

The natural world in the 21st Century --- - We're bringing nature back

Growing up on a farm was all about the natural world; the sense of wonder, curiosity, freedom and respect for the environment. Some children today do not have the opportunity for such experiences and for early childhood educators; it is our responsibility to help bring back these opportunities and the desire to connect with nature and the natural world through play.

In a world with lots of screen time and 21st century learning how do we bring your children back to engaging and enjoying a more natural environment? Grove Kindergarten is a kindergarten just outside of the Adelaide CBD. Many of the families live in houses with small yards. Adelaide, in general, however, has many outdoor playing environments for families to explore, some with traditional play equipment and others that are beginning to show signs of our 'forgotten' nature play areas, logs are now being left.



The challenge for educators is how we can plan and develop a curriculum that is exciting and rich, that evokes curiosity and wonder in children and connects them to their natural world. How do we help children to use play to investigate and explore new ideas? How do



we help children show appreciation and care for natural environments and explore relationships with other living and nonliving things? How can we help children observe, notice and respond to changes in their world? How can we support children to develop an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments and the interdependence of all living things? How do we help children appreciate aesthetics in their world? How can we embed thoughts and actions of recycle,

reduce and reuse?

Over time, small inspiring play nooks and spaces have been created at Grove Kindergarten through planting interesting plants, thinking about texture, shapes and function – a great example is the variety of edible plants indigenous to an area, and the use of different textures and mediums for built structures to appeal to all senses.

Recently educators attended a sustainability workshop 'Wipe Out Waste'. With education, policy change and embedding sustainability into the daily curriculum, children, families and educators began to see a shift in approaches to snacks and food storage, waste management and recycling. This has extended to a genuine interest in nature and play and

the use of up cycled 'loose parts' play. In our kindergarten environment the children see and are involved in our and the world's sustainability.

The children began to engage with the environment on newer, deeper levels, noticing the life that was around them, working, hidden amongst the garden. This sparked the creation of a bug hotel, a four storey high rise of pallets that invited children to develop little habitats for bugs to live in. Children and families were involved in collecting recycled and natural materials needed to create a variety of habitats to attract native insects and bugs.



Research was carried out with the children to determine the kinds of materials needed to attract different insects. Through this research it was discovered that bamboo attracts lady birds and specific coloured flowers attract butterflies. The project attracted much interest from the parent community and many families have begun building their own insect hotels in their backyards. One family has even begun a community bug hotel in their local park.



Children's play and thinking has changed from the bugs point of view, no more are we seeing bugs harmed. With the introduction of scientific bug catchers, magnifying glasses and torches, children monitor the movement in the hotel and record their findings using clipboards, to draw or collect data. In addition to the hotel the children have made cedar wood boxes filled with various collections of flora from in and around our environment. Pine cones, seed pods, bark and bamboo,

which provide another habitat as well as an attractive feature to stimulate conversation and wonder. Children now see the connection of insects living in harmony in our community.

The strong connections and 21st Century learning opportunities the children have in these natural play spaces at kindergarten have had a significant impact on the families attending the kindergarten and has helped to change their home and play spaces to encourage more extensive outdoor unstructured play. Mud kitchens, bug hotels and loose parts play that encourages imagination, problem solving and a connection with nature have all become a part of our families homes and play making strong links between home and kindergarten. Families are now connecting more with nature play ideas and discussing alternatives for their children rather than screen time.

Our vegetable gardens are very productive now that we have put worm farm towers into the middle of each garden and have re-located our worm farm closer to the kindy play space. With a change to our eating policy, moving to 'brain food' for morning snack, our organic waste has increased, while decreasing our plastic waste. The children now cut up all the organic waste during the day and feed it to the worm farms keeping our worm tea supply

filled while encouraging more worm movement within the gardens, which has seen our vegetables grow significantly in size and yields. Currently we have close to 10,000 hard working worms in our eco environment. Weekly cooking experiences always feature the edible foods from our garden, as well as inspiring productive and imaginative play within the mud kitchen, as our master chefs transfer their knowledge and skills from inside to outside.



Our kindergarten is closely located to a community park. Recently an inspiration evolved from a random act of kindness when someone created a knitted line of tiny clothes on the fence. This has inspired the children to include this in their own play environment, using wool to add a new perspective to our trees, posts and fences, adding yet another texture and natural material to enhance wonder and conversation.

The return to nature and the environment, link all outcome areas within Australia's Early Years Learning Framework as well as many highly regarded Early Years curriculums around the world. The natural environment supports and fosters effective communication, promotes confident and involved learning and encourages a strong sense of wellbeing. It also involves physical health and feelings of happiness. Children feel connected with and contribute to their world and develop a strong sense of belonging and identity. They can explore different aspects of it (physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive) through their play and relationships.

We hope what we are doing here at Grove will help to inspire and promote an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a love of the outdoors in the lives of our children and families, giving them the foundation to become aware and responsible for their local and global environment.



2014 Sally Cook is the Director of Grove Kindergarten in Adelaide, South Australia. She is passionate about young children and the way they learn. Over the last few years her focus has been the importance of setting up inspiring learning spaces, particularly in the outdoor learning area, and enthusing families and children to engage in nature

Brett Gent is the teacher at Grove Kindergarten and has worked in various roles within the school and childcare sector for over 10m years. He is passionate about the outdoor play space and the value it provides children to foster their learning, especially curiosity, confidence, commitment and risk taking.