

NATURE PLAY HANDBOOK



City of
STONNINGTON



Acknowledgments

Thanks to Parks Victoria for their assistance in developing this handbook and Ewing Kindergarten for their case study and nature play photos.

Council recognises and accepts its responsibility to learn from, and promote the intrinsic value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, heritage and contemporary aspirations to the wider community, understanding that this enriches Australia's heritage and our community.

Council acknowledges that nature play activities in Stonnington take place on the Traditional land of the Boon Wurrung and Wurunjderi People, and we offer our respects to the Elders past and present. Council recognises and respects the cultural heritage of this land.

Orrong Romanis Reserve



Exploring and playing in the outdoors has many benefits for children, including connection to nature, health, wellbeing and cognitive development.

The City of Stonnington encourages early education and care providers to embed regular outdoor learning experiences into their programs, and families to explore the outdoors and local biodiversity with their children.

This handbook helps families and educators in Stonnington locate appropriate green spaces to develop meaningful nature play experiences and educational programs for children.



▼ What is nature play?

Nature play involves regular, play based learning sessions where children participate in outdoor activities in a local green space.

These can be unstructured such as free play and experimenting, or more structured activities such as guided walks, observational drawings and plant and animal identification.

Nature play can incorporate:

- ▶ Diverse sensory elements and landscapes such as hills, flowers, water and dirt
- ▶ Loose materials for play such as logs, bark and leaves
- ▶ Risk and challenge such as balancing and climbing
- ▶ Novelty and change such as seasons, colours and growth
- ▶ Connecting to Indigenous meaning and significance of place

"No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced." – *Sir David Attenborough*

Nature play and environmental stewardship

Children are increasingly disconnected from nature due to spending more time indoors and a lack of access to outdoor spaces. Regular outdoor learning experiences lead to positive gains in connection to nature, ecological knowledge and environmental stewardship (Andrejewski, 2011).

Parents and early learning educators are uniquely placed to enable children to experience nature by developing regular outdoor learning experiences.

By taking learning beyond the four walls of a classroom you will create hands on, experiential learning opportunities while developing nature literacy and stewardship.

Facilitating these experiences will benefit the health and wellbeing of young learners, while also ensuring future generations care about our natural environment.

Health, wellbeing and cognitive development

The benefits of outdoor activities, particularly for the health, wellbeing and development of children are well known. They include improved focus, motor skills and physical health, and developed social skills, resilience, self-awareness, self-esteem and independence (Townsend et al, 2015).

In addition, unstructured play in a natural outdoor space encourages 'richer imaginative play; increased physical activity; calmer, more focused play; and positive social interaction' (Nedovic, 2013).



Fitting into the Early Years Framework

Outdoor learning is explicitly highlighted as an important feature of Australian learning environments in the Early Years Learning Framework.

The framework states:

(Outdoor learning environments) 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, confidence-building, 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 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2009).



OUTCOME 01

Identity

Children construct their identity partially through their relationship with place. Learning outdoors helps children to confidently explore their physical environment and strengthens their relationship with nature to build and explore their own identity.

OUTCOME 03

Wellbeing

Outdoor environments enable children to develop sensory capabilities and become physically and mentally resilient through independent and cooperative exploration and discovery.

OUTCOME 05

Communication

Children draw upon their natural environment to develop stories, create art and develop imaginary worlds with their peers.

OUTCOME 02

Connection to their world

Nature play lets children explore relationships between land, people, plants and animals and develop respect for their natural environment.

OUTCOME 04

Involved learners

Outdoor experiences provide children with dynamic challenges, fostering problem solving, experimentation and imagination.

Managing safety and risks outdoors

It is important to ensure an outdoor space is safe for nature play activities. For educators this means ensuring appropriate risk protocols are in place with regular evaluation each time you revisit a space.

RISK MITIGATION EXAMPLES

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Weather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Check weather prior to departure ▶ Locate designated shelter point ▶ Ensure children have appropriate clothing ▶ Consider location of session based on sun, strong wind or rain ▶ Keep first aid kit on hand
Tripping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Assess terrain to identify hazards; additional supervision may be required ▶ Ensure students have appropriate footwear ▶ Keep first aid kit on hand
Falling branches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Check for signage regarding park tree maintenance ▶ Avoid large trees in high winds ▶ Listen for cracks and groans of tree branches ▶ Keep first aid kit on hand
Interaction with animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Maintain a safe distance from animals, including dogs ▶ Instruct children not to pat unknown dogs prior to session ▶ Instruct children not to touch dead animals and notify staff if found at the site
Interaction with strangers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discuss stranger protocol with children ▶ Maintain constant supervision ▶ Run session away from other park users
Water safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Maintain safe distance from water ▶ Maintain constant supervision ▶ Maintain supervision ratios
Bites, stings and irritants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Instruct children to keep hands and fingers where you can see them ▶ Instruct children not to touch insects or pick up plants ▶ Keep first aid kit on hand

Please note, these mitigation strategies are provided as a guide only as each space, group of students and specific activities will come with their own risk.

