

# THE BENEFITS OF CONNECTING TO NATURE

There's been lots of talk and media attention over the past few years about children being 'disconnected from nature'. Some would argue that children, and all humans for that matter, are nature, and therefore cannot be disconnected. Regardless, it is important for children to spend as much time in nature as possible, given the limitless opportunities nature provides for children to maximise their developmental and learning potential, and build the range of skills they will need to be the best they can be.



Time outside provides opportunities for children to develop their fine and gross motor skills, social and emotional skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, communication and language skills, and have fun while they do it! It has also been shown to reduce stress levels and support many aspects of physical and mental health.

Playing outside provides children with opportunities to engage with their environment, to understand that they are part of nature and not separate or outside of it. As children spend time experiencing nature they learn to appreciate that the decisions they make impact on things around them; not just people but also animals, plants and the natural systems that support us. They learn that these impacts can be both positive and negative. This can be extremely empowering: what they do does make a difference.

Nature play promotes development of fine and gross motor skills, including coordination, balance, agility, grip, and manipulation of materials. Nature play also provides opportunities for building social and emotional skills such as resilience, confidence, cooperation, teamwork, concentration and attention. It's much more fun to build a sand castle or a cubby with friends! But there are also opportunities for quiet reflection and being alone, also very important in our hurried lives.

Sometimes early learning centres and services don't have access to an idyllic natural outside space. Instead, they may have access to a rooftop, a low maintenance AstroTurf and shade sail environment or a simple patch of grass (or weeds as the case may be!). Nonetheless, there are still lots of things you can do to bring nature into your space. Vertical gardens on walls or fences are great, and there are lots of creative upcycling ideas using old buckets, cans or even gumboots! You can introduce things like:

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- Pots of plants, herbs or vegies
- Rocks and logs
- Sand or soil
- Branches, flowers, seedpods or bark.

Anything you can bring to the space, or inside for that matter, is great. Having things that are moveable, or transient has the advantage of providing any number of imaginative experiences for children, particularly when they can move, use and manipulate for different purposes. Loose parts are king!



On top of that, we are lucky enough to live in a place where nature is nearby in most places. Visiting places locally to experience nature is extremely important for children in order to understand their connection to nature in their local context. Do you have a park, bushland reserve, beach, creek or national park nearby? Do you or could you use it as part of your regular program? You may need to consider your service's policies and procedures and discuss the opportunities that exist for your service with your leadership team, management, and families.

Being active in your community also has many benefits for the children, your service and community. You can provide meaningful opportunities for children to feel like they belong to the local community and can make a valuable contribution. Having children involved and visible in the community is a great way to demonstrate to others that children are capable and competent in playing a part in community life and being part of decisions that affect them.

Being out and about with children also gives your service an opportunity to promote the great work you are doing for children, and build meaningful relationships and partnerships with others in your local area. This may be with schools, businesses, or community services such as libraries, community centres, or other community groups. You never know what might come from a chance meeting or conversation – sponsorships, funding, donations, volunteers, anything!

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