
LEARNING
OUTDOORS
BENEFITS
RISKS
Nature Play
SA
Government of South Australia
Department for Education and
Child Development


SUSTAINABILITY
TRUST
CONSTRUCTION
DISCOVERY
SPONTANEITY
ENVIRONMENT
RELEVANT
EXPERIMENTATION
RISK-
BENEFIT
CREATIVITY
OPPORTUNITY
CHILDREN'S VOICE
RISK
NATURE
PROBLEM-SOLVING
AUTHENTIC
CHALLENGE
BALANCE
IMAGINATION
EMBEDDED
COMMON-
SENSE
RESILIENCE
TEAMWORK
OUTDOORS
EXPERIENTIAL
INDEPENDENCE



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THE NEED FOR CHANGE



"whatever landscape a child is exposed to...that will be the sort of gauze through which he or she will see the world."

WALLACE STEGNER

Children's lives today are significantly different than they were just 1-2 generations ago. As a general rule, children today have fewer opportunities for outdoor free play or regular contact with nature. Their physical boundaries have shrunk and they experience less autonomy today than they did in the 60's and 70's.

A 2011 ***Planet Ark Study*** showed that 1 in 10 children today play outside once per week or less.[1] Children's free time has become structured and watched over by adults. Technology dictates their lives and Australian children of all ages are too sedentary and not physically active enough. Only 19% of young people in the 5-17 year age bracket, meet the national daily physical activity guidelines (60mins/day) while only 29% are meeting the sedentary behaviour screen time guidelines (<2hrs/day).[2] Children are losing their understanding that nature and opportunity exists in their own backyards and neighborhoods. Richard Louv, called this phenomenon, 'nature-deficit disorder'.

The long term impact of nature deficit, is the loss of future environmental stewards. Sir David Attenborough said, *no one will protect what they don't care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced.*

The current direction in our schools is to focus on educating children to become the innovators of tomorrow. Ensuring children are exposed to curriculum connected to nature will ensure that the highly capable students of today, will be the environmental stewards of tomorrow.

Our aim in Australian schools is to ensure that all young people are supported to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens (MCEETYAA) 2008. We need students who learn through experience, who understand and make sense of the world and their place within it.

John Dewey, a hundred years ago warned of the 'pedagogical fallacy' that everything children learn they have to be taught: *"Children are people, they grow into tomorrow only as they live today."*

A lot has happened to get us to this point. The growth of urbanisation and parents' fears for children's safety, has limited their ability to roam freely and their exposure to risk.

1 http://treeday.planetark.org/documents/doc-534-climbing-trees-research-report-2011-07-13-final.pdf

2 https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/8F4516D5FAC0700ACA257BF0001E0109/$File/childrens-nut-phys-survey.pdf

Many supervised educational settings feel pressured to ensure that absolute safety is provided and all risk is removed. The fear of being blamed or sued and the consequential damage this will cause to reputation often results in knee jerk reactions to remove whatever item or activity has caused an injury or harm. *It is often the risks to adults – blame, loss of reputation, liability – that cloud providers' judgements when it comes to allowing children to take risks,* Gill, T. 2007.

For children, a lack of time to explore, play and learn outdoors is having a negative effect. Their ability to regulate emotions, socialise, self-direct tasks, and to develop greater intellectual flexibility and self-awareness is compromised. Many children are presenting as more accident prone, more anxious and as a result, more susceptible to harm.

Sara Knight says *young children are pre-programmed to keep stretching themselves,….. until they reach maturity and the peak of their own particular set of abilities.*

The nature-based outdoor learning environment offers a unique opportunity for educators to encourage the stretching process in children and help them realise their full potential. When outdoor learning environments are places that allow inspiration and creativity to take root, for curiosity and spontaneity to be realised and importantly, for risk and failures to be viewed as positive learning experiences, children will be the beneficiaries. This learning can help them develop the life skills and awareness they need to be confident, resilient and able-bodied adults who take responsibility for themselves and their actions.



'The outdoor play and learning environment needs to be an environment where inspiration and creativity can take root, where curiosity and spontaneity can be realised, and where risk and failures can be experienced.'



THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING IN AN OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT



"The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky."

MARGARET MCMILLAN

Outdoor learning environments provide opportunity for students to engage in open-ended, diverse and meaningful learning experiences that are connected to nature, while also being connected to curriculum.

Outdoor learning environments provide a rich opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, behaviour and dispositions of learning as outlined by the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities; particularly in the areas of Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding.

The Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standards also acknowledge the importance of outdoor learning environments, paying homage to the Australian cultural norm that we are an outdoor nation - spending time outside should be regarded as normal:

Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Play spaces in natural environments include plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education.

Despite this, 2017 Planet Ark research surveyed 200 primary and secondary teachers and found that <34% taught outdoors for 15 minutes or more in a 10 week term. The same study cited research that showed outdoor learning helps grow problem solving, grit, emotional intelligence and key educational outcomes both during and outside of school hours. It also found that nature ignites passion, inspiration, creative and purpose and plays an important role in the cognitive, emotional and physical development of children.[3] Significant research has been conducted all over the world and the statistics supporting the need for change are compelling. View our ***statistics page*** for further evidence.

Playing and learning in nature builds opportunities for powerful learning. Professor Guy Claxton talks about powerful learning as mind stretching, a disposition that can be learned and fostered. His vocabulary describes the wondering, engaging, explaining, experimenting, imagining, reasoning, collaborating and reflecting - all positive attributes that children utilise when engaged in outdoor play and learning. Nature based playgrounds can work effectively to build powerful learning opportunities for children and promote a growth mindset through the provision of risk, challenge, engagement and process-based play. If you have ever built a cubby, constructed with loose parts or played in a sandpit, the fun is in the doing, not the end result.

The possibilities for learning opportunities outdoors are diverse. The Australian Curriculum Framework places Outdoor Learning as one of the key Curriculum Connections to support and guide educators' practice. *"The outdoor learning connection provides a framework for students to experience guided, integrated learning across the curriculum in natural environments. Students have the opportunity to gain unique and specific benefits from outdoor learning. They develop skills and understandings while valuing a positive relationship with natural environments and promoting the sustainable use of these environments"* (ACARA, V8.3)

The ACARA website provides resources to help educators organise and deliver learning in the outdoors at all year levels from R-10.

Nature provides something for everyone regardless of age, culture, physical disposition or level of disadvantage. The outdoor learning environment cuts across multiple curriculum areas, engaging students of all ages in open-ended interactions, spontaneity, discovery, exploration, risk-taking and connection to nature. The calmness and sensory nature of the outdoor environment, means there is a place for everyone, regardless of age, culture, physical disposition or level of disadvantage.

The case study sites featured in this document, showcase what is possible and demonstrate how their experiences in the outdoor learning environments have facilitated positive learning outcomes and powerful learning opportunities. These sites are committed to ensuring children have quality, learning experiences in the outdoors that are inclusive of opportunities to experience risk and challenge and that enable outdoor learning to be seamlessly incorporated as part of the Australian Curriculum and Early Learning Frameworks.

3 http://treeday.planetark.org/research/

The case study sites have many things in common, including demonstrated benefits of more time spent in the outdoor learning environment.

Their experiences demonstrate:

Authentic learning and independent thinking

Hands-on experiences and open ended communication, fosters rich, meaningful learning that allows for more complex and self-directed lines of inquiry, observation and awareness.

Social skills and relationships

Children gravitate to common interests, and as a result show a greater sense of co-operation, encouragement of each other, ability to compromise and negotiate, problem-solve and take risks more readily. Children learn about relationships. The autonomous states of being amongst others drives a sense of powerful and connected learning.

Confidence

Nature is a perfect leveller, it's not just for those who are physically capable. Here every child can find a sense of mastery at a level they are comfortable with.

Literacy and Numeracy

The rich social interactions children have when they are playing and learning in the outdoor environment encourages development of oral language and vocabulary. Allowing children to **experience** the concepts of numbers, patterns, measurement, spatial awareness and data, mathematical thinking, reasoning and counting is easily accommodated in the outdoor environment and provides a perfect platform to facilitate more formal learning of these concepts.

Physical development and wellbeing

Fine and gross motor skills, core strength, co-ordination, balance and physical endurance, are enhanced when children encounter the diversity of experiences in an outdoor learning environment – climbing trees, balancing on logs, walking on uneven surfaces, swinging from ropes, spinning, running, pushing heavy materials, pulling themselves up steep banks (proprioception), walking long distances, engaging in rough and tumble play.

Decreased anxiety and negative behaviours

The more time children spend in the outdoors, the more relaxed and less anxious they become. Children who have trouble adjusting physically and socially, generally settle better, become calmer and show decreased anxiety, particularly when there is a diverse range of experiences to opt to.

Appreciation of the environment

Spending regular and sustained periods of time in the outdoors, allows children to see, understand and experience seasonal changes and the different elements in nature. Children have deeper conversations around nature, demonstrating a greater sense of awe and curiosity, and a greater level of respect for nature, allowing for more meaningful learning opportunities around environmental issues and sustainability.

Greater risk taking and self assessment

The uncertainty and unpredictability of natural elements in the outdoors offers challenge for children of all ages and abilities. It requires them to make decisions and judgements constantly but it also allows children to experience graduated risk, at levels they are comfortable with.

IS IT WORTH THE RISK?



