

# PLAY SPACE GUIDE

Creating valuable places to play and learn outdoors  
**in Western Australian schools**



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“A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it.”<sup>1</sup>

**RENOWNED NEW YORK ARCHITECT RICHARD DATTNER’S** inspirational quote suggests that a playground could be like an interpretive trail of exploration and discovery. To achieve this outcome in the school context we need to be consultative, exercise creativity, and be thoughtful. Above all, we need to see the world through the eyes of the student’s.

There is growing momentum in Australia and around the world to broaden our understanding

of the traditional ‘playground’ concept. For this reason the term ‘play space’ is suggested, as it incorporates a greater range of play experiences that might be suitable for students. For instance, gardens, art, music pieces, places to socially interact and outdoor classrooms may be included within any play space. A broader notion of ‘play spaces’ also recognises the valuable way in which play contributes to child development and learning outcomes. Supporting a broader range of play experiences also complements and extends the classroom learning environment.

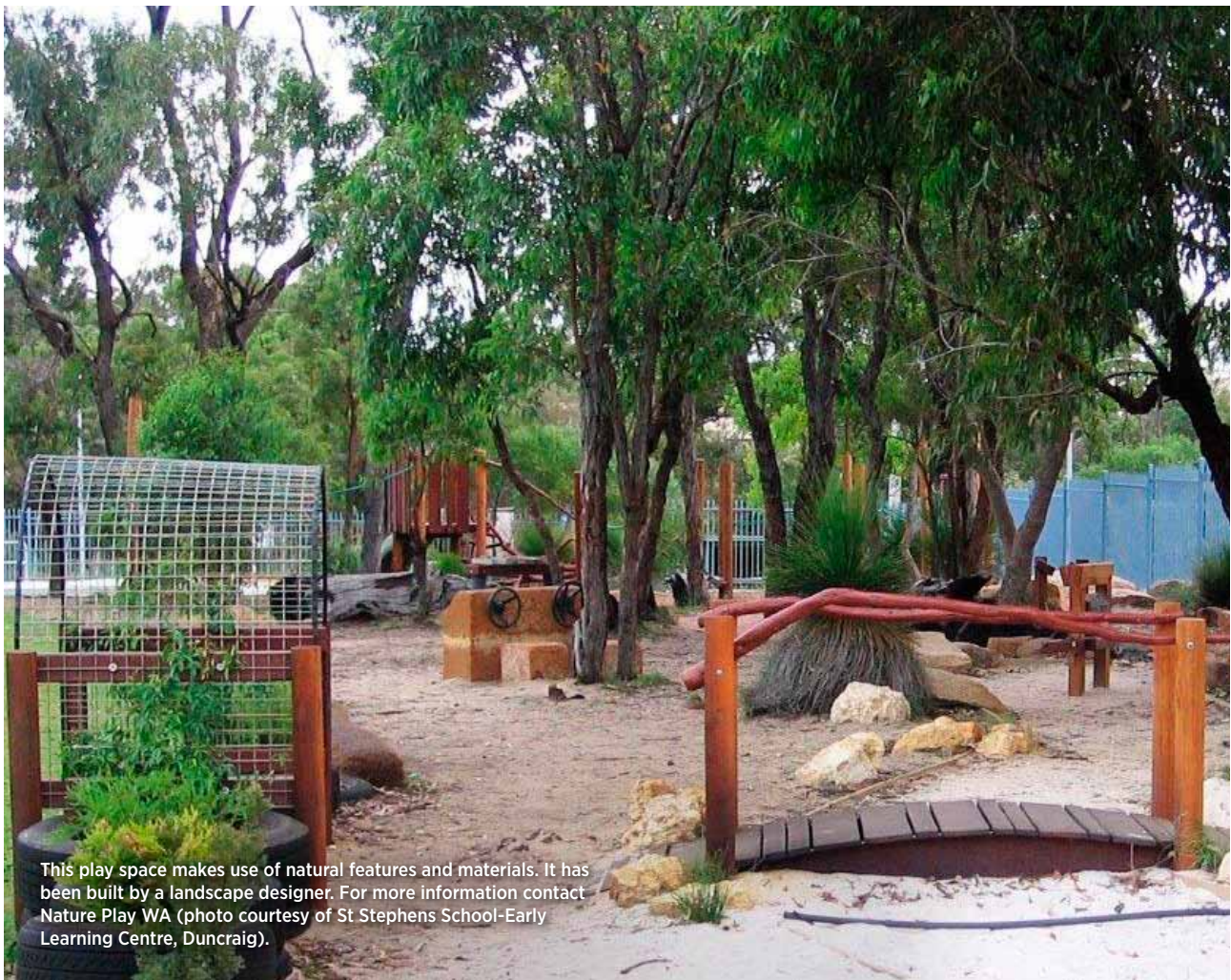
Best practice play spaces provide contact with nature, stimulate students’ creativity and imagination, and encourage ‘active play.’ As much as play spaces need to be safe they also need to be challenging for students. For some practitioners, this may present a dilemma, but it need not. There is plenty of support available



