

CHANGING PLACES:  
CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF PLACE DURING MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

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## ABSTRACT

### CHILDREN'S PLACES: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF PLACE DURING MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

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This thesis explores the role of special places—forts, dens, and hideouts— during middle childhood (ages 6-12). Natural settings have traditionally been children's special places. Research has demonstrated the importance of outdoor special places in children's lives including: helping children to develop and form bonds with the earth, and as locations for both privacy and socialization. The landscape of today's childhood is undergoing dramatic shifts and researchers posit that children's special places are shifting toward indoor settings.

This thesis seeks to understand children's experience of place in the Humboldt Bay region of Northern California. 'Children-centered,' qualitative research methods include interviews and an analysis of participants' drawings and photographs. This thesis primarily examines how children's special places contribute to child development, place attachment, and environmental stewardship values. More generally, this thesis asks children to reveal what places they consider to be 'special.'

Results build on previous research and suggest several findings concerning the significance of children's special places. First, children still prefer outdoor places as their special places. Second, outdoor special places are important for holistic physical, cognitive, and social development. Third, both indoor and outdoor special places are vital

to children's emotional development because these places act as refuges and sites for emotional regulation. Fourth, children care deeply about their outdoor special places and express environmental stewardship values concerning these places. And last, special places facilitate healthy place attachments.

This thesis recommends that people who are involved in the processes and structures that shape children's lives recognize the value of outdoor special places and provide children with time, freedom, and access to natural landscapes.

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And, most of all, thank you to my participants. Your enthusiasm for your special places was inspiring. May this thesis motivate those involved in children's lives to understand and appreciate the importance of outdoor special places. Every child needs a climbing tree, a row of hedges, or even a ditch. These places help to create healthy persons, communities, and environments. Let's go outside and play!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Preface .....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Child Development .....	8
The importance of nature .....	8
The importance of special places and place-making.....	14
Place, Space, and the Geography of Children’s Everyday Lives .....	20
The Changing Landscape of Childhood.....	30
METHODS .....	37
Research with Children .....	37
Rationale.....	38
Site Selection and Participants.....	42
Procedure.....	43
Phase 1 .....	43
Phase 2 .....	45

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS .....	46
Drawings .....	46
Interviews .....	49
Outdoor and indoor places and activities.....	49
Special places as sites of refuge and emotional regulation.....	56
Special places as social and “fun” .....	59
The emergence of environmental stewardship values.....	60
Place attachment.....	62
Photographs and Interviews .....	64
Sharing stories and images.....	64
Designing children’s places: Ideas from participants.....	71
DISCUSSION .....	73
Preferred Places and Activities .....	73
Outdoor Special Places and Child Development.....	77
Special Places as Sites of Emotional Regulation and Refuge .....	79
The Formation of Environmental Stewardship Values.....	82
Place Attachment .....	84
CONCLUSION .....	85
Making Time, Freedom, and Space for Children’s Special Places .....	85
Suggestions for Future Research .....	87
REFERENCES.....	89

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

APPENDIX A PARENTAL CONSENT AND PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORMS.....	97
APPENDIX B DRAWING CODES .....	100
APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	102
APPENDIX D INTERVIEW CODES .....	103

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Indoor places featured in drawings.....	47
2 Outdoor places featured in drawings .....	47
3 Outdoor places mentioned during interviews.....	50
4 Indoor places mentioned during interviews .....	50
5 Outdoor activities mentioned during interviews .....	53
6 Indoor activities mentioned during interviews .....	54

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Backyard tag game and climbing tree.....	48
2 Bedroom with television and computer .....	48
3 Tree house with Star Wars themed pretend battle .....	49
4 Different places inspired different activities .....	54
5 Bedroom with reading chair and iPod; park with slide and reading spot .....	55
6 Secret “clubhouse” in burnt redwood stump.....	55
7 Kent’s tree and stick forts.....	58
8 Chloe’s tree swing and climbing trees.....	64
9 Chloe’s other hiding spot: her neighbor’s gazebo.. ..	65
10 A view from the top of Erer’s climbing tree. ....	65
11 Inside Sarah’s secret clubhouse. ....	66
12 Jerry on his fallen redwood tree. ....	66
13 Marie’s climbing tree.....	67
14 Ricardo’s “salamander pond”.....	67
15 Sapphire’s art supplies. ....	68
16 Sapphire’s chickens.. ..	68
17 Taylor’s neighborhood bike loop.....	69
18 Zap’s backyard. ....	69
19 Zap’s tree fort. ....	70
20 The secret entrance to Hikaru’s “hole” .....	70

## INTRODUCTION

*As we pulled English Ivy from the school's hillside, my eighth grade service-learning students stumbled upon Fort Hi-ding. To an undiscerning adult, Fort Hi-ding appears to be nothing more than a young redwood tree flanked by unruly blackberry bushes and tall grasses, but to my students this place represented possibility. They excitedly cleared the ivy and other debris to reveal a cavernous space where the redwood boughs touched the earth. From within the fort, my students could look out into the playground area and remain unseen. No children or patrolling teachers would be able to detect students hidden within the fort. Modifications slowed as they wanted to ensure the fort's privacy. One by one, the students ran out of their new enclosure to the playground to see for themselves if their fort was truly hidden. Satisfied, they returned, grabbing pine cones along the way. The small space quickly filled with the cones—potential ammunition. Schemes danced on the lips of my students. They were going to invite their friends, hide, and have wars with other forts; the prospects seemed endless.*

My adolescent students will probably phase out of fort building as they transition from middle school to high school. Their special places will shift from outdoor, hidden places like Fort Hi-ding to more public locations such as downtown or the mall. This shift in place location mirrors changing developmental needs. For children during their middle years, fort building and other types of place-making activities, have numerous benefits.

Special places—the forts, dens, and hideouts of childhood—play an important role in development and place attachment (Chawla, 1992; Moore, 1990; Sobel, 2002). Typically,

children engage in place-making activities between the ages of 5-15 with a peak occurring within the years of 8-11 (Sobel, 2002). Research suggests that children's outdoor special places and children's experiences in nature have the potential to positively shape adult environmental stewardship values (Chawla, 1992; Cobb, 1977; Tanner, 1980). Special places help children to develop their identities, test social relationships, engage in problem-solving, and become independent and environmentally competent (Dovey, 1987; Ellis, 2004b; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Powell, 2007; Sobel, 2002).

Given the opportunity, children select places that offer them security, social affiliation, and the potential for exploration and personal expression (Chawla, 1992). Children in their middle years often choose outdoor, natural places as their special places (Ellis, 2004a). Special places are usually close to home and are interstitial, that is, they are spaces that exist between other areas with clearly designated functions (Hart, 1979; Sobel, 2002). For example, alleyways, hedge rows, and culverts can all be children's special places, along with vacant lots, neighborhood woods, city parks, and waterways.

Most adults can recall a special place from their childhood. When looking for an adventure or an escape from chores, my brother and I would grab our Huffy bikes and tear through the neighbor's field to the solace of the woods. We spent hours exploring old ATV trails or simply watching butterflies swarm the fragrant milkweed. While such experiences may have been common in the past, for today's younger generations the freedom to explore nature and find special places is becoming less common. Robert Michael Pyle (1978) refers to this phenomenon as the "extinction of experience."

Children, without any intimate contact with nature, have the potential, as adults, to perpetuate a cycle of disconnection from the earth, environmental apathy, and the progressive depletion of natural resources.

The causes of children's growing disconnection from nature are numerous. Some research indicates that the increasing development of semi-wild areas limits children's abilities to interact with nature (Pyle, 2002), while other research suggests that children are spending more time in virtual worlds (Zaradic & Pergrams, 2007). Another hypothesis posits that parenting styles are changing. Fears of "stranger-danger," increased traffic, and unsafe playgrounds have created a more interventionist style of parenting (McHendrick, Bradford & Fielder, 2002). Children's lives are more apt to be scheduled around school, sports, and other prescribed activities with little room for free play outdoors (Louv, 2005). The effects of limited free play outdoors and limited access to natural, outdoor places are just beginning to be revealed through literature concerned with phenomena such as Nature Deficit Disorder and childhood obesity (Galson, 2008; Louv, 2005). The research concerning the psychological and physical benefits that nature provides children of all ages is sparse. However, what research has been done indicates that children need direct experiences in nature in order to develop fully on a variety of levels: socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Crain, 2001; Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Louv, 2005; White, 2008).

In a world where the thermostat of environmental woes continually reaches new mercuric peaks, it is necessary that children be raised and educated with a respect for, and an intimate contact with, the natural world. Many researchers agree with the assertion

that children need to have their own special places in the natural world, even if nature means a humble, overgrown lot. The importance of contact with “ordinary” nature is powerfully suggested by Pyle (1993):

It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth... We need to recognize the humble places where the alchemy occurs... Everyone has a ditch, or ought to. For only the ditches—and the fields, the woods, and the ravines—can teach us to care enough (pp. xv, xix).

Everyday natural areas have the potential to foster environmental stewardship values and encourage people to care about their local biotic communities. Most people experience the alchemy that Pyle describes during middle childhood when they explore semi-natural areas. Rural, urban, and suburban children alike have the capacity to make special places in the outdoors, if there is an opportunity for them to do so.

In this thesis I examine children’s experience of place with a focus on children in their middle years who reside within the Humboldt Bay region of Northern California. The research is exploratory and utilizes qualitative methods to examine the construct of children’s special places. For this study, I focus on how outdoor, semi-natural areas are utilized by children. Specifically, I examine how children’s special places contribute to child development, place attachment, and environmental stewardship values. More generally, I investigate what places are considered “special” by children, what the characteristics of those places are, and what children do and where they go when they have free time. I hypothesize that children’s special places are shifting toward indoor settings and I investigate the ramifications of children’s increasing disconnection from nature and outdoor special places.

The literature related to this topic is interdisciplinary and spans fields as diverse as child development, psychology, geography, and landscape design. Therefore, no single theoretical framework guides the research. In order to garner a holistic understanding of children's special places, theories of child development, geographical theories of space and place, and the changing social and spatial constructions of childhood are explored.

The research methodology that I selected reveals not only what places are considered special by children, but also children's experiences within those places. Roger Hart (1979) pioneered the study of children's experience of place and deemed this type of methodology as an "eclectic-ecological-field approach" which attempts to describe the environment not only as it is used by a child, but also as it is known and felt" (p. 9). Research methods include conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as analyzing both children's drawings and photographs of their special places. The draw-and-interview technique has been utilized by several researchers interested in children's experience of place (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Sobel, 2002). The inclusion of a photographic analysis stems from Kim Rasmussen's (2004) research concerning the differences between "places for children" and "children's places." "Places for children" are adult-designed structures including playgrounds, schools, and after-school institutions, while "children's places" are often interstitial and include locations such as alleyways, hedgerows, and hidden dens. Utilizing photographs taken by children, Rasmussen notes that a "differentiated picture of children's spatial culture emerges when children discuss and take photographs of settings that are meaningful to them" (p. 155). The children photographed places that adults are apt to ignore or consider unimportant in

children's lives. The combined methods of drawing, interviewing, and photography are intended to allow children to mediate their own personal experience with their special places.

## Preface

Before delving into the literature review, I must clarify how I operationalize the concepts of *child*, *children*, and *childhood*. Firstly, this thesis recognizes that there is neither such a construct as *the child* nor a uniform social category of *children*. Children are a diverse social grouping who “come in all shapes and sizes and may be distinguished along various axes of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, health, and age” (Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 65). Such differences may have a significant impact on the experiences and engagements of children's everyday lives. Who the child is and where the child comes from help us to understand the complex and multiple realities of a child's life (Aitken, 1994). However, there is danger in over-emphasizing the diversity of children's everyday lives to the extent that commonalities are ignored. Children, despite their differences, have consistently demonstrated similar affiliations for natural environments and place-making activities (Cobb, 1977; Hart, 1979; Louv, 2005; Moore, 1990; Pierce, 1977; Sobel, 2002). Thus, while not proposing that a uniform of typical *child* exists, I can assume some degree of commonalities in childhood experiences of place.

Secondly, this thesis recognizes that *childhood* is a subjective social construction as opposed to a biologically defined category determined by chronological age. It is generally assumed that children are human beings who have yet to reach physical and

social maturity—they are younger than an adult and have yet to develop an adult’s full ranges of competencies. However, history challenges this notion of childhood. Over the past centuries, childhood has gone from something that did not exist during the Middle Ages, to a time filled with evil spirits during sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and to a period of innocence and virtuosity during the eighteenth century (Ariès, 1962). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, childhood is considered a special time when children should be given the opportunity to play and learn and should have few responsibilities. Gill Valentine (1996) elaborates on the current dominant conception of childhood, “Namely that a child is temporarily set apart from the adult world (although there are multiple and conflicting definitions of the age at which that division occurs); that children are innocent, incompetent, and vulnerably dependent (both on parent(s) and on the state); and that childhood is a happy free time without responsibilities” (p. 587). Today’s social construction of childhood clearly informs this thesis; however, this thesis will deconstruct common adult conceptions of children’s experience of place.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Child Development

#### The importance of nature

Middle childhood (ages 6-12) remains one of the least studied age ranges in empirical research (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Sigmund Freud (1956), the founding father of psychoanalytic theory, famously declared middle childhood to be a time of “latency.” Many researchers find other periods of child development to be more worthy of scientific research and focus their attention on infants, toddlers, and adolescents—ages when physical and cognitive growth occur at rapid rates. Yet, there has been a small surge in research examining the developmental aspects of middle childhood (Collins, 1984; Williams & Stith, 1974), with some research highlighting the important functions that nature and special places have for children during their middle years (Chawla, 1992; Cobb, 1977; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Pierce, 1977; Sobel, 2002).

Edith Cobb (1977), an oft-cited researcher within the field of environmental psychology, suggests that children during their middle years are predisposed to engage with nature in a unique way. She writes:

...the study of the child in nature, culture and society reveals that there is a special period, the little understood, prepubertal, halcyon, middle age of childhood, approximately from five or six to eleven or twelve, between the striving of animal infancy and the storms of adolescence—when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes (in Sobel, 2002, p. 78).

Cobb suggests that a child's understanding of the natural world emerges during a critical period of development. Children between the ages of 6-12 years experience nature in an exploratory, experimental manner that binds them to the world in a profound way. This exploration of nature stimulates the imagination and instills in children a sense of wonder (Cobb, 1977). Of course, not all children develop along the same trajectory. Because Cobb's research spanned several decades and involved extensive observations and psychological testing with hundreds of children, it is one of the most credible sources of research concerning the importance of nature during the middle years of child development.

