

# The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine

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Image by Louis Brems, University of Florida Health

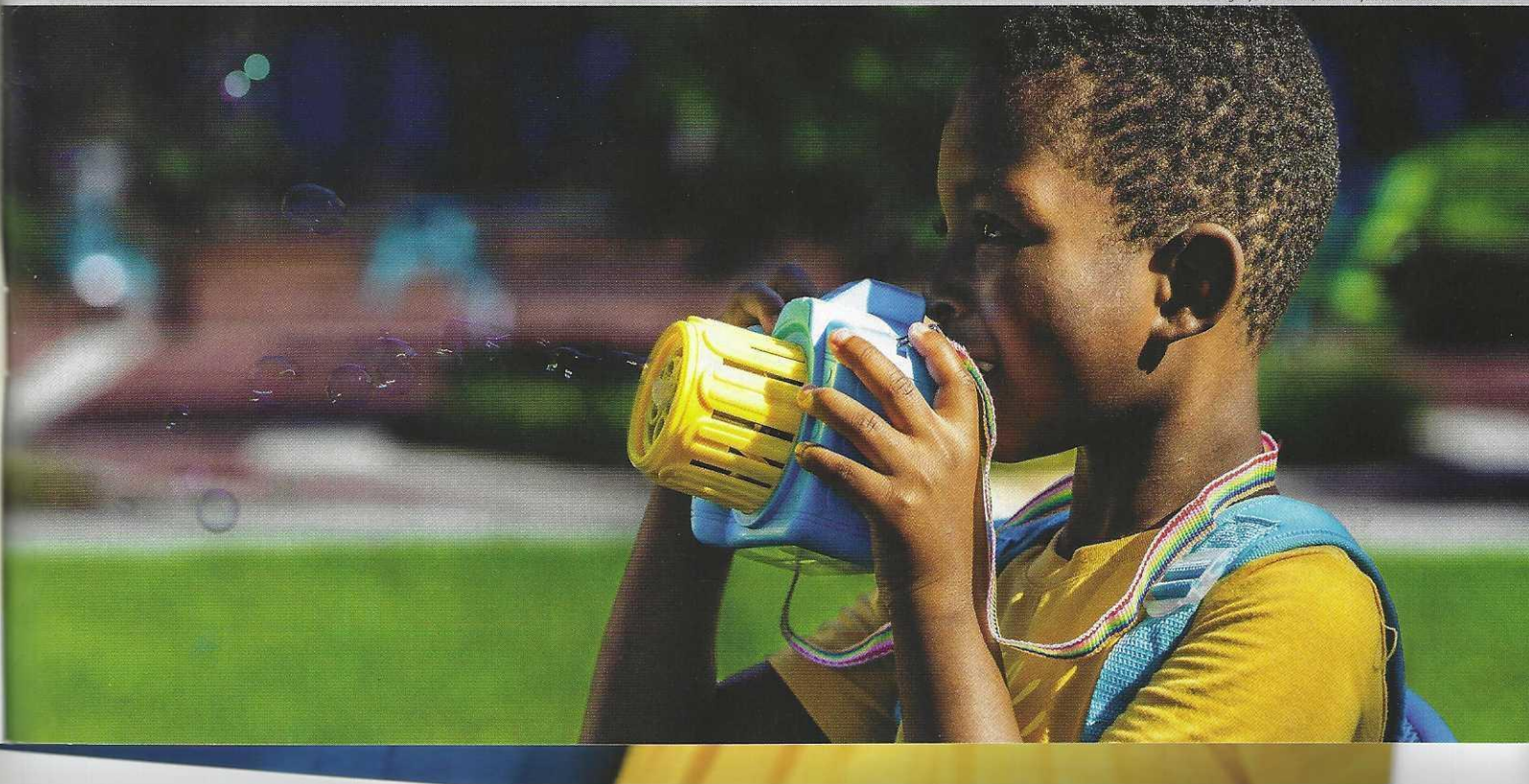






Image by Louis Brems, University of Florida Health

# A Healing Garden

## A Unique Outdoor Area Promotes Healing and Wellness Through Connection With Nature

by Josh McDaniel

Children and their families come to the University of Florida Health (UF Health) Shands Children's Hospital in Gainesville, Florida, to receive treatment for the most serious diseases that a child can face—diabetes, cancer, brain disease, and heart failure, among others. The complexity of treatments often means that children are in the hospital for weeks or even more than a year. That is a long time to restrict a child to a hospital room without the opportunity to go outside and play.

