

Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

Connecting with nature in the city, Explore and Develop, Annadale

Explore & Develop, Annadale is located on a roof top, 5km from the Sydney CBD on Gadigal Country. The privately owned service is a long day care and education centre for children 0 -5yrs. There is a team of 21 educators across the week, including a designated Outdoor Coordinator.

As the service is located in a highly urbanised area, the educators do not have access to 'wild space' in their local area. In response to this, the nature play program takes places across multiple small 'green spaces' that provide different play affordances and learning opportunities. All age groups take part in the program, walking to different locations in their neighbourhood.

The immersive nature play program at Explore & Develop Annadale has been developing over the last six years and it is now strongly embedded in their practice.

The service had an established culture of venturing out regularly with the preschool group to play at local parks or visit shops, post office, and cafes in the local community. When early childhood teacher (Educational Leader) Melanie Elderton joined the centre, she extended this existing program to focus more on play in spaces that were more 'natural' and avoid playgrounds.

As the nature play program became more regular, the teaching team in other learning groups began to see the benefits and the service started to explore how they could get younger children involved in nature play. The room leader in the 0-2 years space was very interested in developing an 'out the gate' nature play program and began researching, acquiring double prams, and consulting with families.

The program now encompasses all learning groups. All children sign permission to attend walking excursions in the local community upon enrolment, with new families informed from the beginning that this is an important part of our pedagogy and practice.

Melanie reports, "We know that connection to the natural environment through unstructured play supports children's physical, cognitive and ecological development. We have seen the impact the program has on children's social and emotional development, with greater confidence and resilience displayed".



Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

Connecting with nature in the city, Explore and Develop, Annadale

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

We began to see the impact of lots of little feet on some of our spaces and became aware of the impact our program could be having on the plants and animals. The introduction of an Outdoor Teacher role helped us to overcome this problem. She began to oversee the nature play program across all the learning groups, go out on excursion with each group on a scheduled day weekly. This allowed her to gauge where our play was affecting the spaces, and she communicated that to the rest of team. Those places were in turn avoided and given time to rejuvenate.

Wet weather was a challenge for inner city families. We overcame this with purchasing class sets of 'splash-suits' and asking families to provide gumboots and raincoats for children to engage in wet weather play at the service. We documented this play, highlighting the joy alongside the learning opportunities rainy days offer. Once families were comfortable with our practices around wet weather play we raised the idea of venturing out to our Nature Play places during wet weather. We found that families were comfortable with this plan after seeing our wet weather practices within the service.

How does your nature play program influence the curriculum in your centre?

We take a holistic approach to curriculum design. This means that everything influences everything. We would not engage in Nature Play if it was not relevant to the overarching curriculum. In saying this, as a relatively stable teaching team, we have grown our pedagogy over time. This has included a permanent Outdoor teacher role. The Outdoor teacher role was initially developed by ECT, Katie Vander Donk who went on to complete her Masters in Sustainability and Environmental Education. Throughout her studies she critically reflected on the Nature Play program and its relationship with Education for Sustainability. Working across all learning groups and with all educators allowed her to mentor educators through collaborative curriculum design practices and support an overarching approach to engaging with Nature Play.

Developing children's ecological identity through nature play has expanded our intentionality around embedding sustainability within curriculum. It has also supported educators to listen to children's environmental concerns and ideas for environmental activism.

The service has a range of sustainability initiatives in place, including solar panels and energy saving lighting, minimal laminating and printing, composting food waste for gardens, native bee hives, and ethical sourcing of resources and furniture.

What advice would you give to other ECCs considering a nature play program?

- Uncover your WHY and communicate it to your community
- Research pedagogical approaches and what fits for you.
- Respond to your context, your community and your place. Your program should not be exactly the same as anyone else's.
- Look at the Regulations, understand the legal requirements and make sure you can meet them.
- Make a comprehensive Risk/Benefit analysis and communicate it clearly.
- Make documentation your friend for communicating with other educators and families about your program, the learning, the joy, etc.
- Be a microphone for children's voices and listen to what they tell you about nature and play. Help them share their ideas with your community.

This case study was written by Melanie Elderton for the Take Me Outside NSW project, assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.