"The more risks you allow children to take, the better they learn to look after themselves."

ROALD DAHL

Children are competent, confident and capable learners, who are able to make choices and decisions for themselves. They are naturally curious and inquisitive and want and need to find out how the world around them works. They learn by experience and when that experience is mastered, they need to find opportunities that will stimulate and challenge them further.

Children's actions are often constrained by adult's fears, many times influenced by adult's own negative experiences – be careful, don't fall, not so high, don't get dirty, you'll cut yourself. As educators, it can feel as though you are not executing your duty of care, unless these warnings are provided.

Children can't learn about risk from a text book or from sharing someone else's anxieties. Adults cannot build a child's self-esteem. They need to experience authentic challenges themselves, in whatever degree that means for them. They need to exercise decision-making and learn the consequences of those decisions and how to self-correct. They need to learn to manage, control and even overcome their fears by taking risks. This helps them learn what they are able to do and how far they can push themselves. When they overcome a challenge, children experience a genuine sense of achievement and self-satisfaction. Research undertaken by Knackstredt & Wellisch, 2005, suggests that *children will engage in less risky behaviours, when the environment offers a variety of experiences with appropriate levels of challenge.*[4] Experiencing success and failure is an important part of this learning, as is supporting children to 'have a go'. Society today, has become so concerned with protecting children's self-esteem and ensuring they never know failure, that every uncomfortable bump, obstacle and discomfort has been bulldozed out of their way, depriving children of one of the most important lessons of childhood: ***"setbacks, mistakes and failures are how to learn and the experience provides the foundation that teaches children how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative and resilient."*** Jessica Lahey.

4 Knackstredt, V., & Wellisch, M. (2005).
Managing challenging behaviour: Is the environment a factor?

Minor injuries may be an outcome of this learning. Many preschools term these **learning injuries.** They are seen as opportunities to learn and reinforce the value of having a go, seeing what you can do. If children make a mistake and get hurt, there's an important lesson in knowing what to do next time and having another try to achieve success. We need to keep children safe from serious harm, but reframing the way we look at minor injuries will build children's risk-taking endeavours and ultimately their resilience.

Jo Boaler, a mathematician at Stanford University in the US, has connected her work to Carol Dweck's ideas about mindset. She has presented extensively on a growth mindset as essential for learning in maths. She describes how synapses fire when we make mistakes and that mistakes are vital for learning. This links back to the idea of learning injuries. Mistakes can be cognitively beneficial in the classroom - a learner who is afraid of getting things wrong does nothing unless guaranteed success. This can be debilitating to a learner's progress.



The case study sites visited, demonstrated a range of opportunities for risk exploration. Use of real tools, sticks, loose parts, fire, tree climbing are all 'risky' activities. To the uninitiated these elements can be dangerous, as can mobile phones, cricket bats, balls etc. Sites have trained children to use and respect the items they are using so they and others are safe. Sharing demonstrations of their competence has helped minimise the risk profile of these items for their communities.

USING REAL TOOLS

Real tools provide an authentic experience for children for tinkering, for gardening, constructing, whittling, cutting, understanding how things work and other activities. Adult sized tools may be too heavy and unwieldy for small children, so adapting the size of the tool to the skills of the user and the task at hand will allow greater success and achievement.

Benefits:

- Attempting difficult and challenging work, encourages practise and perseverance.
- Gives children a sense of responsibility and an opportunity to demonstrate what they are capable of.
- Children derive self satisfaction, a sense of achievement and independence at having mastered use of a real tool
- Provides children with authentic learning experiences.

At ***The Nest***, children use drills, hammers, vices and all manner of woodworking equipment for construction and tinkering projects. ***Upper Sturt Primary School*** encourage whittling and carving as an activity and children use whittling and carving knives for their activities. All sites used proper gardening equipment for work in the vege beds and garden plots. At ***Blackwood Child Care Centre***, children are engaged in cutting up of fruit for morning tea and use real knives in this activity. This involves Director trusting teachers to guide children appropriately and teachers respecting childrens' abilities and trusting in their competence.



CLIMBING TREES

This is a rite of passage for children and all sites offered a tree climbing experience at different levels of risk, according to children's confidence and competence. At ***Madge Sexton Kindergarten***, a child when asked by an educator how he could get safely to the top of the tree and back down again, explained *'I just look where I'm going and I use my hands and feet to hold onto the bits of the tree that stick out'*. It demonstrates the ability for children to assess what they are comfortable and capable of. Providing graduated levels of risk, allows children to experience it at their own level.

Each site visited had determined their own rules around what they were comfortable allowing for the children in their care. Ensuring trees are audited regularly, providing guidance to children around what trees are able/suitable to be climbed, keeping the base of the tree clear of obstacles, and providing appropriate soft fall are ways sites can help manage the risk of injury from a fall. For more information, check the ***DECD Outdoor Learning Standard***. Statistics around Australia show that the majority of injuries for children relating to falls, occur from monkey bars, slides and swings, not falls from trees.

Benefits:

- Supports children's ability to problem solve and make decisions as they assess distances and angles, judge the strength of limbs, work out where to put their hands and feet and navigate uneven surfaces.
- Provides a tactile and sensory experience.
- Encourages development of fine and gross motor skills.
- Teaches assessment of risks and an understanding of what their bodies can do.
- Gives confidence and achievement, laying a good foundation for children to learn new skills and challenge themselves.

Different levels of entry were offered at Kindergarten sites. Practice trees featured at ***Blackwood CCC*** with ladders/ boxes being offered to build children's confidence. At others, a line on the tree marks the boundary for climbing. At ***Clarendon Primary School***, tree climbing is encouraged but only if children are able to get up and down themselves. At ***West Lakes Shore OSHC***, children are encouraged to only climb as far as they are comfortable, and go no further, no matter who is telling them to.



FIRE

Fire is provided as a learning opportunity at almost all of the sites visited, especially Kindergartens. Children of all ages find fire fascinating, offering a good entry point for learning. While the risks with fire are real, teaching children to have a healthy respect for fire and the rules around its use, provides them with a life skill and minimises the risk of serious harm or injury. Many sites visited introduced the fire activity in a small way, beginning with little fires in bowls, talking about what makes fires burn and what fire can be used for, observing what happens when you add tinder to embers, learning how to keep a fire going, knowing what is suitable to burn on a fire and what isn't and understanding what happens when the safety rules aren't followed.

Each site has its own compliance measures in place, from a bucket of water on standby for a fire pit to a fire barrow with fire blanket, extinguisher, SOP's, and safety gear on hand for a pizza oven. Helping your community of parents and staff to know how you are managing the risk so children can reap the benefits, will allow them to see the value for their children and have confidence in the process.

Benefits:

- Provides an authentic and relevant experience for children.
- Marc Armitage (2001) says *'there is nothing like it for the noise it makes or how it looks or the obvious power it has – and that fascinates children who want to experience it'*.
- Provides opportunity to embed 'real life' learning into an education program and allows children to demonstrate their competence and capability.
- Children who cook on fire can see the changes taking place and are more likely to eat or at least try what they have prepared.

West Lakes OSHC engage the services of professional organisations or individuals to talk with children about fire safety before the firepit is used each season – the science of fire, how to put out a fire, walking near fire etc. At ***Tanunda ELC*** children learn to light fires with flints and to make charcoal for painting and grinding. Fire is used for cooking, opening the conversations about use of fire in different cultures. At ***Blackwood CCC***, the firepit is used for cooking and science (liquids/gas/solids). Their introduction to fire began small - a little brassier, a small group of children, a lot of control. Many families questioned the value for children, but the children loved it and talked about it often. They shared the children's experiences through photos and videos and Janine McLoughlin (Director) talked to them about the benefits of risky play, not just fire. After 3 years, it has become an embedded element of their program.



STICKS AND LOOSE PARTS

Children of all ages are drawn to loose parts play because they are un-prescriptive and open-ended. A stick can be a writing implement, a horse to be ridden, a shovel, a laser, a sword, a guitar etc. Sticks and loose parts are the ultimate drivers for powerful learning, allowing children to be autonomous, creative, imaginative, and to experiment, engage, collaborate, make decisions and problem solve. Children who use sticks and loose parts have been guided on safe and appropriate use and despite the concerns of parents and even some staff about the use of sticks, there were no recorded eye losses or injuries to eyes or other parts of the body (with the exception of splinters) caused from sticks at any of the sites visited.

Benefits:

- They are portable allowing children to move, stack, sort, construct and manipulate them how they wish
- Offers endless opportunities for imaginative and creative play.
- Provides opportunity to problem solve and think independently as children work out how to use a stick or loose part in the way they want.
- Encourages teamwork, communication and social skills, strength, muscle development and body awareness as children move, manipulate, construct and carry.

Sticks were an important feature at all of the sites visited, most commonly in the construction of cubbies, shelters, hideouts, construction projects. Children are engaged in conversations about safety, respecting other peoples' spaces, carrying sticks appropriately and reinforcing the play value of sticks for building, constructing and playing. Simple safety rules apply:

- Carrying sticks behind you
- Always having one end of the stick in the ground
- Only walking when carrying sticks
- Carrying sticks in your hands



BAREFEET

Many of the sites support children going barefeet for the benefits it provides children and their developing feet. Occupational Therapists like Angela Hanscom, advocate for children having lots of barefeet time for the benefits they provide for growing and developing feet.