Recognizing the healing benefits of time outdoors, the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and other organizations collaborated to create the UF Health Children's Healing Garden—a space where patients and their families can lift their spirits and connect with nature. The garden is a certified Nature Explore Classroom, part of a national network of outdoor play and learning spaces.

USFS has a national-level partnership with the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation Nature Explore Program and has sponsored construction of other Nature Explore classrooms at strategic locations around the country. Though the garden's official opening is planned for later this year, its initial development was complete in

March 2020, and patients and hospital staff use the space for rest, relaxation, movement, and play. UF Health Shands Hospital is the second health care facility and first hospital in the Certified Nature Explore classroom network, following the 2016 installation of a Nature Explore Classroom at the Lone Star Family Health Center in Conroe, Texas, also in partnership with USFS.

Amy Wegner is the director of the Child Life Program at UF Health, and part of a multidisciplinary team that works with patients and families. She leads a team of certified child life specialists that help with the emotional and developmental needs of children and families during their hospital stay.



Josh McDaniel is a freelance writer living in western Colorado. He loves exploring stories at the intersection of culture and the environment. Josh can be contacted at [jmmcdaniel24@gmail.com](mailto:jmmcdaniel24@gmail.com).



Wegner said the garden has become an invaluable asset.

“We have children who have not been outside for months. Just sitting outside and feeling the sun on their bodies is a relief,” Wegner said. “When they have been isolated in a hospital room for so long—feeling the wind, hearing the birds, just being outdoors ... that is so important in their healing process.”

Shelley Collins is the chief medical officer for UF Health Shands Children’s Hospital and a key figure in making the garden a reality. She said feedback from patients, their families, and the hospital staff has been overwhelmingly positive.

“Children love it because they get to go outside and feel normal for a while,” Collins said. “Parents love it because they can take their kids there—whether it is their child who is a patient or their siblings. Children can run around. The surfaces are all very soft. They can fall down in the grass and there is nothing dangerous there.”

The partnership that came together to design and construct the garden is a case study in diverse individuals from different professional backgrounds cooperating because of a shared belief in the health benefits of nature.

Kelly Balcarczyk, the volunteers and service program manager for the USFS Southern Region, explained that the national USFS office in Washington, D.C., was interested in funding construction of a Nature Explore Classroom at a medical facility. They approached USFS staff for help identifying a good location for the project.

“We wanted to find the most appropriate medical facility to partner with, based on interest in the project and the potential to have local Forest Service engagement on a project with potential

for long-term outcomes for the community,” Balcarczyk said.

Annie Hermansen-Baez, a science delivery coordinator for the USFS Southern Research Station and one of the project leads, first proposed the idea to UF Health of partnering with USFS to create the healing garden. During a design consultation with Nature Explore architects, hospital staff—including doctors, nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and more—created an ambitious vision for the garden, which required additional sources of funds. Hermansen-Baez said UF Health staff, including Collins and Wegner, enthusiastically embraced the proposed project and committed to helping find

additional donors to bring the garden to life. They soon brought together a diverse group of medical and natural resource professionals, landscape architects, engineers, horticulturists, and volunteers.

## Designing Fun and Healing

Visitors enter the garden through an arbor that signals they are entering a special space. An open grassy area in the garden’s center is a space for children to roll around, play ball, hula hoop, and blow bubbles (a big hit in the garden). The garden also includes a space for group gatherings and performances. Other spaces provide opportunities for patients to engage in nature



Image by Louis Brems, University of Florida Health

*“Our goal was to create an outdoor space that would support activities for children that reduce anxiety and pain, where they can feel like themselves and be a kid again, regardless of their diagnosis or disability.”*



art activities such as leaf rubbing, building pine cone bird feeders, finger painting, playing with building blocks, and exploring a climbing area with balance beams and stepping logs.

“Nature Explore designs outdoor classrooms based on research and field testing of what engages and inspires kids,” Hermansen-Baez noted.

In the pollinator garden, kids can get close to plants and butterflies. They can burn energy on scooters and other wheeled toys. Hermansen-Baez and Wegner collaborated to create an adventure guide (adapted from the Lone Star clinic), an animal track guide, and scavenger hunt in both English and Spanish, which patients and families use to explore the garden.

Leah Diehl, director of the University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Program, helped select plants with therapeutic attributes for the garden.

“We wanted to include plants that children want to check out, that promote discovery,” Diehl said. “We chose plants that were engaging for children with bright colors, fuzzy textures and aromatic smells.”

