

Tree Cookies for Play and Learning

What are some ways to improve an outdoor learning environment without breaking the bank?

Tree cookies are a simple, affordable, and effective way to improve an outdoor learning environment. They afford a variety of play activities and either fixed in place to serve as "stepping stones" or other types of play surfaces or as "loose parts."

Sliced segments of logs (3"-6" thick) = instant stepping "stones", informal paths, bug habitats (look underneath!), and natural building materials.

Preparation

Look around the community for free logs to slice up into tree cookies. Hardwoods are preferred to soft woods and recently cut wood is preferred dead wood. Red cedar is ideal because it is resistant to decay and the cross-section of the trunks provides cookies with fun shapes.

Fixed Tree Cookies

Fixed tree cookies generally have a larger diameter and can afford sitting, jumping, and balancing. Tree cookies that are fixed in the ground linearly create a path. Tree cookies are great stop-gaps if stepping stones are not initially affordable. They will need replacing within two to five years and are not suitable for a permanent path solution. If creating a path, the tree cookies should be a minimum of 4 inches thick. Any rough edges on the top side of the tree cookies should be sanded. To make them last longer, the bottom side of fixed tree cookies could be slathered with polyurethane or oil-based paint to create a barrier against water being absorbed from the soil. Larger logs will require a chain saw with a sharp blade for a clean cut.

Loose Tree Cookies

Loose tree cookies have a variety of potential affordances, including dramatic play, stacking, sorting and hauling. Loose tree cookies can be 1" - 6" thick and have a diameter of 3" - 12". A radial arm saw or band saw can be used to cut smaller diameter tree cookies. Both cut sides of loose tree cookies should be sanded smooth.

Uses

During Preventing Obesity by Design (POD) post-intervention site visits, the versatility of tree cookies was observed firsthand:

- Intermountain Children's Place, Spruce Pine, NC. A row of eight loose tree cookies could be rearranged to afford building, stepping, jumping and balancing.
- Irene Wortham Community Child Care Center, Asheville, NC. A collection of small tree cookies was left for the children on a stump. Children moved the tree cookies to the stage and used it as a work surface to prepare a "meal." Some of the tree cookies became plates and serving trays, while others became the food. Visitors were served a delicious tree cookie and pine needle sandwich.
- Kids R Us, Liberty, NC. Tree cookies and small logs were gathered by the teachers and placed in a half circle of upright logs. Children hauled the tree cookies and small logs across the site with tricycles and wagons, prepared and shared "food" and built and demolished castles (gross motor, dramatic play and social play).
- Shepherd's Way, Asheboro, NC. Small moveable logs and tree cookies were prepared within a log circle. Children very quickly engaged in deep dramatic play, building a "campfire," catching fish, roasting fish and marshmallows, telling ghost stories and singing songs.
- YWCA of Asheville and Western, NC Child Care Center, Asheville, NC. Tree cookies and other natural loose parts were stored in cubbies with a work surface on top. Within minutes of arriving outdoors, tree cookies were affording a variety of play across the outdoor learning environment, including investigating worms and dramatic kitchen play.