This play space features an outdoor classroom at Redcliffe Primary School (photo courtesy of Nature Play WA).

<sup>1</sup> Dattner, R. (1969). In *Design for Play* (p. 44). Cambridge: MIT Press.





to assist schools to achieve the balance. The purpose of this Guide is to advise principals, teachers, parents and citizens committees, and school boards of the latest research and ideas that may assist schools to build the “best play spaces” that support the development needs of their students and compliment learning outcomes.

A play space may be nature based, use prefabricated equipment or incorporate elements of both. With mounting research indicating the benefits of natural elements for children, and evidence that children desire play in natural areas<sup>2</sup>, schools are encouraged to incorporate nature into their play space design as much as possible<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of this Guide is to advise principals, teachers, parents and citizens committees, and school boards of the latest research and ideas that may assist schools to build the “best play spaces” that support the development needs of their students and compliment learning outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> Martin K and Wood L (2013 (in Press)). *'We live here too'... what makes a child friendly neighbourhood?* Wellbeing and the Environment. Cooper R, Wood G and Burton E, Wiley-Blackwell publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Read more about the research behind the differences between the two forms of play spaces at the website: <http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com/research.php>.





This teepee tent functions as a play space and a classroom. It is centrally located to the school and incorporates a vegetable garden (photo courtesy of Singleton Primary School).

## Best practice play spaces

**AS WELL AS THE VALUE OF PLAY ITSELF, PLAY** spaces provide important learning opportunities for students. A compelling body of evidence<sup>4</sup> has shown that through play in nature, children improve cognitively, emotionally, socially, physically and behaviourally. Furthermore, research<sup>4</sup> identifies that play and learning are inseparable dimensions particularly in early schooling years and that teachers achieve the best educational results when they focus on supporting children's play.

The Early Years Learning Framework for children from birth to five years of age emphasises the need for a 'play based learning context', with a **focus on the natural** environment (Outcomes 2,3 and 4), so that children may learn about the social world<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, K. (2010). *Putting Nature back into Nurture: The Benefits of Nature for Children*. Perth, Western Australia, Department of Sport and Recreation, The Government of Western Australia.

**Proactively providing opportunities to play in nature is more critical than it was for past generations of children**, as their opportunity to do so spontaneously has diminished in the face of more built up suburbs, manicured parks and backyards, restricted freedom to roam within their neighbourhood, and greater time spent in sedentary and indoor activity<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Details of the Early Years Learning Framework are available from the Australian Government's, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website: <http://deewr.gov.au/early-years-learning-framework>. For information on the outcomes refer to the key document *Belonging, Being & Becoming-The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, K. and L. Wood. "'We Live Here Too'.... What Makes a Child Friendly Neighbourhood?" In *Wellbeing: A Complete Reference Guide*, edited by Rachel Davies-Cooper and Cary Cooper Elizabeth Burton: Wiley-Blackwell publishing, 2013 (in press).

A compelling body of evidence<sup>4</sup> has shown that through play in nature, children improve cognitively, emotionally, socially, physically and behaviourally.

