

Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

Bush Preschool at Keiraville Community Preschool

Keiraville Community Preschool is a not-for profit community managed preschool operating since 1952. The preschool has extensive outdoor space with many natural elements, adjacent to the Illawarra escarpment on Dharawal Country. During Term 2 & 3, teams of 10 students attend Bush Preschool, with a focus educator and 1-2 other supporting educators.

During Bush Preschool, the children and educators will spend about 3 hours in a bush play location. The team travel to the location on foot through the bush and this journey is an important part of the experience. There is a safety briefing and a visual checklist to help each child prepare for bush preschool and pack up afterwards. Children are empowered to develop their independence and to see themselves as capable people.

Families in the service contribute to planning by participating in site assessments and sharing their passion and expertise. One family developed information guides for educators, sharing their knowledge of local flora and fauna.

Why did you start this program?

From our research we understood the benefits to introducing the immersive nature program. Educators feel a responsibility to enact the rights of children in connecting to place and to nature. We aimed to redress the hurried nature of many childhoods and the lack of time and space for children to play in natural spaces.

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

- Phone coverage is patchy and so we opted for a walkie-talkie to give reliable contact with preschool.
- The changes to the landscape can pose challenges. For example, in severe drought our impact on the environment needed to be closely monitored so we were not damaging habitat. After a period of good rain, the weed growth can make some areas inaccessible. Prolonged heavy rainfall can make access very problematic with mud and water adding a major hazard for travel. We monitor this closely and respond to changes as needed.

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

Children's observation skills inside the fence are enhanced by their experiences on bush preschool. They are more aware of birds, plants and the world around them. They may discuss stories of shared experiences or research questions that have arisen while beyond the fence. Their understanding of their role in Caring for Country is also visibly increased for many children. Educators are able to link discussions on environment, habitat and protecting the land to our actions inside the fence.

Do you have other sustainability initiatives in your service?

We are building our everyday habits and building our culture of sustainability practices. This includes water saving, paper saving, recycling, reducing waste and packaging, repurposing and reusing, We also take part in many community initiatives and environment days such as Clean Up Australia Day, World Bee Day and National Recycling Week.

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

Bring dreams to reality. Work to make it happen. Start with thorough planning and the involvement of all stakeholders. Capitalise on the knowledge and passion of families and community members. Plan manageable stages while building confidence. Reach out to others. Join networks.

