

# Designing Natural Playgrounds

## Involving and activating children and their parents in the process of playground design.

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A natural playground can contribute to social and cultural integration of children and their parents in any given living environment; and may very well be beneficial for the psycho-social and motoric development of children.

During a participation project in one of the municipalities of Amsterdam in 2009, approximately 180 children, their parents and local professionals and officials were actively involved in the design process of a natural playground facility. The active and creative input of children and parents were successfully integrated in the actual design of the natural playground facility in an Amsterdam park which is to be realized during 2010. In their input children and parents have the following design principles in common: adventure, participation in nature, diversity (of users), natural education, safety, maintenance and sustainability.

In view of the diversity of anticipated users of the future playground, the participation process was designed to fit a dynamic and flexible approach of different groups of children and parents, with the use of different working methods adapted to different groups, i.e.:

### Consultations

Several one time only consultations with children and parents in public spaces, tinker and potter activities with local children during a municipal street festival, and a support meeting with stakeholders from local grass root organizations.

### Creative sessions

Creative sessions with children - Junior Creators - and separately with parents and local professionals - Senior Creators.

### Fun & Play Days

Fun & Play days with children at different playgrounds, supported by participatory observation.

### Child Reporters

Child Reporters, researching the design and participation process, interviewing other children and publishing their reports (online).

The effectiveness of the aforementioned methods depends on the extent of input they generate for the actual design of the natural playground, and on the perceived effects on the active and voluntary involvement of children and parents with the natural playground. The experiences of children and parents during the project in Amsterdam suggests that this effectiveness is affected by: physical proximity of participation activities within the actual living environment, incremental logic of consecutive activities, forms of interaction in accordance with the preferences of participants, and finally the availability of pictorial or exemplary and illustrative materials supporting expression of their own views and creativity.

*Alexander Foundation is a non-profit Dutch national research institute on youth participation that implements projects for those already working with or interested to work with youth participation. Since 1993, the Alexander Foundation has been active in the area of participatory youth research and has set up training and coaching programs for children, young people and professionals that draw on a variety of participatory methods.*