Beyond the early years, play and outdoor environments are still vitally important for students across the primary school years. An outdoor play space can become part of the teaching environment for a range of Australian Curriculum outcomes, including personal and social competence, literacy and numeracy, critical and creative thinking, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding, as well as the cross curriculum priority of sustainability. As students transition into adolescence and high school the nature of play changes, but is still an important part of development, and older students also benefit from outdoor environments in which they can be exposed to nature, participate in physical activity, socialize with peers or undertake learning activities in a different setting.

Play spaces also foster physical movement which results in many benefits for students. According to the draft Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education<sup>7</sup> paper “Movement is a powerful medium for learning through which students can acquire, practice and refine personal, interpersonal, behavioural, social and cognitive skills”.

Play spaces also provide environments for students to gain two hours of physical activity per week during class time as mandated by the Department of Education in Western Australia.

Researchers from the University of Western Australia’s Centre for the Built Environment and Health have summarised the evidence describing elements of a good play space<sup>8</sup>. This includes creating environments that encourage physical activity, social interaction, creativity, imagination

and problem solving, as well as contact and interaction with nature. Accumulating evidence points to the health and developmental benefits of contact with nature, such as improved cognitive function, increased creativity, improved interaction with adults, reduced attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and reduced rates of aggression<sup>8</sup>. In summary, a good play space can achieve so much!

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<sup>7</sup> Details of the draft *Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education Foundation to Year 10* (Dec 2012) are available on the Australian Curriculum website: [www.australiancurriculum.edu.au](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au).

<sup>8</sup> A report summarising the benefits of nature for children can be found on the Centre for the Built Environment and Health website: <http://www.sph.uwa.edu.au/research/cbeh/projects/childsplay>.

# Where to start

## RESEARCH SHOWS THAT PLAY SPACES

designed by adults for students may not be as interesting or stimulating as they could be<sup>9</sup>. Adults often lose the art of play, and see the world differently. The best way to find out about a “good play space” is to talk to students about their experiences, about what works and what doesn’t, and observe how they like to play.

It is important students are involved in the planning, design and implementation of any play space. This will help to foster stewardship for the play space. Teachers from the different years of learning can also provide advice about their play space objectives. A play space can function as a learning space or as an extension of the classroom. Getting ideas from other schools and pictures of play spaces may also help. Case studies about innovative play spaces developed at other schools may also be useful - links are available at the end of this Guide.

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Community involvement has the potential to enhance the play space and helps to build a sense of ownership and commitment toward the school. This process may involve talking with parents, the local parents and citizens committee, or your local government representatives. Parent, community or local business donations of help or materials can also be a great asset when budgets are tight.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin K and Wood L (2013 (in Press). 'We live here too'... what makes a child friendly neighbourhood? *Wellbeing and the Environment*. Cooper R, Wood G and Burton E, Wiley-Blackwell publishing.



Everyone has an idea of what makes a good play space. Please talk with your clients (photo courtesy of St Stephen's School- Early Learning Centre, Duncraig).





## Give it some thought

### THOUGHTFUL PLANNING RESULTS IN BETTER

play spaces that are exciting, aesthetically pleasing and engaging for students, and can enhance links to learning areas (e.g. landscaping with a sensory garden or plants native to the area).

When developing a play space it is necessary to get a ‘feel’ for the project site and to look for ways to make the most of the existing space and landscape.

When planning the project, breaking down the scope of the work into stages assists with development. This will help to identify the major tasks that make up the collective whole. The design component phase of the project can be time consuming and needs to include consultation with students, staff, parents, gardeners and other people that the play space will impact upon. When developing a play space it is necessary to get a ‘feel’ for the project site and to look for ways to make the most of the existing space and landscape (for example, retaining slopes, incorporating existing trees and plants into the design).

Although the design is important, “over designing” the play space can take away the opportunity for students to engage in creative play and discovery. Play spaces are primarily for play and to be fun.



In some cases it may be worthwhile to appoint a project manager to oversee the development of the play space. A project manager has good communication, conceptual and analytical skills. This person needs to have passion for the work, and the ability to ‘get things done’ in a consultative and logical manner. This could be, for example, a member of staff or a member of the parents and citizens’ committee.

Project management need not be complicated. It is a simple process that involves planning, implementation and review stages. In the first instance, the project manager should establish the scope of the work to be done. This will be informed by a design concept, the available resources, the budget and the time frame. Developing routine maintenance inspections and strategies at this development phase will assist with the future success of the play space.