Benefits:

- Offers sensory stimulation by walking on different surfaces with uneven and varying textures eg mud, pebbles, grass, bark, rocks, sand.
- Enhances children's ability to sense what their feet are doing without even looking at them (proprioception).
- Builds strength in children's arches (preventing flat feet).
- Allows normal development of feet and how they function - hampered by wearing of shoes.
- Makes feet and ankles stronger, bodies more agile and less prone to injury as children learn to pay more attention to themselves and their surroundings.
- Fresh air on feet prevents the growth of bacteria and fungal diseases.
- *"Going barefoot in nature helps develop normal gait patterns, balance and tolerance of touch in the feet, all of which provide a strong foundation for confident and fluid movement."* Angela Hanscom

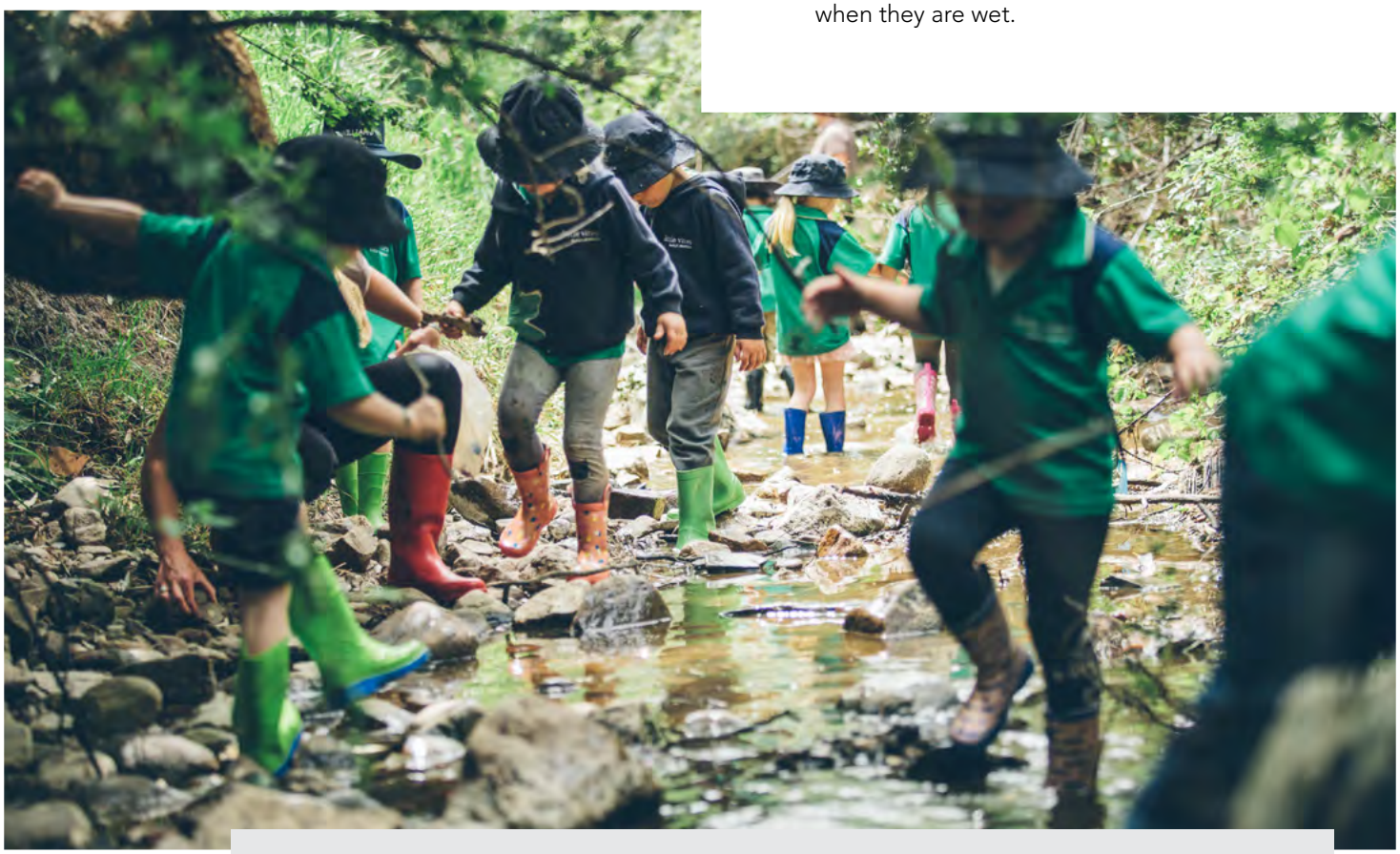
At ***Clarendon Primary School***, the value of barefeet for development is supported. Reception students are involved in Barefoot Club which is a co-ordination program where children engage in a range of activities to help them develop fine and gross motor co-ordination, balance, spatial and physical awareness activities.

OUTDOORS IN ALL WEATHER

Many adults (staff included) believe that preventing children from being outdoors during cold, wet weather will protect them from coughs and colds. This is a myth substantiated by research from many quarters, including Prof Raina MacIntyre (Prof of Infectious Diseases Epidemiology, Uni of NSW). Exposure to cold weather does not induce a cold or make the symptoms of a cold worse. Colds are caused by viruses which are often transmitted in cold weather because we tend to huddle together indoors. Being outside in the fresh air, is the best way to minimise colds and viral diseases spreading. All sites visited endorsed all weather play (except in extreme weather conditions) and ensured children were dressed appropriately for the conditions.

Benefits:

- Prevents the spread of illness by having exposure to fresh air.
- Gives opportunity to expand children's authentic learning about seasonal changes and weather patterns.
- Allows them to ***experience*** changing weather and strengthens their immune systems.
- Being outside in or after rain, presents a whole variety of new challenges for children to overcome, both physically and cognitively, building problem solving, imagination and co-ordination as they navigate new ways to do things. Rocks become slippery, walking in muddy ground requires a greater level of muscle co-ordination, and trees branches, logs are more difficult to manipulate when they are wet.



Staff at ***The Gums***, Clare, work intentionally to help parents overcome the idea that children should not be outdoors in bad weather. They are unwavering in their approach and keep talking to parents about the developmental benefits for children. The Centre uses the mantra, 'there is no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing'. Gumboots, raincoats, hats are easy to organize. ***Newland Park Kindy*** promote all weather play with staff actively involved. Their Nature Kindy sessions involve staff stomping through the creek, sliding down cliff banks and tasting mudpies. ***Gowrie SA*** have developed an ***'Outdoor Play in Winter' Policy*** to reflect their Position Statement and takes into account the research around this topic and their commitment to intentionally teach outdoors.



NATURAL OUTDOOR LEARNING SPACES

All sites had some form of natural outdoor learning space, from natural bushscape to designed spaces. Natural elements are unique and unpredictable and while they have a perception of greater risk, sites reported less injuries in these spaces, compared to traditional playgrounds. One reason for this could be that children understand the need to exercise judgement and care when navigating natural elements successfully.

Helle Nebelong, Danish Natural Landscape Architect, believes that to prepare children to manage life and be strong, social and resilient individuals, they need to practice in natural and asymmetrical playscapes. If children are only allowed to experience standardised, risk-free equipment, children will develop poor risk assessment skills and higher rates of injury. Helle believes *"when the distance between the rungs in a climbing net or ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where to put his feet. Standardisation is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements"*.

Playspaces that allow children to be autonomous, take risks, be in charge, construct and de-construct, collaborate, wonder and reflect build learning power and offer opportunity for a child to be respected as competent and capable. Many modern playgrounds are one dimensional and prescriptive and lack the graduated challenges that keep children working harder and harder for success. They become easily bored.

Nature Play SA have developed a set of ***Principles*** to help sites who are designing natural outdoor learning environments. They provide a starting point to consider what elements to include.

Benefits:

- Provides engagement of all 5 senses.
- Enables every child, no matter their age or ability to find mastery and to experience risk to suit their competence and confidence.
- Encourages a higher level of creativity and imagination.
- Allows for child initiated learning.
- Offers hands-on learning and life-long skills, like growing food.
- *"Increases spontaneous play and learning opportunities by more than 3x compared to a traditional playspace"* (Adam Bienenstock).
- Enables greater opportunities for exploration, discovery and a platform for learning about the natural world and sustainability.
- *"Enables greater contact with dirt - proven to increase healthy immune response, decrease irritable bowel and gut based chronic disease"* (Adam Bienenstock).

The Helsinki report 2014 blames a decrease in exposure to natural environments as one of the reasons children's immune systems are compromised and chronic inflammatory disease is on the rise. It is important to find ways to offer children opportunities and experiences that allow them to learn about risk safely. *'Having supportive relationships with educators enables children to develop confidence in their ability to express themselves, work through differences, learn new things and take calculated risks'* (ACECQA, 2001).

Children with additional needs have an equal if not greater need for adventurous play opportunities since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers. Providing access to risk and opportunities may require a little more innovation and planning by educators. However our case study sites found their additional needs children generally thrived in natural learning environments. The distinction between those with additional needs and those without also becomes less apparent in OLE's.

So, is it worth the risk? Tim Gill argues that denying children the opportunity for risky play could result in a society of risk averse citizens, unable to cope with everyday situations. Ellen Sandseter and others (2011) offer compelling evidence that taking risks in play is a natural coping mechanism, which helps to reduce fears and tackle phobias.

