

# Nature Play isn't an option, it's a necessity!

15th December 2020

On the 10th of December, the NSW outdoor education sector came together to discuss the development and growth of Nature Play in the state. WA, QLD, SA, ACT, and VIC all have dedicated nature play organisations, so this was an important action for inclusion across a range of industries including urban planning, preventative and restorative health care, active recreation as well as primary and early years education.

Hosted by Outdoors NSW & ACT and facilitated by Sam Crosby, Greater Sydney Parklands, there was an overwhelming 100 registrations for the one-and-a-half-hour event which proved the interest in the effort to do more.

"It was so pleasing to hear that we have a united voice when it comes to the importance of nature play in this state", said Lori Modde, CEO of Outdoors NSW & ACT. "We had representation from Nature Play Australia, Network of Community Activities, NSW Early Years Nature Connections group, Australian Association of Environment Education, early childhood practitioners, environmental educators, local councils, out of hours school care providers, landscape architects, urban planners, park managers, parents, and researchers".

Western Sydney University published a research paper, "Wild Play Garden" (Dobia, Truong, Ward, Regalado, 2019) that deduced nature play exposes children to risk in order to learn and increase resilience. Parents noticed their children enjoying the freedom to explore and to take risks in a safe environment. This is one of many research articles that prove the benefits of playing, learning, and being educated outdoors.

"There is much current research about nature play and in support, we know it has benefits and those practicing can demonstrate these. What we now need is a wide-ranging association that invites more people; practitioners, teachers, and children to access nature play so we can provide results for children and families", said Fran Hughes who is the convenor of a professional development networking group known as NSW Early Years Nature Connections.

"Increase social, physical and language skills, increased resilience, self-management, cooperation with others, increase imaginative play, develop positive relationships with self, others and the environment to name a few".

As a result of demand and need, the Greater Sydney Parklands are currently developing a Nature Play Strategy in partnership with many stakeholders across NSW, including Outdoors NSW & ACT, Network of Community Activities to name a few, that will take form in 2021.

"We saw the effects of COVID on our kids and youth so it's so important we move on these solid findings and start with the younger years on getting them outdoors, playing, and discovering nature more." Says Mrs. Modde.

In a research paper about growing up in a digital age in Australia by the Gonski Institute in 2020, 84% of teachers surveyed believe that digital technologies are a growing distraction in the learning environment. More than nine of ten educators think that the number of children with psychological, social, and behavioural challenges has increased in the last 3 – 5 years. Empathy has also declined, as well as student physical activity.

As we were coming out of lockdown Tom Mulvaney, Psychologist, and Co-Leader of Policy at the Australian Association for Bush Adventure Therapy spoke to the media on a similar line, "We need to keep people physically and mentally well through a system that caters for a safe, stable and connected time in the outdoors. Going outdoors is one cost-effective and safe way to support physical, mental, and social wellbeing and prevent longer-term ill health".

Sam Crosby from Greater Sydney Parklands who facilitated the forum said, "Bringing together a wide spectrum of people and organisations to discuss the opportunities that nature play can bring was extremely inspiring and I look forward to building on the success of this forum to develop a movement for nature play in NSW and all of the benefits it brings for children and families."

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