climbing and jumping, building with small and large natural objects, examining nature at its largest and smallest
- problem solving - finding ways to climb, jump, run, load, build

“Children who play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, less aggressive and show better concentration.”

Stacey Loscalzo confirms these theories in her article, “Why Playing Outdoors Makes Children Smarter”:

It is through unstructured, open-ended creative play that children learn the ways of the world. While playing outside, children explore with all their senses, they witness new life, they create imaginary worlds and they negotiate with each other to create a playful environment. Outdoor play is open-ended, increases attention spans, promotes problem solving, develops respect for other living things, improves listening and communication skills, encourages cooperative play, increases grit and persistence. But most of all, outdoor play is fun.

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And so, in early November, the NatureScape was opened for business.
Our 3’s teachers report that the children have taken to their new space like birds in a tree, otters in a river, clouds in the sky.

“We’re surprised and amazed that the kids have never asked to go back to the ‘conventional’ two’s playground, with all its prefab toys and colorful distractions, and how creatively they interact with whatever they find in the new space, from trees, boulders and wooden ramp to baskets and rocks.”
Karen Aschenbrenner and Sue Kaplan

“…the new three’s outdoor classroom is inspirational!”
Lisa Schnorr

“When we were outside this week one child came up to me and showed me a cut piece of wood and told me that they were watching Frozen. They could pause, press play, raise or lower the volume. Soon another child followed and was watching his own Fire Dragon video - he didn't want to watch Frozen with us. Who knew we could play ‘iPad’ with wood?”
Betsy Hannon

Sabina Soloway
Science Educator
Playground Designer
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