Before exploring the beneficial relationship between nature and development, it is necessary to establish the types of experience that children have with nature. Kellert (2002) classifies experience of nature into three broad categories: *direct*, *indirect*, and *vicarious* or *symbolic*. *Direct experience* involves actual physical contact with habitats and living creatures that exist and function independently of human intervention. Therefore, direct experience can be exemplified by a child's spontaneous play in the woods, creek, or vacant lot. *Indirect experience* of nature also involves actual physical contact, but in a more restricted, supervised way. "Nature," within this classification, is usually a product of human manipulation or mastery and is experienced through planned activity. Examples include children visiting the zoo or a science museum. A different form of indirect experience involves interactions with domesticated animals including pets, and domesticated plants. All habitats and creatures encountered in an indirect experience of nature are dependent on extensive human intervention and control,

meaning that a zoo or a botanical garden would likely fail if people were to stop feeding the animals or watering the plants. Lastly, *vicarious* or *symbolic experience* occurs in the absence of actual contact with the natural world. Images and representations of nature can be vicariously experienced through television, computers, books, and radio. Symbolic natural experiences can also include ancient means of understanding found in cave paintings, myths, and legends.

All three types of experience can be beneficial for children. Indirect experience helps children form a tentative bond with nature (Kellert, 2002). Vicarious and symbolic experience can help children gain knowledge, classification skills, and evaluative development (Kellert, 2002). However, it is believed that if children only experience nature in indirect or vicarious ways, they will not have any long-term developmental effects because the experiences are “sporadic, atypical, highly structured, and planned features often limit the spontaneity and adaptive behavior provided by less restrictive and managed encounters in the natural world” (Kellert, 2002, p. 145). Indirect and vicarious experience usually requires children to remain within an approved area or follow a rigid schedule. Often, there is little room for children to explore at their leisure. Because direct experience of nature allows spontaneity, exploration, and experimentation, researchers contend that direct experiences in nature are the most advantageous for children’s development (Cobb, 1977; Pierce, 1977; Kellert, 2002; Pyle, 2002; Crain, 2008). On the other hand, indirect and vicarious experiences of nature when paired with direct experience have the potential to profoundly influence development. For example, children’s direct experience of a creek is greatly enhanced if they first read a story that

involves a creek. A book's words and pictures come to life when coupled with a direct experience. Children are able to relate what they learned through the story to what they experience when engaging with the creek. Through direct experiences with nature, children encounter the diversity and dynamism of the natural world which in turn challenges children to develop in healthy ways.

Even in urban settings, a multiplicity of sights, sounds, smells, and tactile stimuli originate from the natural environment. This montage of sensory experiences pushes children to experiment with and adapt their behaviors to an ever-changing natural world. Mary-Ann Kirkby (1989) expands on this notion, writing, "A natural setting has the degree of complexity, plasticity, and manipulability which allows a child to experience many developmentally significant play behaviors such as role playing, cause-effect actions, constructive play, etc" (p. 7). The phenomenon Kirkby describes is also known as the theory of "loose parts." The theory of "loose parts" states, "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30). Because the natural world is filled with loose parts, it offers innumerable possibilities for creative expression and discovery.

Built environments, on the other hand, rarely provide children with a vast array of options because they are often clean, static, and their uses are prescribed. For example, children know what to do when they see a sliding board; the object contains within it structures that guide its 'appropriate' use. They climb up the stairs, slide down, and then promptly return to the stairs to slide down again. Conversely, a stick has fewer usage

guidelines. In the hand of a child, a stick can become a magic wand, a bucking bronco, a sword, fort-building material, or any number of other options. With nature's loose parts, children engage in problem-solving, dramatic role play, construction, experimentation, and observation—all of which help children to develop cognitively, socially, and physically.

Recent research demonstrates the importance of nature in children's cognitive development. For example, research has illustrated that children with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are better able to concentrate after contact with nature (Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Exposure to natural environments also has been shown to improve children's awareness, reasoning, and observational skills (Pyle, 2002). Children with views of, and contact with, nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. The greener and more natural the setting, the better the scores (Taylor et al., 2002; Wells, 2000). In addition, nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity, and may instill a sense of peace and being at one with the world (Crain, 2001).

During my college years, I spent my summers as a camp counselor. Each summer it seemed more and more children came to camp with prescriptions to control their ADHD. Frequently, as the week would progress my campers would forget to take their medication because their symptoms lessened. Being outdoors improved my campers' ability to concentrate and served as an outlet for their energy. Nature's complexity and dynamic characteristics encouraged my campers to slow down, explore, and observe thereby aiding their cognitive development. Although anecdotal, these first-hand

experiences have led me—and others—to recognize the significant impact natural experiences have on children (Crain, 2001; Louv, 2005; Taylor et al, 2001).

Nature's loose parts provide children with numerous options for creative play, personal expression, and discovery. When children play in natural environments, their interactions are more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Fjørtoft & Sageie 2000; Moore & Wong, 1997; Taylor, Wiley, Kuo & Sullivan, 1998). Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and a sense of wonder (Cobb, 1977; Louv, 1991). Wonder is an important motivator for lifelong learning (Wilson, 1997).

Additionally, natural environments encourage positive social interaction between children (Bixler, Floyd & Hammitt, 2002; Moore, 1990). Over the course of several years, Robin Moore (1989) helped convert an asphalt schoolyard into a nature area called the Environmental Yard. Follow-up interviews with students indicated that they felt more peaceful in their new environment and were less likely fight with one another. The school nurse reported that fewer injuries occurred in the Environmental Yard than the previous asphalt schoolyard. Moore's study parallels other research that reports that play in diverse natural environments reduces or eliminates bullying (Malone & Tranter, 2003). Nature buffers the impact of stress on children and helps them deal with adversity, and the greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (Wells & Evans, 2003). Hart (1979) notes that exploration in outdoor settings intensifies friendships, creating long-lasting, healthy relationships. These close friendships in turn intensified exploration behaviors as children were encouraged to explore more frequently and farther from

home. Thus, nature can positively shape social development by helping children deal more effectively with stress and by encouraging healthy, positive relationships.

Children also develop physically when they play in nature. Several Scandinavian studies report that children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Grahm, Martensson, Lindblad, Nilsson & Ekman, 1997; Fjørtoft, 2001). Outdoor environments are also important for developing physical independence and autonomy (Bartlett, 1996). Children who play outdoors have improved health, physical fitness, and independence.

As the above discussion suggests, recent research is just beginning to reveal the range of benefits that nature provides to children's cognitive, social, and physical development. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly apparent that children need nature in order to develop in a holistic and healthy manner.

#### The importance of special places and place-making

During middle childhood, special places are often located in natural, outdoor settings; therefore, many of the previously discussed developmental advantages occur when children interact with their special places or engage in place-making activities. Special places also offer developmental advantages for children because of two ways these places function: 1.) as a private refuge; and 2.) as a site for social activity.

In Cobb's important 1977 study, she discusses the significance of special places as a personal refuge, writing:

I became acutely aware that what a child wanted to do most of all was to make a world in which to find a place to discover self. This ordering reverses the general position that self-exploration produces a knowledge of the world. Furthermore, while observing the passionate world-making behavior of the child while he is given plastic materials and working dimensions which are manageable and in proportion to his need...I have been made keenly aware of those processes...(in Sobel, 2002, p. 81).

Given the opportunity to create small worlds with malleable “loose parts” such as sticks, sand, dirt, and Legos, children are able to organize places in which they can discover themselves. In these miniature, manageable worlds, children are capable of projecting themselves into that place and making it their own. They become the authors of their own experience, thereby advancing their level of independence and self-competency.

As private refuges, special places allow children an opportunity for personal mastery and introspection. David Sobel (2002) elaborates on the importance of privacy to children in their middle years: “During the period of middle childhood, the self is fragile and under construction and needs to be protected from view of the outside world” (p. 70). Special places often provide children with a secluded location wherein they can try out different versions of themselves and a place that they can manipulate to match their changing identities.

As a child, I hid from the world in the belly of a large rhododendron bush. The canopy of branches created a series of tunnels leading into a spacious room at the bush’s trunk. It was here that I could be alone and do whatever it was that pleased me; I could read, act out scenes, or create roadways in the dirt for my Matchbox cars. Most importantly, I was hidden, camouflaged by the thick leaves and brightly colored flowers.

Maria Kylin (2003) studies children's dens in suburban Sweden. Her research also illustrates the importance of hidden dens. In one interview, a girl illustrates the function of her den, "You can be by yourself there, you are left alone, no one can disturb you, you can play without anyone hearing" (p. 14). Being hidden afforded the girl a chance to engage in solitary play without being interrupted. The desire for privacy is not uncommon among children. For example, my students' fort, Fort Hi-ding, was named for the quality they revered about it most, its ability to hide them from the outside world. The fort allowed my students to observe the school yard and all its activities without being seen, a prized characteristic of many special places.

Secrecy is a familiar theme for many children. A colleague of David Sobel's asked his fifth grade class to write about their special places. About half of their work described secret forts and hideouts. Here one poem highlights the value of secrecy:

A special place is in the woods very far away.  
It is in the biggest oak tree I ever saw.  
It is about eight feet off the ground.

All you could hear is birds and other peaceful sounds.  
Before I climb I carve the words DO NOT DISTURB.  
It takes a long time to climb.  
There are steps to help you.  
No one or nobody knows where this is,  
not even my brothers...

I don't have a secret password because  
no one knows where it is.  
If you tried to find it you could not because  
there are branches covering it (Sobel, 2002, p. 68).

Privacy and establishing territory are natural processes during child development. Children as young as 3-5 years old have been known to establish territory in order to experience privacy (Zeegers, Readdick & Hansen-Gandy, 1994).

Privacy allows children to be semi-autonomous and maintain a balance between social interaction and avoidance of interaction. For example, if a child feels overwhelmed she will likely retreat to a quiet, secluded place. This place could be in a number of locations such as a bedroom, a closet, or a climbing tree. When she is ready, the child will rejoin her friends, family, or peers—whomever she has retreated from. However, private places do not always indicate personal retreat; often private places can serve as social gathering locations. Children will bring their friends to their private place to play or hide from adults.

When special places serve as gathering locales, a number of developmentally advantageous activities occur, including construction, problem-solving, testing new identities, developing social relationships, and making social contracts. Children simply refer to these activities as “play.” Play has traditionally been thought of as a way for children to practice being adults. In past centuries, children were frequently understood to be “human becomings” (Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 5). However, new theories of play focus on children as active agents and strive to better understand play as a multifaceted phenomenon that fulfills a wide range of purposes (Frost, 1992). This integrated approach to theories of play is evident in the research concerning children’s special places. Research has demonstrated that play takes a variety of forms and fulfills a

variety of purposes when children engage in place-making or when children are within their special places (Kylin, 2003; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Powell, 2001).

Place-making provides children with an opportunity to practice construction and problem-solving. Often the act of building a place can be just as significant as the place itself. The centrality of building is reflected in an interview by Kylin (2003). She asks a pair of boys what is the best thing about dens and they reply, “It is to construct. After that the only thing to do is to take it down and build a new one” (p. 15). The process of creating and recreating a place satisfies them. Roger Hart (1979) notes that building allows for two important benefits:

Firstly, the satisfaction which ensues from the sense of being able to transform the environment successfully—the development of a sense of personal competence. Secondly, there is the comfort in being able to make a place of oneself; ordering the physical world assists in the development of a sense of personal order (pp. 217-218).

The manipulation of the environment provides children with a sense of personal competence and personal order because the environment immediately reflects their actions and can be reshaped to fit their changing needs.

Hart (1979) also suggests that another form of competence emerges when children manipulate the natural world, “environmental competence.” Through problem-solving and trial-and-error, children learn a range of outcomes that they have on the environment and they are encouraged to think critically and work cooperatively. As children age, they may learn to make trade-offs between their developing sense of selves and environmental responsibility. For example, a child may have built a tree house and wish to expand it to accommodate his growing number of friends; however, if he decides

that the tree is unable to support more construction, he could move his tree house to the ground. Research has demonstrated that children's intimacy with nature and their environmental competence can be precursors for adult environmental stewardship values (Tanner, 1980; Vadala, Bixler & James, 2007; Wells & Lekies, 2006). As sites of construction and problem-solving, special places help children to develop critical thinking skills, personal and environmental competence, and social cooperation.

When special places act as social gathering locations, these places become sites for other forms of play such as dramatic play, which encourages children to test new identities, form social contracts, and develop social relationships. Role play, fantasy, and games are all types of dramatic play. Children test new identities by trying out new roles. For example, a child may want to pretend to be a cowgirl one day and the next day she will want to be a wizard. Often play follows themes that children devise collaboratively. Dramatic play can be quite intricate and involve rules and social contracts. When playing, children may set boundaries or decide what behaviors are considered acceptable. Research investigating the culture of children's forts has revealed the complex social contracts that emerged within and between forts. Powell (2007) and Dovey (1987) found that children created currency to exchange for fort-building materials, "food," and other essentials. Also, rules established when different groups could enter each other's forts. Separate code languages and cultures emerged between groups of children playing in the same schoolyard. When conflict arose between groups, children preferred to mediate it themselves without adult intervention. Through play, children learn how to cooperate, follow rules, mediate conflict, and think creatively.

Additionally, outdoor natural environments evoke more imaginative and dramatic play than built environments. Kirkby (1989) studied children's play within a playground that had both a built and a natural refuge. The built refuge consisted of a wooden box-like construction, while the natural refuge consisted of a "scruffy" part of the schoolyard with overgrown junipers and shrubs forming tunnels and several small "rooms." Her analysis showed that dramatic play ranged from 42 percent of the total play content in the built refuge to 68 percent in the natural refuge setting. In addition, the children significantly preferred the natural refuge to the built refuge. Therefore, play within the natural refuge was more diverse and inventive and was more valued by the children than play within the built refuge.

Overall, the research concerning child development, nature, special places, and place-making activities clearly indicates that outdoor, semi-natural places help children to develop along an array of trajectories.

### Place, Space, and the Geography of Children's Everyday Lives

Because this thesis investigates children's special places and how these places facilitate healthy development, place attachment, and environmental stewardship values, it is essential to be explicit about meanings of place and space. The words place and space encompass a variety of definitions and connotations. As concepts, place and space are subjective, dynamic, and socially constructed.

Space is not as readily felt and understood as place. Often space is complicit in the formation of place. Edward Relph (1976) explains, "Space is amorphous and

intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analyzed. Yet, however we feel or explain space, there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place. In general it seems space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places” (p. 8). Without space, place cannot be formed and experienced. Space becomes place when it is invested with meaning by those who spend time in it (Ellis, 2005). For example, a young child ventures into the woods behind her house. These woods are unfamiliar to her; they are a space. She discovers a climbing tree in these woods and returns to it frequently. Sometimes she brings her friends to the tree; other times she goes to be alone. This once unknown space becomes familiar. Her climbing tree and the woods surrounding it transition from space to place as the area is infused with personal meaning, security, and a sense of belonging.

