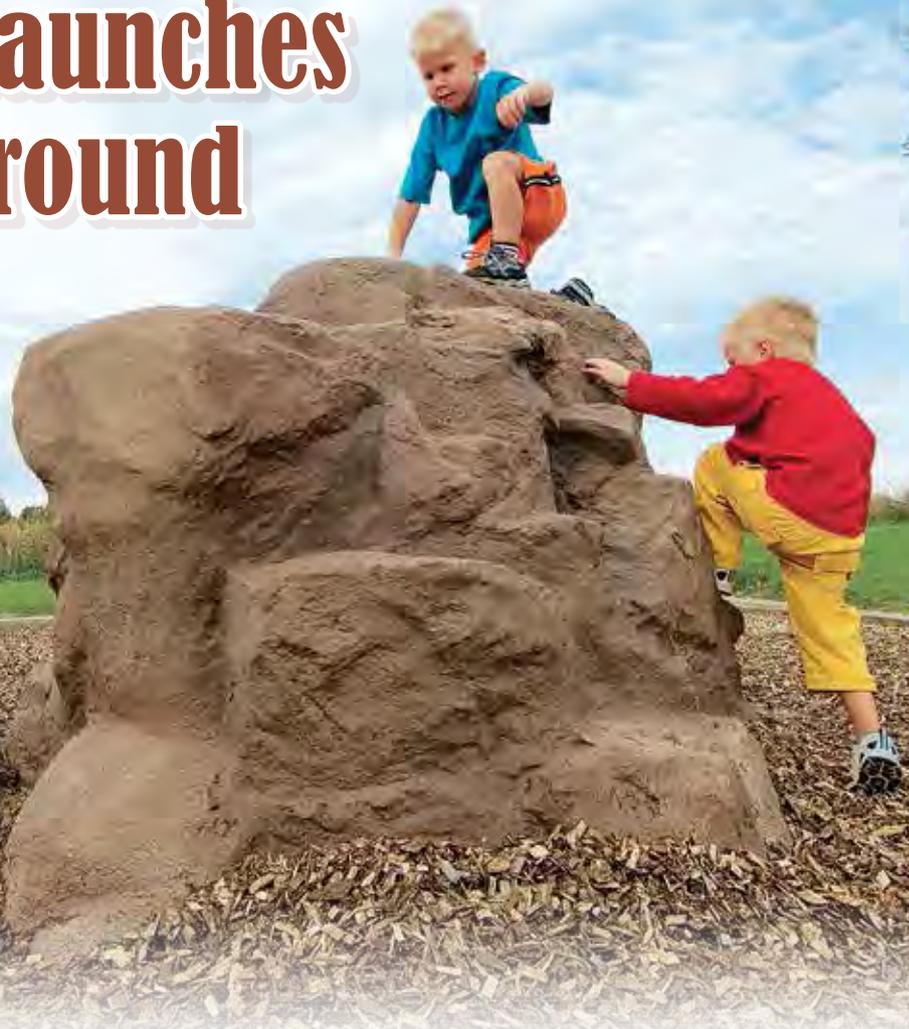


Air Force Launches New Playground Initiative



The Air Force playground initiative includes the addition of age-specific climbers and open space in natural surroundings to run and explore. PHOTO COURTESY OF LANDSCAPE STRUCTURES, INC.

In an effort to provide more outdoor learning and play environments for children and youth on base, the Air Force has launched an initiative that will include the creation of Nature Inspired Outdoor Play Environments (OPEs) and Accessible Playgrounds (APGs) at Child Development Centers (CDCs) and School-Age Programs (SA Programs) Air Force-wide.

“The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) provided Air Force Child and Youth Programs funding to add/alter/renovate selected OPEs at the CDC for ages 6 weeks - 5 years, SA Programs for ages 5-12 years, and Youth Programs (YP) for ages 9-18 years,” explained Child Development Program Section Chief Patti Mehrens, Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) Directorate of Services. “We have 57 projects with approximately 170 age-specific OPEs planned, with 63 APGs awarded.”

Mehrens pointed out that for the “Natural OPEs” funds are available to Airman and Family Services (AFS) Flight Child and Youth Programs (CYP) to enhance their OPEs while incorporating nature components.

“The goal is to provide natural play and learning environments that support children and youths’ interactions with the natural world,” she said. “Research has shown a positive link between children and youths’ experiences in nature and their psychological well-being and overall development. Benefits of access to natural play environments include: improved con-

centration and impulse control; emotional coping and stress reduction; stimulation of creativity; reduced symptoms of attention deficit disorder; increased analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking skills; enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence and independence; and improved motor coordination.”

These funds, up to \$50,000 per project, must be used to enhance existing play spaces to maximize exposure to nature and offer meaningful outdoor play and learning opportunities, according to Mehrens. “A project equals one play space. An installation may submit more than one funding initiative application to enhance different OPEs in the flight, but the total amount awarded per installation will not exceed \$75,000. An individual application package must be submitted for each project.”

For each OPE, the entire environment shall create a natural “playscape” or play space that uses a blend of natural areas “to interest children in learning about the wonders and secrets of the natural world,” noted Mehrens. “Swings and slides may still be present, but new-style playgrounds also offer other activities. The learning environment should be extended from the inside to the OPEs.”

OPE plans identify the relationships between specific play areas and the overall OPE for each age-specific group of children/youth that shall be adhered to during design. Some examples are:

Playgrounds/Outdoor Amenities

- **Hills** - provide children with new heights and vantage points
- **Water** - provides opportunities for endless play and experimentation
- **Plants** - provide moods, seasonal interest, secret places to play and natural shade (select plants for their shape, colors, foliage, effects in the wind and scents)
- **Sunflowers** - the perfect natural playscape plant
- **Pathways** - the more choices of materials and surfaces the better
- **Sand** - engaging for all ages
- **Stages/Platforms** - a flat place to get on top of to sing, dance, perform, etc.
- **Artwork** - places to create or display murals, sculptures and mosaics, etc.
- **Sound** - provide opportunities for different types of sound: musical instruments, bells, chimes, natural elements, etc.
- **Hideouts** - safe, small and secure places that still offer some visibility
- **Open Areas** - wide-open space for running and roaming
- **Seating** - a place to rest
- **Gardens** - provide opportunities to observe the cycles of life

As of June 2014, for playground projects executed by the Air Force Nonappropriated Fund Purchasing Office (AFNAFPO), Landscape Structures was selected to provide the equipment and surfacing; Freenotes Harmony Park and Nature Explore were selected to provide the musical equipment. AFNAFPO will manage the contracts and Landscape Structures will design and install OPEs for all new HQ AF/AISOC-funded projects.

Some of the equipment being used for these projects includes age-specific climbers, sandboxes and water tables, musical equipment (tuned drums and marimbas), art easels, shade structures, stor-

age units (trike/bike storage), and basketball, volleyball and soccer through the SA and YP programs.

“During the standardized design development, the Air Force worked with the National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS), a landscape architect, and various child and youth specialists to design and develop equipment and surfacing specifications,” Mehrens explained. “Each specification incorporates nature in some way (color of equipment, type of materials used, etc.). Proper use zones under and around equipment shall comply with American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) 1292 for impact attenuation and shall be poured-in-place rubber.”

For the garden areas, above-the-ground planter boxes were purchased from Nature Explore, Big Toys and Grounds for Play, or built by the contractor. Throughout the OPEs, native, non-poisonous vegetation was planted and arbors were installed.

“An intentionally designed OPE offers a powerful context for learning,” said Mehrens.

—GRF



Integrating musical instruments, such as drums pictured here, is an important aspect of the Air Force's new playground initiative.

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