NATURE PLAY | HEAD START

A Certified Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom

Fig. 1 View of Habitat Hub from Children's Entry

DESIGN INTENT

Beyond simply getting children outside, we are taking play, culturally thought of as a recess time for teachers, into a learning environment. The benefits of providing a natural outdoor play and learning environment for Head Start is essential because research links socioeconomic disadvantage with compromised physical health and wellness.

THE SITE

A 1.5-acre field to the north of the existing classroom building and traditional playground of Head Start is transformed into an ecologically rich nature-based learning environment that set a new benchmark of design for educating a creative, healthy, eco-literate generation.

THE PROGRAM

With our community partner we created a nature-based play and learning environment for 300 preschool-aged children at Head Start. Our primary goal was to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature-based education an enriching and sustainable part of their daily lives.

Fig. 2 View from Habitat Hub looking west through Bird Blind

The central area of Nature Play is a large certified outdoor classroom called the *Habitat Hub*. It has room for two classes and acts as the starting point for the children's outdoor adventures. This timber frame structure is made of diseased ash trees re-harvested, milled down, with hand cut mortise and tenon joints to form an undulating tree like canopy under which the children learn.

Fig. 3 View from Habitat Hub looking east to the wetlands

Habitat Hub leads to other activity areas with names like *Crazy Climbers, Fort Fun, Timber Time* and *Hideaway Hill* that are constructed within four Indiana habitats: prairie, meadow, wetlands, and woodlands. The children learn through play with natural elements, native plantings, and traditional building materials in an unstructured, creative, and innovative way as their gross physical motor skills, fine motor skills, and cognitive and social learning skills are developed.

Fig. 8 View from the Community Entry crossing the wetland bridges over the bioswale created to drain the site and parking area

This is the way the community enters into the Nature Playscape. The community garden to be developed to the north is in the fenced in area and the more natural woodland, prairie and wetland habitats are to the north and east outside of the fenced in learning area. Students from Head Start are able to enter these natural habitats while on a "field trip."

Through rich programming planning with teachers, children, and parents, we created twelve clearly defined activity area in Nature Play. Children need order, not a jumble of spaces arrranged indiscriminately. Clearly defined activity areas empower children to make choices and plan their own learning. Separated activity area decrease conflicts among children. Clear areas increase children's ability to focus on learning activities.

Fig. 13 View from the top of the hill of Trickle Stream looking over the Dirt Dig, Messy Materials, Fort Fun, and Creative Corner activity areas to the south of Habitat Hub

Fig. 23 Overall Site Plan Drawing showing each activity area

Highlighting water drainage through a bio-swale off of the parking lot and creating a wetland stream through which the entire playscape drains to, collecting water in rain barrels for use in the water wall and garden areas, and recycling wood from a local salvage yard are all sustainable values showcased in the overall design. Accessible features include a sand play area for wheelchair use, all accessible paths of curshed limestone and engineered wood chip fibers, and sensory gardens highlighting smell, touch, and sound for sight impaired.