Place manifests itself in two ways: as an actual physicality, and through people’s invested and subjective meanings. Geographically a town is a place that can be located on a map; it can be visited, seen, and experienced. However, place means more than its physical location. The town, as a place, holds meaning; for the town’s citizens, it means something to be from that place.

Being from small-town Mt. Jewett, Pennsylvania, means that I grew up without stop-lights and chain restaurants. I knew my neighbors, I ran through their yards, and in the fall I helped rake their leaves. My town holds special meaning for me. However, each resident of Mt. Jewett has a different understanding of that place based on his or her personal experiences.

A place's meaning is socially constructed and dynamic and is affected by local systems such as the family, school, community, and neighborhood. However, it is important to recognize that larger political, economic, and social forces also influence how place is known and felt. Place adopts various meanings at different times and is under continuous social construction.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) defines space and place in a way that informs this thesis. While the terms are quite complex, Tuan simply states, "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other... Space and place are basic components to the lived world; we take them for granted" (p. 3). Place can be understood as the center of familiarity, security, nurturance, and stability. Place also evokes a sense of belonging, meaning, and personal identity. Conversely, space can be understood as the opportunity for growth, expression, and creativity (Ellis 2004a; Hay, 1992; Tuan, 1977). According to Julia Ellis (2004a), "Good places are a source of belonging, identity, and security but also include space for exploration and creative self-expression" (p. 33). Space and place can be conceptualized as a push outward and a pull inward. Good places push people to expand their comfort level by exploring new spaces and realms of creativity and expression. Conversely, good places pull people back because of the place's familiarity and security.

For example, Mt. Jewett was a good place for me; I was familiar with the residents and the town's streets and woods. I felt comfortable there and knew that my parents, friends, and neighbors cared for my well-being. Because Mt. Jewett was a positive place, I felt free to explore new spaces. As a child, I wandered the woods without

fear and felt confident to make new friends and explore new interests. And as an adult, I wander the United States meeting new people, trying new occupations, and living in new places with the understanding that I can return to Mt. Jewett and be welcomed home.

Good places give people a strong center from which to face the unknowns of the larger world. For most people, meaningful relationships form the basis of their strong center because attachment to place helps facilitate meaningful relationships. Crang (1998) explains, “The lived connection binds people and places together. It enables people to define themselves and to share experiences with others and form themselves into communities” (p. 103). Through a shared place and shared experiences, people are able to build resilient relationships and form communities. These places provide both a sense of belonging and the space and freedom for exploration and expression. Good places foster healthy people and communities.

For children, a good place offers similar characteristics of security and freedom. However, children need an additional set of place-based qualities in order to develop along a healthy trajectory. Ellis (2004a) writes, “Places are good places for children when they provide for their material well-being, are culturally rich and provide positive identity and integration within a cohesive community, and include desirable undefined space and accessible, active public space” (p. 87). Children in good places have their physical needs met (food, water, shelter, clothing), have meaningful inter-generational relationships, have public places in which they are welcome, and have open-ended space in which to explore and express themselves. While places provide children with three types of satisfaction—security, social affiliation, and creative expression or exploration—the most

highly valued satisfaction comes from the opportunity for self-development through creative expression and exploration (Chawla, 1992). Louise Chawla (1992) emphasizes the importance of the availability of space for youth of all ages:

At every age there is a need for undefined space where young people can formulate their own worlds: for free space where preschoolers can manipulate the environment and play “let’s pretend” in preparation for middle childhood demands; for hideouts and play-houses indoors and out where school-age children can practice independence; and for public hangouts and private refuges where adolescents can test new relationships and ideas (p. 69).

Children and youth, at every stage of development, need the freedom and space for personal expression, to try out new roles and relationships, and to explore the larger world around them. Good places are akin to children’s special places in that these places offer freedom, security, and space to test social relationships and identities. Additionally, they provide space for children to physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally grow and mature.

Good places also help foster place attachment. Place attachment occurs when a child has meaningful relationships, a sense of security, and space for exploration. Children are attached to a place when “they show happiness at being in it and regret or distress at leaving it, and when they value it not only for the satisfaction of physical needs but for its own intrinsic qualities” (Chawla, 1992, p. 64). Through place attachment, children recognize not only the beneficial physical attributes of the place, they also attain a personal sense of belonging and purpose. Childhood place attachment is an important contributor to a child’s quality of life and has enduring effects when childhood is over (Chawla, 1992). Chawla’s (1992) analysis of environmental autobiographies and favorite

places revealed that children during their early-middle years are primarily attached to outdoor, natural areas that allow them freedom to manipulate and explore the environment and create small hideouts that offer privacy and a social gathering location. Place attachments change as children mature. During adolescence, public hangouts and private refuges are highly desired and are the primary sites of place attachment (Matthews & Limb, 1999). A child's healthy place attachment balances the inward hold of familiar places with the outward attractions of an expanding world, thereby allowing that child to grow, learn, and develop in a healthy manner.

Good places and place attachment are not phenomena that all children experience equally because not all places are created equal. Place and space assume different meanings for children and other disenfranchised groups such as the elderly, minorities, and the impoverished. Place has a long history of serving as a tool of exclusion and hegemonic rule because place embodies the dominant group's values and understandings of "Truth" (Sibley, 1995). Ideals of the dominant group are written into the landscape through the processes by which physical environments are designed and managed (Anderson & Gale, 1992). Years of research have been dedicated to understanding how sociospatial marginalization has affected various groups including: women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans, immigrants, and people with disabilities.

Deconstructing the geography of everyday life reveals the factors involved in reproducing sociospatial marginalization. Everyday life entails the basic routines and interactions in the home, workplace, and communities. Often, everyday life is a taken-

for-granted reality that provides the unquestioned background of meaning for individual lives. Ellis (2004b) explains:

It is through our actions in everyday life that we build, maintain, and reconstruct the common sense ideas, values, roles, and motivations that shape our actions. Thus people are not simply passive recipients of the ideology of the hegemony of consumer capitalism. Instead, they ‘actively create and creatively transform themselves, and these constructions and reconstructions are located firmly in an experience of everyday life’ (p 27).

Through words and actions, people are active agents in shaping and reshaping places and their meanings. However, it cannot be forgotten that certain groups of people are constrained by societal structures—rules and resources—and community interactions.

John Eyles (1989) argues that if researchers study people’s experience without critically interpreting the spatial context in which it occurs, they can risk emphasizing individual agency and may fail to “discern the ‘structures of society,’ the societal contexts of everyday life, which may significantly shape and constrain our experiences” (p. 104).

Therefore, this research project must critically interpret the geography of children’s everyday lives in order to reveal the structures and relationships that restrict children and also to disclose the ways in which children actively negotiate these limitations. In addition, Hugh Matthews and Melanie Limb (1999) assert that children have been largely ignored by geography researchers interested in the ways in which the geography of everyday life has reproduced sociospatial marginalization.

Kim Rasmussen (2004) studied the geography of children’s everyday lives throughout Denmark; she focused on children between 5-12 years of age. According to Rasmussen, children’s everyday lives are dominated by the “institutional triangle” whose

corners include: children's homes, schools, and recreational institutions (p.157). The research discloses the interfaces and discontinuities between "places for children" and "children's places." "Places for children," including schools and recreation facilities, "are institutionalized to the extent that architects and planners intend them to be 'special' places for children; children spend increasing amounts of time in them; they put children in contact with 'professional' adults" (Rasmussen, p. 157). These places are designed by adults and mirror adults' socially constructed values of childhood. Often "places for children" have prescribed elements such as playgrounds or sports fields.

The differences between adult-designed "places for children" and "children's places" were disclosed in the pictures taken by the children in Rasmussen's (2004) study. Participants were given cameras with which to take pictures of the places they considered to be special. The photographs reveal a differentiated set of places often not recognized by adults or perceived by adults as examples of "disorder, mess, destruction, and prohibited behavior" (Rasmussen, p. 162). Rasmussen terms these places, "children's places." Her research demonstrates that children prefer places with "loose parts," that are interstitial (areas that exist between places with clearly designated functions), and that afford space for exploration. In their everyday lives, children are constrained both physically by adult values imprinted on the built landscapes and socially by the watchful gaze of adults. Unable to transform the larger, institutionalized adult world and looking for an escape from these restraints, children often hide in private refuges, engage in place-making activities, and search for their own special places.

The difference between “places for children” and “children’s places” is based on the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Heft, 1988). Children view a landscape for its inherent functions, while adults primarily view landscapes for their form. According to Gibson (1979), environments are experienced not only as a configured setting, but also as places that afford different kinds of opportunities. For example, an adult may view a cluster of shrubs and recognize it for its form as a boundary between neighbors’ yards. A child may recognize the shrubs’ form, but he will additionally identify the different functions that the shrubs afford him such as series of tunnels for play or an enclosure for hiding. Barker and Wright’s (1955) famous study discussed how certain aspects of the environment exert a “coercive influence” on perception and activity (p. 55). Midwestern children, when seeing an open level field, recalled these places not for their designated function (schoolyard or courthouse lawn), but as potential sites for physical activity such as running and tag games.

Adults seldom recognize the multiplicity of opportunities that children perceive when viewing the natural and physical world (Matthews & Limb, 1999). Consequently, when adults design and build places for children, they do so without considering the affordances that these places offer children. These built environments are often sterile and do not present children with an opportunity to explore the place’s various functions. Asphalt slabs dominate most schools’ play areas. These places are designated for children, but deny children the ability to create their own places. Hostility breeds within play areas that have limited space and resources as Moore (1989) demonstrated in his study of the effects of ecological diversity on children’s behavior, play, and feelings.

Moore discovered that with the transformation of a barren asphalt school playground into an ecologically diverse nature area (the Environmental Yard), children were more likely to be cooperative, friendly, and feel a strong sense of belonging and ownership in their place. The Environmental Yard afforded them opportunities for exploration, place-making, and contact with the natural world—all things that children highly value and consider to be qualities of good places.

The geography of children's everyday lives is often incongruent with their actual needs because adults dominate the design and structure of places for children. Adult values concerning what childhood should look like are revealed in the landscape of children's everyday lives. Children do not recognize the discontinuities between their places and the places created for them because these institutionalized, adult-designed places are an integral and naturalized part of their lives. Children have a hidden geography of their everyday lives and "their bodies tactically point out that they need different places than those adults create for them" (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 161). The chalk drawings on the sidewalk, the secret hole in the fence that provides a shortcut, and the "goal" posts between two trees reveal what places children value and prefer. Good places afford children opportunities for creativity and exploration and provide children with security and familiarity. Good places allow children to participate in community processes and build meaningful relationships; and good places grant children access to natural areas. Good places—children's special places—are essential landscapes within the geography of children's everyday lives.

## The Changing Landscape of Childhood

Places for children and the geography of children's everyday lives have undergone rapid changes within the last several decades. Forces of globalization, modernity, and capitalism have eroded the place-based nature of communities, rendering children with less richness and stability for their community lives and their experience with the natural world. Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine (2000) note, "Local cultures—how children organize their day—are bound up with 'global' processes" (p. 11). These global practices have significant local consequences for children's lives. Cultural geographer Stuart Aitken (1993) studies the physical and social condition of children's lives and recognizes that children can be "the ultimate victims of the political, social, and economic forces which contrive the geography of the built environment" (p. 3). Despite children's individual agency and competence, forces beyond their control largely shape their lives. The landscape of childhood has changed dramatically leaving children with limited access to their outdoor special places. Landscape, for the purposes of this thesis, refers to the places and spaces designed for, and/or utilized by, children.

Children's access to the natural environment has decreased significantly for a host of reasons. Research shows that there is simply less "wild" left in the world; forces of urbanization are colonizing once natural areas. According to Pyle (2002), "Empty ground has represented little but an opportunity for more growth. The precarious condition of undeveloped land in modern cityscapes threatens the basic ties between humans and the rest of nature, as expressed and achieved by children and their preferred haunts" (p. 305).

As the vacant lot becomes another shopping center, children's opportunity for exploration, education, and intimacy with the natural world is diminished. Children's special places are lost and supplemented with places built for children.

However, children's growing disconnection from nature cannot be pinned entirely on development. Even in towns that remain surrounded by wildlands—forests, prairies, deserts, and swamps—children are still spending less time in natural areas. Research suggests that interventionist parenting styles are limiting children's ability to access semi-wild areas and even their own neighborhoods (McHendrick et al, 2002). Fear of strangers, traffic, abductions, and unruly children cause parents and guardians to intervene in their children's lives. Today, parents are more likely restrict their children's range, to encourage their children to play indoors, and to clutter their children's lives with organized activities than in the recent past. Children do not have the time or parental permission to explore natural areas and create their own special places. Unstructured time outdoors is becoming a thing of the past. In the United States, children spend an average of 30 minutes per week engaged in free play outdoors (Zaradic & Pergams, 2007). In addition, when children are able to play outdoors, their physical boundaries have shrunk considerably (Kytta, 2004). Between 1970 and 1990, a study of three generations of nine-year-old children found that the radius around the home where children were allowed to roam on their own had shrunk to a ninth of what it had been in 1970 (Louv, 2005). No longer are children able to explore their surrounding neighborhoods; instead they are restricted to their own yards, their friends' homes, and the immediate city block. Parents

increasingly want to know where their children are at all times and often require that children remain within eyesight and earshot (White, 2008).

Parents, rightfully, are looking out for the well-being of their children and should not be faulted for wanting to know where their children are playing. However, the media has perpetuated an interventionist parenting style by increasing parents' and children's fear of strangers, abductions, and violence. While the actual number of cases of child abduction and childhood violence has decreased since the 1970s, the media has increased its coverage of such events. Louv (2005) writes, "In Los Angeles, coverage of violence overwhelmingly outstrips the incidents of violent crime—by a factor of as much as 30 to 1 in the case of murder" (p. 127). This exaggerated coverage has made parents wary of letting their children play freely and has made children more fearful of public interactions.

Not only has the media caused children to be more fearful of strangers, the media has also increased their fear of the natural world. The media does offer neutral representations of nature; however, the media often portrays nature as hazardous, consequently teaching fear. Robert Bixler and Cynthia Carlisle (1994) reveal that when children are exposed to realistic media depictions of life-threatening events, such as fire and drowning, they reported feeling more at risk to those events and less likely to engage in activities related to the viewed tragedies. The media's depictions tend to sensationalize nature's hazards, promoting the perception that wildlands areas are dangerous. Without early and regular exposure to nature, children become unfamiliar with these settings,

finding nature to be uncomfortable and overwhelming, as a result, preferring built settings to natural settings (Bixler & Carlisle, 1994; Heerwagen & Orians, 2002).

