

NATURE BASED PLAY AT EAST MANJIMUP

Australian children today spend less time outside playing than at any other time in our history and many schools across Australia are addressing this issue by designing school playgrounds that encourage free and imaginative play. This type of play is known as 'NATURE PLAY' and East Manjimup Primary School is a leader in the district in both implementing Nature Play and educating other schools in regard to the benefits of Nature Play and how to design and build a Nature Playground.



In the past, playing outside in nature was a part of everyday, normal childhood experience; it's the way that most of us, as parents and grandparents, all grew up. We have fond childhood memories of time spent outdoors; building tree houses; catching frogs, splashing in creeks, daydreaming in a special hiding place, building cubbies in the bush, playing make believe games and generally just getting outside and being kids.

These activities, which used to be an integral part of growing up, can all be classified as NATURE BASED PLAY: unstructured childhood play in "wild" areas, whether it's the bit of bush down the street, the local park, on a farm, or even at school. At its very best, nature play isn't scheduled, planned, or led by adults, nor is it confined by grown-ups' rules. Instead, it's open-ended, free-time exploration and recreation, without close adult supervision and done in a natural environment. For many of us, this sort of nature play virtually defined our childhoods.



Unfortunately, many children today are increasingly unable to relate to these experiences. In the space of just one generation, there has been a dramatic shift in childhood activity from outdoors to indoors driven by a number of factors including the advent of new screen-based technologies, smaller backyards, 'stranger danger', parent working hours and the emergence of a risk-averse culture where we are so afraid of children being hurt that we are 'wrapping them in cotton wool!'

Researchers at the University of WA have found that natural playgrounds provide children with more opportunities than typical pre-formed playgrounds to develop gross-motor skills. *They noted that contact with nature has been associated with a number of **health benefits for children**, such as **improved cognitive function**, increased creativity, improved interaction with adults, reduced attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and reduced rates of aggression.*

Summary of the Key Benefits of Nature Play

- Children who play regularly in natural settings are sick less often. Mud, sand, water, leaves, sticks, pine cones and gum nuts can help to stimulate children's immune system as well as their imagination.
- Children who spend more time outside tend to be more physically active and less likely to be overweight.
- Children who play in natural settings are more resistant to stress; have lower incidence of behavioural disorders, anxiety and depression; and have a higher measure of self-worth.
- Children who play in natural settings play in more diverse, imaginative and creative ways and show improved language and collaboration skills. Single use, repetitive play equipment becomes boring quickly.
- Natural, irregular and challenging spaces help kids learn to recognise, assess and negotiate risk and build confidence and competence.
- Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other.
- Bullying behaviour is greatly reduced where children have access to diverse nature-based play environments.
- Symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder are reduced after contact with nature.



What Do The Students Think About Our Nature Play Area? :



"I like to run through the tunnel and climb on the ropes." (Marco, Pre Primary)

"I like the jumping tyres because we can play dodge on them." (Declan, Year 1)

"We love the flying fox, the ropes and building cubbies in the fort." (Levi, Bronte and Delyth, Year 2)

"I like the log that joins onto the tyres because I can run along it and jump off when he's playing Chasey." (James, Year 3)



I enjoy the climbing frame in the fort because I can swing off it and hang from it. (Lola, Year 4)

"We love building cubbies and making up our own games in the fort." (Mitchell & Lexi, Year 5) *"I also really like the fact that everything is natural and you can share it."* (Lexi, Year 5)

"I like the natural theme of the play area and like the fact that lots of the play structures are made of recycled materials like tyres." (Precious, Year 6)

Nature Play WA have acknowledged the quality of our playground on their website, with an excellent gallery of photos and information about how we put it together. [Read more.](#)