Diehl says therapeutic plants provide a low-cost way to treat patients in a holistic manner while increasing health and well-being. The garden was designed to relieve stress, improve mental well-being, provide distraction, encourage movement, and foster hope.

“Our goal was to create an outdoor space that would support activities for children that reduce anxiety and pain, and offer them a time or an experience where they can feel like themselves and be a kid again, regardless of their diagnosis or disability,” Wegner said.

While it may seem intuitive that time spent in nature is healthy, a growing body of research points to the concrete

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benefits that exposure to nature has on health—not only reducing stress but also providing real benefits for people who suffer from pain, anxiety, obesity, diabetes, attention-deficit disorders, and autism. Tara Sabo-Attwood, chair of the Department of Global and Environmental Health at the University of Florida, said the medical community is moving from anecdotal observations of nature’s health benefits to quantitative research.

“We are now finding hard, scientific, medical-based evidence that spending time in nature leads to biochemical changes in a person that are associated with bettering health or reducing adverse health outcomes,” Sabo-Attwood noted.

Collins said she is interested in bringing in researchers to study the garden’s therapeutic effects, particularly how the garden reduces anxiety and depression in many patients and

relieves the stress around procedures that can be frightening.

## A Shared Passion

The team that came together to plan and build the garden was truly interdisciplinary, with representatives from the USFS, UF Health, Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, the National Environmental Education Foundation, as well as engineers, landscape architects, horticulturists, and others.

Hermansen-Baez said everyone came to the project from a unique professional perspective, but all were willing to learn and remain open to others’ ideas. Forestry professionals, horticulturists, and landscape designers put in time to learn new terminology unique to a hospital setting and how to adapt Nature Explore principles for health care environments. Health professionals showed a keen interest in the



natural resource aspects and touting the benefits of nature exposure to patients and families.

“From the beginning, we were amazed at how supportive and excited everyone was about the garden, and how much community support we received. Everyone has taken it on as their space,” Hermansen-Baez said.

The project team said several design challenges arose during planning, such as ensuring that the sidewalks’ width and slopes could accommodate wheelchairs and medical equipment, and that electrical outlets and backup electrical sources for medical equipment were available. The team noted the importance of including therapeutic design principles in a hospital setting, and the time it takes to get approval for project elements. Since the children’s hospital is not directly adjacent to the healing garden, hospital staff also face the challenge of getting patients to the site and providing supervision for patients and visitors.

## Prescribing Nature

The project team encourages patients and families to continue outdoor activity once they leave the hospital. One strategy is to connect families with nature trails in the Gainesville area, which are part of the Kids in Parks TRACK Trails program (kidsinparks.org). The program offers incentives and prizes for kids who track their adventures and explore natural areas. Doctors and health professionals at UF Health hope to soon begin “prescribing” time in nature to patients through the KIP Track Rx Program, hoping patients and their families will seek natural experiences, including visits to nearby forests and parks.

“There is a ton of evidence that getting outside and walking or hiking improves physical and mental health by reducing stress, improving sleep, and restoring attention capacity,” said Jason Urroz, director of the Kids in Parks program for the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation. “Health care providers recognize that

connections to nature can play a big part in positive health outcomes.”

## Partnering for Success

The Healing Garden was a community effort with input and investment from a wide range of sources. A diverse group of individuals and organizations envisioned it as a shared space that benefited children and the community. They kept that vision at the center of the project from start to finish.

Balcarczyk said the key to the success of the project was having dedicated partners from both the natural resource and health care communities.

“The core mission of both natural resource managers and medical facilities is serving communities,” she said. “There is a natural partnership alignment. The Healing Garden is a natural win all around. Who does not want to see a young person smiling and playing? That is the project’s most important benefit.”

Hermansen-Baez is confident the unique partnership will grow into more efforts to encourage patients and their families to have a lifelong connection to nature.

“The healing garden shows the powerful benefits these sorts of collaborations can have on kids and communities,” she said.

Visit the Urban Forestry South website ([urbanforestrysouth.org/nature-explore](http://urbanforestrysouth.org/nature-explore)) for more information on the USFS Nature Explore program. Check out the UF Health Children’s Healing Garden webpage for project updates. ([ufhealth.org/uf-health-shands-childrens-hospital/uf-health-childrens-healing-garden](http://ufhealth.org/uf-health-shands-childrens-hospital/uf-health-childrens-healing-garden)).



Image by Louis Brems, University of Florida Health