Increasingly, children spend their lives in built environments with scheduled activities leaving little room for free time. School, home, and after-school institutions dominate children's everyday lives. Children's after-school lives are filled with lessons and sports that are intended to make them more successful as adults (Moore & Wong, 1997). Louv (2005) notes that between 1987 and 2003 children's discretionary times (when children play at free will), fell by more than nine hours a week, with the fastest rate of loss occurring between 1997 and 2003. For many children, discretionary time no longer involves playing in natural areas. Instead children are spending more of their dwindling free time engaged with sedentary media-based activities.

Playing video games, watching TV, and using the computer and Internet are quickly becoming children's preferred activities. When Richard Louv (2005) asked a fourth-grader in San Diego where he liked to play, the child answered, "I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where are the electrical outlets are" (p. ii). Patricia Zaradic and Oliver Pergams (2007) suggest that this trend represents a shift away from *biophilia* to *videophilia*. E.O. Wilson (1984) defines *biophilia* as "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike process" (p.1). Conversely, *videophilia* is defined as "the new human tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media" (Zaradic & Pergams, 2007, p. 130). This shift in focus has profound negative implications for children's cognitive and physical development. Childhood obesity and Type 2 diabetes are on the rise along with loneliness, depression, and attentional problems such as

ADHD. The more time children spend using electronic media, the less likely they are to engage in face-to-face interactions with family and friends, thereby leading to feelings of loneliness and depression (DeBell, 2005; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). In a longitudinal study of 2,600 children, Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe and McCarty (2004) note that an increase in the number of hours of television watched at either age one or age three is associated with a 28 percent increase in the probability of having attentional problems at age seven. Children need direct experience in natural areas and direct experiences with their families and peers in order to develop cognitively, physically, and emotionally.

When children disconnect from electronic media and are given time to play, they are often taken by adults to “token spaces” such as a playground or commercial play center (Hart, 1992). “Token spaces” are akin to “places for children” (Rasmussen, 2004). Playgrounds, no matter how novel and stimulating, are still designed by adults and are intended to isolate and contain children within public places and in doing so contribute to what Matthews (1995) calls the process of “childhood ghettoization” (p. 457). Childhood ghettoization occurs when places for children do not match their needs for creative play and/or serve to detach them from the public sphere. Commercialized and privatized play areas are no exception to this process. Across the world, the commodification of play is a growing trend. Many of these play areas are located within adult domains such as shopping centers, restaurants, and airports. These play areas are provided to hold children in a confined area while adults continue with their activities (McKendrick et al, 2000). The purpose of commercialized play areas is entertainment as opposed to meaningful and creative play.

The most meaningful forms of play emerge when children are allowed access to natural areas, when they are free to explore and experiment, and when they are able to create their own special places. However, children's play in natural areas is becoming criminalized in some towns and neighborhoods. Louv (2005) elaborates:

The cumulative impact of overdevelopment, multiplying park rules, well-meaning (and usually necessary) environmental regulations, building regulations, community covenants, and the fear of litigation sends a chilling message to our children that their free-range play is unwelcome, that organized sports on manicured playing fields is the only officially sanctioned form of outdoor recreation (p. 31).

When children build forts, erect dams in the creek, or create jumps for their bikes it is often viewed as messy or a hazard to the environment and the children themselves. Many housing associations have strict guidelines concerning the order of their surrounding areas and children's outdoor free play often does not conform. Town ordinances have begun to ban aerial tree houses because they are a fire hazard and are considered dangerous. Cities, neighborhoods, and parents fear being sued because they allowed children to build or do something "unsafe" (Louv, 2005). The current adult mindset suggests that it is better to have children stay indoors where they can be monitored and where the dangers are known and can be reduced, thereby disconnecting children from the greater natural world.

Recent research and activism is pushing to reconnect children to the natural world, to encourage free play outdoors, and to include children in the decision-making that guides the processes and shapes the landscapes of their daily lives (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Louv, 2005; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Moore, 1989; Pyle, 2002).

According to children themselves, they need time and space to explore the natural world and to create their own special places (Chawla, 1992; Ellis, 2004a; Ellis, 2004b; Sobel, 2002). Research demonstrates that intimate contact with wild and ordinary nature is influential for positive development, place attachment, and future environmental values (Wells & Lekies, 2006). In a world with a volatile environmental future, it is vital to connect children with nature and encourage them to forge a meaningful relationship to a tree, a stream, or a thicket. Those special places are what teach children to care enough—about themselves, each other, and the earth.

## METHODS

### Research with Children

While all forms of research are a political activity involving an intrusion into the lives of people, research with children requires enhanced researcher reflexivity and sensitivity to power relations (Lindsay, 2000; Mauthner, 1997; Valentine, 1999). The social context of adult-child relationships and the unequal power dynamics that comprise these relationships necessitates a mindful, conscientious approach to research with children. Feminist researchers and others refer to reflexivity as “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994, p. 82). By utilizing children’s preferred methods of communication, the development of children-centered research methods has been one of the key ways of addressing the issue of unequal power relations. Samantha Punch (2003) explains, “Many children find traditional methods such as questionnaire surveys either intimidating (since they require a high degree of literacy), inappropriate (since they are devoid from any context) or boring (since they are no ‘fun’)” (p. 36). New ‘methodologies of representation’ have been developed to enable children to communicate through drawings, photography, song, story, and drama (Alderson, 2000; Christensen & James, 2000). Such methods aim to address children’s different learning styles despite age and/or abilities. Additionally, children-centered research methods attempt to be inclusive and to build rapport, trust, and confidence with participants (Solberg, 1996).

Acknowledging that children have a range of “expressive, communicative, and cognitive languages,” this research project utilized a combination of informal (drawings, photographs) and formal (interviews) qualitative methods (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 7). The combined methods of drawing, interviewing, and photography allowed children to mediate their personal experience with their special places. Research demonstrates that qualitative methods capture children’s experiences more accurately, and are more ‘child friendly,’ than quantitative methods (Barker & Weller, 2003; Greene & Hill, 2005; Punch, 2002; Yuen, 2004). Children are likely to respond more enthusiastically and truthfully to qualitative methods such as drawing, photography, and interviews than to quantitative methods such as surveys, which often rely on abstract concepts such as the Likert scale. In addition to addressing appropriate research methods, I was sensitive to reflexivity. Throughout the research process, I continually evaluated my influence on both the participants and the production of data and attempted to facilitate meaningful participation.

### Rationale

This research project revealed not only what places are considered to be special by children, but also illuminated children’s experience within those places. Roger Hart (1979) pioneered the study of children’s experience of place and defined this methodology as an “eclectic-ecological-field approach’ which attempts to describe the environment not only as it is used by a child, but also as it is known and felt” (p. 9). Guiding this research was the question of how children’s outdoor special places

contribute to child development, place attachment, and environmental stewardship values.

Several studies have delved into this field of inquiry. David Sobel (2002), looking at English and West Indian children's cognitive maps, realized the importance of forts, dens, and bush houses in children's spatial experience. Interviews revealed that these special places were also important to children's mental and psychological development. This research project also utilized the draw-and-interview technique, but sought to garner a more holistic understanding of child development by exploring how outdoor special places contribute to cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Louise Chawla (1992) explored the role of indoor and outdoor special places in the formation of childhood place attachment. Relying on adult environmental autobiographies, Chawla discovered that when recollected, special places served as personal anchors during both childhood and adulthood. The relationship between childhood exposure and access to nature and the concurrent formation of environmental stewardship values has been explored by both Tanner (1980) and Vadala et al. (2007). Tanner surveyed conservation leaders, while Vadala et al. surveyed college students involved in leisure and environmental professions. Both research studies revealed the importance of children's play in natural environments as a precursor for adult environmental stewardship values. This research project diverged from the approaches that have characterized past research concerning place attachment and the formation environmental stewardship values. Using children's drawings and photographs as gateways into in-depth one-on-one interviews, this research project asked children to

personally elucidate how special places contribute to place attachment and the establishment of stewardship values.

This research project was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved a drawing activity with four separate fourth and fifth grade classrooms. A total of 82 drawings were collected. From these drawings, 24 students were theoretically selected to be interviewed. Phase 2 involved giving cameras to 12 students who had been interviewed regarding their drawings. Participants were asked to take pictures of their special places and were later involved in an open-ended interview regarding their photographs

The draw-and-interview technique has been utilized by several researchers interested in children's experience of place (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Sobel, 2002). Drawing enables children to express themselves and communicate freely, especially among children with low literacy skills (Young & Barrett, 2001). In addition, drawing is a process in which children are in control because they have time to think about what they wish to portray and are able to amend their images. Drawing with children can be fun and creative, and can encourage children to be actively involved in the research (Punch, 2002). However, not all children respond to drawings and it should not be assumed that drawings are a 'natural' method to use with children as it depends on their actual and perceived ability to draw. A few students in each of the participating classrooms were not interested in drawing and chose not to participate, while most students responded to the drawing activity with enthusiasm.

In order to better understand the children's drawings, a follow-up interview was necessary. According to John Barker and Susie Weller (2003), "interpretation is key to

enabling children to communication through drawings... it is necessary to discuss the drawing with the child to ensure the drawing represents the child's meaning and interpretation, rather than those of the researchers" (p. 44). I was able to gain a superficial conception of most of the students' drawings by going from desk to desk during the drawing activity and asking questions concerning what they had drawn. Twenty-four students were interviewed, thereby ensuring a rich interpretation of their drawings.

Traditionally, research associated with children's experience of place involves the researcher going into the field with his/her participants and touring the participants' places (Kylin, 2003; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Powell, 2001). Roger Hart (1979) notes that children mention more "land-use" places in interviews that are combined with "place-expeditions" than in interviews at school, in which they mention more "social" places (p. 162). Due to time constraints, I chose to use children's photographs as an alternative method. The inclusion of a photographic analysis stems from Kim Rasmussen's (2004) research concerning the differences between "places for children" and "children's places." Rasmussen notes that a "differentiated picture of children's spatial culture emerges when children discuss and take photographs of settings that are meaningful to them" (p. 155). Giving children cameras allows them to explore and record their own experiences, feelings, and sense of place, thereby providing their own practical observations of their experiences (Hart, 1992). Unlike traditional place expeditions, using cameras allows the researcher to avoid altering the dynamics of the place and empowers children as there are no temporal and spatial restrictions (Barker & Weller, 2003). Including photographs as a research method was intended to allow participants an

opportunity to portray their special places in a unique way. In order to ascertain participants' reasoning for taking photographs, I conducted interviews as a means of accurate interpretation and representation. Participants responded positively to the use of cameras as a research method.

### Site Selection and Participants

The research took place at a charter school in the Humboldt Bay Region of Northern California. I was employed as a part-time seventh and eighth grade service-learning instructor at the selected site. Familiarity with the principal and teachers was a contributing factor in the site selection process. During the data collection period (January – February 2009), I was not actively employed by the school. Additionally, I had no contact with the participating classrooms prior to introducing the research project. To further delineate my role as a researcher, rather than an instructor, research participants were encouraged to call me “Chelsea,” as opposed to my students who called me “Mrs. Benson.”

Two fourth grade and two fifth grade classrooms participated in the study. Fourth and fifth grade students were selected to participate because research indicates that they are in the peak range for children involved in place-making activities and because it is during this age range (8-11 years) that children most actively use outdoor places (Cobb, 1977; Chawla, 1992; Sobel, 2002). Approximately 60 percent of students attending the charter school live outside of the school district. Therefore, students involved in the research did not all live in the same town or neighborhood. Similarly, a range of both

towns and rural areas within a 15-20 mile radius of the school were represented in the research, allowing for investigation of a variety of special places from indoor to outdoor rural and outdoor urban.

## Procedure

### Phase 1

The first phase of data collection involved conducting a drawing activity with each of the four classrooms involved. A week before the drawing activity, I visited each classroom to introduce myself, explain my research project, and hand out parental consent forms (“permission slips”). The consent forms also asked for students to sign their own names, thereby indicating that not only did their parents permit them to participate, but they were also willing to participate in the research project. (See Appendix A for parental consent form.)

The drawing activity was performed with the entire class. Students who returned consent forms were instructed to write their names on the backs of their drawings so that I could select those with consent to be interviewed. Because the drawing activity did not fall outside the range of a normal classroom activity, parental consent was not required for the entire class. Those students not interested in participating in the drawing activity were given the opportunity to do other class work, read, or ‘doodle.’ Approximately one-two students per classroom opted not to participate. Students were given approximately 50 minutes to draw; however, most students completed their drawings within 40 minutes. A total of 82 drawings were collected.

Instructions for the drawing activity were said aloud:

*Hello, it is good to see you all again. Today I am going to be doing a drawing activity with you. I would like for you to draw pictures or a map of your favorite places, the places that are important to you in your neighborhood. By neighborhood, I mean the area around your home where you spend most of your time and where you hang out. Think about where you like to go when you have free time. Or the places you are allowed to go with your friends or to be alone. Please don't share your ideas with those people around you. Quietly draw places you consider to be special or important to you. Feel free to write descriptions near your pictures. Remember you should be quiet while you are drawing. If you have a question, please raise your hand.*

I collected the drawings and took photographs of each drawing. The photographs were taken so that I could return the students' drawings promptly and also so that I could later code themes that had emerged (i.e. fort, bedroom, climbing tree). A complete list of drawing codes is provided in Appendix B.

One-on-one follow-up interviews were conducted with six students from each classroom. A total of 24 students were interviewed. Students were selected for interviews based on parental consent and personal assent. Anticipating children's preference for outdoor places, drawings were theoretically selected. Of the selected drawings, 16 (66.7%) portrayed only outdoor places, six (25%) portrayed both indoor and outdoor places, and two (8.3%) portrayed only indoor places.

Students were asked to sign an assent form prior to being interviewed. (See Appendix A for participant assent form.) I verbally explained what information was included on the assent form. Students were assured that their information was confidential and selected their own pseudonyms. Students were also aware that their participation was voluntary and they could decide not to participate at any time.

Interviews took place in the school's library and lasted between 10-30 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured and often involved participant story-telling. Interview questions are included in Appendix C. The transcribed interviews were coded for emergent themes (Glesne, 2005). (See Appendix D for interview codes.)

## Phase 2

Twelve students were selected to participate in the second phase of research. Criteria for selection included participation in Phase 1, interest in participating in Phase 2, and an interview following the drawing activity that produced rich detail. Students were given disposable cameras with which they were instructed to take pictures of their important places which were discussed during the previous interview. The film was developed with one set of prints for me and another for the participant. One-on-one interviews were conducted in the school library and lasted 10-15 minutes. The interviews were open-ended and involved discussing what participants had photographed. To conclude, students were asked to hypothetically design a place that they thought kids their age would enjoy going to for play, relaxation, and 'hanging out.'