Activities

There are a number of learning activities that can be undertaken in Stonnington's parks and green spaces.

See page eight to find one close to you.

Scavenger hunts

Looking for natural objects can help students see things they may not have noticed. These can be categorised by size, shape, colour and textures and provide a fun opportunity to develop maths and language skills. Children can draw or take photos of the items they find.

Please do not take items home with you. Leave them there for the next group to enjoy or even re-find them on your next visit.



Stick cubbies

Building cubbies allows children to create, collaborate and problem solve while having fun. You can extend on this by discussing what makes a good shelter, the different requirements for humans, animals or insects and any design features they could include.

When selecting materials it is important to only use materials such as sticks and bark that are already on the ground. It is also important to dismantle cubbies and redistribute materials.



Befriending trees

Encouraging children to look up at the tree canopy above them expands their view of a natural space. Have children closely observe trees and use their senses to explore and describe features, like feeling bark texture or smelling leaves. This fosters deeper understanding of trees and develops children's descriptive language.



Eastern Spinebill

Listening walk

Outdoor spaces are rich with sounds that provide learning opportunities for children. Have children stay silent, then identify and describe the things they can hear to predict what might be making the sound. This can help to build language and curiosity.

Species identification

Children can look for animals and insects, search for tracks and describe the different plants they can see. They can discuss how we identify different animals (e.g. birds have wings) and what different animals might need to survive. Children can expand on this and create temporary, animal specific hotels based on their needs.



Southern Brown Frog

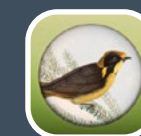
There are a number of apps that can be used to help identify animals:



► iNaturalist



► Frog Census



► Museums Victoria's Field Guide app to Victorian Fauna



► ClimateWatch



Activity ideas and resources

- ▶ **Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network**
earlychildhoodoutdoorlearning.weebly.com/
- ▶ **David Suzuki Foundation: Connecting Youth with Nature**
getbackoutside.ca/#youth
- ▶ **Kids in Nature Network**
kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au
- ▶ **Royal Botanic Gardens teacher resources**
rbg.vic.gov.au/learn/teacher-resources
- ▶ **Parks Victoria educational resources**
parks.vic.gov.au/learn
- ▶ **Nature Play Australia**
natureplay.org.au
- ▶ **Department of Victoria Bush Kinder Information**
education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/bushkinders.aspx



Steps for educators to get started with nature play:

- 01 / Find a suitable park (see map)
- 02 / Visit the park and conduct risk assessment
- 03 / Communicate your program with parents and children
- 04 / Let us know by emailing environment@stonnington.vic.gov.au with information on your program, including site, dates and times of visits and number of students involved
- 05 / Check the park and weather conditions on day
- 06 / Have fun!



Respecting the spaces

A key part of nature play is developing respect and care for nature while exploring, playing and learning. It is important to discuss this and reinforce the message frequently with children.

In Stonnington we ask that you:

01 / Leave the space the way you found it by:

- ▶ leaving plants, shells, logs and rocks behind
- ▶ redistributing any stick/rock piles, stick cubbies etc.
- ▶ taking all food scraps and rubbish with you.

02 / Respect the plants and animals by:

- ▶ not pulling out plants or ripping off leaves
- ▶ not trampling small plants
- ▶ not feeding or scaring any animals
- ▶ checking before entering garden beds.



Hardenbergia seedling at Urban Forest



Ducks at Glen Iris wetlands



Southern Brown Frog at Glen Iris Wetlands



Grevillea at Toorong Park



Wiry Daisy at Darling Park

Finding a space

Stonnington City Council has a number of parks and green spaces that can be utilised for nature play. Use this map to find one close to you.

An initial visit to potential sites will allow you to select a space that best suits your children, activity and safety requirements. In general, sites with some open spaces are preferable as they provide the opportunity for independent exploration while allowing supervisors to maintain line of sight of the children. Low grass and minimal ground cover are also beneficial as they allow easy identification of any ground hazards and minimise the risk of trampling.

You can also support children to learn about and connect with the Indigenous history and significance of specific sites in Stonnington by exploring Council's map of Indigenous heritage markers on our website:

stonnington.vic.gov.au/About/Our-community/History/Heritage-Markers/Indigenous-history-markers



Parks and Reserves with capacity and green spaces for the nature play program.