Our current culture of overprotection can cause children to become more anxious and develop behaviours associated with anxiety and risk aversion throughout their lives, effectively placing children at greater risk. Tim Gill (2011) calls for the *wholesale rejection of the philosophy of protection'*. He argues that in its place we should *'embrace, risk, uncertainty and challenge'*.

He identifies four arguments supporting the value of risk in childhood activity:

- Children learn for themselves how to manage risk and understand safety.
- Feeds their innate need for risk and prevents them finding greater unhealthy or unmanaged risks.
- Provides unlimited health and developmental benefits.
- Builds character and personality traits such as resilience, confidence, independent thinking and self-reliance.



PROVIDING A BALANCED APPROACH



"A degree of risk – properly managed – is not only inevitable, but positively desirable"

TIM GILL, 2010

If children are to experience the benefits of risk and challenge in a supervised setting, a positive approach to risk is required.

For care and service providers, this means moving away from a risk averse approach where children's play/learning experiences are restricted, and moving to a more holistic risk-benefit model. This approach improves the developmental opportunities for children by allowing them to take acceptable risks, without putting them in undue danger or serious harm. It allows educators to thoughtfully consider the benefits of an activity, experience, facility or structure, alongside the potential risks and determine what is reasonable and what is not.

Claire Warden (2011) founder of Nature Kindergartens in Scotland says, *"it is important to be hazard-aware, not risk-averse and to employ a sense of perspective when assessing play-based situations"*.

For educators and OHSW officers, this means removing or pointing out hazards that children may not see that are likely to cause serious injury or harm. A rotting piece of timber on a bridge or a piece of equipment that is likely to entrap a body part are hazards that are not acceptable and need to be managed. A large boulder in a playspace that allows children to scale and leap from is still a hazard, but it presents a challenge that will have enormous benefits for the child in trying to conquer and in succeeding (physical strength and dexterity, balance and co-ordination, judgement, decision-making, satisfaction, achievement and confidence etc) This makes it an acceptable hazard. The risk benefit approach is not about removing every hazard or risk to make things as safe as possible, rather it is about making things as safe as necessary.

Removing all risk from playspaces is detrimental. If not given opportunity to confront risks early in life, children will potentially seek it out in antisocial or more dangerous ways as they grow through the teenage years. Slipping on a wet surface teaches us to be more careful and considered when surfaces are changeable. Watching a child climb a tree gives insight to this - they tend not to go higher than they feel able or ready to.

Remove hazards and risk that is unacceptable, but not risks that can promote learning.

It is important to regularly inspect and maintain any equipment and to educate children on the use of equipment or dangerous tools so they know how to use them safely. Teaching children about risk, encouraging them to make their own risk assessments and think about the possible consequences of their actions will help children develop the life skills they need:

- Confidence
- Taking responsibility for self and others
- Handling challenges and failure
- Resilience

At ***West Lakes Shore OSHC***, educators encourage children to think about the risk involved in an activity and let them decide if their planned approach is appropriate. An example:

An educator stands a little way back from a tree that is being climbed by a young student who is new to the program. She is notices him about to put all of his weight on a slender branch which would no doubt have broken.

The dialogue goes like this:

Educator:

So Tom, you've done well to get that high. That's a little branch you have your foot on. Do you think it will hold your weight?

Tom:

Probably not!

Tom looks at the ground and assesses the fall height. He tests the branch, realises it will not hold and chooses another more solid limb.

Educator walks away and Tom's tree climbing continues without incident. As he was new to the program, the educator wanted to make sure he would not cause himself undue harm. The educator knows she does not know Tom well enough to know how capable he is and whether he is able to effectively risk assess, so has guided his decision-making by asking questions that still allow him to make the decisions himself and encourage risk taking safely.





The adult role is to remove or point out the hazards that children do not see, to make the play and learning opportunities as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.

Many sites have found that taking a 'routine' approach to potentially risky activities like fire and even snake sightings, can help the activity to become less sensationalised and part of their everyday.

Snakes are a reality for many sites, but their potential to be a hazard is kept in perspective. For sites where snakes are prevalent, children adopt a very 'matter of fact' approach. Children recognise their place in the ecosystem and instead of being fearful, are taught what they can do to deter snakes and how they should respond if they see one.

Firepits were a common feature at sites visited. The risks with fire are real, however teaching children in supervised education settings, to have a healthy respect and knowledge of fire is an important life skill. Putting simple strategies in place and making it part of normal, everyday activities, reduces the possibility of children coming to serious harm and increases the benefits for children taking part. Many sites introduced this activity in a small way, beginning with little fires in bowls, talking about what makes fires burn, what they are used for, what happens when you add tinder to embers, how you keep a fire going, what is suitable to burn on a fire, and what isn't, what happens when you get too close etc.

At ***Blackwood Community Child Care Centre***, the fire is a regular feature in winter. Rocks surround the fire pit at a safe distance and the area between the fire and the rocks is devoid of any trip hazards or debris. Children know they are not allowed to run into this area at any time of the year, whether the fire is on or not. Children at the Centre know the rules of the fire pit from the time they are 2 years old. The fire is not event focused, it's often on and is part of what they do regularly for learning focused on cooking or science (understanding solids, liquids, gas). It is supported and encouraged by families, because they know the Centre has sound policies and procedures in place to guide safety and that allows them to understand the benefits of risk and challenge for their children.

Involving children in the risk benefit process, has the added benefit of being able to talk through the hazards, benefits and risks of an experience with all concerned. It establishes greater ownership and responsibility for the children involved and it also means there is something tangible to share with parents and stakeholders to show the learning value for children when they are able to take part in riskier opportunities.

An article written by staff at Gowrie SA which featured in the national magazine for Gowrie sites, outlines their ***risk benefit approach***.

Applying a risk benefit assessment lens to risky experiences means:

- children are not denied the value of an experience because it is 'perceived' as dangerous
- parents know that sites have taken their duty of care responsibilities seriously; and
- educators can be assured they are still meeting their legal responsibilities.

The requirement for educators is spelt out in the ACECQA Guide to the National Law and National Regulations, which states: *"an approved provider must ensure that every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children from harm and hazard likely to cause injury. The service must have policies and procedures in place to protect children from harm and hazard, including health and hazard matters….services should use risk assessments to identify potential hazards relevant to their own service, and strategies to protect children. The National law does not require services to eliminate all risk and challenges from Children's play or environments".*

The legal obligation does not require educators to eliminate or minimise risk for children.

The Risk Benefit approach is endorsed by Department for Education and Child Development and needs to become embedded practice for supervised education settings.



At ***Crystal Brook Kindy***, children visit an offsite public park (Bowman Park) once a fortnight and spend the day. It has taken significant work helping parents overcome their anxieties about taking children offsite to a public park. Before the visits began, Karena Wilson (Director) gathered parents together and with Centre staff, ran a risk benefit assessment process to help them talk through their concerns. Parents and staff were pushed beyond their comfort zones. Parents were encouraged to think about their own childhoods and what was important to them. Staff were able to share their commitment to nature-based outdoor learning and how it related to children's dispositions for learning. Most parental concerns were able to be alleviated by talking through the issues and by putting in place procedures and policies to address the areas of concern, Stranger/Dog/Snake Awareness, Wet Weather, Clothing, providing a 'rest and relaxation' tent for children with special anxieties etc. Their ***Risk Benefit Assessment*** for visits to Bowman Park is comprehensive and is shared so others can see how they have navigated potentially risky experiences.



Adopting a Risk Benefit Assessment process requires a different approach than what many educators may be used to. It requires sites (and their communities) to:

- take a site approach to support a risk benefit approach for children
- actively encourage and acknowledge children's competence to assess risks and possible consequences
- **stand back** and give children trust and freedom to test the limits for themselves, allowing them to seek out the challenge and risk that's appropriate for them
- acknowledge the valuable learning and quality experiences that are taking place through a child's participation in a risky activity
- support anxious parents, other educators and even OH&SW officers to see the value of reasonable risk experiences for the children – share the benefits and broadcast the learnings
- recognise that accidents will happen from time to time and while they can be distressing for child and carers, are the best mechanism children have to learn.

Numerous approaches to risk benefit have and are emerging to support educators to consider risks alongside of benefits. One example of this is the ***Risk Benefit Assessment Guide*** produced by DECD.

The Australian Standards for Playgrounds also plays an important role in the risk management process. The Standards do not aim to make the environments risk free, but to reduce the likelihood and severity of injury in these settings. When applying the Standards to nature based learning environments, interpretation is required through a benefit/risk lens. Nature is unstructured, dynamic and not fixed, so the Standards serve as guide to reflect best practise for sites.

As many nature based learning environments include elements like boulders, logs, different surfaces, levels, topography, planting etc, many of the principles within the Standards apply. DECD developed an ***Outdoor Learning Environment Standard*** which was approved in 2016. The OLE Standard details the minimum and recommended standards for creating and maintaining an outdoor learning environment that provides children with optimal learning opportunities. It can be used across government and non-government organisations to support this outcome.

A ***Snapshot table*** highlights the key factors to consider when applying the Standards to a Nature-based space. This list is not exhaustive and expert advice should be sought from Kidsafe SA to consider the assessment of likelihood and probability.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.