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Drawings

Eighty-two drawings were collected with a total of 198 places depicted. Outdoor places totaled 140 (70.7%), while indoor places totaled 58 (29.3%). Trees, forts, sporting areas (basketball courts, baseball fields, and skate parks), yards, and waterways were the most frequently drawn outdoor places. The most frequently depicted indoor places included: bedrooms, living rooms, and houses. See Table 1 and Table 2 for a complete list of indoor and outdoor places with totals and percentages.

Drawings also portrayed both indoor and outdoor objects and activities. A total of 17 indoor activities and objects were drawn. Indoor objects and activities primarily featured electronics (television, iPod, computer). Electronics represented 76.5% of all indoor objects and activities. Other indoor objects and activities included games, musical instruments, and reading. A total of 14 outdoor activities and objects were drawn, including tag games, pretend battles, dancing, searching for wildlife, and reading. A complete list of indoor and outdoor places, activities, and objects with totals and percentages can be located in Appendix B. See Figures 1-6 for a sampling of participants' drawings.

Results from the drawing activity indicated that participants (age 8-11) prefer outdoor places. When prompted to draw places they considered important, places they liked to go to in their free time either to be alone or with friends, participants primarily

drew pictures of trees, forts, waterways, and yards. Additionally, outdoor activities were more active and imaginative than indoor activities which largely featured electronics.

Table 1. Indoor places featured in drawings

Indoor Places	Total = 58	Percentage
Bedroom	28	48.3
Living room	9	15.5
Own house	6	10.3
Other's house	3	5.2
Playroom	3	5.2
Business	2	3.4
Kitchen	2	3.4
Garage/barn	2	3.4
Pool	1	1.7
Desk	1	1.6

Table 2. Outdoor places featured in drawings

Outdoor Places	Total = 140	Percentage
Trees	37	26.4
Sporting area	20	14.3
Waterway	18	12.8
Fort	13	9.3
Path/bridge	12	8.6
Yard/bushes	11	7.8
Neighborhood	7	5.0
Garden	5	3.6
Park	5	3.6
Trampoline	4	2.9
Coop/pen	3	2.1
Sitting area	2	1.4



Figure 1. Backyard tag game and climbing tree



Figure 2. Bedroom with television and computer



Figure 3. Tree house with Star Wars themed pretend battle

## Interviews

### Outdoor and indoor places and activities

Interviews reinforced the drawing data concerning participants' preference for outdoor places. During the interviews, 112 (67.3%) outdoor places were mentioned, while only 52 (33.7%) indoor places were mentioned. Eleven different types of outdoor places were discussed. The most prevalent special outdoor places included trees, yards, forts, and waterways. Nine different types of indoor places were mentioned. Bedrooms,

living rooms, and other's houses were the most prevalent indoor special places. See Table 3 and Table 4 for a complete list of outdoor and indoor places mentioned during the interviews including totals and percentages.

Table 3. Outdoor places mentioned during interviews

Outdoor Places	Total = 112	Percentage
Trees	31	27.7
Forts	20	17.8
Yard/bushes	14	12.5
Sporting area	7	6.2
Path/bridge	6	5.4
Park	5	4.4
Garden	4	3.6
Neighborhood	3	2.7
Trampoline	3	2.7
Sitting area	1	.9
Horse arena	1	.9

Table 4. Indoor places mentioned during interviews

Indoor Place	Total = 52	Percentage
Bedroom	19	36.5
Living room	9	17.3
Other's house	7	13.5
Garage/barn	5	9.6
Business	4	7.7
Kitchen	3	5.8
Pool, hot tub	3	5.8
Playroom	1	1.9
Desk	1	1.9

Indoor and outdoor activities discussed during the interviews also served to reinforce data obtained from the drawings. A total of 179 outdoor activities were described throughout the interviews. Exploring (climbing trees, wading in streams, finding new outdoor locations), creating (building, experimenting), hiding and spying, and pretending were primary outdoor activities. When totaled together—creating, exploring, pretending, hiding/spying—these activities comprised 59% of all outdoor activities. Playing sports, riding bicycles, and playing with pets were also mentioned as outdoor activities. There were a total of 16 different types of outdoor activities. See Table 5 for a complete list of outdoor activities mentioned during the interviews complete with totals and percentages.

The following quotations illustrate the ways in which participants' build, create, and explore in their outdoor places:

*Zap:* I have been in the tree climbing a lot. I have made four forts and this is the one I stuck with. I made one in the fig tree. One in the rose bush. And then two in the same area of the forest. One fell down. The other one, since my dad kept on pruning it, sometimes it was good for hiding spot and sometimes you could eat figs or pelt them at someone else. There was a rope there to swing on. The other fort was a really good hiding spot.

*Dequoya:* It [the yard] is a place that we can not only do things in the house because we want a yard to have space to do some things that could maybe be experiments. Like right here, we are doing an erosion experiment. We don't want to do it in the house. We just want to do it on the sidewalk so it can run like a river of some sort.

*Ashley:* My sister and I it is like, "okay we are out here [forest] to find new stuff." New stuff to talk about and explore. My sister is obsessed with exploring.

The outdoors also inspired imaginative, pretend play.

*Lucy:* The reason I drew the stump is because me and my friends make plays up there. We do little skits. One time me and my friend did Rumpelstiltskin with our stuffed animals.

*Sarah:* And we put water balloons in it [the fort] for defense. We pretend that we have a bully or something. It is really fun. We look for more clubhouses farther away in her backyard.

Overall, interviews reinforced and expanded the drawing activity data revealing the significance of outdoor places for creative play and exploration.

A total of 101 indoor activities were mentioned during the interviews. Paralleling the drawing results, indoor activities were again dominated by electronics (18.8%). Homework, creating (drawing, cooking, writing), reading, and “hanging out” (daydreaming, sitting, thinking) were also frequently mentioned as indoor activities. There were a total of 13 different types of indoor activities. Most indoor activities tended to be passive. For example, when asked how she felt at her grandma’s house (her favorite place), Kiana explained,

*Kiana:* I like it because I just get to hang out and watch TV.

Tommy’s favorite indoor places also revolved around electronics and passive entertainment:

*Tommy:* In my room I just watch TV. In the mornings I go to the living room to watch because it has Nick [Nickelodeon], I just have the Disney Channel in my room.

However, some participants valued their indoor places for reading and being creative.

*Erer:* Under my bed is very fun. I like to lay under my bed on a bunch of pillows. I will stick my head out and read by the lamp. It makes me feel in the story more. It flushes out all the noise and the light.

*Sapphire:* This is my art room. I share it with my sister. It is also the TV room, but we don’t watch much TV, so I call it the art room. I like

hanging out there because we have tons and tons and tons of art supplies. I love art and stuff.

Interviews reinforced drawing data that suggested indoor places held less importance for participants and were dominated by passive activity including watching TV and playing video games. See Table 6 for a complete list of indoor activities mentioned during the interviews complete with totals and percentages.

Table 5. Outdoor activities mentioned during interviews

Outdoor Activities	Total = 179	Percentage
Creating	48	26.8
Exploring	37	20.7
Pretending	13	7.3
Play with pet	13	7.3
Riding (bike, skateboard)	11	6.1
Hanging out (daydream, think)	10	5.6
Sports	9	5.0
Hiding/spying	8	4.5
Gardening/picking	7	3.9
Reading	6	3.3
Organized games (tag)	5	2.8
Trampoline	4	2.2
Talking	3	1.7
Play with toys	2	1.1
Fishing	2	1.1
Taking pictures	1	.5

Table 6. Indoor activities mentioned during interviews

Indoor Activities	Total = 101	Percentage
Electronics	19	18.8
Creating	12	11.9
Homework	11	10.9
Reading	10	9.9
Hanging out (daydream, think)	10	9.9
Play with toys	8	7.9
Hiding	6	5.9
Play with pet	6	5.9
Talking	4	4.0
Games (board games)	4	4.0
Pool, hot tub	3	3.0
Play musical instrument	3	3.0
Gymnastics	3	3.0

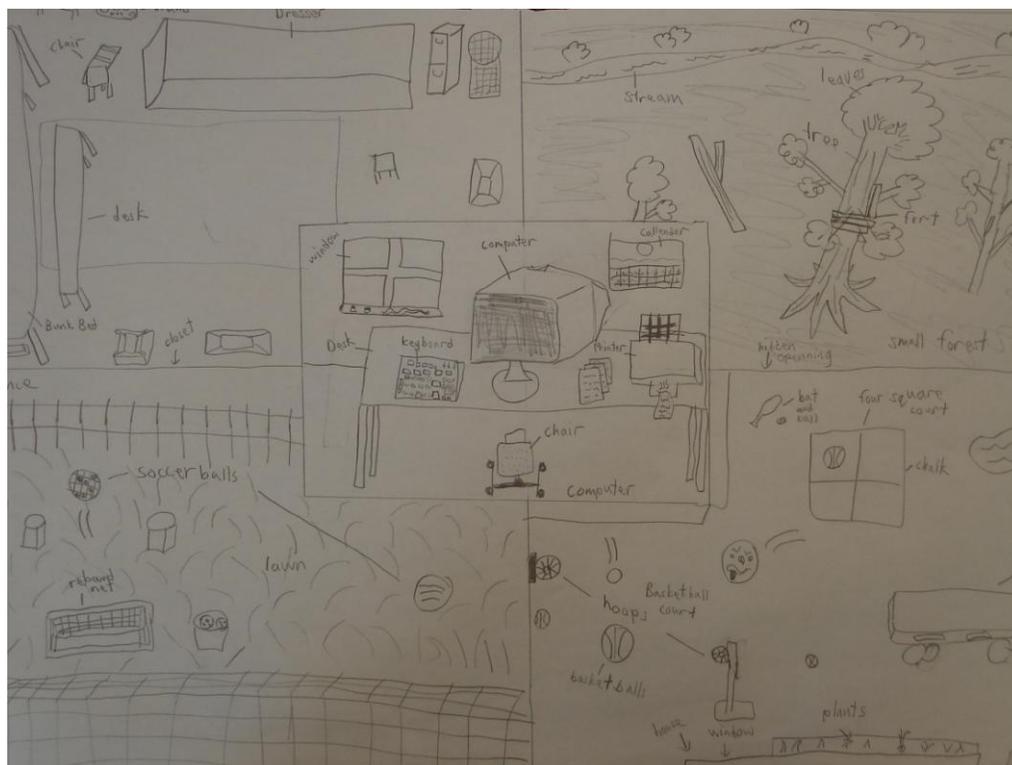


Figure 4. Different places inspired different activities: (clockwise) bedroom (writing, playing musical instruments), forest (climbing, fort building), driveway (sports, organized games), backyard (sports), and computer room (computer games).



Figure 5. Bedroom with reading chair and iPod; park with slide and reading spot



Figure 6. Secret "clubhouse" in burnt redwood stump

## Special places as sites of refuge and emotional regulation

When participants were asked why they went to their special places or how they felt when they were at their special places, an unanticipated theme emerged—that of special places as sites of refuge and emotional regulation. A total of 30 special places were described as refuges or as being secret. Both indoor and outdoor places served to help participants reduce stress, relax, escape, and increase their happiness. The following quotations are examples of places as sites of emotional regulation:

*Erer:* I started climbing trees when I was around five and it has really helped me focus. If I get mad at my brother or at I get mad at someone, I will just walk away, go outside, and climb that tree. Sometimes I will scratch at its bark and it will make me feel better.

*Sapphire:* I often garden with my mom, but sometimes when I just feel mad or when I have a bad feeling in me I will go out there and sit among the plants.

*Ricardo:* If I am upset, I can just go down here [fort] and no one else knows how to get there without my help because I am the one who found it first of all. It's kind of like my special place.

Feelings of calm, comfort, and peace prevailed when participants described how they felt at their special places. “Calm” was mentioned 31 times as a place-based emotion.

*Erer:* I feel peaceful. I feel happy. I feel a lot better. It helps me take my stress out.

*Taylor:* Cool but not like “it's cool” because when you ride [bike] it kind of calms you down.

*Kate:* The house was like 80 years old and it [bedroom] was just like my place to be alone and be calmed down.

*Sapphire:* The piano, I love playing the piano because it lets my feelings out and it just makes me feel really good. If I am feeling really sad and I just play a song there it really makes me feel a lot better.

When feeling upset and overwhelmed, participants sought out their special places to help regulate their emotions—to increase their happiness, relieve their stress, and give them a sense of peace.

In the same way, special places often acted as refuges for participants, places where they could be away from adults, places they went to be alone or with friends and siblings. Feelings of happiness, excitement, and peace emerged when participants were within their refuges. For example, Chloe often fights with her younger sister; in order to escape, she hides in her neighbor’s gazebo and in the tops of the trees that line her front yard.

*Chloe:* I feel alone but happy and excited to be somewhere away from other people. Because her house [neighbor] is over here and her backyard is really alive with stuff. I just sit there [gazebo] and look at all the plants and stuff. I think I climb the tree more than I swing on the swing because I like to climb and jump and stuff. It is fun because I like to go up the top because it is really high. I like to go up to the top and look down and stay up there and nobody ever finds me.

Within the refuge of the trees, Chloe feels happy and excited to be alone, away from her parents and her sister. She spends her time exploring, climbing, reading, and watching the world below her.

Indoor hideouts and outdoor forts were also common sites of refuge.

*Why do you hide in your closet?*

*Jerry:* Partly because my brother is annoying. He wants to try to play with me and I don’t really want to. Also it’s a big closet so you can set up a sleeping bag and read in there.

*Why do you like forts so much?*

*Hikaru:* Probably to just get away from everyone. To have my own place to hang out.

*Kent:* Well this one [tree fort] because it is not finished, Phil and I will play with toys on it and use it as a base for our toys and this one [stick fort] we just go there to be alone. We talk about friends we want to have play dates with.

Kent made a distinction between his tree fort and his stick fort. (See Figure 7).

The stick fort is a project that he and his brother are working on by themselves; while the tree fort requires adult assistance. The stick fort offers more privacy because they have woven branches together in an effort to make in hidden. In contrast, the tree fort is open and exposed because it is unfinished.



Figure 7. Kent's tree and stick forts

Interviews indicated that participants often utilized their special places as a refuge to escape adults and their siblings, and as sites of emotional regulation where they could decrease stress and increase feelings of happiness.

### Special places as social and “fun”

The dialectic of special places as refuges and sites of social activity was revealed as participants described their places as fun and entertaining, where they spent time with friends and siblings. Often participants’ special places are both a place for them to be alone and a place for them to socialize. A total of 41 places were described as social and “fun.” And when asked how participants’ felt at their places, “good,” “happy,” “excited,” and “free” were mentioned 31 times as place-based emotions. The following quotations illustrate how participants’ felt when within their more socially-oriented favorite places:

*How do you feel when you are at the horse arena with your friend?*

*Erer:* I feel happy and tranquil and at the same time energetic and excited.

