



## WILD AND NATURE PLAY

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Many organisations have traditionally provided formal managed play areas as part of a visit to a property or attraction. The recent trend away from manufactured items such as climbing frames and swings has led to the use of various terms to describe the provision of alternative types of play opportunities.

It is important that we fully understand what is meant by these terms and the implications for management of risk and the need for safety inspections.

## Definitions

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**Formal play** uses manufactured items, bought from a supplier. These have been purpose-designed and built as play pieces. The design will have dealt with many of the inherent risks and they are often supplied with a certificate of conformity.



**Nature play** is the provision of a play opportunity within a structured play area using something from the natural environment rather than a purpose built piece of equipment. For example the use of a tree trunk as a climbing frame or balance beam. The piece is usually modified to provide safer access. Branches may be trimmed to avoid traps or limit heights.

There are also examples where formal play and nature play are found together on the same site, such as the National Trust's Crow Wood play area at Lyme Park (below).





**Wild play** is opportunistic play with the visitor using something they would expect to encounter in the environment.

There is no planned intention for play to be part of the management of such a feature.

There may, however, be wider active encouragement for this type of play through national or local campaigns.

An example is the National Trust's **50 Things to do before you're 11 3/4** campaign that aims to promote nature and outdoor play as a fun part of a healthy, happy and enjoyable family life. First on the list of things to do is to climb a tree.

## Management implications

Activity	Play Type	Management
Provision of a climbing frame, purchased from a commercial manufacturer.	Formal	<p>Properly installed by provider or following provider's instructions.</p> <p>Safe fall zone created with relevant surfacing where appropriate.</p> <p>Inspection on completion of installation by competent person.</p> <p>Ongoing recorded inspection of the structural integrity of the piece and of any surfacing associated with the piece.</p>
Use of a felled tree as a climbing frame within a designated play scheme.	Nature	<p>Properly installed to ensure the piece is secure.</p> <p>Some delimiting probably needed to reduce trap hazards, to ensure limbs are strong enough to hold the weight of the climbers and to limit the height a climber can reach.</p> <p>Safe fall zone created with relevant surfacing where appropriate.</p> <p>Inspection on completion of installation by competent person.</p> <p>Ongoing recorded inspection of the structural integrity of the piece and of any surfacing associated with the piece.</p>
Climbing a tree.	Wild	No management implications in terms of play provision.

## Context is highly significant when defining type of play

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Activity in Context	Play Type	Management
Visitors use brash from a thinning operation in a stand of trees to build shelters or dens.	Wild	No management implications in terms of play provision. An increase in the number of visitors and time spent may alter the use zoning, increasing frequency of tree inspection.
The land manager brings brash from a felling site to provide material for people to build dens or shelters.	Nature	Ensure the correct tree inspection regime is in place for the level of use. Regularly check area and remove hazardous constructions. Take reasonable steps to remove sharp stumps and reduce trip hazards.
The land manger constructs a framework for walls and a pitched roof to encourage building of a den or shelter. Materials are provided to cover the roof and fill the walls.	Formal	Proper design and installation of the structure. Inspection on completion of installation by competent person. Ongoing recorded inspection of the structural integrity of the piece. Trip hazards removed from the play area.

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## Links to further information

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- The Forestry Commission provides a [practical guide on nature play](#) that offers fun, simple and cost effective examples of play ideas from easily sourced materials.
- A good example of how the Forestry Commission has put these ideas into practice is at the Westonbirt Old Arboretum Play Trail, which is featured as a case study on this website.
- [Play England](#) also publish advice on how to introduce nature play. [Nature\\_Play\\_Maintenance\\_Guide\\_Play\\_England\\_2009.pdf](#)
- The Play Safety Forum has considered the benefits to children from allowing risk to be experienced in their play. [Managing\\_risk\\_in\\_play\\_provision\\_Play\\_Safety\\_Forum\\_August\\_2002.pdf](#)
- The Health and safety Executive have produced guidance on striking the right balance between protecting children from the most serious risks and allowing them to reap the benefits of play. [HSE\\_High\\_Level\\_Statement\\_on\\_childrens-play-july-2012.pdf](#)
- The National Trust pose a series of questions when considering outdoor play provision. [If\\_a\\_play\\_area\\_is\\_the\\_answer\\_what\\_is\\_the\\_question\\_National\\_Trust\\_2010.pdf](#)

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