

serious play at Ithaca Children's Garden



FOR KIDS, play is serious business. It's not "just about having fun, but taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries," states the American Academy of Pediatrics in a clinical report called *The Power of Play*, published in August 2018. The report also asserts that play yields all sorts of benefits in relation to brain development, learning, and stress reduction. When a garden is designed to encourage play, something truly magical happens, like it does every day at the Ithaca Children's Garden (ICG) in upstate New York.

Here, young visitors find limitless opportunities to engage in interactive explorations of the natural world. "ICG provides a safe place for children to connect to abundant and diverse life forms right in the city," says Erin Marteau, its executive director. "ICG is about wonder and curiosity, and slowing down in a time when all the visual chatter

and data can overwhelm and dull our senses. It's about connecting with what's real, here, and now, and educating the senses of the whole person, beyond what any screen can provide," she adds.

What makes ICG and gardens like it unique is the way in which they go about encouraging these outcomes. "While most children's gardens invite a level of engagement," explains Marteau, "they are typically highly curated and controlled." In contrast, every space within ICG is designed to connect with children's developmental needs and interests in open-ended ways.

Learning happens here, but, unlike in a heavily structured learning environment, it happens more organically, on each individual child's terms. "It is much more memorable for a child to pick weeds to feed to the chickens, smell freshly picked mint, and climb trees to experience what the bark feels like than it is to read a sign,"

Connecting to the natural world is child's play in this interactive, hands-on space.

BY KATHERINE SOMERVILLE

Visitors can get an elevated view of the children's garden atop the gigantic sculpture of Gaia the snapping turtle.

says Marteau. And this is where ICG’s mission of cultivating environmental stewardship comes into play. When children have fun and memorable outdoor experiences, they are more likely to become adults who will prioritize nature and the environment.

ICG PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION

During the American Horticultural Society’s National Children & Youth Garden Symposium (NCYGS) in Ithaca in July, participants experienced ICG for themselves. As these educators, garden designers, and program leaders began to wander the garden and observe kids at play there, they were hesitant at first, especially when encountering the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone (HONAZ). This space is an adventure playground modeled after nature-based learning and play settings in Germany, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom. Here, the culture of play reigns and children can take complete ownership of how they interact with their space.



The unconventional Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone allows children to freely explore and interact with their environment.

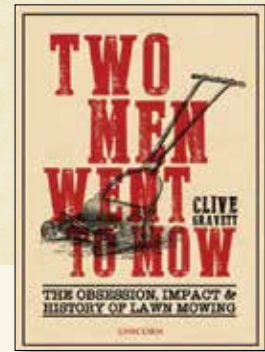
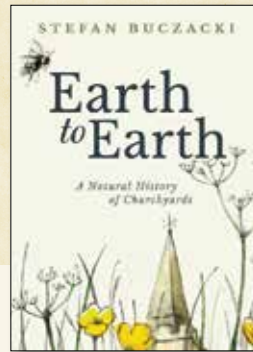
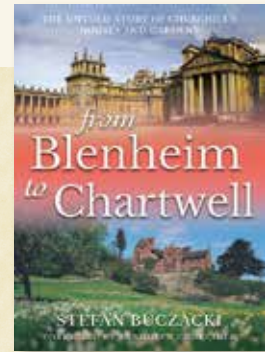
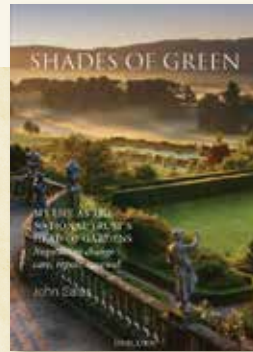
Picture an area with dirt-covered terrain featuring a series of mounds and pits, some filled with water. Strewn about are “loose parts”—straw bales, stumps, cardboard, rope, large tubes, and other detritus. Now, add kids into this scene. Under the watchful eye of an adult playworker, who is trained to constantly monitor and assess risk, kids build forts, climb trees, and create their own entertainment. In the process, some will get muddy and wet, most will get dirty, but all will tap into their imagination and ingenuity while exploring the natural world.

Not surprised by the initial reaction of the NCYGS visitors, Marteau notes that “adventure play can look very different than typical playground play. Often it is much more creative, expansive, and socially complex than what we allow for in typical settings. There’s usually a learning curve for adults to understand what they’re looking at and reframe how to interpret and respond to what’s happening.” But once adults get past that curve, “the benefits to child development become so obvious,” Marteau adds.

And sure enough, a few NCYGS attendees soon began swinging from a tree in HONAZ, experiencing the space as a child might.

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Others climbed on Gaia, the larger-than-life snapping turtle sculpture that inspired the ICG's logo. One or two even rolled around in a giant plastic pipe on the open expanse of the Village Green.

"It was refreshing to see a garden where children have greater freedom in manipulating their surroundings during their exploration and discovery," observes NCYGS attendee Joshua Beblo, a landscape designer based near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

NCYGS attendee Secethia Boardley-Davis, who is director of a preschool in Virginia, notes that she was "struck by how engaged each child was. That engagement contributes to the ICG philosophy of honoring the whole child, fostering environmental stewardship with hands-on sensory experiences, which is

Labyrinth Memorial Garden, and the Rice Paddy Pond with myriad amphibian and insect inhabitants. The Kids' Kitchen, built in 2013, is newly reliant on solar energy to power the cooking, eating, art, and other special events that happen there.

Each of these features is designed to be "engaging and creative for visitors, while also being durable, rugged, and reasonable to maintain given our resources," says Marteel.

A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

At ICG, kids are not only given permission, but also encouraged to actively explore and discover the natural world through play. These playful, positive experiences foster greater envi-



NCYGS attendees admire the abundant blooms in the Bird Garden, one of several habitat landscapes at the Ithaca Children's Garden.

how we all, in the natural world, best establish, maintain, and sustain relationships with and in that environment."

PLAYFUL SPACES

With Gaia as the anchor on the south side of ICG's three-acre property tucked into a corner of city-owned Cass Park, other spaces have been added on as resources became available since the garden's ground-breaking in 2005. It now includes a wildflower meadow, bioswale, and green-roofed troll house. A child-sized nest and mural-adorned birdhouse are focal points of the Bird Garden whose diverse plantings attract, feed, and provide habitat. In the Kitchen Garden, raised beds are planted with fragrant herbs, colorful flowers, and delicious vegetables, inviting children to engage in a multisensory experience. Colonies of bees and the chickens that reside in Cluckingham Palace lend further biodiversity to the space.

More recent additions include Woven Tunnel Huts designed by master willow sculptor Patrick Dougherty, the Bulb

ronmental awareness in addition to yielding numerous other benefits to children related to "mitigating stress, improving academic skills, and helping to build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress and build social-emotional resilience," explains pediatrician Michael Yogan, lead author of the recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

No wonder ICG is beloved by the Ithaca community, welcoming 70,000 visitors annually. Marteel often receives inquiries about how to start similar spaces elsewhere in the United States, but to her knowledge there's nothing else quite like it yet. After their own memorable experiences there, perhaps a few of the NCYGS attendees who visited this summer will start experimenting with play in their own garden spaces.

A former middle school teacher, Katherine Somerville is member programs associate for the American Horticultural Society.