*How do you feel when you are at the creek?*

*Jerry:* I feel relaxed and energetic and that’s my feelings.

*What are some words to describe your special places?*

*Chloe:* And the trampoline would be like fun, exciting. I go there when I have friends over and sometimes by myself.

Often participants considered outdoor places to be more fun than their indoor special places. Additionally, outdoor places gave participants a sense of freedom and relaxation. The following quotations demonstrate participants’ regard for the outdoors:

*Erer:* I feel better when I am outside because sometimes I feel like I am cooped up in my house and I can’t go outside sometimes. I like outside better because it makes me feel free.

*Why would you choose to go to your outdoor places instead of your indoor places?*

*Zap:* Inside is more noisy and outside is nature and you can feel it.

*Sarah:* It [outdoors] is somewhere that I can go explore, have fun. I like it because when you go out you can do whatever you want.

*Do you feel differently when you are inside or outside?*

*Taylor:* Yeah sometimes when I am inside I am kind of cranky. But when I am outside I just kind of feel relaxed.

*How do you feel when you go to these outdoor places?*

*Ashley:* Really happy and sort of pure because there is so much nature and it's really beautiful. It is like wow that is so amazing.

*Brice:* I feel more calm outside. Maybe because of the fresh air.

The outdoors was both a place for fun and relaxation. When indoors, participants felt they could not escape their parents or their “annoying” siblings, even hiding in a closet could not block the household’s noises. Participants largely controlled the activities and persons within their outdoor special places; therefore, they considered these places to be fun, liberating, and relaxing.

The emergence of environmental stewardship values

Environmental stewardship values emerged as an important theme for the participants, especially for those with outdoor special places. Values of protecting nature, befriending nature, and being knowledgeable about the natural world were expressed by participants. Throughout the interviews there were 23 mentions of stewardship values.

Ashley provides an example of the value of protecting nature by leaving it undisturbed:

*Ashley:* You can't step in it [the creek] because that would ruin it completely... it is only about 3 or 4 inches big, so if you stepped in it, it

would change its shape and make it go to different areas. And I think that if nature is going to take its course, I don't think you should alter it unless you have a good reason. Stepping in it is not a good reason.

Ricardo also describes how he protects the salamanders and fish living in the stream:

*Ricardo:* I built these two bridges and we closed off a little thing and there are salamanders in there. We close it so that they don't fall down the little waterfall. Once I saw one and it landed on a sharp rock and it went straight through. It was bad. We want to keep them safe. I built the fishing rod. They are like sticks with string on them. Three of them have hooks, but we don't usually use them because they hurt them [fish] and we usually catch them and release them...

While Ashley and Ricardo have different ideas concerning how to be stewards of the natural world, both realize the importance of nature.

Participants' knowledge of the environment was considerable. Many participants lived near a waterway and noticed seasonal changes such as water levels and salmon spawning. Ashley's knowledge of redwood ecology provides an example of environmental knowledge:

*Why do you like the redwoods so much?*

*Ashley:* Just because they are so unique. You only find them in California. You don't even find them in Oregon. You find Douglas firs, you find pines, but you just don't really find redwoods. It is just really unique because they need fog. Fog is really important. You can't exactly have them down in San Diego or in Oregon even because it is just not the climate. Also they are just so tall. They are the tallest trees in the world. I like the color also. This is sort of stupid, but they are sophisticated, elegant, and long-standing, just up. I like the pines coming out and the way its branches go. Not all loopy-doo or gnarly or stick thin. The branches are in any shape you could imagine.

Throughout the interviews many participants communicated their feelings about nature, describing nature as "beautiful," "interesting," "exciting," "quiet," and "friendly."

Nature was depicted in these positive manners a total of 29 times. The following quotations illustrate participants' feelings towards the natural world:

*Jerry:* It is really awesome and pretty because you don't normally have a redwood log that falls across the creek.

*Sapphire:* Even if a little bird comes and perches on the fence and starts singing it makes me feel really nice like they are trying to be friendly to me. Even when the grass is swaying it makes me feel like they are being friendly to me.

*DJ:* I think it is interesting because there are a lot of plants out there [dunes] that I don't know what they are and it is kind of fun to have my mom teach me what they are. And it is exciting because you can find a new plant where another plant was or you can go around the bend and see a fallen tree. You could have been there yesterday and it could have been totally clear.

Many of the participants appreciated nature in some way, expressing their preference for outdoor places, while other participants explicitly verbalized what could be considered environmental stewardship values. These participants were knowledgeable about the environment and felt the need to protect and befriend nature.

#### Place attachment

Themes of place attachment also emerged during interviews as participants expressed the excitement they feel to go to their places or the sadness of losing a place. For example, Kate and her sister lost an indoor hideout when their house was remodeled. When asked how she felt, Kate responded:

*Kate:* I just feel sad. I still have the memory of it... We are really sad that it had to go down and the rest of the house too.

Hikaru expressed his attachment to his family's property and his desire not to move, something his parents are considering in the near future:

*Hikaru:* Well, we actually kind of made this property. My grandfather and my great grandfather they built our house with their bare hands. Our property used to be a dump and my dad, my great grandfather, and my grandfather they cleaned up all this stuff. They bought the property. They moved all the junk and they put it in a real junk yard and they built the house and they cleaned it. Then my brother and sister were born and then I was born and then we lived here. So it is pretty important to me because my family built the property with their bare hands. That is kind of why I don't want to leave because I have been there my whole life.

Sapphire articulated the excitement she feels to go to her special places:

*Sapphire:* I like to go there; it is something that I look forward to doing. I'll be at school and say, "Oh when I get home I can't wait to go and see the chickens" or "I just thought of this new invention because I am tired of doing this I'll just go and write it down in the art room" or "I can't wait to play my new piano piece that I just learned the rest of it" Those are some things that I look forward to.

While not all the participants stated their enthusiasm for their places in the same manner as Sapphire, it was apparent throughout the drawing activities and interviews that the participants had a strong attachment to their places. Most participants embraced the drawing activity with enthusiasm and were anxious to share their drawings and associated stories. Those who were not selected for an interview were quite disappointed. The keen response I received from participants indicated that their special places are something they treasure and I anticipate that if they were to move or lose their places, many would experience feelings of sadness and loss.

## Photographs and Interviews

### Sharing stories and images

Participants were eager to be given disposable cameras and just as earnestly shared their images. Follow-up interviews primarily consisted of participants describing their pictures. The photographs and interviews reinforced findings from the drawing activity and previous interviews. No new themes emerged during the second phase of research. See Figures 8-20 for a sampling of participants' pictures and descriptions. The following samples of pictures illustrate participants' views of their special places and include descriptions and stories that the participants disclosed during the interview.



Figure 8. Chloe's tree swing and climbing trees. Chloe enjoys seeing how high she can swing. In her yard, there are five trees growing in a cluster and she times how fast she can traverse through their branches. Chloe often hides in the trees and spies on her family and neighbors.



Figure 9. Chloe's other hiding spot: her neighbor's gazebo. She used to hide up in the rafters when she was younger, but now enjoys going there to read and "hang-out" among her neighbor's plants.

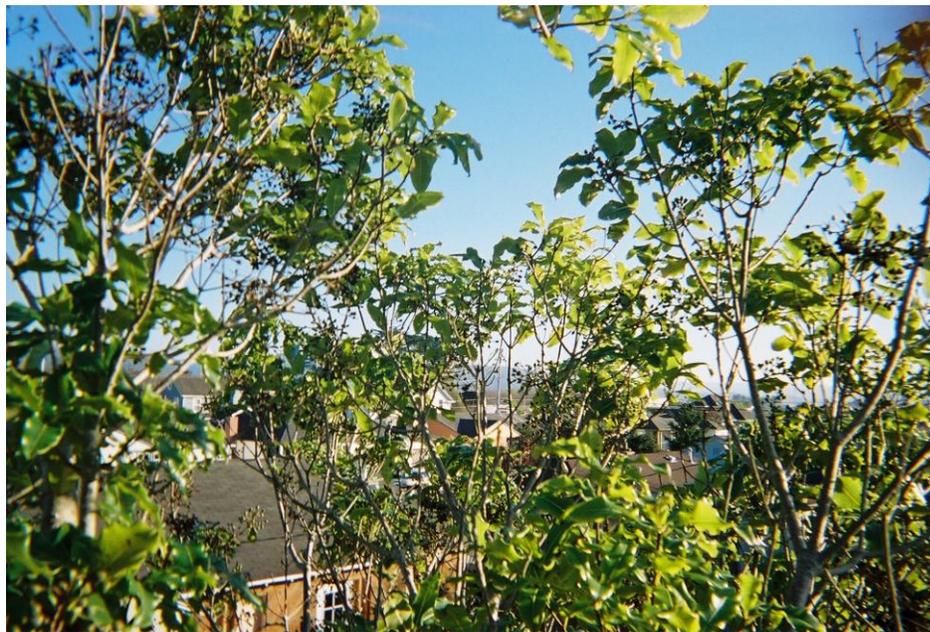


Figure 10. A view from the top of Erer's climbing tree. She can see the bay and her neighborhood. Erer climbs the tree on a daily basis in order to relax, have fun, and "feel the wind on my face."



Figure 11. Inside Sarah's secret clubhouse. She and her friend have placed chairs inside and hope to get a table so that they can have "picnics" together. The clubhouse has a side entrance from which Sarah likes to spy on her neighbors.



Figure 12. Jerry on his fallen redwood tree. Jerry comes here to skip rocks in the creek and eat blackberries. He really likes his place because it is "quiet and pretty."



Figure 13. Marie's climbing tree. She was disappointed that the tree was trimmed a few days prior to being given the disposable camera, remarking, "I was thinking it would be pretty and stuff because I was thinking of the leaves." She and her neighbors play hide-n-seek in her yard and this tree, when it is leafy, is a prime hiding location.



Figure 14. Ricardo's "salamander pond." Here Ricardo tried to protect the salamanders from going over the waterfall and downstream.



Figure 15. Sapphire’s art supplies. Sapphire “loves art” and often daydreams about what she will create next in her art room. Currently, she is working on a collage of used postage stamps.



Figure 16. Sapphire’s chickens. Taking care of the chickens is her chore. She enjoys her task and explains, “I love hanging out there with them because I formed a strong bond with them and they are just my really good friends.”



Figure 17. Taylor’s neighborhood bike loop. Taylor loves riding down the big hills and feels calm when she is outside riding her bike.



Figure 18. Zap’s backyard. He goes back here to play soccer and play with his dog. Zap likes to kick the ball into the rebound net, “So I can kick it and I can catch it. Sometimes it goes over my head. And sometimes it goes all the way to the fence.”



Figure 19. Zap's tree fort. He is building it by himself. Right now it is just a platform, but he is hoping to be able to create a big fort with walls and a roof.



Figure 20. The secret entrance to Hikaru's "hole." The "hole" in an underground fort that Hikaru and his older brother built. Hikaru goes down there almost every day to play video games and daydream. Hikaru explains how he improved his fort, "I put wood down and glued the wood to the ground so I am not laying on dirt. I also put wood on the top of it because it is all rock up there so I just hammered it in."

## Designing children's places: Ideas from participants

To conclude the interview, participants were asked to design a place they thought kids their age would enjoy going to for fun, relaxation, and 'hanging out.' Most participants chose a combination of natural and built environments. Natural environments included streams, forests, gardens and fields, while built environments included playgrounds and tree houses. The following are examples of participants' ideas for designing children's places:

*Zap:* By the forest. Have a little fort for people to play in. It could be by a creek like our tree fort it is by Jacoby Creek. I think that would be a good spot. Maybe there would be some games in the fort. Checkers and chess or you can do one person games like Solitaire.

*Marie:* I could build a tree house. It would be really hard though. It would be fun for all of us, my neighbors because they used to climb this tree a lot with me and since they climbed a lot now we could have a hideout.

*Erer:* It would probably have a playground, a cavey thing. Because I know a lot of people like to go in caves and climb around. There are definitely going to be some trees.

*Jerry:* It would probably be the tree fort when it is finished. It is going to have a zipline. We are going to put a platform on another tree so you can zipline to the other tree and also we are going to put more than one story on the fort.

*Sarah:* There is this thing [stump] in my friend's backyard, we could carve it out and make it smooth. And clean it out. There are stairs you could go on top. It is open on the top. You could look out. A tree house kind of thing. You would be actually in a tree. There would be a stairs and a table.

*Taylor:* A field with soccer goals and around it a cement track and then a playground in the middle of the field, maybe.

*Ashley:* There this is this really huge curved log and it is really fun to walk on it. You can have picnics there. So if you are going to build a

playground or something, I recommend you build something like that. They are really really really fun.

Most participants did not envision scripted playground structures, structures that they see in their everyday lives such as swings, sliding boards, and asphalt courts. In the following quotations, Ricardo and Sapphire revealed why these types of structures are “boring”:

*Ricardo:* There would never be boring stuff and it would always be fun. Just one ball area with a ball that would be boring. A big field for sports and a nice big play structure for kids who like to play on play structures and really big swings for people to have fun on the swings. If people really liked animals, I would probably have animals, rabbits or something. Have trees around it [playground]. Lots of big logs to climb on and a creek with fish in it.

*Sapphire:* A really cool thing, I don’t know if you have ever seen one but they have them in Poland. I went to Poland and the Czech Republic and they have them everywhere. It is basically this rope figure. Basically a rope net with really heavy duty rope. It is really fun to climb and you can do endless things with it. And that is something I would never get bored with. You know if you have a slide, you slide down the slide a certain amount of times and you get bored sliding down the slide but with that you can do endless things. You can hang upside down on it. You can climb it. You can play on it. You could use it as a place to play house if you wanted.

Limited possibilities for play create “boring” play areas. According to the participants, if play structures are going to be built they should have innovative components that allow for many different types of play. Natural areas with creeks, trees, and tree houses were the most frequent hypothetically-designed play areas.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion returns to the main question of how children's special places contribute to children's development (physical, social, cognitive, emotional), place attachment, and the formation of environmental stewardship values. More generally, this discussion explores children's special places and the activities that occur within those places.

### Preferred Places and Activities

This research project clearly demonstrates that children during the peak of middle childhood (ages 8-11) prefer outdoor places as their special places. This finding aligns with past research studies that suggest that children favor interstitial, outdoor places as their special places (Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1980; Sobel, 2002). Trees, waterways, forts, and fields were all highly valued by participants in this current research project and in past research.

