

# Time to step out to great outdoors



NATURE play is lacking for many children today. Small back yards, more screen time, busy parents and less time for outdoor play can make the outdoors seem a forbidding place for many tots.

But parents can turn back the clock and take their tots out in the great outdoors, no matter how big or small, and introduce their children to nature.

The warmer weather of spring has encouraged lots of smiling, tickled cutters after the cold winter and gardening centres are brimming with people updating their yards.

So it's the perfect time to introduce babies to their back yards and invigorate your toddler's love of the outdoors.



**MICHELLE POUNTNEY**  
Pht: 9292 2693  
[babysteps.com.au](http://babysteps.com.au)

A recent survey found only 35 per cent of children played outside every day and only 10 plays outside only once a week.

And almost three-quarters of parents said they played outdoors more often than indoors when they were growing up, compared with 13 per cent of today's children.

"Nature play is a fundamental part of a healthy childhood," Royal Botanic Gardens education coordinator Christine Joy says.

"Nature play is good for kids. It makes them healthier, happier and helps their brains to grow." Parents can introduce babies from birth, few months old to nature-based activities in the back yard.

Teacher, bush playgroup facilitator and mother-of-three, Narelle Debenham

runs Nutured Kids, an outdoor program for babies to five-year-olds and their families to explore and connect with nature in their local area.

"If we raise a generation

of kids whose recreational activities are predominantly indoors, it is likely they may not develop a relationship with the environment. They may see no reason to care," Ms Debenham said.

With more regularly immersed in their natural environment, children's involvement in nature during their formative years guarantees eco-literacy, care for the natural world and environmental sustainability.

Here are some simple

activities to do in the back yard

or on short walks near home

that require next to no special equipment and that everyone

can do.

#### For kids 6-12 months:

- Make worm stew (mud pies).
- Feel moss, leaves, feathers and other textures.
- Tickle their cheek or tummy with a flower.
- Walk bare-footed.
- Float petals in a bowl of water for a beautiful swirling water play.
- Read stories outside.
- Make daisy chains or put buttercups under their chin.



taste great and can be used for playing garden games.

■ Let children collect and play with sticks to build an elf or fairy cubby or a home for the garden.

■ Create a mandala, collage on the ground (no glue), using leaves, twigs, flowers and other items from nature.

■ Fly a kite.

■ Find a place to lie under a tree or in a secret place to observe the sounds around us on sounds. Ask children to respond to sounds. For instance, how do they make you feel? This can lead to paper airplane flights on the effect of sounds in a city while animals use sound and so on.

■ Talk about smells as you walk together to raise awareness of the subtleties and effects on feelings.

Grow herbs, make potpourri and explore why and how plants smell.

■ Allow children to make their own mini-landscapes. Encourage them to consider terrain, angles, water drainage and so on. The landscape could be modelled on an imaginary real place from a story or a place and could include toys.

■ Put on a coat, grab an umbrella and go outside in the rain. Explore how things change in the garden when they are wet and have fun with the puddles.

■ Go outside at night and look at the stars and moon.

■ Plant seeds or seedlings and, armed with child size secateurs, let them give children the responsibility for care for their garden.

■ Read outdoor-themed stories outdoors.

#### Longer projects:

Narelle Debenham says one of the favourite activities for her three boys is to build mud houses for creatures, then waiting to see what "moves" in.

Weight down a flat piece of cardboard in the backyard and wait for two to three weeks. Then carefully lift it up to see what has moved in. The new house, Worms, slaters and earwigs will be the most commonly found bugs, but you never know what might appear.

A magnifying glass makes the experiment even more fun. To add to the educational aspect, use the creatures that have moved in as a

literacy hook and new books from the local library that "star" the creatures.

Create mini-habitats.

Visit your local indigenous nursery for tips on creating habitats for butterflies, birds, lizards and other creatures. For example, find out which plants attract butterflies and what else could encourage them to visit your garden. Did you know butterflies love sand, as the minerals it contains helps sustain them?

"Activities courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, [www.rbg.vic.gov.au](http://www.rbg.vic.gov.au) and [naturaled.com](http://naturaled.com)