CHINESE PROVERB



Our case study sites have learned over time, what elements have helped them achieve successful outcomes for learning and play in their outdoor environments.

Educators with a similar mindset

- A good staff culture with all staff being able to discuss and debate, resulting in a shared view
- Educators who take on a growth mindset, respecting children as competent and capable learners
- Educators who value the outdoors as a learning environment and have a united approach
- Tackling educator 'doubters' head on – showcasing what you do, backing up what you believe with research, documenting learning through videos, voice recordings and learning stories
- Having a culture of ownership, attitude and pride in what is being offered.

Communicating with parents proactively and boldly

- Being fearless in challenging the myths around safety (whether with staff, parents, community) – children shouldn't climb trees, children should wear shoes, children will get sick if they play outside in water, dirt, cold...
- Having conversations with parents, governing councils, staff to rationalise the profile of risk-based experiences. Share the research and statistics, the risk vs benefit assessments completed, and keep your own data around accidents and injuries and make them available.
- Using a range of mediums to document and share, displays, videos/films, voice recordings, Newsletters, Facebook, Messenger, emails, Information Nights, practical workshops.
- Having regular interactions with parents gives opportunity to talk about what you are doing and why, sharing the developmental benefits for children and giving opportunity for parents to share their concerns.
- Building a relationship with parents (and children) based on trust that begins with a conversation with parents at the time they enrol - share what you do/allow at your site early in the relationship so it can become culturally acceptable practice within your context.

Building relationships with community to broaden awareness

- Holding community events on site
- Sharing your approach broadly and finding levers to share art projects, exhibitions with community neighbours etc.
- Offering produce grown on site so everyone sees and shares the benefits
- Actively demonstrating care and respect for the local environment and community.

An enabling approach to scaffold children's learning and interests

- Having Educators who are prepared to stand back, observe and support the discoveries and learning taking place
- Trusting in children's abilities and judgement
- Offering a child led, emergent curriculum which picks up on children's ideas and interests and scaffolds their experimentation
- Listening carefully to children, responding accordingly and provided open-ended experiences where children are in control of their learning.

An holistic approach

- Nature-based learning environments are central, PD focused around nature-based learning and viewing nature as a library
- Teaching children to care for their environment and giving them responsibility for recycling, composting, encourages empathy and care for people, animals and plants.
- Starting the conversation around risk can begin with the introduction of a kitchen garden or cooking, allowing children to use real tools for an authentic purpose. Cooking and gardening are widely accepted and approved practices and provide an excellent pathway for parents to be involved and to see first-hand the competence of their children.

Evaluating

- Reflecting on what you do, why you are doing it and how you can improve.
- Make the sure the outdoor learning experiences can be reverse engineered into curriculum or framework options. See where the learning can be and document it. Proving the efficacy and knowing the impact of the outdoor learning approach is critical in helping it become established, respected, sustainable and deeply valued.





A PLACE TO START



"Start where you are. Do what you can. Use what you have".

ARTHUR ASHE

How does your site measure up? How do you encourage risk taking and opportunity in your OLE? How are children at your site exposed to challenges where they can test the limits of their physical, intellectual and social development?

Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Look at how much time is being spent outdoors for learning including the length of playtimes. Do a play audit and record how children are using the spaces they have. Is there enough zones to accommodate different types of play (socio-dramatic, action-retell, active, passive, solo, small group, whole class etc). What does behaviour management tell you about interactions in the yard. Do an equipment audit - is it all fixed and standardised or loose and open-ended? Are playspaces provocative and bespoke offering opportunity for children's varying needs and play preferences. Just as varied curriculums allow children to achieve success and excel, playspaces should do the same. Decide what you can do to make the outdoors a greater part of your learning environment every day.
- Encourage conversations and professional dialogue around aspects of the risk benefit approach, with staff, parents, children. Challenge one another, problem solve and be innovative on how you can implement this approach. Organise PD opportunities for staff.
- Consider your policies for outdoor learning. Incorporate all weather outdoor learning. Consider what you need to do to make it 'comfortable' for children eg rain coats, gumboots.
- Revisit your outdoor space and look at what it offers from nature. Does it inspire creativity and imagination? What can be explored and discovered? Does it encourage sensory integration, opportunities for all types of play, experiences that allow risk-taking? Make a commitment to change some aspect of it.
- What benefits do children receive from the risk opportunities you are providing? What can you do to incorporate more? Choose one element to begin with and test it out, record the observations and learnings and develop a strategy that will allow it to be incorporated more often. Apply a risk benefit approach to all of your activities and make it policy. Incorporate children in the process of developing risk benefit assessments for your activities. Prepare a clear statement of belief with parents and staff who are new to your site. Document and broadly share your findings and research about the value of these experiences for children.

Here are 4 suggestions for what to do now:

1. Build a change coalition - gather evidence and like-minded people and create a case for change and innovation. Build resources and gather community support. Read some of the materials in the Further Reading Section or watch a film like Project Wild Thing.

2. Work out the best starting point for your community. Gauge the sentiment or resistance and pick a starting project that will be appropriate for your context - create a kitchen garden, introduce loose parts, build a mud kitchen, or campfire, explore a local area of bush etc

3. Use materials that can be locally or cheaply sourced. Build momentum in your community by seeking their help to donate items you may need for your project. If you are planting, plant for play spaces. Use the resources on the ***Adelaide Mt Lofty NRM Education site*** to guide you.

4. Seek out and gather templates for risk vs benefit assessments. Use the ***DECD*** model or create your own.



CLARENDON PRIMARY SCHOOL



PRINCIPAL
JOSH ANDERSON

A Reception to Year 7 small community-based primary school with a strong rural and agricultural context and one of the inaugural Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Schools.

Clarendon intentionally use the outdoors to find levers for classroom learning, ensuring relevance and meaning for students. They consciously plan for play and see risk as an important developmental aspect of learning. The Kitchen Garden, which is built around a pizza oven, provides a good entry point for risk-taking and has a strong focus for all year levels, across many curriculum areas.

The Clarendon site features many micro playzones to allow different types of play and different spaces for children to opt for:

- cubbies and hideaways
- quarries for digging and grinding
- central meeting places that are built on the idea of a village philosophy.

Indigenous plantings offer an ephemeral feel and give children a sense of belonging. Plants are chosen with their play value and environmental appropriateness in mind and the sloped/terraced terrain of the site lends itself to interesting and varied experiences for children. Students have a strong sense of responsibility, ownership and autonomy and there are few negative behaviours as children have many options and places for play. The yard rules are simple – play in a way that is safe and fun and everyone is welcome.

Clarendon's culture acknowledges the value of diverse outdoor play and learning outcomes. It is backed by evidence that demonstrates that in 4 years:

- There have been minimal injuries requiring first aid
- No suspensions
- Increase in overall wellbeing of children
- Higher level of engagement
- A richer level of play that is deeply connected.
- The benefits of multi-age play
- There is strong identity and ownership over the school environment.






RESOURCE CENTRE
PRODUCE Stall
garden
Welcome to the Produce Stall









CRYSTAL BROOK KINDERGARTEN



DIRECTOR
KARENA WILSON

A small centre, north of Adelaide offering Occasional Care and Kindergarten to children in Crystal Brook and the surrounding area.

The journey for Crystal Brook Kindergarten began in 2015. Director, Karena attended a NPSA workshop and drawing on her own childhood memories, felt inspired and compelled to make their Kindy a nature-based experience for their children. They developed a Philosophy statement, created a new brand, and continued the transformation of their outdoor space into a more natural, organic learning environment. After missing out on a POLA upgrade, they received a visit from Simon Hutchinson, from Climbing Tree who ran a loose parts workshop with children and an information session with parents. In the meantime, staff visited other Kindergartens and photographed the elements they knew their children would enjoy. Parents and children were surveyed to work out what they wanted in their own space and a 6 stage development was planned. Staff drew on the community spirit and goodwill established amongst their community and began their transformation. On a small budget, they have almost completed 6 stages, well ahead of their proposed schedule.

The success of their nature based outdoor learning environment is due to careful planning and consideration of how best to support children as capable and confident learners in the context of risk-taking and STEM. However significant energy has been invested in educating parents, dealing with their anxieties, sharing research and articles to substantiate their approach as a nature-based Kindergarten and importantly, sharing through photographs, videos, and Learning Stories the valuable learning taking place. This has meant helping parents adjust their thinking that Kindergarten is not just a place that prepares children for school, but it is a place that supports children's dispositions for learning, that encourages child-led unstructured play and involves children getting dirty and taking risks.

This approach extends to connecting children to the 'beyond' spaces in their natural environment. Regular visits to local parks provides a greater range of experiences to support their learning and risk-taking. It required considerable effort to help parents to feel comfortable in allowing children to participate in visits offsite. What began as a 3 hour visit to local site, Bowman Park, initially now extends to a full day and the children have become the biggest advocates for their time in the 'beyond' space. Two brief video clips demonstrate the array of ***learning experiences*** enjoyed by the Kindergarten children in this natural environment and captures the ***unsolicited joy*** of one child who was totally immersed in her activities.

Karena has been successful in sharing her approach broadly within the Crystal Brook Community and through her Partnership. other Directors, Regional staff and DECD staff have access to their closed Facebook page which demonstrates the learning outcomes and experiences of the children at the Kindergarten.










