

# Children in wild Nature

**A practical guide to nature-based practice**

**Niki Buchan**

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the children for allowing me to share in their enthusiasm and joy of wild nature.

To my parents, Sybe and Annemarie Bakker, who allowed me the freedom to roam, to explore the beach and the bush, it is only as an adult that I realise the true value of this trust. To my husband, David, and children, David, Stuart, Caitlin and Martin who put up with my desire to wander and wonder in nature, to photograph what amazes me, thank you for your continued patience and support.

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# Foreword

Niki Buchan is the right person to be writing a book of this nature – pun intended. Her experience in working with children in wild natural spaces encompasses many years in the United Kingdom and South Africa and more recently, and to our inestimable benefit, in Australia. Niki works with adults and children on a daily basis in many different parts of our vast and varied country. Indeed, during the last three years in Australia, Niki has travelled tens of thousands of kilometres and conducted many hundreds of training sessions with educators, parents and children to assist them in reconnecting with their local environments in a holistic, respectful and purposeful manner.

As much of Niki's work is with early childhood and school educators, her knowledge of legislation in all jurisdictions is comprehensive. Niki assists educators to unpack their legislative requirements so they can meet all health and safety requirements while safely supporting children in developing their own skills as risk assessors and to challenge themselves in a manner that is healthy, developmentally appropriate and empowering. Her unique sense of risk and benefit are carefully weighed and applied on a number of different levels, as outlined in this book. The respect with which she approaches the natural world is evident in all of her training and encourages participants to interact with wild natural spaces in a mutually respectful way.

Niki Buchan's approach to supporting children's interaction with the natural world is the way of the future. The climate and environmental crisis we face on Earth is now undeniable and compels us to find new ways of interacting with our planet. Engaging children in the natural world in a purposeful and respectful manner is the beginning of re-imagining our relationship to the planet. Repeated visits or time spent in wild spaces highlights the effect we have on them, and in turn allows the agency of the natural world to work its magic on us. I believe this type of relationship will redefine sustainability education. We will, in time, say: I know this place and this place knows me; together we move into the future. Niki's new book takes us a big step closer.

Dr Kumara Ward, Centre for Educational Research:  
Sustainability, University Of Western Sydney



# Background to wild nature experiences

The nature-practice model initiative originated in Scandinavia and the Nordic countries. In the UK this developed into weekly sessions in a forest environment which became known as Forest Schools. In this approach, children traditionally have access to a forest site for half a day per week for a 6-week period.

A different approach is followed in the Nature Kindergartens in Scotland where children of mixed ages spend prolonged periods of time in the forest on a daily basis.

There is a big difference educationally and experientially between children accessing a space once a week for 3 hours over a 6-week period and children accessing the space every day for many hours all year round. Apart from the continuity of experiences, the more exposure children have to nature the more beneficial.

9 Nature alleviates the impact of life stress on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (Wells & Evans 2003).



At Auchlone Nature Kindergarten in Scotland children from the age of 2 have access to real-life experiences including cooking on fire.

9 Australia is a nation defined by its outdoor environments ... However, research reveals that one in ten Aussie kids play outside once a week or less. The landscape of childhood has changed. In a single generation we have seen a profound shift from outdoor play to indoor play. (*Climbing Trees: Getting Aussie Kids Back Outside* – Planet Ark 2011)



Many older adults in Australia have memories of being free to roam, to explore the creeks, the beach and the bush. Such memories, together with the well-researched negative consequences to children of not having contact with nature, have led to a growing movement among concerned educators, academics and parents to address this imbalance that denies children the right and privilege of experiencing so much of what Australia truly has to offer.

There now appears to be a growing desire among parents to again allow their children such adventurous childhoods.



## What is wild nature?

Wild nature is nature that has not been tidied up, cleaned, prepared or processed (such as in manicured gardens, and many children's playgrounds with man-made static equipment).

Wild nature is nature as it is found, with fallen sticks, washed-up shells and opportunities for the unpredictable. These might be spaces where there are still pathways and signs, but nature in its natural state is maintained. They do not necessarily need to be large spaces – but could be a patch of bushland on a block, or a creek in an urban scrublands.



