

# Early Childhood Case Study: Take Me Outside NSW

## Exploring outside the gate with Paddington Childcare Centre

Paddington Children's Centre is a not for profit, 80 place long day care centre in Paddington, Sydney. Located in a highly urbanised area on Gadigal Country, PCC is walking distance from Centennial Park and Paddington Reservoir, with much natural flora growing along their street and surrounding community.

PCC staff have been "going outside the gate" for nearly 20 years. For educator Sarah Marksman, the process started with a personal love of nature. It started simply – with children digging in the dirt, stick drawing, jumping in puddles. When they got braver, educators started taking street walks to the 'grassy knoll' visiting Centennial Park. They would regularly visit the same part of the park, providing familiarity for children and studying the changes of seasons. As an inner city service, 'going out in nature' is not a rugged bushland experience. Children find wonder in everyday things, like the moss in the pavement, flowers and water. They experience nature as something tangible in their own local environment.

Before going beyond the Kindy gates educators will talk about behaviour and the importance of keeping everyone safe. They will have a chat about leaving our toys behind, safe in our lockers, holding hands while we walk, road safety, and staying close together as a group. Children have the opportunity to talk about behaviour expectations and they can make the choice of whether to come along.

In recent years PCC staff made a connection with Uncle Jimmy, from the Local Land Council. Uncle Jimmy started going on walks with student groups, sharing stories and knowledge about respecting and being part of nature. With this new focus, learning and connecting with nature really evolved. Teachers gained new knowledge on these walks and with Uncle Jimmy's permission, shared their new learning with families and other children within our Centre. Children were provided the opportunity to be caretakers of the earth and to grow an emotional connection with nature.

When COVID restrictions came in, it reduced the staff's ability to go beyond the gates with Uncle Jimmy. Other opportunities to explore a connection with nature were introduced, 'bringing nature in' in a digital form and turning their attention to the internal green spaces, noticing a lot more nature was growing inside the kindy gates or sometimes blown in on the wind.

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

One of the main challenges is the legalities involved in going outside the centre. It is important that you do a proper risk assessment and that the experience is safe, but it does remove some of the spontaneity. If you have done some forward planning, it reduces the missed opportunities.

We have had to consider children with special rights and different risk mitigation strategies. For example, for one child we sought to include found it difficult to follow safety guidelines, so we asked the parent to come along with the group. With the parent involvement we were able to support this child, and they benefitted highly. The parent also saw how much the child enjoyed this experience and continued it outside the Centre learning. For another group of students with behavioural issues, taking them outside led to amazing changes in group dynamics. This group of student had so much energy, they needed to be running, climbing and jumping. Rather than arguing over toys they started celebrating each other rock jumping.

Another challenge for inner city nature exploring is toileting! We carefully plan our walks, and have a route that provides an opportunity for a toilet stop if needed. Sometimes we just take short walks nearby.

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

It is really important for children's physical and mental health to get them outside and it is part of a holistic program. It is something that should be happening for all children, it is every child's right! Start small if you are nervous, open your eyes to nature experiences where you are. Find your champion and connect with people that are passionate.

