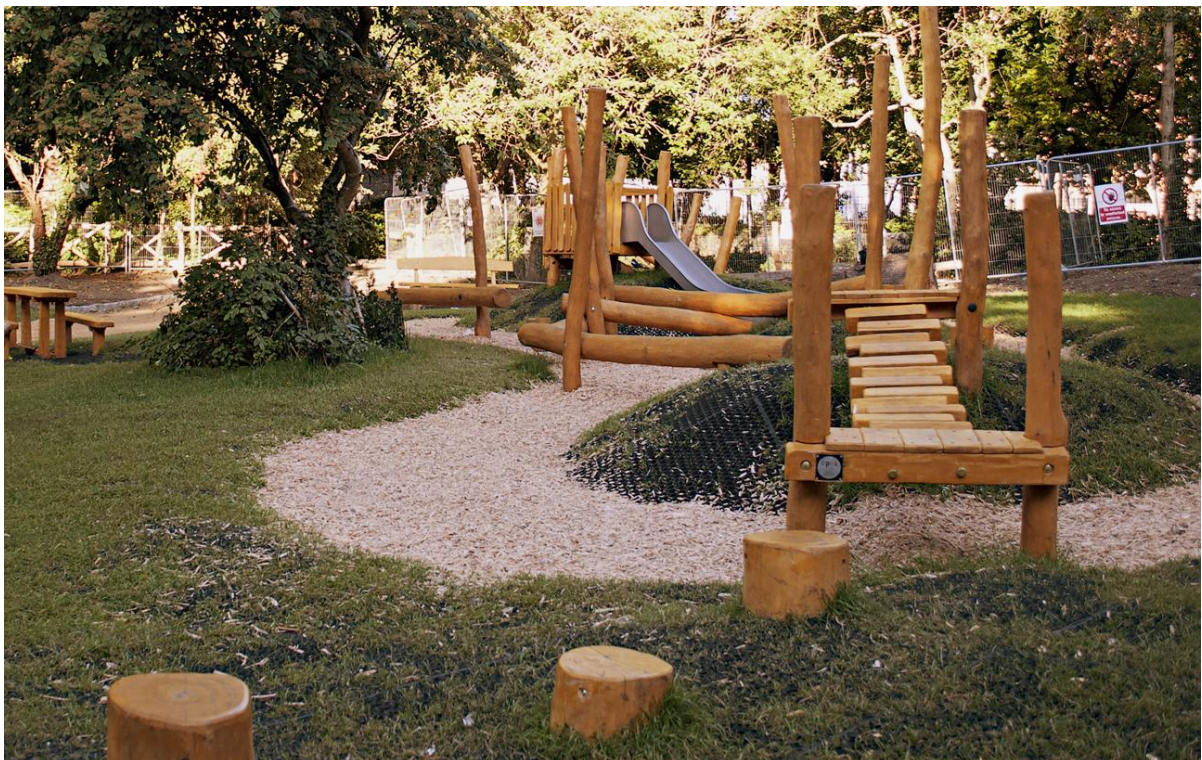


## What is a Natural Playground?

A natural playground is a play area designed to incorporate natural elements for play. These can include trees, rocks, water, sand, and more. A space or place that combines several natural elements to allow children more creative and unstructured play. These spaces should encourage children to use the surrounding natural environment—the sticks, stones, water, earth, and foliage—as their own imaginative, ever-changing playthings. Access to trees and planting as part of those natural materials add

### **What is the difference between a natural playground and a traditional playground?**

Traditional playgrounds often comprise hard surfaces and plastic coated equipment that can lead to injuries during play. In contrast, natural playgrounds are designed with softer surfaces such as grass, sand, or wood chips, which can absorb impacts and reduce the risk of injuries.



*Merrion Square, Dublin*

# Why?

Current findings on natural playgrounds indicated that children used more language and more complex language while playing in the nature-based playground. Natural environments provide a context that contributes to children's general wellbeing, health and their cognitive functioning. Young children themselves prefer playing in nature-based playgrounds, mentioning nature's affordances as sensory-rich ('you can watch birds', 'grass is soft' and 'the sun is warm') and contributing to their comfort and wellbeing

*Full article: [The importance of play in natural environments for children's language development: an explorative study in early childhood education](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2022.2144147) Prins, J., van der Wilt, F., van Santen, S., van der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2023). The importance of play in natural environments for children's language development: an explorative study in early childhood education. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(2), 450–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2022.2144147>*



*Herzog Park, Dublin*

## What elements could form a Natural Playground?

Constructed mounds or berms, sensory play elements including water. Natural materials including timber, stone, sand, boulders and soft landscape elements such as trees, grass, planting, bark mulch.

Dublin City Council encourage the creative design of play features that evoke an understanding of the world and opportunity for children to investigate, re-enact and make sense of complex real-world systems in a safe and managed space. In addition to structured play pieces, we welcome designs that allow for:

- Use of natural materials muck, rocks, pebbles, gravel, tree trunks, sand to provide a direct sensory connection to the natural world.
- Replicate natural experiences
- Features that promote group play
- We are trying to achieve a wilder aesthetic with our playgrounds that provide opportunity to engage with nature and test boundaries.
- Where there is opportunity to pull back fencelines and engage with surrounding natural park features such as wooded areas or grassland (these can be an extension of the primary playground space)



*Merrion Square, Dublin*

### **Additional Information on Risk/Benefit from the DCC Play Strategy 2022 :**

Diminishing access to natural landscapes has contributed to the current decline in opportunities for risk in play. Additionally, increased and speeding traffic and an increase in the amount of time children and young people spend indoors are all inhibiting opportunities for playing outdoors. As a result, childhood is becoming undermined by risk aversion and children and young people have less experience of assessing and taking risks (Gill,2007).

Why is 'Risk in Play' so important? The rationale for providing for and facilitating risk in play is associated with the many health and developmental benefits for children. Risk and challenge within play experiences support children and young people to develop resilience, problem solving, face fears and develop physical intelligence. Overall risk in play supports children to embark on a journey of self discovery and experimentation. If this is restricted, children and young people will inevitably seek out more hostile environments to experience opportunities that involve risk and challenge. This will happen regardless of adult involvement, intervention or permission.

*(From the DCC Play Strategy, 2022)*

### **Recent Examples within DCC**



*Bridgefoot Street Playground, Dublin 8*



*Chapelizod Playground, 2025*



*Kildonan Playground, 2025*

## Natural Playgrounds within Dublin City

### All playgrounds are different!

Dublin City Councils playgrounds vary from large suburban parks such as Bushy Park to small urban spaces such as Diamond Park, Bridgefoot Street Park and St Michans Park. Due consideration to be given to context - city centre locations often have larger footfalls, smaller spaces and require robust design solutions.

**Consider different needs and contexts:** there's need for careful consideration of different requirements and contexts to create more inclusive and accessible natural playgrounds.

**Focus on the balance between risky play versus physical accessibility:** a balance between different playground features to accommodate different needs and a diversity of different users.



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