

Grove Kindergarten Learning outside - Natural learning environments

In a world of electronic screens how do we bring children back to engaging and learning in a natural learning environment filled with authentic experiences to nurture the dispositions and capabilities that are essential for 21st Century children's learning? The challenge for teachers and 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 can we help children use play to investigate and explore new ideas? How can we help children observe, notice and respond to changes in their world?



Nature pedagogy thinking provides ideal opportunities to build a foundation for children's understanding of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). The natural outdoor learning environment is a powerful vehicle for children to develop these skills through teachers and educators being intentional in their teaching, supporting children to explore, observe, ask questions, predict, infer and integrate their learning. Research now tells us that learner

success means the learner must be at the centre of the experience. Children have innate curiosity about the living world. Learning becomes more relevant when children go outdoors and explore nature. Take, for example, the four natural elements of fire, earth, water and air, and think about the knowledge teachers and educators must have to encompass the entire curriculum.

By asking the right open questions teachers and educators stimulate investigations through which children can identify objects, make comparisons, make predictions, test ideas, document findings and share their discussions; all while observing their natural environment. This encourages children to think in a more holistic way, and to investigate ideas in a variety of settings and contexts. They can explore sizes, shapes, patterns and quantities in the process. In this way



children begin to build skills, interest and knowledge, take initiative and be active and engaged in their own learning.

Children's involvement in building bug hotels, growing vegetables, caring for chickens, recycling and composting food scraps provide real learning and problem solving opportunities. From mud kitchens to cloudy skies children can be inspired and learn from everything natural: collecting eggs; picking vegetables and herbs for cooking; observing butterflies; and making leaf sculptures. Nature provides a bountiful learning wonderland that engages the heart, head and hands.

When children play in natural environments they are required to use a number of cognitive processes to calculate varying distances, balance on uneven surfaces and work with moveable parts. Working with loose parts, such as logs, shells, seeds, rocks and water with open-ended possibilities encourages children to engage in rich play experiences which increase their need and desire to cooperate and negotiate with each other.

At Grove Kindergarten children are given long periods of uninterrupted time in unstructured play to wonder and explore deeply their ideas through a nature lens.

Children are capable and competent learners and this drives teachers' programs for all children to participate in the developmentally appropriate challenges offered in a nature play based practice.



Research tells us play enables humans to become powerful learners and problem solvers. Neuroscientific studies have shown that playful activity is important to synaptic growth, particularly in the frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for higher mental functions. Studies have consistently demonstrated the superior learning and motivation that arises from playful, as opposed to instructional, approaches to learning. Pretend play supports children's early development of symbolic representational skills, including those of literacy and numeracy, more powerfully than direct instruction. Physical, constructional and social play supports children in developing their skills of intellectual

and emotional 'self-regulation'. These skills have been shown to be crucial in early learning development. Nature pedagogy is a dynamic way to support this learning and build strong, engaged learners who develop the kinds of problem solving skills necessary for higher-order thinking. When children have a sense of control in their environment their well-being is supported and strengthened. Nature play environments provide gross motor opportunities, support children's risk taking, offer challenges, promote creative/social play, and foster imagination.

Children need to take risks in play in order to learn how to manage them, and test the limits of their physical and emotional development. It is our responsibility as educators to assess and manage risk so that children are given the opportunity to stretch themselves and develop their abilities without exposing them to unacceptable risks. Children are able to self-risk assess. The more we trust them to make decisions and provide supportive environments for them to do so, the more they will thrive. Responsible risk-taking builds problem solving, inquiry, cooperation and persistence. Children who develop effective risk-taking attitudes are more confident in approaching new tasks. In an education risk-benefit assessment process it is vital to weave children's voices with those of the adults, instilling in them a sense of responsibility. At Grove Kindergarten when children get bumps and bruises they are referred



to as learning injuries. This positive reframing helps teach children resilience, and educates parents to see adventurous play as learning opportunities. This approach opens up possibilities for children to gain mastery.

Parents see the learning benefits when their children play with and in nature. They recognise that nature responds to children's natural curiosity in ways that inspire them to explore, to find out and to continually ask questions. Parents observe their children actively participating and having control of their own learning.

"Ezra is 4-years old and has been with Grove Kindergarten since Feb 2016. We are amazed at how quickly he has settled down at his Kindy and the way Ezra interacts, learn and play with his friends. Through the outdoor playing and learning, he is given various opportunities to express his creativity like collaborating with his friends to construct a dam using twigs and pebbles, a waterfall using pipes, the sand pit where his friends and him used toy trucks to transport the sand to build a hill, just to name a few. The experiential learning has exposed him to teamwork, social skills, and fundamental numeracy and literacy skills for his age.

Ezra always come home to tell us how much he has enjoyed his learning. The well-established spacious outdoor play area at his Kindy is certainly a haven for Ezra to explore and learn. More importantly, we have also observed that Ezra has developed a greater sense of confidence in assessing risks and taking up challenges in his play. From being a shy boy who dare not take risk to become a more confident risk taker. We could not think for a better Kindy for Ezra."

Hans Cheong & Serene Soh

Nature-based practice is rewarding, allowing children time to do their own investigating, exploring and discovering. It is when teachers and educators make learning relevant and follow children's interests, that skills and knowledge are built. Children become connected and involved learners who develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, persistence, cooperation and confidence. They also develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, enquiry, researching and experimenting necessary for lifelong learning.



Sally Cook is a qualified Early Childhood teacher with many years' experience in education both in Australia and overseas. Her passion is in creating inspiring learning spaces and in particular natural outdoor learning environments across Adelaide. She is currently the Director of Grove Kindergarten in Adelaide, South Australia.