My results somewhat contradict current trends in research and one of my original hypotheses, both of which suggested that children's preferred places are moving indoors, where children's activities are dominated by electronics (DeBell, 2005; Heerwagen & Orians, 2002; Louv, 2005; Zaradic & Pergams, 2007). This research finding may be explained by the region's physical and cultural characteristics. The Humboldt Bay region of Northern California is fairly rural. The largest city is Eureka, and according to the 2006 projected Census the city has a population of 25,435 (US Census Bureau). Smaller

towns are located to the north and south. The 2007 estimate of the total population of Humboldt County was 128,864 people with 35.4 persons/square mile (US Census Bureau). While I did not specifically ask where participants lived, locations were often revealed during the interview process. Most participants resided in towns with populations of less than 17,000 and some participants lived on remote parcels of land. Even urban residents in this area have fairly close and easy access to forests, parks, riparian zones, and other types of interstitial spaces—an ease of access not common in larger urban areas and dissimilar regions. Most urban participants noted that they utilized forested parks near their neighborhood. In addition, this region of California is historically known for its back-to-the-land values. Participants were knowledgeable about gardening, sustainable energy, and participated in a variety of outdoor activities including hiking and surfing. The school where this research project took place boasts an array of solar panels on its gym, offers local foods on its salad bar, and is in the process of building sustainable classrooms. Because of this region's physical and cultural distinctiveness, participants may have been more likely to espouse preference for outdoor special places, thereby explaining why my findings differ from developments in current research.

When participants in my research project did express a preference for indoor places, the activities within those places were often passive and focused on electronics such as the television, computer, or iPod. This finding aligns with current research, which suggests that children are moving toward “videophilia,” defined as, “the new human

tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media” (Zaradic & Pergams, 2007, p. 130).

Participants explained that they preferred indoor places when they were tired from a long day of school, sports, and other activities, and therefore resorted to passive forms of entertainment. Participants went to outdoor places when they had free time and energy. Half of the participants expressed that they felt too busy to go to their outdoor places and wished they had more time for playing outdoors. Consequently, weekends and school vacations were the primary times when participants went to their outdoor places. Richard Louv (2005) writes about children’s lives being cluttered with organized activities and the resulting loss of children’s exposure to nature. My findings parallel the trend that Louv reveals through his research. With limited time and energy, participants were compelled to stay indoors and reserved small blocks of time for free play outdoors.

Once outdoors, participants engaged in a wide variety of activities including: building, exploring, climbing, pretending, riding bikes, hiding, and playing with pets. Outdoor activities were spontaneous, imaginative, and devoid of direct adult supervision. These findings support past research concerning children’s experience within outdoor places (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Sobel, 2002).

The theory of “loose parts” (Nicholson, 1971) and the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1979) help to explain why children prefer outdoor places and engage in such an array of activities. The theory of “loose parts” states: “In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30). Nature

offers innumerable possibilities for creative expression and discovery. Even in urban settings, a multiplicity of sights, sounds, smells, and tactile stimuli originate from the natural environment. Children prefer natural landscapes because these places offer an infinite arrangement of opportunity for play and exploration. According to the theory of affordances, children view a landscape for its inherent functions while adults primarily view landscapes for their form. Gibson (1979) explains that environments are experienced not only as a configured setting, but also as places that allow different kinds of opportunities. Places are understood not for what they are, but for what they afford a child. Outdoor settings provide children with more opportunities for experiences and activities than do indoor settings, which have finite possibilities for different forms of play.

Understanding the theories of affordance and “loose parts” also explains why participants suggested natural landscapes as hypothetical play places. When participants were asked to hypothetically design places that they thought children their age would enjoy going to, for playing and ‘hanging out,’ almost all participants described natural environments with a built hideout. These types of places afforded more opportunities for play than built playground structures. One participant, Sapphire, articulated why she thinks slides are “boring,” saying, “You know if you have a slide, you slide down the slide a certain amount of times and you get bored sliding down the slide.” Conversely, streams, trees, forts, and innovative play structures were suggested by participants because of these places’ limitless opportunities for play and exploration.

## Outdoor Special Places and Child Development

Many of the outdoor activities that participants reported have been demonstrated to be developmentally significant for children (Fjørtoft, 2001; Kellert, 2002; Moore, 1989; Pyle, 2002; Taylor et al, 2001). Exploring, climbing, building, pretending and playing organized games all help participants develop physically. According to Fjørtoft (2001), children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance, and agility. Participants in this research described the challenge of balancing on fallen logs, traversing through tree tops, and building their forts. These types of activities required energy and dexterity. While organized sports and playgrounds do allow for children to develop physically, the types of play that occur within participants' outdoor special places add a noteworthy contribution. Additionally, not all children respond positively to competitive sports and games; therefore, play in natural landscapes may be seen as a more desirable physical activity.

Outdoor special places were considered to be fun and social by many participants. The majority of the activities that participants described were important to their social development. Free from adult supervision, participants, along with their siblings and friends, devised schemes, created their own games, and conversed. By interacting with one another within the shelter of their special places, participants and their companions developed social contracts, talked freely, and engaged in creative expression. These types of activities occur primarily in places where children feel secure and free (Ellis, 2004a).

As sites for social activity, special places become a shared place and a shared experience. According to Hart (1979), exploration and play within outdoor places facilitates the formation of healthy, long-lasting relationships between children. Moore (1996) adds that children who play together in natural settings feel more positively toward one another. Certainly children develop socially when they interact with one another in school and during organized activities such as sports and clubs; however, special places allow children to have privacy in order to socially test with each other things that adults would consider inappropriate or disorderly such as children ambushing friends with a shower of crab apples or children building a rambling fort from the “junk” they found in the garage. Special places provide an important location for children to experiment with new identities, develop meaningful relationships, and explore the larger world.

Cognitively, outdoor special places are developmentally important because they provide a place for children to think creatively, engage in trial-and-error, and separate themselves from the world. During interviews, participants described activities that helped stimulate their cognitive development including: pretending, designing and building structures, experimenting, creating plays and dance routines, and observing the natural world. All of these activities assist the development of higher order thinking. Additionally, my research findings align with past research, which suggests that nature helps children develop cognitively by stimulating creativity and imaginative play which in turn fosters language and collaborative skills (Fjørtoft & Sageie 2000; Moore & Wong, 1997; Taylor et al, 1998). Pyle (2002) notes that natural environments assist cognitive development by improving children’s awareness, reasoning, and observational skills.

During an interview, Ashley described why she goes to her special place in the forest: “When I go by myself it is to see the views. I really like nature and animals. And I like the swamp because you can see the tracks of the animals and I have seen deer down there a couple times. I have seen a lot of cool animals down there.” Observing animals and the surrounding forest is important to her, allowing her to forget about the day at school and any responsibilities she may have. She can simply become immersed in her surroundings. Sitting quietly is rarely considered a valuable cognitive activity in Western culture; however, outdoor special places allow children to engage in the activities of their choice.

Frequently the activities that children choose to do within their outdoor special places help them to develop in ways that augment the development that occurs within schools, sports, and other organized activities. Physically, children develop motor skills such as balance, coordination, and agility. Socially, children develop relationships and engage in forms of creative expression and exploration. And cognitively, children develop critical thinking skills through building, pretending, and observation. Special places facilitate healthy, holistic child development.

#### Special Places as Sites of Emotional Regulation and Refuge

Another key discovery in this research project was the role of special places in emotional development. Participants frequently described their indoor and outdoor places as refuges, places to which they escaped for solitude. They went to refuges when they felt stressed, angry, or sad and when they wanted to avoid their families. These places helped participants to regulate their emotions. When asked how they felt within their refuges,

participants described feelings of calm, peace, relaxation, security, and comfort. Being in the refuge also helped the participants feel “happy” and “good.” One participant, Erer, provided a powerful example of using her climbing tree as a refuge. When upset, she retreated up into the branches of her tree. Here she scratched at its bark, felt the wind on her face, and regained self-control. Refuges were located both indoors (bedrooms, closets) and outdoors (trees, forts, waterways). Special places facilitated participants’ emotional development by providing participants a private location for self-reflection and emotional regulation.

Several other researchers have discovered the importance of special or favorite places for self-regulation and emotional regulation (Hart, 1979; Korpela, 1992; Korpela, Ylén, Tyrväinen & Silvennoinen, 2008; Sobel, 2002; Sommer, 1990). According to Korpela (1992), “the concept of environmental self-regulation holds that self-involvement in a physical environment is possible and that physical environment itself can be used as a strategy for regulating emotions and maintaining one’s self” (p. 249). Sommer (1990), looking at Estonian adolescents’ favorite places, noted that the places provided a respite from daily stressors as well as feelings of well-being, peace, and comfort. Additionally, Korpela (1992), studied Finnish adolescents and revealed that favorite places can be used to “regulate pleasurable and painful feelings, and the coherence of self-experience, and to maintain a favorable level of self-esteem” (p. 249). Favorite places help adolescents—and according to my research, children in their middle years—cope with life’s pressures, and restore their peace and sense of self.

When special places are outdoors, in natural settings, children experience a significant decrease in negative feelings. According to Wells and Evans (2003), nature buffers the impact of stress on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater children's exposure to nature, the greater the benefits of reduced stress. This research helps to explain why children in my research project reported feeling more peaceful and calm when they were in "nature" as opposed to when they were indoors. For example, during an interview Taylor commented, "Yeah, sometimes when I am inside I am kind of cranky. But when I am outside I just kind of feel relaxed." Frequently, participants described the indoors as noisy or confining and preferred to go outside to relax and feel "free." Consequently, this research posits that outdoor special places have the potential to offer greater benefits of emotional regulation than do indoor special places.

Hart's (1979) extensive study of Vermont children's experience of place (age 4-11), reveals another important aspect of special places as a refuge. Not all children go to special places when they are distressed; some children simply need to be alone for quiet reflection. Hart (1979) writes,

Contrary to the urban and recreational planners' image of children as desiring to continually run, jump and climb, some children search out quiet places to be alone. These places frequently carry water, dirt or sand and are sites for hours of quiet introspection often dabbling seemingly aimlessly. Such activity is all too easily dismissed by us but it may well be extremely important to a child's development (p. 171).

Many participants in my research went to outdoor special places to engage in the activities that Hart describes. Participants reported skipping rocks, playing in the creek, sitting idly in their forts, and laying down in fields. These quiet refuges

allowed participants to slow down, disengage from the larger world, and think, or as they called it “hang out.”

This research project adds to the pre-existing literature concerning the importance of special places as sites of refuge and emotional regulation. Because of the high occurrence of special places as refuges and places where participants went to regulate their emotions, it can be suggested that these places are becoming increasingly important in children’s lives.

### The Formation of Environmental Stewardship Values

As evidenced in interviews and drawings, participants espoused a preference for outdoor, natural places. Additionally, participants described nature in a range of positive ways including: “beautiful,” “interesting,” “exciting,” “quiet,” and “friendly.” The theme of environmental stewardship and respecting nature also significantly emerged in my research findings. Participants were knowledgeable about nature’s cycles and felt protective of the landscapes, trees, and animals that were found within and around their special places. Nature was also considered to be welcome, comfortable, and stimulating.

The emergence of environmental stewardship values during childhood has yet to be explored in research. Most research utilizes adult surveys and interviews to explore how childhood nature experiences act as a pathway to adult values of environmental stewardship (Tanner, 1980; Vadala et al, 2007; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Therefore, this project is unique in that it investigates the formation of environmental stewardship values during childhood and does not rely on adult recollections. During this research,

participants frequently expressed their valuation of nature and feelings of stewardship without being prompted. Participants' passion and respect for their outdoor special places suggested that they were developing a stewardship ethic. From participants' direct experience with nature in their special places, values for the place and the activities performed there were transferred to the features and residents—flora and fauna—making up these places.

Additionally, some participants experienced loss of natural habitats, which revealed participants' attachment to their places and their formation of environmental stewardship values. When describing their places' destruction, participants disclosed their strong feelings for both their places and the environment. For example, Ashley stumbled upon a fresh logging area in the forest where she likes to explore. When I asked her why she thinks they logged the forest, she expressed her frustration, saying, "Maybe for timber. Maybe to clear it out. I don't know. But the path was wide enough. It was a really wide trail so I don't think they needed to do that. I was a little bit upset when I saw that." Ashley was shocked and saddened when she saw the broken land. On a smaller scale, Marie lost a hiding spot when her climbing tree was trimmed. She revealed her disappointment that the tree was not as pretty now as it had once been.

The participants' experience within their outdoor special places may serve as precursors for adult values of environmental stewardship. Determining the trajectory of stewardship is difficult at best; however, this research reveals that children care deeply about their natural landscapes and value these places for the play, exploration, and the intrinsic qualities of nature they provide.

## Place Attachment

Recognizing that participants felt passionately about their special places (both indoors and outdoors), it is safe to say that participants experienced place attachment, which Louise Chawla (1992) defines as, “children are attached to a place when they show happiness at being in it, regret or distress at leaving it, and when they value it not only for the satisfaction of physical needs but for its own intrinsic qualities” (p. 64). Healthy place attachments allow children to experience an inward pull of familiarity and security with an outward attraction to their expanding world. Children with meaningful relationships, a sense of security, and undefined space for exploration and expression are likely to have healthy place attachments (Chawla, 1992).

Chawla’s descriptions of place attachment parallel the findings of this research. Participants felt positively about their places, described them as “safe” and “comfortable,” and engaged in activities that involved creative self-expression (drawing, role-play, building, writing) and spatial exploration. Additionally, participants anticipated going to their places and had feelings of loss when their places were altered or destroyed. Places were valued for their actual physicality, the activities that they afforded participants, and for their inherent qualities of beauty and peace.

## CONCLUSION

### Making Time, Freedom, and Space for Children's Special Places

This research builds on previous research and suggests several important findings concerning the importance of children's special places. Findings include:

- Children prefer outdoor places as their special places.
- Outdoor special places are important for physical, social, and cognitive development.
- Both indoor and outdoor special places are vital to children's emotional development because these places act as a refuge and provide children with a place to regulate their emotions.
- Children care deeply about their outdoor special places and express environmental stewardship values when talking about their places.
- Special places (indoor and outdoor) are important for the formation of healthy place attachments, thereby allowing children to form positive relationships and balance the inward pull of their place's familiarity with the outward attraction of exploring the larger world.

Threats of environmental catastrophe, economic collapse, a failed education system, and social unrest fill the ears and eyes of today's children. These abstractions, so intangible and boding in children's lives, can make the world a scary place. Yet the world can also be an amazing place. As suggested by this research, special places fill children's lives with wonder, beauty, and excitement. Special places ground children in a tangible and concrete world. These places connect children to the earth and to each other, and help children to develop in a holistic and healthy manner.

These discoveries are significant considering the fact that current trends in research continue to demonstrate the increasing disconnect between children and nature. Electronics, fear of the ‘wild,’ fear of strangers, and the hustle and bustle of their daily lives push children indoors and encourage children to engage in passive forms of entertainment (DeBell, 2005; Heerwagen & Orians, 2002; Louv, 2005; Zaradic & Pergams, 2007). However, this research offers a glimmer of hope—children, despite external pressures, still seek out natural places as their special places. Once within these places, children engage in an array of activities that are developmentally beneficial and that facilitate place attachment and environmental stewardship values.

