

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 freedom for unstructured play can make the outdoors seem a forbidding place for many tots.

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

The warmer weather of spring has encouraged lots of families back outdoors 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.



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A recent survey found only 35 per cent of children played outside every day and one in 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 just a few months old to nature-based activities in the back yard.

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

runs Natured 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.

"When regularly immersed in their natural environment, children's involvement in nature during their formative years guarantees eco-literacy, care for our 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.

Toddlers:

- Make daisy chains or put buttercups under their chin.



- Play drums. Put a stick inside a large gumnut to make a drumstick and turn some pots upside down for drums.
- Lie on your back under a tree to look at its canopy.
- Lie on tummies to sniff the grass and look for creatures in the "grass jungle".

- Make a dinosaur garden. Use plastic dinosaurs, grab a potting tray and make your dinosaurs a prehistoric garden with loose materials from the yard.
- Plant a vegetable garden and tend it together.
- Look at raindrops on nasturtium leaves, with tiny magnifying glasses, and roll the drop carefully around the leaf without letting it fall off.
- Make a bird's breakfast. Grow sunflowers along the fence and then watch when the

cockies and parrots come along to eat them.

- Grow sunflowers in a circle then tie their heads together to make a cubby.

- Collect leaves, feathers, seed pods and other natural items from the yard or while on a walk. Put them in a dish or bowl near the front door to create a nature plate to remind visitors of nature.

- Don't toss your child's first, or outgrown shoes, away. Instead, keep the memories alive by planting a succulent or other small plant in the shoe and using it as garden art.

- Using a stick, scratch your child's name, a smiley face, noughts and crosses or other shapes in the soil and plant seeds of quick-growing plants such as radishes. Radishes sprout in just four to six days and, once grown,

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 their small, plastic toys.

- Create a mandala, or 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 close your eyes and focus on sounds. Ask children to respond to sounds. For instance, how do they make you feel? This can lead to poetry or discussion on the effect of sounds in a city, why 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, vegetation, rivers, drainage and so on. The landscape could be modelled on an imaginary place, a place from a story or a real 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 how fun with the puddles.

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

- Plant seeds or seedlings and, armed with child-sized gardening tools, give children the responsibility to care for their garden.

- Read outdoor-themed stories outdoors.

Longer projects:

Narelle Debenham says one of the favourite activities for her three boys was creating new homes for creatures, then waiting to see what "moves in".

Weigh down a flat piece of cardboard in the corner of the backyard and wait for two to three weeks. Then carefully lift it up to see what has moved into 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 borrow 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 a dish of wet beach sand, as the minerals it contains helps sustain them?

*Activities courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens and Narelle Debenham at naturedkids.com