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# Innovation

**THERE ARE MANY PLAY SPACE OPTIONS, AND** no need to limit choices. While it may seem easier to select playground equipment from a catalogue, it pays to research the options, and get some design ideas that may be more suited to the school's needs.

Having a bold and 'unique' play space is becoming a marketing asset for schools.

The latest research provides examples of innovative play spaces. Borrowing ideas from others (including other schools or innovative elements seen at parks) can reduce the design

burden or alternatively introducing completely new ideas may be easier. Having a bold and 'unique' play space is becoming a marketing asset for schools.

Play spaces need not be cost prohibitive. By using recycled materials, in-kind labour and by implementing simple play space designs, the overall cost of the play space can be minimised. For instance, sand is a cheap form of soft fall and a great play medium. Immediate costs can be reduced by staging the project over time.



Students play musical instruments and listen to the sound in this play space (photo courtesy of Mullaloo Community Kindergarten, Mullaloo).



## Some layout and design tips

### THE DESIGN AND LAYOUT OF THE PLAY SPACE

needs to be considered within the school context and environment. There are varying age groups and capabilities amongst primary school students, with different requirements and preferences. By offering a wide range of activities, it is possible to meet these different needs. This can be more easily achieved through play spaces that are open-ended and can be modified by students. Different play spaces can be integrated through connecting pathways, trails, or a recurrent theme, so that students do not feel isolated.

There are varying age groups and capabilities amongst primary school students, with different requirements and preferences. By offering a wide range of activities, it is possible to meet these different needs.

The best play spaces remain relevant over time and are changeable, where students continue to use and enjoy them, and are able to play imaginatively and interactively. This could be achieved by providing loose materials (e.g. for building cubbies), and adding new features (e.g. new paths or stepping stones, a dry creek bed) or introducing new stages to the play space to keep it fresh and creative.

The location of the play space in relation to the school is important. For instance connection between the play space and the classroom, toilets, oval and other facilities helps to build a cohesive environment.

A play space also has the potential to enhance the 'community experience'. Linking to local community gardens, the recreation centre or parent meeting areas (e.g. via pathways, trails, plantings etc) is a strategy that can promote community connection. It is important that the play space design is based on sound, socially responsible principles with an aim to enhance rather than take from the environmental





and social values of the play area<sup>10</sup>.

The schools' surrounding physical and cultural landscape provides many opportunities for play space development. Play spaces should be integrated into the environment, and borrow elements from it, to enhance the students experience.<sup>11</sup>

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Schools may seek professional assistance or chose to complete the play space design task. There are now a growing number of designers who can work with schools to develop nature based creative play spaces – a list of these can be found on the Nature Play WA website. Other schools have parents with skills in landscaping, or play space design that may assist with ideas or drawings for a design concept.



<sup>10</sup> For more information visit the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative-WA website: [www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculumsupport/sustainableschools](http://www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculumsupport/sustainableschools).

<sup>11</sup> For more information visit the City of Swan Play Space Strategy on the website: [swan.wa.gov.au/Our\\_City/Corporate\\_Publications/City\\_Plans\\_and\\_Strategies](http://swan.wa.gov.au/Our_City/Corporate_Publications/City_Plans_and_Strategies).



Students have temporarily decorated these poles adding colour and vibrancy. It is important that students have the opportunity to be creative and modify their play areas as they want. Note the woodchip materials used as soft fall (photo courtesy of Quintilian Early Learning Centre, Claremont).



There are so many ways to make furniture attractive and fun (photo courtesy of Harmony Primary School, Bertram).

## Apply the necessary standards

**THERE ARE A NUMBER OF STATE AND AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT** standards that apply to play spaces. It is important that these are considered and applied as appropriate; however, schools need not be overwhelmed. Risk aversion needs to be balanced with the essential need for play to incorporate challenges and child development needs. Play spaces need to offer challenges as well as adhering to safety standards.

