

NATURE LESSONS MAKE CHILDREN SMARTER, FITTER

Sherrill Nixon, Urban Affairs Editor

Since they began bird watching, worm farming and gardening during their school *day*, St Helens Park public school students' grades have soared. Spotting echidnas and monitoring the health of local rivers near Campbelltown have done wonders for their maths and English marks. The students are beating the state average in the Basic Skills Test and their teachers and parents are reporting all-time high levels of engagement in class. Led by its principal Andrew Best, the school is at the forefront of an international movement to restore contact between city children and nature.

Advocates say that if cities were more child-friendly and encouraging of a back-to-nature approach, children would learn more easily and they would be less likely to be overweight or need to take drugs such as Ritalin.

Australian and international experts in environment and behaviour studies attended a conference at the University of Sydney at the weekend to discuss the theme of child-friendly cities.

A professor of landscape architecture at North Carolina State University, Robin Moore, said children had lost touch with nature as formal child care, computer games and parents' fear of abduction kept them indoors. "In just two and a half decades kids have stopped going out doors, and outdoors is where they need to be to get enough exercise to keep them in good fit condition. Especially if you link that with bad diets, it's a toxic mix," Dr Moore said.

While playground equipment has its place, he said, studies show it limits physical activity because children cluster together. The best kind of outdoor play is where children explore natural environments.

Parents and teachers did not need to visit the country to give children this experience, he said. Tree-filled local parks would do.

In the US, children's museums with outdoor play spaces are popular, while in Europe professional play teams co-ordinate some children's play. "[If we don't do this] the children are going to start dying before the parents and countries are going to be investing horrendous amounts of money into healthcare systems ... beginning in early childhood," Dr Moore said.

A PhD student at Monash University's department of psychology, Kathleen Bagot, is studying how contact with nature affects children's health and wellbeing. Her research shows that children who spent their lunchtime in the play-ground were mentally and physically fitter than those who spent it in the library.

None of this is news to Mr. Best, whose first project at St Helens Park was planting native trees to attract the endangered Regent Honeyeater. Most recently the school has built a frog pond and uses an outdoor amphitheatre for art and drama classes. "It isn't the tidiest area," he said, "but we want the kids to see what the bush is like. "Kids should learn that the creepy-crawly things aren't necessarily bad for you."



Bright sparks... St Helens Park pupils. Photo: Brendan Esposito