



Nature Play

GETTING KIDS OUTDOORS

Western Australian kids are heading back outdoors to get their hands dirty and feet wet, thanks to Nature Play WA – a bold program based on a raft of scientific research and a touch of common sense. This is producing happier, healthier kids who are experiencing a range of physical, cognitive and emotional benefits.

by Paul Jarvis



In 2011 Nature Play WA was developed with the simple aim of getting more kids outdoors more often for unstructured play so they can reap the benefits of playing, learning, being physically active and connecting to their community. The initiative was developed in response to a mix of historical trends and societal factors that have resulted in our children spending less time outdoors and interacting with nature and their community than any other generation in history. The program was started as an initiative of the WA Department of Sport and Recreation and was inspired by the ideas of American social commentator Richard Louv and the Children and Nature Network. Happily, it's going from strength to strength and attracting the attention of child health specialists, the media and governments.

BACK TO BASICS

Nature Play is founded on an understanding of the intrinsic value of time at play in nature and is underpinned by a growing body of research that shows the physical, cognitive and emotional benefits that come with unstructured play outdoors. The program is focused on finding ways to make communities and public spaces where 'mucking around outside' is part of children's everyday lives and the noise of children playing becomes a key component of the soundtrack of a connected community.

Long-term research identifies a point sometime in the past 20 years when child recreation shifted to become increasingly sedentary, indoors and screen based, as opposed to active, outdoors and largely

Left Nature Play WA runs a number of community events and 'play out days' throughout the year.

Above Getting dirty feet is an important part of childhood.
Photos – Nature Play WA



Above Nature Play WA partnered with Parks and Wildlife to offer a geocaching family challenge at Wharnccliffe Mill in Bramley National Park. The sell-out event was held in May and saw families venture out for a weekend to uncover hidden containers (known as geocaches) and bridge the gap between technology and active play.
Photo – Nature Play WA



Above right Felix Anison and Palenque Blair discovering nature together.
Photo – Damon Anison



Right Nature Play passports provide activities and information.
Photo – Nature Play WA

unstructured. And while the amount of organised sport that children are doing has not changed much over the past 30 years (if anything it has increased) the amount of physical activity has decreased significantly. The long-term impacts of this are not yet fully understood but it is clear that the decrease in nature play is paralleled by increasing rates of childhood-obesity, depression, attention-deficit disorder and a disconnect from the world and the community around young people. Just as importantly, research also highlights the value of unstructured play in developing children’s imagination, their ability to make decisions, resolve conflict, develop resilience and build a broader physical fluency as a foundation for more specialised sports and activities.

While the most immediate and obvious benefits of nature play are to child health

and development, land developers, natural resource managers and urban planners are increasingly recognising the potential broader community benefits it also brings. Another key consideration, and one that has been readily recognised in Queensland and South Australia where natural resource managers have led the charge to instigate Nature Play organisations, is the need to engage children in a longer-term narrative of environmental stewardship.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Nature Play WA has become a local success story with the strategies and tools of engagement developed in WA during the past four years now being used by partners in South Australia and Queensland as well as in Seattle, USA. These ‘sister’ organisations are built on the Nature Play WA model and, while no two

communities are the same, Nature Play WA’s initiatives and programs are proving transferable, and partnering agencies are developing and deploying jurisdiction-specific solutions that help address what is a universal challenge being played out in vastly different contexts. These programs and resources such as the ‘Passport to an Amazing Childhood’, family nature clubs, active school diaries and play spaces are recognised as innovative and world leading.

NEXT GENERATION

It is very easy to look at the trends associated with our increasingly sedentary kids and point the finger squarely at the rise of personal screens and the difficulty of competing with the action, excitement and general mayhem being played out on a range of virtual worlds. Not only does this narrative set up the sort of ‘us and



How to get involved

You can take part in 'nature play' any time of the year wherever you are – whether it's gardening in your backyard, having a play in your local park, forming a family nature club, taking a walk in the bush, going camping, fossicking in rock pools, exploring wetlands or going for a bike ride. And if you're stuck for ideas then head to www.natureplaywa.org.au for ideas and handy resources.

Parks and Wildlife also runs a range of programs for schools and community members through its *Nearer to Nature* program (see www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/get-involved/nearer-to-nature for more information). Special events are also held throughout the year, including school holidays, in parks and reserves throughout the State (see parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/whats-on).



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them’ dichotomy that has a real tendency to alienate, it also fails to recognise the incredible benefits that can be had from effectively using the single most important human tool since the invention of the printing press.

A key challenge for those looking to find strategies to get kids outside and active in unstructured play is to weave in ways for them to use tools they are familiar with, and the ability to successfully wield a smartphone is a given from a very young age. An electronic

‘Swiss army knife’ that puts easily accessible GPS, mapping, geocaching, photography and communication abilities in the palm of your hand is undeniably cool and useful, and it will prove to be one of the biggest allies in our attempts to get young folk outside and active. These tools will hopefully help to realise a generation of well-rounded and engaged young people who go on to lead happy and fulfilling lives thanks to having spent time in nature and experiencing physical, cognitive and emotional benefits.

Top ‘Nature play’ playgrounds are popping up in suburban parks such as in Kings Park.
Photo – Rhianna King/Parks and Wildlife

Above Rope courses help kids of all ages to develop a range of skills.
Photo – Wharcliffe Mill

Above left Sometimes a stick and some water is all you need.
Photo – Nature Play WA

Paul Jarvis works with Nature Play WA in an advisory capacity and is the principal of Gervasi Consulting.

For more information about Nature Play WA visit www.natureplaywa.org.au or email info@natureplaywa.org.au.

