

# Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

## Nature Play Wednesday at Ngaarrila Preschool, Kalang

Ngaarrila Preschool, Kalang is a small rural preschool, catering for 2-6 yr olds. The service is not for profit, run by a parent management committee with a team of 4 educators. Kalang is about 30 minutes from Bellingen, on Gumbaynggirr Country. The pre-school has a beautiful natural playground on an acre of space, with a working rock waterfall, a dragon sandpit and a lots of established climbing trees.

Kalang's immersive nature play program, Nature Play Wednesday, ran for one year. Each Wednesday, a group of 10 children and 3 educators would venture 'outside the gate' for a 4 hour program. Each week the families would drop off and collect their children from the chosen nature play site, which was at a number of locations along the Kalang River. The families could choose to enrol in this program separately from the regular preschool. The program was funded through a Quality Support Grant, which allowed the service to employ additional educators to maintain the high ratios it needed for nature play. Two experienced nature play mentors from the Centre for Ecological Learning (one of which was the Centre Director) plus a Diploma or Cert 3 educator from the preschool facilitated the program.

Feedback about the program was extremely positive. The families, educators and children LOVED Nature Play Wednesday! It was the best day of the week! The team felt so lucky to be able to spend the day by the river swimming when it was hot and exploring and roasting food on the fire when it was cold. When the program ended everyone kept asking when it could start it again and many new families enrolled in the service because of the rich nature play focus.

### Why did you start the program?

The program began with the desire to develop a strong connection to place among the children. Our preschool's proximity to the river and surrounding forests offers the perfect opportunity to build a strong connection to nature and to Kalang in particular. Centre Director, Erin Chapman, has a background in nature play and with her understanding the value of spending extended time in nature for children's growth and development, she advocated strongly for the inclusion of nature play in the preschool.

The program was designed to build on the children's comfort in nature, to create a sense of safety and belonging in our nature play space and ultimately in Kalang. We wanted the children to feel at home by the Kalang river (children learn best when they feel safe, secure and supported). From this sense of belonging and familiarity we hoped that they would then branch out, explore and play together, trying new skills, overcoming challenges and creating a shared story about their special river play space... We wanted to help the children build a HEARTFELT connection to nature.

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

- One major challenge was the remote location! There is absolutely no phone service in Kalang and the river locations are about 1km from the nearest house. To overcome this we added into our risk assessment the procedure for contacting families and emergency services in case of an emergency – we timed ourselves driving up to the nearby house and using the landline. We had walkie talkies that had a 3km range to ensure we maintained contact with the group and could relay any information to authorities.
- The second challenge was the midges and mosquitoes! There is no such thing as a paradise when mosquitoes are around! We overcame this challenge by spending lots of time in the water, lighting a camp fire, wearing long loose fitting clothing and using repellent on our clothes and exposed skin.

### Does your nature play program influence the curriculum in your centre?

The nature play program definitely influenced the curriculum back at the preschool, we would often harvest clay from near the river bank and use this at preschool. We also often had campfires at preschool to not only combat the pre school mosquitoes (we are very close to the river at preschool) but to replicate that nature camp feeling and sense of belonging it generated in the group.

The children loved playing in the river, water was central to our nature play program, we always chose sites with shallow river access. Appreciating the vast learning opportunities water offers and understanding the importance of water play for the child we ended up designing and building a running rock waterfall space at preschool. This space has provided endless hours of open ended play and has given the children an opportunity to continue to explore this affordance in its fullest with no limitations or restrictions. At the river we can use the water as much as we need and are not restricted – the children often collected, moved, re-directed and experimented with the river water – replicating the river itself, building dams, rock pools, mini eco systems for the water creatures both real and imaginary... water was the foundation of the nature play program and now it is the foundation of our preschool program with most days spent by the waterfall at preschool.

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

We would say GO FOR IT!! Nature is the best classroom, children thrive if they are given unlimited and regular access to nature. The connections such programs create not only to nature but to each other is truly special and will inspire and enrich all other aspects of your program. The main thing I would say is do reconnaissance missions! Make sure you know the site like the back of your hand and be prepared for anything. We had sight specific hazards that required a lot of forethought, i.e bullrouts and no nearby shelter for storms. A thorough risk assessment is really important.



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