Following is a sample of standards that may apply but by no means is it an exhaustive list:

- Australian Standards for Playgrounds<sup>12</sup> ([www.standards.org](http://www.standards.org)); and

<sup>12</sup> As noted on the WA Kidsafe website, "the Australian Standards for playgrounds recognise that children need opportunities to experience risk and challenge in playgrounds" <http://www.kidsafewa.com.au/playgroundhazards.html>.

- the Guide to the National Quality Standards (<http://acecqa.gov.au>).

(It is pertinent to note that many of the standards relate to prefabricated playground equipment.)

There are various measures to address safety. Aside from good play space design, high quality construction standards and regular maintenance, schools should also ensure that younger students are adequately supervised, as appropriate.

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## Find out more

### **NATURE PLAY WA IS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT**

organisation dedicated to making unstructured outdoor play a normal part of every WA child's life, so they can develop into resilient, healthy and creative members of the community. Nature Play WA offers advice on nature playgrounds and has a list of schools that have built nature based play areas.<sup>13</sup> There is also a list of playground designers.<sup>14</sup>

Child's Play is a research project grounded in the 'real world' being undertaken at the University of Western Australia's Centre for the Built Environment and Health (CBEH). The research focuses on the importance of play and nature for children and young people, and looks at how play opportunities can be enhanced in parks, schools and communities. The resource entitled *What makes a good play area for children* is a useful resource for decision makers prior to developing play spaces. CBEH have also prepared several case studies on play spaces.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> These case studies are available on the website: <http://www.natureplaywa.org.au/case-studies>.

<sup>14</sup> For more information visit the website: <http://www.natureplaywa.org.au/designers>.

<sup>15</sup> For more information visit the website: <http://www.sph.uwa.edu.au/research/cbeh/projects/childsplay>.

The Building Spaces and Places for Children and Young People is an excellent resource released by the Commission for Children and Young People, which may assist with the design process of your play space.<sup>16</sup>

The research focuses on the importance of play and nature for children and young people, and looks at how play opportunities can be enhanced in parks, schools and communities.

In Western Australia the not for profit organisation Kidsafe offers a playground advisory service (specialising in natural play areas) to schools. The aim of the service is to "help create and maintain play spaces that support children's development, learning, health and well-being while reducing the risk of serious injury".

<sup>16</sup> For more information visit the Commissioner for Children and Young People website: <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au>.

There is a lot of helpful information for planning play spaces on the Kidsafe website: [www.kidsafewa.com.au](http://www.kidsafewa.com.au), or schools can discuss their proposals with the Kidsafe advisors.

The aim of the service is to “help create and maintain play spaces that support children’s development, learning, health and well-being while reducing the risk of serious injury”.

There are a growing number of more innovative or natural play areas in parks throughout Western Australia. A visit to these may provide some ideas, and/or a discussion with the planners may provide some insight into the planning and construction process for play areas. The Botanic

Gardens and Parks Authority website: <http://www.bgpa.wa.gov.au/> provides information on Rio Tinto Naturescape in Kings Park.

Other play areas that may provide inspiration include the new Woodbridge Riverside play space, the Kadidjini Park in the City of Melville and the new nature based play space in Swanbourne, which is a good example of what can be done in a relatively small space. By no means is this an exhaustive list and there are other nature based examples elsewhere.

The connection between outdoor play and the early years of learning in the United Kingdom can be explored on the website: [admiralplay.co.uk/education-earlyyears.html](http://admiralplay.co.uk/education-earlyyears.html).



These students have their own private space. A key design element for play spaces is some quiet areas, nooks and crannies (photo courtesy of Quintilian Primary School, Claremont).





This play space uses natural materials to create a rustic feel, yet manages to incorporate the necessary safety features (photo courtesy of Quintilian Primary School, Claremont)

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A recently released study examining the effects of nature based experiences on creativity and problem solving amongst hikers in the United States of America provides valuable information. Visit the website: [www.plosone.org](http://www.plosone.org) and enter the article code e51474 to read, "Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings".

To find out more about the lessons learned from students on play spaces visit the website: [propertyobserver.com.au/design/brooks-reach-estate-developer-gets-playground-lesson-from-school-kids](http://propertyobserver.com.au/design/brooks-reach-estate-developer-gets-playground-lesson-from-school-kids).