..."When I was walking,
I thought I was climbing
up a mountain.
I feeled happy
and a bit scared
because I don't
like heights.
Nobody held
my hand
because I didn't
want to.
I just did it
by myself
and climbed
back down"
Miss M (4 years)





GALILEE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, ALDINGA



PRINCIPALS
ANTHONY GARTON
JODIE HIGGINS

Jodie Higgins talks about their vision and intent for learning and play at Galilee: A vision for learning. Grounds for learning were developed with a vision where children are viewed as active protagonists of their growth and development. They are central to making meaning of their world and have the ability to do this.

Questions were considered around the traditional recess and lunch times in schools. What is the purpose? Is this a time for learning or play, can it be both? With a desire for a focus on the environment and sustainability, and an inquiry approach to learning, where each child is seen as capable, confident and creative, a nature play focus was established.

Intent: Nature Play

Galilee developed grounds where children learn through play in a supportive environment. Spaces were established that enabled children free and self directed play. Where children could construct and imagine in spaces individually or with others.

Through developing a grounds for learning project and subsequent research by Johnson, research (Johnson 2013) showed, for example, that playing freely in nature supported children's creativity, feelings of belonging, and sense of efficacy. Other independent research also showed that free play in and with nature:

- offered excitement and fun;
- sustained longer lasting play;
- supported diversity of play;
- responded to player's needs; and
- reduced the number and severity of accidents (Trageton 2007, p.189)'.

Johnson, P. (2013) Playing and Nature, Pure and Simple? Topics, Vol.23, No. 4, pp. 9-10.



This clip tells the story of Galilee, the embedded beliefs that environment is a co-teacher and that children need personal experience of the environment and agency in it.

Risk Benefit

"At Galilee we can play in the shared spaces and we have more nature than other schools. We've got trees, butterfly gardens and wetlands where we can explore and build cubbies with sticks. It's ok because we are all safety officers."
Stephanie aged 10 and Maddison aged 9 years.
Galilee (2011), Environment as Teacher

Safety is a priority to enable nature play in an environment which is ever changing and can be manipulated. Strategies have been established to keep safety a part of play and decision making.

Children's voice is significant in establishing 'guidelines' for play. As new items are introduced or if challenges arise, children's input for resolutions and guidelines is imperative to enable ownership. This occurs in homeroom meetings, Student Executive or school gatherings. Adults are responsible so continual discussion with students, in staff meetings and grounds committee along with documentation of risks, play spaces and resources is essential.

Galilee's values of Welcoming, Respecting and Constructing are at the forefront of safety and wellbeing. With the focus on grounds for learning, staff are encouraged to engage with children in the yard in a constructive relational manner to support learning, wellbeing and safety. Children's actions or play are guided by staff enquiring if their play is constructive, welcoming and respectful. Children are able to discern appropriate choices with staff asking questions to assist children to challenge their thinking to support safety, learning and wellbeing.

Work Health and Safety structures are incorporated including regular risk assessments of yard and resources by students and staff. Students are encouraged to be 'Safety Officers' and taught 'Take5' strategy when constructing play spaces. Each week children pack and reset spaces and during this time resources are checked for safety.

Galilee has incorporated natural elements into our students' learning and play. We believe our play spaces actively contributes to the health, cognitive development, and social wellbeing of our learning community. We also have reasons to believe that our naturalized school grounds are contributing to students' spiritual and ethical development.

















NEWLAND PARK KINDERGARTEN, ERINDALE



DIRECTOR
HEATHER TOZER

Set in the leafy surrounds of Burnside, this Kindergarten has been on an evolutionary journey as a Nature Kindergarten over the last 5 years, beginning with all things sustainable and relevant to children's learning, growth and development.

Its beautiful natural environment offers a range of play and learning experiences for children that have been developed inexpensively or by using what they have to repurpose. A range of opportunities encourage risk and challenge including, a large sand pit, loose parts, firepit, pizza oven, chooks, mud, water, garden beds, climbing and diverse topography.

The Kindy supports children's learning at their own pace and their pedagogy is solidly based on relationships, harnessing individual interests, peer scaffolding and allowing time for children to learn and engage. They have built strong networks and connections into the community, providing opportunity for community to be involved in art and craft and environmental projects.

This kindy is known for its risk taking and permission giving. There is a language of risk and hazards however it supports children rather than hinders them. Staff are united and committed to providing opportunities that stretch children's experiences and help them achieve success. Several parent meetings and gatherings at the local creek helped parents realise the learning potential in the natural environment. Asking the question, 'What did you do when you were a child?' and 'how different is it for our children today?' have led to many discussions. This has had the biggest impact on shaping parents' views and has led to high levels of support from families and the wider community.

Newland Park Kindergarten is committed to spending 80% of each day outside in all weather, all year round. Four days a week they head to the local creeks to spend at least two hours learning in natural settings.

The benefits for Newland Park children are significant as they:

- Develop resilience
- Learn to take risks
- Use real tools
- Become a community of learners who support and help each other learn
- Problem solve and design their own learning
- Develop a strong appreciation of nature
- Transfer their learning between nature kindy, kindergarten and home
- Enrich their language
- Increase their capacity for noticing
- Increase independence and organisational skills
- Anxious children are calmer and more engaged

Slide shows are shared at the end of each day giving parents visual examples of their children's learning. There are many examples of the rich and meaningful literacy and numeracy opportunities. These are shared in floor books, children's folders and summative reports.

Readings and latest research on benefits of Nature play are shared. Children are experiencing authentic nature play, risk taking, use of real tools, fire and a strong relationship between nature in both settings.

Risk assessments are done with children. They have a knowledge of hazards and safety precautions.

The staff team are committed to share this lifelong learning with the community. The growth in individual children and feedback from child's voice and parent feedback is testimony to their vision: *"children are encouraged to learn through doing rather than observing and are given opportunities to explore the natural environment and the local area. NPK has been a fantastic place for my son to gain confidence physically and socially, through traditional methods of climbing trees and getting mucky"*.

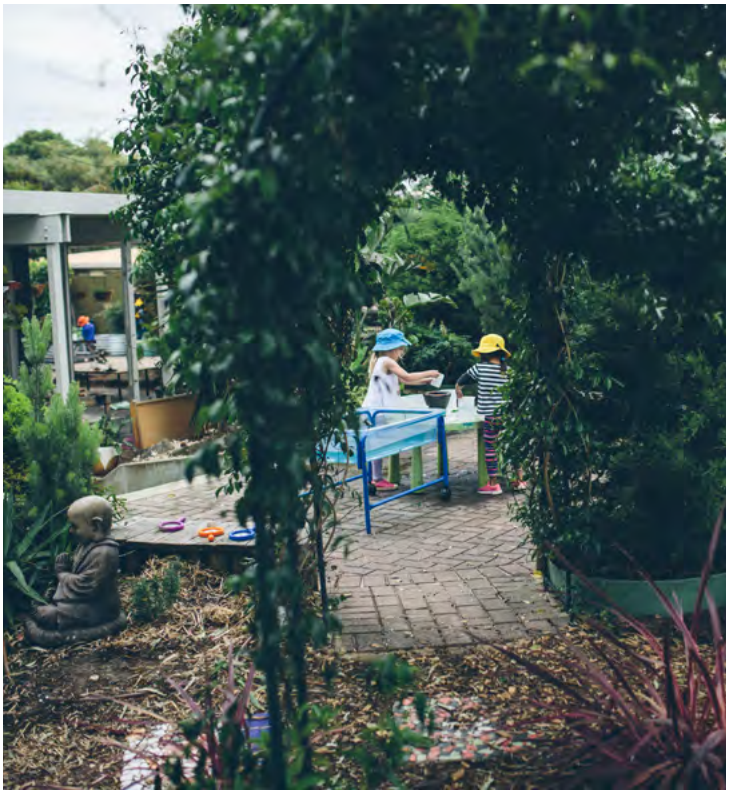
















TANUNDA LUTHERAN ELC, TANUNDA



DIRECTOR
MARIE HAGE

Tanunda ELC's vision is for all children at their Centre to have the right to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors, inspired by the European forest schools, the work of Claire Warden, staff's love of the outdoors and conversations with parents.

In 2011 when the ELC opened, staff discovered a hectare of bushland at the far end of the Tanunda Lutheran School property which bordered the North Para River. Following conversations with management of the School, the ELC were given permission to rename the land, and to redevelop it for use within the program. A $10,000 grant was received from NRM to begin an indigenous revegetation program, but the block first had to be cleared of invasive, non-indigenous and noxious weeds, and non-safe dead limbs removed. The grant money paid for this work as well as a bus trip to the Barossa Valley Bush gardens to broaden children and families' understanding of the possibilities for their own Bush Block, construction of a bird hide on the block, a new entrance path and gate, a shelter and fire pit.

At the beginning of the Bush Block journey, Marie collated all information relevant as a journal in an A3 sketch book. It included newsletters to families, research about the importance of outdoor experiences, notes taken from relevant PD's, photos of each stage of development, documentation of children's theories and involvement, notes of meetings held with NRM, builders, weed, tree and frog specialists.

Planting began in 2013. ELC children and families planted over 200 indigenous plants and so began an annual Maundy Thursday Easter planting day where families are invited to donate specific plants and join the ELC for a bush afternoon tea.