*Don't be restricted. Botanical gardens, arboretums, patches of bushland next to a sports field all offer opportunities. In Melbourne's Botanic Gardens the oak lawn, 'dinosaur' tree and children's garden are welcome invitations to play.*

## Excursions into wild nature

Different wild nature experience models are emerging, which is exciting and encouraging. Many are still initial, exploratory visits, but through reflection and evaluation educators are starting to adopt a more nature-based approach to their practice.

### Situational challenges

Such freedom is ideal but, as with any experience, there will also be challenges. Some of these are unique, such as some of the native fauna and flora, as well as the cultural influences. Others, such as environmental challenges, are linked to the seasons: heat, cold, wind, floods and drought.

However, there is nothing in the current regulations or curriculum expectations that would prevent educators from following the nature-based practice model.



*Invitations to explore come in many different forms – a rough track through coastal grasslands offers an invitation to hidden sights.*

### Current wild nature experience models

- Occasional excursions away from the setting, often annually or quarterly
- Weekly excursions, usually for two to three hours, often for a set time period such as 6 weeks or 10 weeks
- Weekly or twice-weekly excursions, for half a day or a full day, throughout the year
- Daily access for shorter periods of time, often within the playground setting
- Daily access for prolonged periods of time throughout the year



*Children at Spirit of Play Community School have access to a large unfenced bush space. The children are confident, and trusted to explore with minimal adult direction.*

Each of these models can also have a number of variations:

- Limitations on the numbers and ages of children
- The allocated natural space in which the children can roam freely
- The opportunities children have access to and the activities offered

- The adult involvement, including the freedom, directions or instructions given to the children
- The type of resources or equipment taken on the excursions



*In this play group in the Northern Territory, children have access to plastic cars and trucks brought in by the adults which they include in their play with water, leaves and stones.*

## An integrated philosophy

Some centres, with the best of intentions, have set up experience for children with many guidelines and rules, where the current structured indoor practice is transferred into wild nature and where often children return to a largely artificial environment.



*Children of all ages at Goodstart Red Hill in Brisbane have regular access to a nearby creek. They are aware of seasonal changes that increase the flow and height of the water and know that at times the creek is not safe.*

What is required is a far more integrated approach, a naturalistic philosophy that touches every aspect of children's experiences – a place that incorporates community, naturalistic indoor space and playground as well as access to wild nature, and where the philosophy and practice in each space does not change, although the experiences for each child may differ.

## Moving forward

It is important to reflect and analyse, recognise and overcome challenges, identify any adaptations required and then create a model that best works for you. Every journey will be different, and in this book you will meet some of the educators who have started this process and have shared their own unique journey.



# CONSIDERATIONS for nature-based practice

by Clare Nugent & Sarah MacQuarrie

This chapter includes experiences that elsewhere might be described as outdoor play or outdoor education. These labels (and others) in this field imply similar ingredients or elements, yet the development of a range of labels suggests differences, some subtle and others less so, that are recognisable within practice. This chapter aims to avoid any such confusion from the use of overlapping labels and instead considers nature-based practice.

## What has nature-based practice come to mean?

This will vary for different educators in different settings. For some, nature is a landscape with no fences stretching far into the distance. Others will seek out a nature walk, where the path is clear and the area is managed. It could also come to mean a child discovering and revisiting a spider's web in the outdoor area.

Of course, the ways in which experiences are tied to children's learning and the support or guidance offered by educators is a central feature of nature-based practice, and this thread is regularly referred to here.

The term 'nature-based practice' is helpful in a number of ways:

- It recognises the value for young children playing and learning in nature.
- It concisely joins outdoor and indoor experiences.
- It centralises the role of nature within practical experiences.
- It allows for flexibility and is adaptable both across and within settings.

This chapter focuses on experiences aimed at or developed for children that seek to use nature as a resource to support learning.



*At Spirit of Play Community School children have the choice of whether or not to wear shoes. Most choose to be barefoot when climbing trees.*

Figure 1 opposite shows the key components that we feel comprise nature-based practice and set it apart from other descriptions.

## Risk and challenge

There are tensions when considering risk and challenge in early years education, primarily that offering risk opens up the possibility of injury or harm. But the removal or reduction of exposure to risk can lead to environments that offer insufficient stimulation for children. Risky experiences, and reflection on what they have to offer and what they have taught each individual, are crucial in recognising how risk and challenge influence early years education and children's development.