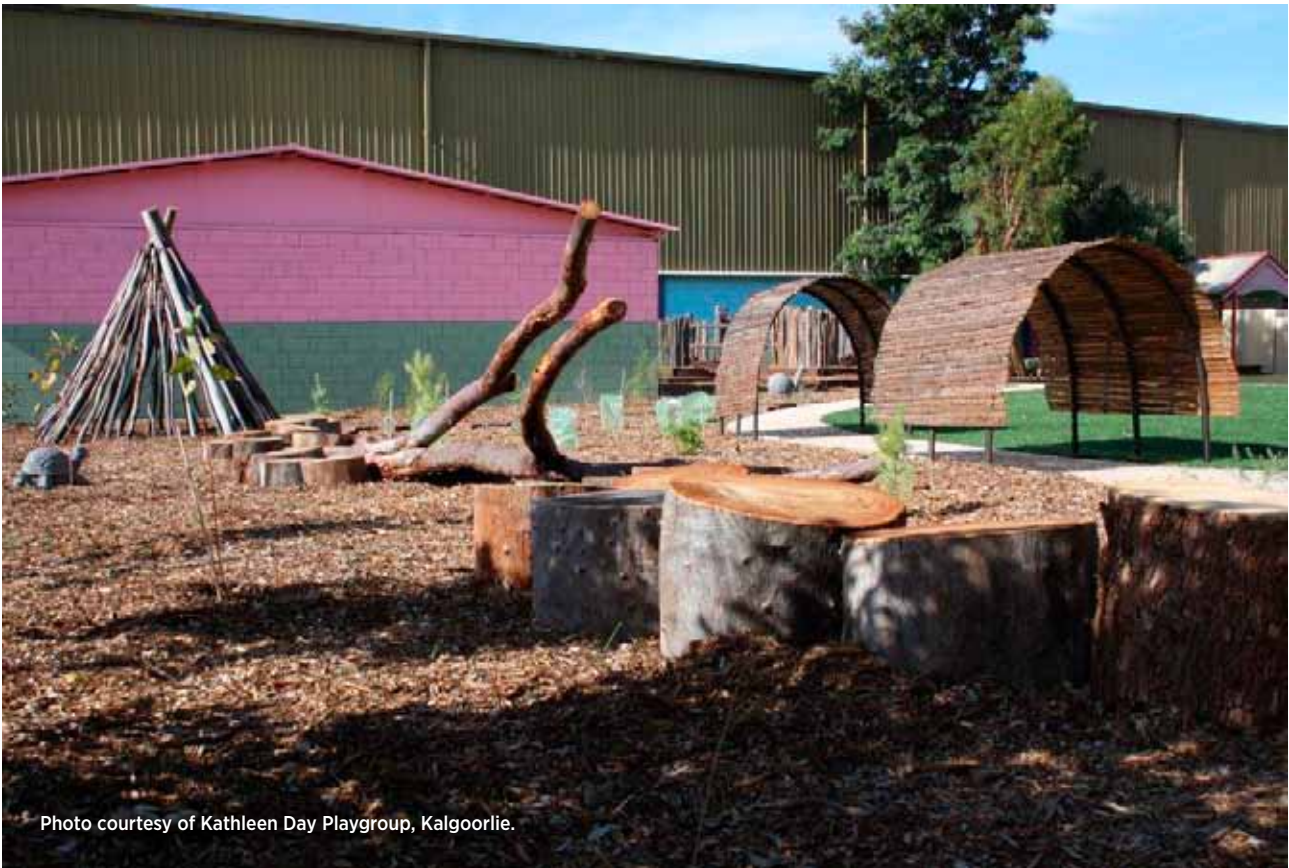


Photo courtesy of Kathleen Day Playgroup, Kalgoorlie.

## Acknowledgements

This Guide is a collaboration between The University of Western Australia's Centre for the Built Environment and Health and various schools from the public, Catholic and independent sectors. It showcases elements of best practice play spaces designed to suit the needs of schools in Western Australia.

The principles of good play spaces and examples provided in this guide were drawn from a review of evidence undertaken by the Centre for the Built Environment, The University of Western Australia.

Written permission was obtained for all photographs contained within this document.