A second NRM grant was received to develop a reed bed, opening up conversations about water flow, catchment and creating habitats for aquatic species. Using ELC families, Kiwanis Club and a local winery who released 10 of their workers for a day of work on the Bush Block, the ELC have benefited from willing community participation.

Marie Hage shares how they have grown their own knowledge and understanding of the value of their Bush Block, and shared that with families, children and others:

Families have been on our Bush Block journey from day one. The Bush Block is an integral part of the ELC program and the school curriculum. Educators have been given opportunities to attend PD's which has increased their understanding of the potential of wild spaces and how they can be incorporated into every area of our program. I regularly share publications and research articles with educators to deepen their understandings. As my own educator's knowledge has grown, so has their confidence and we now spend extended periods of time in the Bush Block, we have fruit time there and lunch, and we regularly have camp fires during the winter months. We have researched the role of the educator in the outdoors, and support Gillian McAuliffe's (Bold Park, Western Australia) belief that educators need to be an active observer, provisioner, monitor, mentor, companion, guide and connector for the children in the outdoor classroom.

Through newspaper articles, presenting at workshops, weekly diaries, newsletters, conversations, sharing research, documentation of the children's experiences, videos, photographs and the school website we have been able to take families on our outdoor learning environment journey. We identified the need for families to have opportunity to visit the Bush Block as their children enjoy sharing their Bush Block experiences with them. Planting days offer this opportunity and we now hold special occasions in the bush. Each year we have Father's Night in the Bush block, we gather at the ELC at dusk, rug up and take torches to a camp fire in the Bush Block. This is followed by a shared supper at the ELC. Mother's Day morning teas are also held in the Bush Block around a camp fire.

The knowledge the children have gained in the Bush Block has been utilised in our ELC garden. We have created a dry creek bed in our garden and the children can experiment with water flow on a smaller scale adapting the knowledge they have gained in the Bush Block. The children also identified that we did not have many birds visiting our ELC garden and so we have planted bird and butterfly attracting plants and they have created a Care Crow which provides the birds with food, water and music.

The children at our ELC have created our risk assessment which we address prior to each visit to the Bush Block, and it is displayed at the ELC . There are real dangers - the creek, the adjoining vineyard where there is the danger of tractors and other machinery, uneven surfaces, ants, toadstools, the danger associated with very windy days, the possibility of snakes, fire safety and the list goes on. The children have thought about these dangers, understand them and respect the rules we have in place. When children begin at the ELC we gradually introduce them to the Bush Block so that they can become familiar with the boundaries. Acknowledging the risks and respecting their Bush Block risk assessment enables the children to embrace being trusted by educators while being able to freely engage in exciting places to play and explore.

This clip shows the valuable learning and risk opportunities taking place within the Bush Block.















THE GUMS CHILD CARE CENTRE, CLARE



DIRECTOR
ALEX NICHOLLS

A privately owned childcare and Kindergarten (Little Vines) catering to children from 0 to school age for 65-75 children. There is a strong nature play focus in their grounds, but the feature is the Bush block adjoining their centre which is visited 2x/week by children in the Kindergarten.

The Bush block is a beautiful 2 acre area of natural bush owned by the site, that has had minimal clearing. It features high grass, tall trees, flowering bushes and plants, olive trees and a running creek at the bottom of 2m high banks. Children don their gum boots, hats, sunscreen (and Aerogard!) and head out the back as part of their weekly routine. Visiting all year round allows children to see and experience the seasonal changes occurring in the creek and in the bush.

Alex Nicholls, Director/Owner of The Gums shares these insights relating to the hazards in the Bush Block:

As responsible adults we need to know the hazards that exist in our bush block. It is the team of educators who regularly visit the Bush Block, who need to decide for themselves what level of risk is appropriate and this must be in response to the local environment and ever changing weather conditions. Prior to visiting the Bushblock, we must consider the group of children and their abilities as this may affect our educator to child ratios. We also check the BOM website for any local weather warnings, and conduct an in person check of the bush block prior to heading out. In recent months, these in person checks have identified smoke from a neighbour burning off behind the creek, a litter of kittens living in an old tree stump, an active bee hive, and the loud noise of an air compressor blowing down a hay baler- which made the hearing of the "Cooee" (our emergency alert) near impossible.

On arrival in the Bush block, educators and children come together around the fire pit. They sit on logs and stumps and talk about possible risks on that particular day. As educators we identify and share the hazards, there are no fences so we discuss the boundaries of the bushblock, and how do we know if we've gone too far. Following rain, we talk with children about how to test the depth of the water in the creek and where the deep pools are. We discuss where the ant nests are- and that we walk around not over them, we look to see if the bees in the bee hive are active. We haven't sprayed any of the ant nests or the bee hive. The bush block is their home and this wildlife has a right to be there.

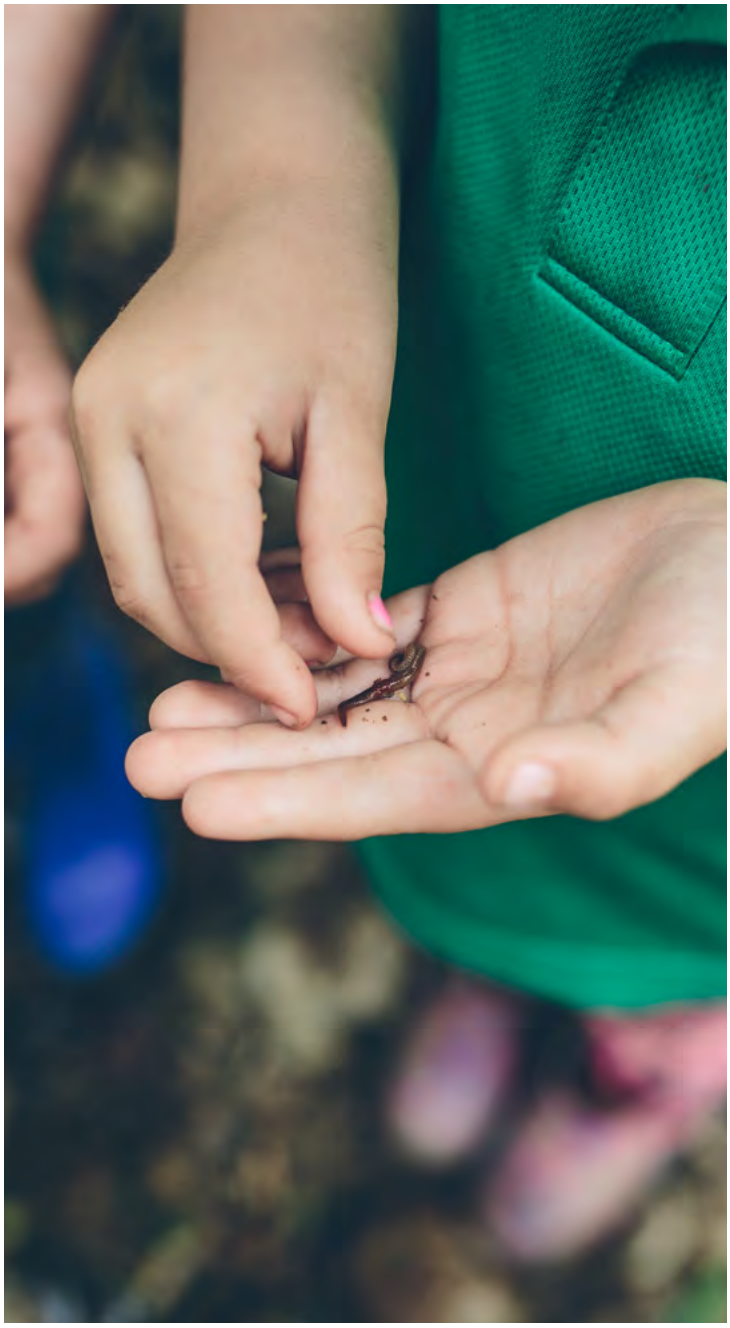
The children understand that in cold areas, such as Clare, snakes and lizards hibernate during winter. We discuss how as the weather warms up, wildlife may be waking from their winter hibernation. We discuss how on warm days snakes like to come out to soak up the heat of the sun. Children know that if they see a snake they must freeze like a statue until it moves past, then tell a teacher. The children also understand that by stomping and clapping our feet as we walk through long grass we can tell the wildlife that we are coming, since snakes can pick up vibrations from the ground and will usually move away.

Once we have equipped children with these skills they become capable and confident risk takers as they explore their ever changing environment out in the bush block.

Unless there are particular areas of learning to focus on, the children are encouraged to go where they wish – to the tyre swing in 'Flower Valley' or to explore the bush, although almost all are drawn to the creek to wade through the water in their boots, to explore under rocks, scramble up the banks using rope supports, get messy, climb trees, swing on tree swings, lie in the grass or just sit. It is child initiated and educators are there to actively listen, encourage and extend children's questioning and interests to a deeper level of understanding. Risk and challenge is experienced continually and at children's own level of comfort. Educators provide encouragement without intervention and this is mirrored by the children as peers.

Learning Stories are shared with parents via Messenger on Facebook. Any concerns from parents about children's bush block or outdoor experiences are met with positive reinforcement about the developmental benefits for children. They have strong links into the community, building the knowledge, education and demonstration of their practice to those outside of the Centre.











