





UNLOCKING LEARNING OUTDOORS

The outdoor learning movement makes for fantastic education opportunities in nature. The global movement that harnesses children's love of being in the fresh air to help unlock a love of learning, is led in Australia by Nature Play, and will this year saw its one millionth child participate in **Outdoor Classroom Day**.

by **Griffin Longley**

Remember how the beam of your torch tunnelled into the bush at night on school camp? Remember the feeling of bike pedals on your bare feet; and the smell of grass on the oval; and the warm electricity of the first rain and how it changed all the colours outside?

Why do these outdoor memories stick out as bursts of colour against the countless hours of bus-rides, home days, and classrooms? And why is it that the sounds, smells, and textures of our outdoor memories so animate, and make intimate, the narratives of our childhoods?

Perhaps it's evolutionary; connected to the survival requirement to be alert for food and for danger beyond the protection of our dwellings. Or maybe it is just nature's sensory richness, movement, and the way it is constantly changing that attunes our attention.

Whatever the reason, research and lived experience tells us that being outdoors is good for people. Our senses dial up, our brain chatter turns down, and we feel better. We observe, process, focus, and collaborate better when we are outdoors and in nature.

That makes for good memories, and combined with high quality teaching, it makes for fantastic learning opportunities. And around the world interest in outdoor learning is gaining traction and a movement to make it part of every child's education is growing.

UNLOCKING LEARNING

In Australia the outdoor learning movement has found a lightning rod in Outdoor Classroom Day – a global campaign, led here by Nature Play, to celebrate and inspire outdoor learning and play all year round in schools and early learning centres.

This year, Outdoor Classroom Day saw its one-millionth child participate in outdoor learning in just its fourth year. Celebrated this year on 5 November, teachers around the country took their classes outdoors and harnessed children's love of being in the fresh air to help unlock a love of learning.

Schools and classrooms did it differently. From one class doing one lesson on school grounds, to whole schools walking to a nearby park to spend the whole day, taking every lesson from

STEM to languages outdoors. But in each case, the aim of the campaign is to make that bright moment help reveal the power of outdoor learning and play.

LEADING THE CHARGE

Outdoor Classroom Day began in just a few schools in South London back in 2011. By 2015 there were more than 600 schools taking part in 15 countries, including a handful from around Australia. And then in 2017 Nature Play WA partnered with the campaign's founding non-government organisation, SEMBLE, and was able to secure some funding through Unilever's Dirt is Good campaign to grow the movement in Australia.

Nature Play WA is a small not-for-profit supported by the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries and with 11 organisational members, from the Department

.....
Opposite page

Main Culinary inspiration outdoors.

Photo – Steve Wise/Nature Play WA



Above left Cubby houses make great outdoor classrooms.

Photo – Nature Play SA

Above Rosalie Primary students have fun under a parachute.

Photo – Nature Play WA

Left Nature walk in Mundaring.

Photo – Simon Cherriman



of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, and the Western Australian Primary Principals Association. So, leading the Australian campaign has been a huge task for us, including helping to coordinate the efforts of partners in every State and Territory.

But the call to action has been simple and compelling. Taking learning outdoors isn't about adding something to the already daunting list of expectations our community has of schools. It is about helping schools reach the goals they already have, and do what they are already doing, in a slightly different, but highly achievable way, that will benefit the whole school community.

GETTING OUT

We know from a growing body of research that simply being in fresh air reduces children's stress, improves their eyesight, increases physical activity, and promotes learning. In one US study of 40 schools, it was demonstrated that

using natural surroundings as a context for learning – combined with best practice education – contributed to improving problem solving, lifted enthusiasm for learning, and led to a jump in test scores in subjects including science, social science, language, arts and maths.

And a study in Norway, that bastion of outdoor learning, showed that pre-school children with more outdoor time consistently scored better on standardised tests for executive function, attention and short-term memory, when compared to children who attended pre-schools with fewer outdoor hours.

GROWING UP FAST

In the campaign's first year in Australia more than 200,000 children from schools and early learning centres took part. By the third year that number grew to more than 314,000, at more than 3000 schools in every corner of Australia – including more than 46,000 Western Australian children at more than 45 per cent of all primary schools in the State.

And the outdoor learning movement has never been more important than in 2020. Paediatric anxiety disorders were already growing at an alarming rate before our community became consumed first with a terrifying fire season, and then a pandemic. And our children are feeling it.

But taking our children outdoors and into nature, not just on Outdoor Classroom Day, but every day, can help. It will relieve some of the stress they are feeling, help them develop a connection to nature that will shape their conservation behaviours into the future and support their learning. And, you know what, it will just be fun.

Griffin Longley is an award-winning journalist and CEO of Nature Play WA. He can be contacted at griffin@natureplaywa.org.au