

# Jester Park Natural Playscape Opens to the Public

After discovering a frog, turtle, and trilobite fossil at the Jester Park Natural Playscape, five-year-old Daniel Linn of Johnston shouted to his Mother Joy: “Mom, this is so cool! I want to be a scientist!”

The Linns were among the crowd of nearly 150 who enthusiastically played in Polk County Conservation’s new, innovative play feature at the grand opening ceremony on Friday, June 27, at Jester Park in Northwest Polk County. The Playscape is now free and open to the public. It is located next to the bison and elk exhibit at Jester Park. The Playscape features an active wetland play area, archaeological dig, and its own mini “Stonehenge.”

Governor Robert Ray told the crowd the Playscape is about connecting to the outdoors and building character. “Character Counts indoors and out,” he said.

Polk County Supervisor E.J. Giovannetti said the Playscape would inspire all ages to learn, to protect resources, and to create. “In the age of computers and I-Pods, we tend to stray from the imaginative and creative but we must be able to understand, interpret, respond, create, and dream,” Giovannetti said.

Polk County Conservation Board Member Tina Hadden of Altoona, who also spoke, compared the Playscape experiences to the freedom “we had as children to lose ourselves to our imaginations” at the creek that ran through the family farm. “This is about how we used to play as kids.”

After the speakers installed a “peace pole” at the site, IPTV’s Dan Wardell urged young people in the crowd to turn off their TVs and go outside and play. Wardell and Polk County Naturalist Lew Major helped the scores of children discover some of the Playscape’s many mysteries hidden in rocks, sand pits, and under bubbling waters.



Five-year-old Travis Moritz of Ankeny said his favorite part was “finding skeletons.” Denise Vazquez, mother of two, said she lives near Gray’s Lake but travels to the Playscape “because it’s worth it. We love it here.” Michelle Bequeaith of Polk City, a mother of three, called the Playscape “wonderful.” “It’s nice for the kids to get to explore their natural world,” she said.

Martha McCormick of Des Moines brought a friend’s grandson to the event. The grandson is deaf. “Here kids can play without adult intervention,” she said. “He’s been able to play with other children and have tactile experiences. He got wet right away. He’s just enthralled.”

Polk County Conservation officials believe the Jester Park Natural Playscape will reconnect kids and their families to the great outdoors. Joy Linn, mother of the budding scientist said: “They’ve created a place for kids to play in the great outdoors, and yet it’s safe. We don’t

want to leave!”

Playscape park hours coincide with Jester Park operations, open from 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. daily and holidays through mid-October. During the winter season, hours are sunrise to sunset.

For more information on the Playscape or for directions to Jester Park, go online to [www.leadingyououtdoors.org](http://www.leadingyououtdoors.org) or call Polk County Conservation at 515-323-5300.