THE NEST, ALBERTON PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL



DIRECTOR
MARILYN HAYWARD

Marilyn Hayward provides the following insights on their journey: Our image of the child is based on the research in the schools of Reggio Emilia where children are viewed as competent and capable from birth.

Seeing children in this way means that we trust children to do their risk assessments before and during a balancing, climbing or building experience. There aren't too many children who want to get hurt. Therefore, children will navigate the way from small risk to bigger risk (which may increase in potential consequence but reduces in likelihood).

In The Nest, we have many capable educators who have engaged in professional learning around the benefits of learning in natural play spaces.

"They truly connect children with nature through play and are a sort of classroom for the next generation of environmental stewards."

Dr. David Suzuki

Our competent view of the child along with our professional learning from experts in the field like Claire Warden, Tim Gill, Adam Bienenstock, Marc Armitage and Nature Play SA to name a few has enabled us to confidently address parent concerns around risk. For example, we know that organised sport has the highest injury rate and that the injury rate in playgrounds is very low. We also know that rubber surfaces and fixed playground equipment lead to more injuries than natural spaces.

The Nest Educators have built trust with our families over a period of time and have shared our learning and pedagogy with them. We didn't really need to convince our families about the value of 'risky' play as they had been seeing it in action for several years. In viewing children as competent and capable we must also view our families in this way. They see the value of risky play when they have the opportunity of seeing it. Provide these opportunities and any observant parent can see the benefits.

Our families are very aware of our beliefs around children learning in nature and that their children spend a good proportion of their day outside. We make learning visible to our families and community through our documentation which includes learning stories demonstrating the competent child using real tools and learning through active play involving risk.

Our families were involved in the planning of the new space as were representatives of our Children's Parliament (Ministry of Environmental Affairs). Our Nest children contributed their ideas after many visits to other school, kindergarten and community outdoor spaces. The consultation process allowed us to share our understandings and advocate for an environment that promoted challenging climbing opportunities; cultural connections for local Aboriginal children and those who visit from the Lands; a space to meet and to build fire; digging and mud play; sensory stimulation and sensory calming; swings; water play; tinkering and loose parts play; ball games and bike riding; wildlife exploration and particularly sustainability.

Our new outdoor learning space provides many challenges for our children including climbing up a rock wall, uneven surfaces, trees to climb, creek beds, a fire pit, water, ropes and a vast array of loose parts including branches and rocks that they can move around and construct with. Our children are experimenting and testing theories as they explore this new environment. We now have pathways and they are working out how to accommodate bikes and pedestrians on these paths.

One final word on risk – During our Playgroup session, I watched a two year-old climb our new rock wall capably, after first watching other children. He made decisions about how high he would go (right to the top) and then chose the best way to climb back down with no difficulties. Unfortunately, that same child was later hospitalised as a result of crossing the school car park with his father and slipping on a patch of mud.

















UPPER STURT PRIMARY SCHOOL, UPPER STURT



PRINCIPAL
BARB JONES

Set on a beautiful heritage bush block in the Adelaide Hills, Upper Sturt Primary School is a unique small community school with 87 enrolments from Reception to Year 7.

Three years ago enrolments were at 25 students and the school was concerned about its future. They had to offer something different than other schools in the area, and so established a play-based learning environment in nature inspired by philosophies and principles of Nature based pedagogy, Positive Psychology and others.

Their pedagogy responds to the wellbeing needs of children in today's society, acknowledging that children need significant time to use nature as a learning resource to inspire curiosity and creativity. They have noticed that the more time children spend outdoors, the more relaxed and less anxious they are. They also know that rich, deep learning happens when children are given the time to experiment and make their own discoveries. They have intentionally increased lunchtime to 1 hour, which has also resulted in making a significant, positive difference to children's level of engagement during the afternoon.

Offering risk is a normal and routine part of school life. The school is all weather and the majority of time is outdoors, using nature as inspiration for all of their learning and play, including den building, gardening, playing in the mud kitchen, using real tools like drills, hacksaws and whittling knives. Risk benefit assessments record the observations for each element of play. As children progress through the year levels, greater independence is introduced. Year 6/7 children were recently involved in a 'Sandpit Challenge' where they were engaged in an activity to build a bridge across a sandpit. After an hour, teachers noticed little progress, but after two hours, children became creative and engaged, using ingenuity, teamwork, problem solving and social skills.

Initially, to ensure children continued their interest in the area and to allow plants opportunity to regenerate and grow, the playspace was used 2-3 times per week. Now it is used most days as plants and shrubs are more established. From time to time, it is also used by our local Kindergarten and Playgroup.



This clip of Upper Sturt shows the learning and risk that happens organically at Upper Sturt.













WEST LAKES SHORE PRIMARY SCHOOL, OSHC PROGRAM



DIRECTOR
JUDY BUNGEY

In 2014 staff West Lakes OHSC were inspired by a session they attended with Marc Armytage about outdoor play and learning. It caused them to think about the absence of risk opportunities and overprotection that has become hallmarks of children's lives today. Staff recalled their own childhoods and the opportunities they had to experience freedom, risk and unstructured play and were committed to ensuring that their program at OSHC, would be outdoor focused and include risk and opportunity for all children attending.

They began the transformation of their repurposed space (former football clubrooms) using a strong consultation process with children and parents. City of Charles Sturt donated a further piece of land adjacent their property for the redevelopment.

Children provided a long wish list which included trees to climb, ruins to explore, bones and skeletons to study, sticks to play and build with, potions to make, cubbies to create, native birds to watch, places to hide, gardens to grow, uneven surfaces to navigate and worm & mushroom farms to care for. Parents were supportive of any plans that would encourage children to play outdoors, in mud and climbing trees.

A plan was developed and work commenced. Regular updates were provided to school community through school newsletters and to the School Council. At the completion of the work, a Councillor from the City of Charles Sturt inspected the project and was so impressed, he arranged for the replanting and redevelopment of the Council side of the boundary fence, creating a beautiful area for children to view.

Updates and education of the benefits of the space continue to be provided to both school families and leadership. An excerpt of the one of the School Council notices is included:

Our children are enjoying the nature play area. Research indicates that there are overwhelming benefits for children when they are able to have free play in a natural environment. Children experience risk taking, problem solving and learn how to face challenges. A natural environment contributes to children's overall physical health and emotional wellbeing.

Fixed equipment is standardised and can limit the value of play. Once children learn to climb on fixed equipment, climbing becomes a repetitive action rather than a stimulating and problem solving experience.

Licensing and Standards encourage centres to think about what their outdoor area looks like and consider making positive changes towards providing more natural environments for the children in their care, our service feels we have met these recommendations.

Judy Bungey shares her reflections and approach:

In the nearly 3 years of using the space apart from minor accidents we have not had a child fracture a limb, however in that time we have had a fracture at the school gym and two at the fixed playground. Our children are informed (as part of their induction) that they are permitted to climb trees at OSHC only if they climb to a height that they feel safe and if their friends encourage them to go higher, they have to listen to their own bodies, not what their friends are saying. We also state in our information package to families that Educators will not pressure children to keep clean, they will be permitted to play with mud and dirt, and so far, we have not had one complaint.

Our play scape area consists of moving parts that encourage upper body strength, we change the environment from time to time with various learning tools such as old bones from a farm, hessian for tee pees and more. During the winter vacation care we have a camp fire where children learn about fire safety and our environment. Our raised garden beds are planted with seasonal crops and our fruit trees will eventually bear fruit. We have a gardener/maintenance person that tends the area every 6 to 8 weeks to check safety and the condition of our plants. To ensure children continue their interest in the area and to allow plants to regenerate and grow, the play scape is used 2 to 3 times a week by us however from time to time it is also used by our local kindy and playgroup.



















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This resource has been developed by Nature Play SA in collaboration with Department for Education and Child Development (DECD), Catholic Education SA, Association of Independent Schools SA (AISSA), Kidsafe SA.

It is intended to be used by educators in any sector as a resource that equips you to understand the importance of providing nature based outdoor learning environments. These environments should be rich in offering and experience, and allow children to take informed and reasonable risks while feeling supported to make mistakes and learn from them.

We acknowledge the significant investment made by the Department for Education and Child Development to produce this resource for the benefit of all educators and the contribution of a wise and supportive Advisory Board made up of:

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Our case study sites were recommended by members of our Advisory Board as sites that offer rich nature based outdoor learning environments. Their story and images are shared in this resource for you to see their spaces and learn how they have integrated risk into outdoor learning. We congratulate them for their commitment and for the example they provide to others. These sites include:

Blackwood Community Child Care Centre

Clarendon Primary School

Crystal Brook Kindergarten

Elsie Ey Kindergarten, *Hewitt*

Galilee Catholic School, *Aldinga*

Gowrie SA, *Thebarton*

Madge Sexton Kindergarten, *McLaren Vale*

Newland Park Kindergarten, *Erindale*

Tanunda Lutheran Early Learning Centre

The Gums Child Care Centre, *Clare*

The Nest, Alberton Park Primary School

Upper Sturt Primary School

West Lakes Shore Primary School Out of School Hours Care Program

Just as the sites visited have been inspired by other people and movements like Reggio Emilia, Claire Warden, Richard Louv, Adam Bienenstock, Niki Buchan, Marc Armitage, Forest Schools and others, we hope you will be inspired too. Learn from their experiences, but as these sites have done, explore what can be adapted and how it can best fit into your site, your culture and your setting.

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