Litigation and anxiety are pervasive features of contemporary society and attitudes towards children's risk-taking behaviours are a complex and hotly debated topic. One perception of risk is visible when we look at how playgrounds or 'nature spaces' are available for learning and play; however, it is rare to see such spaces without a perimeter fence. These walls or boundaries serve a purpose for the adult – namely to dilute their risk-related angst.

Figure 1: The key components of nature-based practice

<p><b>Risk and challenge</b></p> <p>Higher level of risk-taking behaviours          Self-risk assessing and trust          Collaborative (children supporting each other, cross-age working, educators engaging with colleagues)</p>	<p><b>Sustainability</b></p> <p>Environmental awareness          Impact on land of early childhood provision          Demonstrates ownership          Linked learning: sow – harvest – forage – cook – eat – recycle/ compost</p>
<p><b>Flexibility afforded by nature environments</b></p> <p>Encourages activity and exploration          Free from expectation and set learning goals          Freer from adult mediation          Offers time for reflection          Child- and nature-paced rather than curriculum led          Seeks child’s voice</p>	<p><b>Culturally situated</b></p> <p>The heritage of a place is included          Adult as reproducer of social and cultural ‘norms’          Tailoring practice to centralise local knowledge and culture          Sensitive to the children in your setting and their experiences</p>



*These children from a centre in Finland are trusted to be responsible for their own safety, including carrying their own spare clothing and the first-aid kit.*

In chapter 5 there is an example that illustrates how an understanding of risk can be firmly embedded through experiences. This chapter focuses on children and their caregivers who have been tempted into wilder nature environments, hence we can discuss risk in terms of scaffolding children through a progression of challenging experiences. In this approach, progression is understood through children’s prior experience and it tends to adopt a holistic view of children’s development rather than consider specific outcomes.



*Children who have previous experience of playing in the sea will already know about the waves and the power of the currents, while those new to the experience would need additional support to keep them as safe as necessary.*

Little and Wyver (2008) reviewed studies and literature since 1990 and interpreted the findings in relation to early childhood education. They state that risky play is critical to children’s healthy development, but that despite this, many early childhood educators and parents struggle to provide challenging and stimulating outdoor experiences for children. The reason for this, they propose, comes from restrictive regulations, risk-averse educators/adults and/or other social factors.

They emphasise the importance of considering risk within the larger context of children’s development, as well as the need to focus on identifying and fostering a risk balance that is appropriate for each individual child.

Bringing together these points regarding risk, it is a concern that risk averse or risk avoidance strategies still often remain a central feature of early childhood. This presents multiple difficulties, including how adequate progression and layering of experiences can be shaped and provided for children. This is not a suggestion for a radical overhaul of practice. Rather, educators need to be sensitive to children's need for challenge and develop practice accordingly for each individual scenario.

## Sustainability



*Wherever children play in wild nature there will be an impact on the environment. In Finland, children jumping in the snow are aware of the new growth beneath, while in Australia children value the revegetation of sand dunes.*

Several texts on this topic are listed in the references. Of particular note for early childhood are Davis (2010) and Cutter-Mackenzie and colleagues (2013) who offer supporting guidance for those who seek to incorporate education for sustainability in their practice.

A program termed Eco-Schools has been developed and implemented in a number of countries – including Denmark, Germany, Greece and the United Kingdom. Australia is the 55th country to be involved (in February 2014). The program makes links with the curriculum and offers a potential future route for early childhood educators in as it involves different levels of schooling in many countries.

Chapter 4 explains that children who have first-hand experiences of nature also appreciate what it means to live sustainably. Such experience is vital when

considering the contribution that nature-based learning can offer to sustainable lifestyles and the delivery of education for sustainability. Multiple forms of experiences feed into sustainability and include knowledge of the world around us, appreciation of the weather, and knowledge of biodiversity and human impact on nature.

## Flexibility afforded by nature environments

The outdoors comes in many forms and offers many flexible learning opportunities. Such flexibility is often labelled 'affordances', referring to work conducted in the 1970s that has since been interpreted in relation to education (Gibson 1979).

Other material that influenced by this perspective uses a variety of labels such as open-ended opportunities, unstructured play or play involving loose parts (Nicolson 1971). Broadhead (2004) coined the phrase 'anything-you-want-it- to-be-spaces' referring to indoor play and Tovey (2007) developed this to include playing outdoors.

