

Promoting Natural Outdoor Learning Environments

Welcome

Welcome to this special fact sheet dedicated to providing practical information about creating natural play environments.

We know that current research indicates that there are overwhelming benefits for children when they are able to have free play in a natural environment. Children experience risk taking, problem solving, learn how to cope with life, learn how to face challenges, develop a sense of belonging and can begin to understand the world around them. A natural environment contributes to children's overall physical health and emotional wellbeing.

Fixed equipment is standardised and can limit the value of play. Once children learn to climb on fixed equipment, climbing becomes a repetitive action rather than a stimulating and problem solving experience. Fixed equipment is also costly. Synthetic play environments do not allow for creativity and exploration.

Licensing and Standards would like to encourage centres to think about what their outdoor area looks like and consider making positive changes towards providing more natural environments for the children in their care.



Early childhood Outdoor Area, Bold Park Community School

The Nature of Play

The information in this fact sheet is based on information and inspiring ideas obtained at the Western Australian Kidsafe Playground Conference called **The Nature of Play**. The presenters at the conference ranged from local government and community development staff to landscape architects and designers. Many of the presentations were based on practical experiences and ideas in planning and designing creative natural play environments for children. We have put together a range of ideas from the presentations and included photos from some early childhood site visits in Perth.

During the conference, feedback that came from services who transformed their outdoor spaces from fixed equipment and synthetic surfaces to natural environments, indicated that the children were much calmer, happier, and more creative and focussed. These services indicated that they experienced less accidents and injuries as a result of the change. They learnt that when given the opportunity to freely use natural materials with appropriate guidance, children learnt how to use twigs, sticks, branches, stones and rocks to construct and create rather than for weapons as the staff initially thought.



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Getting Started

- Read and research information about natural outdoor play spaces as there is a wealth of information available
- Talk to children and involve them in planning
- Ask children what they like to do when they play rather than what they would like in a playground
- Think about your own childhood and what you played with
- Tackle one small part of the playground at a time
- Have regular working bees
- Be committed to having a quality outdoor learning environment
- Talk to parents about children getting dirty and ask them to bring spare clothes
- Invite community involvement and participation
- Visit your local nursery, contact State Flora or have them come to visit you

Design Principles

There are a number of design principles you can consider when creating a natural play environment for children.



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Connect different areas and spaces with bridges, paths, tunnels, stepping stones

Allow enough time each day for children to play uninterrupted

Use bright colours in small amounts

Create hideaway spaces for children

Create beautiful and aesthetic areas that are pleasing to look at and inviting

Spend money on plants and trees and not on fixed equipment



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Allow for discovery and exploration

Create lots of sitting spaces so staff can be actively involved in children's imaginative play

Consider ecology and indigenous planting



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Allow for imaginative play using sticks, fabrics, leaves, pods, water

Create both active and quiet spaces for social and solitary play

Allow children to manipulate and influence the outdoor spaces

Plan to stimulate all the senses



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Consider the calming effect of nature's colours and materials

Create hideaway spaces for children



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Planting

You can use plants to create different spaces and hiding places for children. Organise an excursion to your local nursery or a specialised native nursery to choose appropriate plants for your area. You can contact State Flora for advice. Consider a range of planting such as groundcovers, climbers, grasses, shrubs, herbs and trees. There are a number of water wise plants available that are suitable for our climate.

Involve children and ask parents to assist with planting and maintaining your garden. This will also lead to active involvement in sustainability. You can investigate sustainable grants available to help you to purchase water tanks and create community gardens.



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Trees

Trees are a vital option for providing shade. There are many different types of trees that are suitable for early childhood settings. You may like to plant trees that are deciduous so that you can have shade in summer and the winter sun during the cooler months. Deciduous trees also provide such wonderful colours and fun times with falling leaves. You may like to consider pruning trees that stimulate growth for low branches for climbing.



Kings Park Community Play Space

Practical Ideas

Here are some practical ideas that you can include in your outdoor environments.



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Use loose items for children to pick up and construct and have moveable stepping stones

Create dry creek beds

Create a frog pond or have fish or turtles

Have low scramble nets

Use embankments

Create winding paths

Make the size and depth of your sandpit large enough to be the 'hub' of activity

Use tree stumps and stones for balancing and climbing



Chrysalis Montessori School

Use platforms with different levels

Have bike tracks with interesting stop points

Have art sculptures in the garden

Create balance beams

Create labyrinths, mazes and totem poles



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Create social areas

Think about attracting birds, butterflies and creatures - bugs, worms, slaters, spiders

Bury interesting things deep in the sandpit for exploration and discovery

Have hidden charms around for children to discover



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Consider sustainability – water tanks, vegies, fruit, herbs, compost, worm farms

Teach children to how to put gloves on and use tools

Sell vegies and herbs to families

Have chickens

Create areas for children to be able to control the flow of water

Have a mud patch

Make tepees

Use material and cushions



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Sustaining It All

Maintenance is the key to a successful outdoor garden area. Consider allocating money and fundraising for maintaining grass, plants, replacing loose matter etc. You can incorporate your garden into the day to day program so that children can experience a sense of ownership and satisfaction from their environment.



Chrysalis Montessori School



Chrysalis Montessori School

Where To Obtain Further Information

DECS are committed to ensuring children have access to quality natural outdoor learning environments. DECS has released a Vision and Values brochure based on *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*. There are resource kits available for borrowing with information about developing natural outdoor environments. These kits are available through the Early Childhood Consultants. Visit our website for more information. www.decs.sa.gov.au/ybsproviders. There are also a number of excellent books available for borrowing. If you are interested, contact the Preschool and Centre Based Care Unit on 8226 0187.

If you would like to discuss options to review your outdoor area you are welcome to contact the licensing and standards unit on 8226 0077.