



#PlayToday

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promoting the value of play

TREES AND KIDS, A GOOD MIX

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Coming to work this morning I heard on the radio a plug for national tree day which was asking kids to “get down and get dirty” planting trees. Further investigation revealed that on this day last year, volunteers planted a million trees nationwide on 3,200 sites. Getting kids involved is a wonderful idea because it may well lead to them becoming adults who care for and respect the natural environment. As a society we know the value of trees, both environmental and aesthetic, and we fight to reduce deforestation around the world because we believe we need trees here on planet Earth.

A recent decision by VCAT enforcing the retention of mature trees in the outdoor playspace of a proposed childcare centre in Melbourne also gladdened my heart. It was inspiring to read that, despite vigorous efforts to get permission to chop them down, the magistrate ruled in their favour and they will remain to enhance the outdoor play experience of all the children who play beneath, alongside and in them, in the years to come. Research is clearly showing us that we need to get it right for kids during their first three years of life when brain development is most rapid. These early years are when young children learn powerful, long reaching life lessons and attitudes. There is also a respected body of research around the connections between exposure of young children to the natural world and the formation of environmentally responsible adults. Young children learn in ways outdoors, which are not possible indoors, hence the insistence by DHS on planned learning experiences for young children in childcare in the outdoor learning areas. In these early years of life, learning occurs via sensory experiences.

In the outdoor area of a childcare centre, young children learn through touch, smell, sight, sound and taste. Young children feel the changing weather conditions on their skin and learn how to take measures to protect themselves from the elements. They learn about light, shade, shadows and colour and how each of these powerful elements influence their wellbeing. They hear the sounds of the world around them and gain valuable information about who is nearby and what is happening by listening. Under a tree they will hear the sound of leaves rustling, branches creaking on a windy day, birds arriving, nesting, perching and communicating. Trees provide many opportunities to learn through the sense of touch, with endless possibilities of texture in bark as children make the early, very natural attempts to climb up and into a tree. Leaves and blossoms have wonderful smells and provide endless opportunities for children to learn via this type of sensory experience. Smelling the air also gives information about what is happening in the world outside the childcare centre. The learning opportunities provided by fruit trees in the outdoor area are very rich as children observe the cycle of change so brilliantly displayed.

On it goes, endless learning opportunities for young children in the outdoor playspaces in childcare centres containing natural elements where, on a day like national tree day, we might find them busy planting trees, if they also have the opportunity to explore the features of mature trees, learning will be enhanced to an enormous degree and old trees can be celebrated to.