Irrespective of what label or descriptions are used to explain children's play or interactions with nature, the common thread is that children can follow their interest and explore the properties of whatever is available to them in their outdoor space. For example, to an adult a stick is just that and often something to be removed from children's play whereas to a child a stick can be used as a writing tool, a weapon, a magic wand, a stirrer or a tool to pick up bugs. Such resources can provide endless scope for play and learning. Of course experience plays a role in how play and learning may be shaped, and this is considered below.



*This man-made log reindeer structure is used in a variety of ways without adult rules or restrictions – which increases its play value.*

## Culturally situated



*Children in countries where snow is a feature will traditionally make snow angels while children in Australia make sand fairies. The action is the same but the natural material used is different.*

The role of culture is a vital component of outdoor experience and children's learning. This has been labelled 'culturally situated' to help include the influences of where practice occurs (place) and what has come before such experience.

Brown (2009), writing about outdoor adventure education, supports the idea that practices are culturally situated and historically constituted.

It is inappropriate to merely note similarities, as practice cannot simply be copied or transported from one setting to another. To do so merely does a disservice to the people (adults and children) and processes involved in learning.

Each of us as individuals go about our daily lives and interactions with others and in doing so, function within a layer of norms, beliefs and cultural expectations borne in part through our society's preferences and our personal experiences. These factors also have a bearing on early years education and thus, what works in one context may not have the same impact or offer the same kind of learning opportunities elsewhere.

Gulløv (2003) draws our attention to early childhood institutions as 'significant loci of cultural transmission' (p.26) where the heritage of history of a place and its people feeds into practice and is supported within children's experiences from an early age.



*It is common practice for children to hold hands when going beyond the fence. These children from UPCCC in Canberra may find a certain comfort in being together without obvious adult supervision.*

Despite the argument offered above that a situated view is needed when looking at early years education, there is value in comparison across practice as lessons can be drawn from sharing ideas. It is prudent to note that practice is not 'right' or 'wrong'. Rather, there are dimensions of resonance and difference to be shared and transferred among educators. In the words of a Danish educator:

9 We [in Denmark] have not found the golden stones, we may not be right, but it is just the way we do it. Here it is done differently, but we see the big, nature picture outside is the same. (MacQuarrie et al 2013).

Educators need to be sensitive and open to considering what nature-based practice can be in their own particular place, given their particular situation. We urge educators to see themselves as their own guide, combining expertise of their locality and their experience to date that has led them to their current forms of practice or ways of doing things.



*It is helpful for educators to get together in a supportive environment to share ideas and knowledge of their local practice.*



# Journeys into nature-based practice

## Educators sharing their journeys

One of the goals in writing this book was to raise awareness of the many settings currently embracing nature-based practice. It is often through having an awareness of like-minded visions and practice nearby that change happens.

"We had long admired the forest kindergartens from afar, never really considering how that might look in an Australian setting. Until last year ... we hadn't seen any Australian schools engaging regularly in wild spaces. It turns out we just hadn't looked carefully enough as there were many wonderful programs being run all over Australia. We realised that here at Red Hill we were blessed with an amazing and diverse environment right on our doorstep and began our thinking about how we could begin accessing it on a regular basis." — *Skye*



*Nature on the doorstep at Red Hill was 'discovered' once educators became aware of the possibilities beyond their gates.*

### Shared journeys

No book about nature-based practice in Australia should be without the voices of the many educators, families and children who are already on this exciting journey. In most cases educators had to push the boundaries, and stand up for the rights of the children. Not always an easy journey, but if educators do not stand up for the rights of the child ... who will?

9 Every teacher, every caregiver, holds in his or her hands the power to shape a child's entire future.  
— *Pam Schiller*



*Children from ECOS explore the dune environment on their journey to the beach.*

### Jenelle Haskew – Bush Place coordinator, Annette's Place Early Education and Care Service, Young ,NSW

In April 2012, Jenelle started taking a small group of 4- to 5-year-old children to a council-owned public bush space. This soon increased to 20 children of mixed ages from babies to 5-year-olds going out for 3 hours three times per week. They currently travel 15 km to a public school site in a bus on a daily basis. This bush place offers a variety of trees and bushes as well as a large open space and a shelter which is not often used.



*Children of mixed ages are encouraged to be part of all the experiences including making fires.*