



Promoting child wellbeing through nature play

Kristel Alla, Kylie Butler, Jasmine B. MacDonald and Mandy Truong – Australian Institute of Family Studies

Introduction and methods

Children around the world spend more time indoors than previous generations. The evidence says this can negatively affect children's development and wellbeing in both the short and long term. There is also increasing recognition of the value of nature play, and time outdoors, for children's development. However, parents and people working with children often need more guidance on how to achieve this.

This resource presents evidence from a literature review on the impact of nature play on children's social and emotional wellbeing, and explores how to foster these beneficial effects. The focus is on early childhood (ages 0–5), a critical period for developing a child's connection to nature.



What is nature play?

A broad term that describes any type of nature contact or the different ways children interact with nature. It refers to any child-led, unstructured play activities where children interact with natural elements such as trees, rocks or plants. A key point is that children play under minimal supervision and lead their own play. Nature play can simultaneously be about 'being in nature', 'playing or interacting with what's in nature', 'the experiences (activities and emotions)' and 'the learning that children gain when in nature'.

Key features

Definitions commonly talk about 4 key features of nature play:

- **nature sites** (parks, forests, green areas) **or natural elements** (plants and trees)
- **play activities**, this can mean the mode of play ('unstructured', 'child-led play' activities) or specific activities (digging holes, climbing trees)
- **types of experiences that engagement with nature provides** (being mindful, fully immersed in the surroundings)
- **benefits gained** (improved learning, skills and wellbeing).

Benefits

- Improvement in children's physical and mental health, sleep, mood and resilience.
- When play is child-driven, children gain the benefits of learning about decision making and cooperation with others, negotiating their needs and resolving conflicts. These are useful in developing their social and communication skills.
- The cognitive benefits include faster learning, better creativity and problem solving.

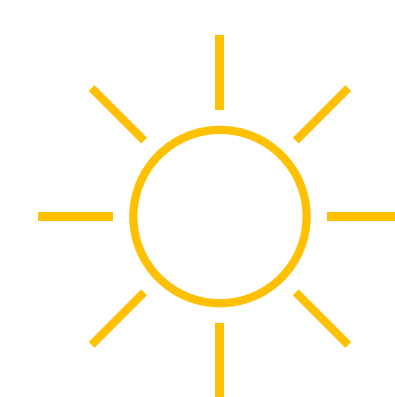
Supporting children to enjoy nature play

3 factors that influence children's engagement in nature play:

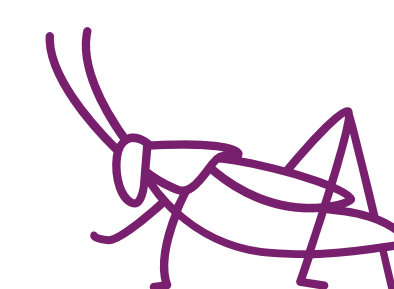
- 1 **Access to green spaces:** Almost all outdoor spaces can be used for nature play and do not need to be large or remote.
- 2 **Child-related characteristics:** Differences in children's personalities and preferences (e.g. being shy or adventurous) can affect the kinds of activities children feel comfortable exploring. One way to support children with enjoying nature play (regardless of their personality etc.) is to ensure the play is led by their interests and preferences.
- 3 **Concerns parents have about health and safety:** Some parents and people working with young children feel unsure about how to balance nature play and risk-taking outdoors.

Practitioners can support parents to feel comfortable with nature play by:

- Discussing or providing information about the benefits of nature play and listening to their concerns around safety and risk
- Workshopping strategies with parents to keep children safe while encouraging autonomy
- Letting parents know that nature play can be adapted for different ages and interests and be gentle as well as active.



Scan the QR code to read the full article on AIFS' website.



Simple nature play ideas for young children



create shapes, letters, or objects with loose items (e.g. sticks, leaves, stones)



lie on the ground and look at the shapes of swaying trees, clouds or stars



make an obstacle course over or around natural objects



feel the grass and leaves or smell flowers and plants



have a picnic or camp out in the backyard



record information about (a) the insects and birds you see or (b) the plants or objects you use



balance or climb on rocks, boulders or logs



use your bodies in different shapes, patterns, speeds and directions when outside



make a mud kitchen



talk about what you can see, hear and feel outside



use a magnifying glass to explore insects and flowers