

Providing outdoor Learning and Play opportunities for children





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“These have been the best days of our lives”!

This is one of four resources designed to provide information about the benefits of outdoor learning and play, as part of Nature Play WA’s Outdoor Learning Webinars. These resources contain hyperlinks to references and links to mandated documents, to support teachers in their delivery of outdoor play and learning.

What does outdoor teaching and learning offer children?

The outdoor environment affords unique opportunities for children to engage with one another in play and integrated learning projects. Children are highly motivated in the outdoors and often show strengths and other sides of their character if they are allowed more choice and agency in their learning. Children gain physical, social, emotional and cognitive benefits by spending time outside. Above all, their sense of wellbeing is enhanced.

What is mandated?

Outdoor learning can be part of everyday teaching and is supported by mandated documents such as the SCOSA’s Western Australian curriculum¹, Early Years Learning Framework², and National Quality Standard.³ Outdoor Learning is supported in the Australian Curriculum.⁴ For example, SCOSA’s Phases of Schooling document confirms that children from K - 2 “should be provided with a holistic curriculum”¹ and the EYLF Practice of Responsiveness to Children relates to children’s preference for active, multisensory learning in outdoor environments.⁶





Promoting a sense of wonder in the world

Experiences should involve exploring and manipulating a variety of materials, problem solving and opportunities to represent their learning using technology or the arts, for example. Learning in the natural environment promotes wonder, discovery and a sense of responsibility for looking after the space as connection builds.⁷

Breaking out of the four walls of a classroom

By maintaining an integrated approach to teaching and learning, children will develop connections to, and appreciation for, the natural world, as well as each other. The Early Years Learning Framework promotes the outdoor learning environments as presenting “a vast array of possibilities not available indoors”.² It is simply not possible to replicate the richness of the outdoors in an indoor environment.

Use the outdoors for authentic project and inquiries

Simon Beames, Outdoor Education Lecturer at Edinburgh University, highlights the importance of exploring real world with his quote “We are not saying ‘goodbye’ to our classrooms; we are opening them up”.⁸ Working outside allows children to lead their learning by investigating inquiries (for example, colour, shape, patterns, insects, weather, seasons, changes in the landscape, estimation, measurement, movement, sustainability, how living things are affected by their environment or other interests). Older children can undertake more sustained projects and inquiries about meaningful topics. This provides the opportunity to plan, make decisions and apply skills they have acquired and interact in collaborative group work.



^{2,7,8} Click on reference number for further information. All references are available at <https://www.natureplaywa.org.au/webinar-references>



Emotional and social skills are enhanced

Learning outdoors in a less structured and more physical style creates a calming environment for children and enhances wellbeing. A multisensory approach strengthens the retention of knowledge and understanding. Brussoni et al. (2017) cite readiness for learning, emotional regulation and social development, and increased physical activity as benefits of children's ongoing and repeated exposure to natural play environments.⁹

Dispositions for lifelong learning

Developing lifelong skills and dispositions for learning such as curiosity, confidence, persistence, courage, trust, and confidence, requires regular and ongoing outdoor experiences.² Teachers should plan to allow sufficient time for exploration, play and learning. Part of the appeal of being outside is a calmer, more natural and less rushed experience.

The teacher's role in outdoor play and learning

The role of the teacher, therefore, is to observe what the children do and how they react to the environment. Trusting children to be responsible and lead their own learning is a skill for the teacher and results in more independent and competent children. The teacher must ensure there is an absence of hazards and teach children to identify benefits and assess risks. Dowdell, Gray & Malone (2011), state that by supporting children in managing themselves and making their own choices and decisions, they will participate in outdoor experiences safely.¹⁰

Memories

There are many, many benefits to children learning in outdoor and natural environments and opportunities for teachers to intentionally plan integrated programs and inquiries across several learning areas while fully supporting the general capabilities such as critical and creative thinking.⁴ Children will remember these times as “the best days of our lives”!



^{2,4,9,10} Click on reference number for further information. All references are available at <https://www.natureplaywa.org.au/webinar-references>