Case Study: Ewing Kindergarten

Ewing Kindergarten has been running a nature play program for students at Hedgeley Dene Gardens. We've had a chat with Libby, one of the educators, on how the program runs to help you set up your own nature play program.

01 /

Can you give us an overview your Nature play program?

2019 was always to be our 'pilot' year where we familiarised ourselves with the park, how the children would interact with the space and how we connected with all stakeholders (families, educators, gardeners, Council, local users of the park).

It has been important to connect with the gardener and Council officer for guidance on safety and which space is suitable for children to explore freely.

The children arrive at the park in the morning with amazing smiles on their faces, jumping with excitement. There is a wonderful big tree and a big variety of plants and animal/bird life to explore. The 3.5 hours go by very quickly, but the children get tired and hungry by the end, despite their morning snack and being able to rest at the park whenever they need to.

We have found the children are developing a close connection with nature and through this developing a desire to care for nature.





02 /

What inspired you to set this up in the first place?

The benefits of nature play/bush kinder are well known now in early childhood circles. Research is saying that all children need to be ready for school is to play in nature.

As well as the physical benefits of outdoor play there is growing evidence that suggests that children's mental health and emotional wellbeing is enhanced by being outdoors.

Nature kinder gives children space to test ideas and put the information they have learned elsewhere into a different context. They can work on their own or in groups, developing socially by interacting not only with their peers, but also with adults.

The ratio of adults to children is kept high as this enables the children to have maximum freedom to create and explore. Nature kinder also offers adults a real chance to be led by the children, and to observe them in a different light. As children's interests emerge, future sessions are planned to suit their explorations.

Adults are often in different roles than the traditional kindergarten environment and the children respond accordingly. Children are helped, tested and challenged and all efforts are praised. There is an atmosphere of positivity, imagination and creativity and throughout, the children are developing their language and communication skills in a variety of ways.

03 /

What kind of activities do the students participate in?

During a typical nature kinder session, children benefit from a range of experiences. They will have time to explore and expand their horizons whilst learning about and managing risks themselves.

Children agree on rules and boundaries and are taught how to behave safely in the natural environment (moving sticks, observing water and insect life, feeling weather and watching the seasons pass). It is then up to them as to what they would like to do during the session and the freedom to initiate their own learning. This learning is observed and, when necessary, facilitated by the teachers.

Children come together at a morning meeting and snack time or if they have something exciting they wish to share with the group.

So far we have seen the children make imaginary homes among the bushes, collect paper bark to make bags using only natural materials and collect sticks and logs and pretend to be camping. They also learn about and enjoy the variety of bird and insect life, run along and roll in the grass or lay under a tree with the sun on their faces and listen to the sounds of nature. They also care for country by picking up any rubbish they may find.

04 /

What are the biggest challenges of running the program?

We are new to running a nature play program and are learning as we go. The biggest challenges relate to planning. This includes writing up policies, understanding the hazards and ensuring safe adult/child ratios and deciding on boundaries for the children to play in.

While running the sessions our biggest challenge is dealing with toilet stops. At least one educator must accompany the children and sometimes two depending on how many children need to go. This leaves fewer supervising eyes back at the main area of play.



05 /

Do you have any advice for other educators hoping to set up a similar program?

Definitely do it. Start slowly, gather information for policies and procedures as you go. Resist taking extra materials/tools at first. Best to just watch how the children interact with nature. Let them be free to explore.

No need for planned activities such as organised games etc. The children need to learn how to create and imagine play in nature and they will do it instinctively without much help from educators.

References

Andrejewski, R. 2011. Nature connection, outdoor play, and environmental stewardship in residential environmental education, Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University.

Australian Government Department of Education, 2009. Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia.

Nedovic S, Morrissey A-M. Calm active and focused: children's responses to an organic outdoor learning environment, Learning Environments Research. 2013;16(2):281-95.

Townsend, M. Henderson-Wilson, C. Warner, E. and Weiss, L., 2015. Healthy Parks Healthy People: the state of the evidence 2015.



City of
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Community languages

Call the Stonnington Community Link, a multilingual telephone information service.

Mandarin	普通話	9280 0730
Cantonese	廣東話	9280 0731
Greek	Ελληνικά	9280 0732
Italian	Italiano	9280 0733
All other languages		9280 0736

Polish	Polski	9280 0734
Russia	Русский	9280 0735
Indonesian	Bahasa Indonesia	9280 0737
Vietnamese	Tiếng Việt	9280 0748

Service Centres

Stonnington City Centre

311 Glenferrie Road, Malvern

Prahran Town Hall

Corner Chapel and Greville Streets

Depot

293 Tooronga Road, Malvern

Open

Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm

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