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The natural environment as a playground for children: Landscape description and analyses of a natural playscape

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Abstract

Previous studies have explained children's experience of place and their special preferences for the unbuilt and unstructured environment. However, the impact of a natural environment on children's learning and development has been a topic of low priority within child research and the importance of natural playscapes for children has also been neglected in physical planning. The present study focuses on a natural environment, a small forest, as a playscape for children. The forest was used by a kindergarten as a supplement to their traditional outdoor playground and the impact such a landscape might have on children's motor development was investigated through an experimental study on kindergarten children aged 5, 6 and 7 years of age. The landscape was described and analyzed by methods of landscape ecology and geomorphology implemented in a geographical information system (GIS). We found

that the natural landscape had qualities to meet the children's needs for a stimulating and varied play environment. Landscape ecology metrics showed high values for diversity, evenness and heterogeneity for the study area. The diversity of vegetation and topography corresponded to function-related structures that afforded versatile play. The study indicated a strong relation between landscape structure and play functions. The diversity of the vegetation was related to phytosociology and physiognomy, while the diversity of topography was related to slope and roughness. Diversity in landscape elements such as vegetation and topography might be considered a dimension of quality for a natural playscape. This playscape comprised the ground for training of motor fitness in children. Through all-round playing and exploring the natural playscape, the children's motor fitness was improved. This proved the learning effects from a natural playscape on children's motor abilities. This paper will focus mainly on the landscape descriptions and the affordance of versatile play.



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Keywords

Environments for play and development; Natural playscapes; Landscape ecology

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