

Nature Play at Imagination Grove: Excellence without Expense

by Ken Finch

Tucked away in the heart of Illinois is an exemplary example of how community nature centers can embrace play as a central and affordable part of their repertoire.

Just south of the twin cities of Bloomington-Normal, Sugar Grove Nature Center is a small, nonprofit facility set amidst over 1,000 acres of prairies and deciduous woods. School classes, public programs, special events, exhibits, concerts and walking trails are all among their standard offerings. Increasingly, though, the Center's visitors are zeroing in on "Imagination Grove," where kids find the kind of natural play area that so many American adults fondly remember from childhoods past.

Just a few years ago the power and potential of nature play was a new concept for most nature centers. But it has struck such a strong and familiar cord with conservationists that at many environmental education centers, nature play has now become an equal methodological partner with the more traditional, cognitive-focused programming. But although the "why" behind the need to restore nature play is now well-established, the "how" remains a work in progress. Across the country, efforts to bring back nature play are blossoming, evolving, soaring and occasionally sinking. There are short interludes of unstructured play added to structured EE lessons. There are multi-million-dollar nature playgrounds designed and built from scratch, and lesser playspaces where landscape designers try to augment and improve on existing natural areas. A new genre of "family nature clubs" has sprung up, scheduling regular "nature play dates" that embrace what one club leader cleverly calls "planned spontaneity." And parents everywhere are redoubling their efforts to get their kids out in nature, wherever and whenever they can — from their own backyards to the most remote wilderness areas.

Angela (Smith) Funk is one of those who have deep and fond memories of playing outside as a child, in left-over patches of vacant land in the south suburbs of Chicago. She spent day after day collecting grass seed heads, watching toad tadpoles metamorphose, and digging to China — experiencing nature in a slow, playful, first-hand way that no digital world is ever likely to reproduce. Long before Richard Louv's [Last Child in the Woods](#) took the conservation world by storm, Angela dreamed of creating an area where today's kids could enjoy those same sorts of outdoor adventures, infused with discovery and imagination. When she became the Director at Sugar Grove, she found the perfect opportunity for her dream to take shape.

In a semi-open, two-acre enclave a couple hundred yards from the visitor center are scattered walnut trees, a small and shallow stream with a little foot bridge, and a roofless “pioneer cabin” that offers enduring kid appeal despite its deteriorated condition. A natural tree line defines the northern

“We . . . wait in anticipation of our Thursdays of Exploring. Walking under the oaks and maples, the worries and cares are swept off and finally, after a week of to-do lists and schedules, this unscheduled, unplanned activity allows us to slow down, relax and appreciate the simple things.”

(written by a home-schooling mother who visits Imagination Grove weekly with her children)

boundary of the area, with the year-round stream enclosing the rest. Upon taking the Sugar Grove job, Angela had a six-month goal to get the main nature center building up and running. But she simultaneously took on the task of converting the stream-side glen into a place dedicated to play in nature – and named it “Imagination Grove.” She had no budget for

this project, no landscape designer to reveal every flaw in the site and every expensive solution, and no master plan for how “IG” would meet the many and diverse developmental needs of children. Instead, she had memories, dreams, and passion. “Having no money actually made it simple,” she says. “Free boundaries, a free creek, the perfect climbing tree, a foot bridge already in place . . . just add shovels, a pile of sticks, and Imagination Grove was born.”

Today Imagination Grove is full of simple child delights — most nature-focused; all outdoors in a quiet setting that is joyfully animated by its young visitors. Among the features:

- ❖ A natural climbing tree with a thick horizontal branch about six feet off the ground. Kids can climb up via the two-by-fours nailed into the trunk, or use a rope ladder at the other end. Beneath the branch, a swing further beckons.
- ❖ On the wilder side of the creek is a short loop trail through trees and tall underbrush, where a small stick fort has materialized without any adult planning.
- ❖ The rundown pioneer cabin remains popular — a nondescript play space that children’s imagination can turn into a primitive shelter, a wilderness fort, or any other pretend setting that they can conjure. Joining it is a newer, volunteer-built clubhouse that kids use differently — typically for playing house.
- ❖ Adjacent to the clubhouse is a simple clothesline and a big old washtub with a supply of sacrificial clothes that get washed, re-washed, and hung up repeatedly.
- ❖ Nearby is the Grove’s third structure, an elevated “lookout fort” with a vertical ladder that accesses an unroofed deck — also constructed by volunteers.
- ❖ A large, hollow log can be climbed on or through, and a bunch of large stumps — set both vertically and horizontally — serve as “hoppers” and as places to peek under for kid-scale critters. Around them, open grassy spaces allow the simple joy of running.

- ❖ A big, plain-dirt digging pit is embellished with four small shovels and a rack to hang them on — when they're not in use for the pit's signed purpose: "Dig to China!"
A sandbox adds a different version of digging, and yet another spin on the theme is a fossil dig site that is seeded with dinosaur bones (which, to adult eyes, look remarkably like deer bones).
- ❖ A "quiet area" has paths through tall grass that lead to a low-slung hammock, and the overall ambiance is embellished with wind chimes, bird houses, and a creek-side sign proclaiming "Raccoon Crossing."
- ❖ The stream itself is crossed by the lumber foot bridge, but most kids prefer to balance across the large rocks and concrete blocks that have been placed in the shallow water — and subsequently moved around many times by budding engineers.
- ❖ One other prominent and cherished feature is a low zip line that lets children glide across the grassy center of Imagination Grove — but is strong enough to also hold the dads who just can't resist....

None of Imagination Grove's attractions can match the glitzy and expensive features found in the elaborate nature playspaces that are springing up in botanical gardens, parks, and even some larger nature centers. But what Imagination Grove lacks in "gee whiz" impact, it makes up for with an indefinable feel of magic: taken together, the Grove is a charming and inviting child's delight that engages kids for hours at a time.

To get Imagination Grove started, Angela initially spent the not-so-grand total of about \$50 on supplies. Later, a \$2,400 grant provided the zip line, supplies for the new clubhouse, and improvements to the footbridge. Volunteers invested roughly 70 hours on these construction projects, and a dedicated individual helper continues to round up things like pie tins, clothes, shovels and buckets from her friends, garage sales, and resale shops — all donated to the Nature Center. Woodchips are also donated, and the larger logs and stumps have come from the Nature Center's own property, friends, and roadsides.

Imagination Grove is open daily, dawn to dusk, year-round; it is free, like the rest of the Nature Center. In addition to drop-in visitors, most of the Center's visiting school classes spend at least some time there, and there is a home-school group that visits IG every week. The play space is also one of the Center's birthday party options, is a regular (and very popular!) part of their summer day camps, and is used by scout groups, day care centers, etc. Each summer the Nature Center hosts a special Imagination Grove Fun Day with lemonade, snacks, and a volunteer-staffed trading post that invites visitors to bring nature items to trade.

Imagination Grove is a unique highlight amidst the beautiful land and trails of Sugar Grove. Not only does it draw and retain children and families, it has come to define the playful, relaxed, yet passionate character of the entire organization. Professionals from other natural areas have visited to see IG for themselves — a pilgrimage that is well worth the time, since words and photos do not adequately convey the delightful essence of the Grove. But thousands of children are capturing that essence in their own spirits, and will be carrying it forward into their adult values and memories — a perfect reflection of the enduring mission of a community nature center!

*Ken Finch is the founder and President of Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood, an Omaha-based conservation organization that speaks, teaches, writes, and consults about nature play and how it can be restored to childhood. He has worked for over 36 years as a professional environmental educator, and is a past President of ANCA.
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