

Kids & nature in Melbourne's north missing out – more bush kinders needed now says Friends of Merri Creek

The children of Melbourne's northern suburbs are missing out on the health and social benefits of interacting with nature as the result of a bush kindergarten shortage said Friends of Merri Creek's (FoMC) President Nick Williams.

As access to open space and parklands is diminishing as the result of Melbourne's population and building boom, there has been a dramatic shift from childhood activities from outdoor to indoor play. The consequences of spending time in front of TV screens and computers instead of playing outdoors is seen in increased rates of obesity, diabetes and mental illness in youngsters.

The development of bush kindergartens reflects the mounting body of evidence that outdoor activities such as exploring natural environments, are good for children and improve their health and wellbeing said Nick Williams.

There are over 350 bush kinders or nature playgroup programs in Victoria, and the number is growing rapidly.

Demonstrating the growing popularity of nature play, Nature Play Week in April 2019 included 150 events across Victoria with an estimated 15,000 participants.

A study by the Kids in Nature Network in 2016-17 identified a growing and unmet demand for nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder programs in Victoria. It found that 90% of programs were delivered in Eastern Melbourne – indicating a major gap in the northern suburbs.

The Kids in Nature Network study report outlines the benefits of nature play and active outdoor learning: "When children are outside, they move more, sit less and play longer. These behaviours are associated with improved physical and mental health and improved cognitive and social skills.

"Children are more curious about and interested in natural play spaces than pre-fabricated play structures.

"Children who engage in active outdoor play in natural environments demonstrate resilience, self-regulation and develop skills for dealing with stress later in life. Outdoor play in minimally structured, free and accessible local environments facilitates socialisation and connection with peers, the community and the environment, reduces feelings of isolation, builds interpersonal skills and facilitates healthy development."

Parks and reserves are fantastic places for children to run, jump, explore and learn. Research shows it's good for them. Children who learn outdoors are less disruptive, show improved social skills, motor skills and physical health, and develop resilience, self-awareness, self-esteem, independence and the list goes on.

An ideal outdoor classroom is an open space amongst natural bushland with low grass and minimal ground cover. This allows children to explore independently while remaining within the supervisors' line of sight.

It also allows easy identification of any ground hazards and minimises trampling, which can damage the undergrowth.

Nick Williams concluded, "FoMC would like to see a strategy prepared that identifies potential nature play sites and how they can be made accessible and resilient, along the Merri Creek from Clifton Hill to Craigieburn and in the new suburbs to the north. Local Councils are best placed to develop this strategy, along with Merri Creek Management Committee".

"A site that has great potential as a bush kinder / nature play site with some tree planting, logs and basic visitor facilities is 1 – 17 Leonard Street Fawkner that was recently purchased by Moreland City Council from the State Government".

ENDS

Issued by: Friends of Merri Creek www.friendsofmerricreek.org.au

Media enquiries: Mr. Joe Perri,
T: 0412 112 545 E: jperri@joeperry.com.au

Contacts

Joe Perri & Associates
+61412112545
[mailto: jperri@joeperry.com.au](mailto:jperri@joeperry.com.au)