

Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

Outdoor playgroup with Bush Balance

Bush Balance is an outdoor, all weather playgroup for children aged 0 - 5 and their carers.

Play sessions run for 1.5 hour each morning over an 8 week term. It is currently run across three different Sydney locations: Cumberland State Forest, West Pennant Hills on the land of the Darug people; Sydney Park, Alexandria on the land of the Gadigal people and Wolli Creek Regional Park, Earlwood on the land of the Bidjigal people. In addition to the weekly term program, there are also one-off holiday events and Saturday sessions.

Bush Balance provides a child-led experience where children are free to explore and design their own play. Children's natural curiosity and questions guide the learning. The program provides time and freedom to explore their environment. It also aims to help children develop social skills and a respect and concern for our natural environment.

The program philosophy is focussed on free play. At times adults who enrol in the program find it challenging to let children 'just be'. To balance this need for activity and free choice, some tools are brought along each week. Each session starts with a short welcome circle, acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, discussing ways to keep each other safe and reading a story. Children then choose their own play. Tools and resources provided include watercolour paints, tools, buckets, books, magnifying glasses and ropes. It is an all weather playgroup, so if it rains children put on their raincoats and gumboots and keep playing. Having a similar structure each week, and a term long program allows children to build memory and connection to place and to explore their environment with curiosity and at their own pace.

Why did you start your nature connections program?

Bush Balance is the passion project of Deborah Wood, an early childhood teacher with experience working in long day care centres, pre-schools and as a private nanny. Through her education practice, Deb regularly reflected on how children's days were increasingly structured with a focus on learning a skill or activity. She felt that young children didn't always have enough time to play or to choose what they do without adult motivation or structure. She felt strongly that children have a need to have outdoor free play, and so she started her own business, Bush Balance.

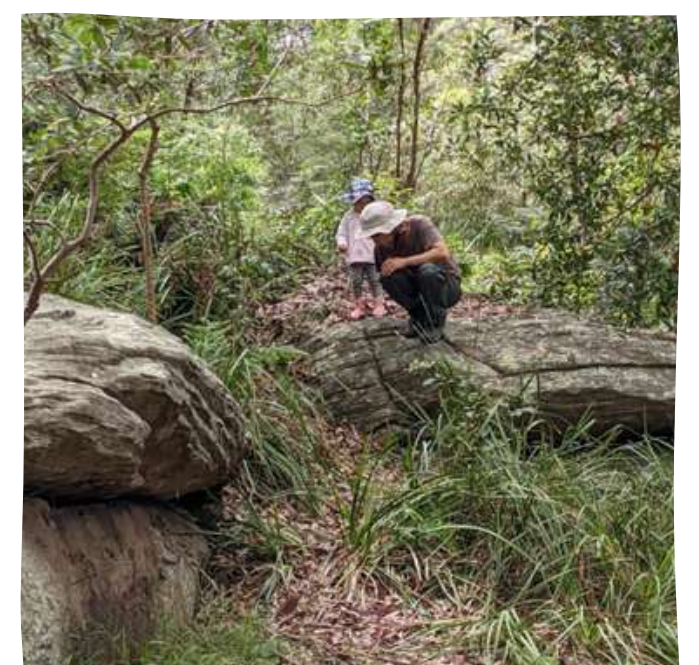
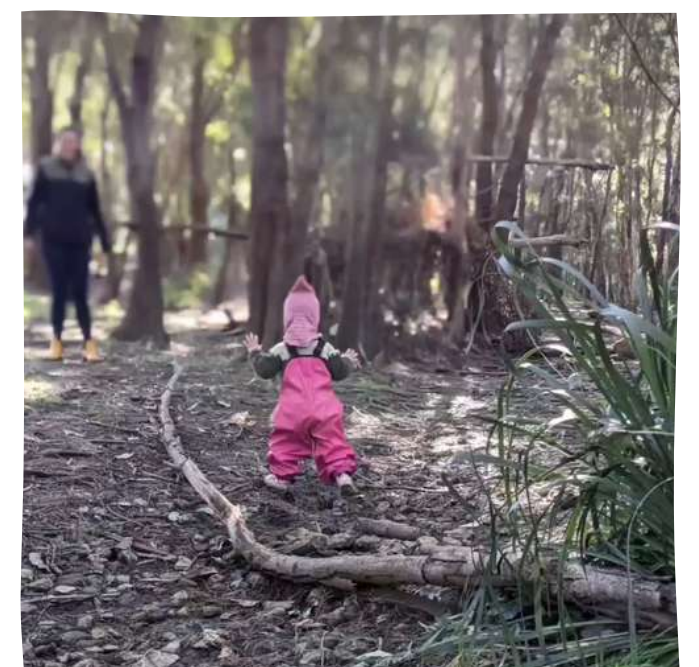
What are 2 challenges that you faced during this program, how have you overcome them?

One of our main challenges is finding a space we are allowed to use. While local councils have suitable outdoor natural spaces, they do not always allow businesses to use them. Some charge high fees for businesses to use their spaces, others only currently allow specific types of businesses to use the space (for example personal trainers). There is also a concern about some bushland areas being used too much. Bush Balance are continuing to explore new partnerships and relationships with other organisations such as State Forests to access outdoor play space for young children in the city.

Another challenge of delivering a play based nature program is convincing parents of the value of paying for unstructured activity. Free play and child led learning is central to the program philosophy. Deborah hopes that through taking part in this playgroup, parents can start to see the value of child's play, of the space it provides for meeting like-minded people and developing a deeper understanding of their environment.

What advice would you give to educators interested in nature play programs?

Jump in and do it! There are so many wonderful play opportunities in the outdoors and children really do thrive in this environment. Nature play is slowly becoming more common in Sydney. Have a look around and see which other groups are running and talk to those people. It's not easy setting up a nature play group, so it's great to talk to others and see if there are opportunities for partnership before reinventing the wheel on your own. Get yourself a good raincoat and waterproof shoes.



This case study was written as part of the Take Me Outside NSW project, assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.