People involved in the structures and processes that shape children’s everyday lives need to recognize the value of special places by providing children with time, freedom, and access to semi-wild places. Urban planners should acknowledge the powerful impacts of green space on children’s lives and work to incorporate parks, greenways, and undeveloped wildlands into the human landscape. Landscape architects should take into consideration the affordances of the places they design, recognizing children need trees to climb, water to play with, and natural refuges in which to hide. Parents and guardians should allow children unsupervised, discretionary time outdoors for exploration, play, and daydreaming. Educators should recognize the value of place-making, and the exploration and observation of the natural world in their students’ lives. Utilizing natural areas surrounding a school can open children to the possibility of play in outdoor landscapes; and for some children that may be their only opportunity to experience the wonder of a row of hedges, an open field, or a cluster of trees. Simply put,

reconnecting children to the natural world, allowing children to have special places, needs to be a priority. Outdoor special places are an essential landscape in the geography of children's everyday lives.

### Suggestions for Future Research

The methods utilized by this research proved to be a powerful tool. Participants expressed enthusiasm for drawing, interviewing, and photography. For future research, I would consider interviewing more children about their drawings. While I was able to conduct 24 interviews, a richer set of data may have emerged by conducting more interviews.

Understanding that rural and cultural characteristics of the geographic setting may have contributed to this research project's findings, it would have been beneficial to select a number of different sites which could vary in location from urban, and suburban, to rural. Data from multiple sites would allow for comparisons between children's experience of place and their preferred places and activities.

Asking for participants' play area design suggestions added an interesting twist to the research project. I had not originally intended to ask that question, but the second interview needed closure and asking for a hypothetical design seemed appropriate. Participants enjoyed giving suggestions. Providing more time to design their places and providing drawing materials for participants to sketch their ideas may have provided richer data. Additionally, asking this type of open-ended, suggestion-oriented question

allowed for the research to be more participatory, especially if those involved had been able to present their ideas to the community.

Overall, the selected methods allowed participants to provide insight into their experience of place and the importance of special places in their daily lives.

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APPENDIX A  
PARENTAL CONSENT AND PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORMS

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY  
*Changing Places: Children's Experience of Place during Middle Childhood*  
CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Chelsea Benson is conducting research on children's special places—the forts, dens, hideouts of middle childhood—in order to better understand children's experience of place and how that experience shapes development, place attachment, and environmental stewardship values. This research is being done in partial fulfillment of a M.A. degree in Social Science, in the Environment and Community program, under the supervision of Dr. Corey Lewis.

This research will add to the limited literature we have about how children experience place in middle childhood. We are hopeful that the information will be of assistance to teachers, parents/guardians, landscape designers, and urban planners.

Your child will be involved in the first phase of the research and may be selected to participate in a second phase. The first phase will involve a drawing activity wherein your child will be asked to draw his/her special places. This activity will take place in the child's classroom and the entire class will be involved. Permission to do the drawing activity has been obtained from Mr. Grantz and your child's teacher. Your child will be interviewed following the drawing activity. The interview will be scheduled with your child's teacher to ensure that your child does not miss any important school work. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will be conducted in the school library. During the interview, your child will be asked to share his/her drawing and will be asked questions concerning his/her experience with his/her special places.

The second phase of the research will involve a smaller number of participants. Your child may be selected to participate. The second phase entails your child being given a disposable camera with which he/she will be asked to take pictures of his/her special places. Your child will be involved in a 30 minute follow-up interview which will be scheduled with your child's teacher and will take place in the school library. During the interview, your child will be asked to talk about his/her pictures.

Any information that is collected as part of this study that can be identified specifically with your child or your family will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your written permission or if required by law. The cumulative results of this study will be published, but the names, identities, and/or images of participants will not be made known. All documentation collected as part of the project will be destroyed after three

years. During the course of the project, participants will be audio recorded. All recordings will be destroyed after three years. Additionally, the photographs taken by the participants in the second phase of the research will be destroyed after three years.

We do not anticipate that your child will be exposed to any risks while participating in this study. There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in this study. Indirectly, your child may benefit from this study by being able to reflect on and share his/her experience of place. Your child will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research you may contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Corey Lewis at 826-3228, cll35@humboldt.edu. You may also contact Chris Hopper, Interim Dean of Graduate Studies, at 826-3949, cah3@humboldt.edu.

I understand that my child's participation in this research is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw my child from the study at any time without jeopardy. I understand that the investigator may terminate my child's participation at any time. I understand that my child will not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

I give informed consent for my child to participate in this study.

Child's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/legal guardian's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



MA Social Sciences: Environment & Community Program

I am doing this study to learn about what places are considered special by kids your age. I want to learn where you like to go when you have free time and what you like to do when you are there. Often adults have a different idea of what places kids like, which is why it is important that I talk with you directly.

If you agree to be in my study, I am going to ask you to first draw pictures of the places you consider special. I will then talk with you about your drawings for 30 minutes. This conversation will be just between the two of us and will take place in the library. I will ask you to explain your drawing and to talk about why you think the places you have drawn are special.

Remember, these questions are only about what you think. There is no right or wrong answer. You do not have to answer the questions if you do not want to. Also, if at any time you do not want to finish our conversation, we can stop and I will take you back to your classroom.

I will be recording our conversation and I will be the only one who can listen to the tapes. Whatever you tell me is confidential, only I will know what you told me. When I publish the results of this study, you will be given a fake name so that people cannot identify you. If you want, you can pick out what name you would like me to use.

If you sign this paper, it means that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, please do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you and no one will be upset if you do not want to participate. Even if decide you want to be in the study now, it is okay if you later change your mind and decide that you do not want to be in the study anymore.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B  
DRAWING CODES

Code	Definition	Total	%
<b>INDOOR PLACES</b>		<b>58</b>	<b>29.3%</b>
Bed	Bedroom	28	48.3
Live	Living Room	9	15.5
Other's House	Other's House	3	5.5
Own House	Own House	6	10.3
Business	Business: Dance, computer games	2	3.4
Play	Playroom	3	5.2
Desk	Desk	1	1.7
Kitchen	Kitchen	2	3.4
Pool	Pool	2	3.4
G/P	Garage/Barn	2	3.4
<b>INDOOR OBJECTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		<b>17</b>	
Elec	Electronic: TV, Computer, iPod	13	76.5
Game	Games: cards	1	
Music	Musical Instrument	2	
Book	Book	1	
<b>OUTDOOR PLACES</b>		<b>140</b>	<b>70.7%</b>
Water	Water: river, creek, ocean, lake	18	12.8
Y/B	Yard/Field/Bushes	11	7.9
<i>Trees:</i>		<i>37</i>	<i>26.4</i>
Tree C	Tree- Conifer	11	
Tree D	Tree- Deciduous	15	
Tree St	Tree- Stump, Log	5	
Tree Sw	Tree Swing	6	
<i>Forts:</i>		<i>13</i>	<i>9.3</i>
Fort N	Fort- Natural: Hollow Stump, Cave	5	
Fort B	Fort- Built: Tree house, dug hole	8	
P/B	Path/Bridge	12	8.6
Coop/Pen	Chicken/Goat	3	2.1

	Coop/Pen		
Garden	Garden	5	3.6
Neigh	Neighborhood	7	5.0
Park	Park	5	3.6
Sit	Sitting area: bench, table, gazebo	2	1.4
Sport	Sport: b-ball court, soccer, skatepark, rockwall	20	14.3
Tramp	Trampoline	4	2.9
Arena	Arena (Horse)	3	2.1
<b>OUTDOOR OBJECTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		<b>14</b>	
CF	Campfire	1	
Wild	Wildlife (or signs of)	4	
Storage	Secret Storage Areas	1	
Book	Book	2	
Games	Games: Tag, pretending, dancing	6	
<b>OTHER: INDOOR or OUTDOOR</b>		<b>15</b>	
Pet	Pets: turtle, dog, cat, horse, fish	11	
Car	Car	1	
Person	Person (parent, friends)	3	

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Description of places:**

1. Tell me about your drawing (or photographs).
2. Describe your favorite places.
  - a. Tell me 3-4 words to describe your special place; the words can have anything to do with your place.
3. What makes these places important to you? Why do you go there?
4. How do you feel when you are there?

**Activities:**

1. Tell me about a typical day at your favorite place.
  - a. What do you do when you go to your favorite places?
  - b. Do you go to your place alone? Yes/no  
    Prompt: Who do you go with?
  - c. What kinds of things do you find at your favorite place
  - d. When you go to your place, how much time do you spend there?
  - e. How often do you go there? How many days per week?

**Duration/Location of Places:**

1. How long has this been a special place for you?
2. Where is your place in relation to where you live?
3. Do you ever change your places? Move locations? Or change the outside or inside?

**Other Places:**

1. Do you have any indoor (or outdoor) favorite places?
  - a. How that is that place different than your other places?
  - b. Do you do anything differently there?
  - c. Do you feel differently there?
  - d. Why do you go there? Indoor vs. outdoor
2. (If the student only has indoor places) Would you like to have an outdoor place?
  - a. What/Who prevents you from having an outdoor place?
  - b. What would you want your outdoor place to look like?
  - c. What do you think you would do there?
3. Think about your past special places that you don't go to anymore or don't go to as often.
  - a. What are they like now? How have they changed?
  - b. Why don't you go there anymore or as often?
4. Do you have any other special places that you didn't include in your drawing?
  - a. Please tell me about these other places

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW CODES

<b>Busy</b>	Busy – chores, homework, practice	12 /24	50%
<b>ES</b>	<b>Environmental Steward</b>	<b>23</b>	
Pro	Protect Nature (don't scare/harm animals, plants, don't alter nature)	6	
Fri	Friend of nature (plants, animals)	5	
Know	Knowledgeable (plant/animal ID)	12	
<b>Utility</b>	Utility – use nature for human benefit	2	
<b>Nat</b>	<b>Nature as:</b>	<b>29</b>	
Beau	Beautiful, pretty	8	
Int	Interesting, awesome, unique	8	
Ex	Exciting, lively, discovery	3	
Cal	Quiet, calming	8	
Fri	Friendly	2	
<b>Place</b>	<b>Place as:</b>		
AA	Always Available	7	
Sec	Secret	5	
Ref	Refuge – to be alone, escape others	25	
Fun	Fun, entertaining	26	
Soc	Social	15	
<b>Attach</b>	Place Attachment	4	
<b>PBE</b>	<b>Place Based Emotions</b>		
Good	Good, happy	22	
Ex	Excited, energetic	5	
Chal	Challenged, competitive	3	
Cal	Calming, relax, comfortable, peaceful	31	
Safe	Safe	3	
Free	Freedom	4	
Abs	Absorbed	4	
<b>OA</b>	<b>Outdoor Activities</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>63.9%</b>
Sport	Sport – basketball, soccer	9	5.0
Pre	Pretend – battles, w/ cross bow or nerf guns, “defense”	13	7.3
OG	Organized Games – tag, hide-n-seek,	5	2.8
Rid	Riding– Bikes, skateboards, rollerblades, scooters	11	6.1
Cre	Build/Alter, Trial-and-error, invent, dance routines, drama plays	48	26.8

Pet	Interact w/ Pet – walk dog, ride horse, take care of chickens	13	7.3
HO	Hang out – think, daydream, sit	10	5.6
Re	Read	6	3.3
Tramp	Trampoline	4	2.2
Ex	Explore: climbing trees, walk, wading, collecting rocks, skipping rocks	37	20.7
Hi/Sp	Hiding, spying	8	4.5
Talk	Talking with sibling or friend	3	1.7
G/P	Garden, picking berries/flowers	7	3.9
Toy	Toys, play with (action figures)	2	1.1
Pic	Taking pictures	1	.5
Fis	Fishing	2	1.1
<b>IA</b>	<b>Indoor Activities</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>36.1%</b>
Cr	Create – invent, draw, art, build, cook, write	12	11.9
Re	Read	10	9.9
Talk	Talk	4	4.0
HW	Homework	11	10.9
Hide	Hide	6	5.9
HO	Hang-out – think, daydream, sit	10	9.9
Elec	Electronic: video game, computer, watch TV, listen to music	19	18.8
Ga	Games: cards, board games, ping-pong	4	4.0
Toy	Play with toys	8	7.9
PHT	Pool, hot tub	3	3.0
MI	Musical instrument	3	3.0
Pet	Play with pet, watch pet	6	5.9
Gym	Gymnastics	3	3.0
<b>Mem</b>	Memories	2	

#### Places Mentioned During Interviews

Code	Definition	Total	Percentage
<b>IP</b>	<b>INDOOR PLACES</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>31.7%</b>
Bed	Bedroom	19	36.5
Live	Living Room	9	17.3
Other's House	Other's House	7	13.5
Bus	Business: Dance, computer games	4	7.7

Play	Playroom	1	1.9
Desk	Desk	1	1.9
Kitchen	Kitchen	3	5.8
PHT	Pool, Hot Tub	3	5.8
G/B	Garage/Barn	5	9.6
<b>OP</b>	<b>OUTDOOR PLACES</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>67.3%</b>
Water	Water: river, ocean, lake	13	11.6
Y/B	Yard/Field/Bush	14	12.5
<i>Trees:</i>		<i>31</i>	<i>27.7</i>
Tree C	Tree- Conifer	7	
Tree D	Tree- Deciduous	9	
Tree St	Tree- Stump, Log	13	
Tree Sw	Tree Swing	2	
<i>Forts:</i>		<i>20</i>	<i>17.8</i>
Fort N	Fort- Natural: Hollow Stump, Cave	3	
Fort B	Fort- Built: Tree house,	17	
P/B	Path/Bridge	6	5.4
Coop	Chicken/Goat Coop, Pen	4	3.6
Garden	Garden	4	3.6
Neigh	Neighborhood	3	4.5
Park	Park	5	4.4
Sport	Sport: b-ball, soccer, skatepark,	7	6.2
Sit	Sitting area	1	.9
Arena	Arena (Horse)	1	.9
Tramp	Trampoline	3	4.5

**Place As:**

	<b>Refuge</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Always Available</b>	<b>Fun</b>	<b>Secret</b>
Indoor	11	5	3	6	0
Outdoor	14	10	4	20	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>5</b>

**Place-Based Emotions:**

	<b>Good</b>	<b>Excited</b>	<b>Challenged</b>	<b>Calm</b>	<b>Safe</b>	<b>Free</b>	<b>Absorbed</b>
Indoor	7	0	1	12	1	0	3
Outdoor	15	5	2	19	2	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>