



Playgroups Victoria Conference

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Kids In Nature Network: Kids do better Outside!

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Activity:

Think about your favourite place to play in nature when you were young.

Share with a neighbour.

What made it so special?

How did you feel?

Who were you with?

What is Kids In Nature Network?

Kids in Nature Network, KINN in short, is a catalyst for rebuilding the connection between our kids and the natural world. We exist to link up key initiatives that promote nature play to improve children's well-being and development, promote creative play and facilitate connection to the natural world. We are based in Melbourne, Victoria. Our diverse cross-sectoral network consist of initiatives of all sizes and shapes, from small initiatives to big organisations and government departments and leaders from health, education, environment, urban planning, outdoor recreation, community, government, business, arts and many other sectors. KINN provides a common platform around the objective of connecting kids to nature.

At the very beginning, we interviewed 35 leaders involved in connecting young people with nature and then invited them to four strategy sessions to co-develop the network's vision, mission and strategy.

Our vision is for all kids to have every opportunity to experience, love and look after nature.

KINN was founded by a group of women who were concerned with the trends in children's physical and mental health and at the same time with the health of the natural world around us. We were wondering, if kids do no longer get the opportunities to experience and love nature, who will look after it and assure that there is nature to enjoy in the future?

KINN works to ensure our kids have got the same opportunity to play in beautiful natural places now and in future and that our natural environment is not diminished and compromised for future generations.

The worrying trends

Over the last decades we have moved more and more towards living in a box. We currently see the first generation of young parents that do not have experiences with unstructured play outside and connection to nature.

Physical Health:

- 2 out of 3 Australian kids between 2-17 do not get recommended daily exercise ¹
- Aussie kids today spend more time in cars than previous generations..²
- 1 in 4 Aussie kids are overweight or obese (1 in 20 in 1960), with Victoria spiking above the other states with over 30%³
- Vitamin D deficiency is more common among those living in Major cities compared with those living in regional and remote areas⁴

Mental health:

- Almost 1 in 7 of children and adolescents aged 4-17 years has experienced a mental health disorders in the previous 12 months⁵
- The number of deaths by suicide in young Australians (15-24 y/o) is the highest it has been in 10 years, which makes it the biggest killer of young Australians and accounts for the deaths of more young people than car accidents ⁶

Screen time:

- The majority of Australian children, across all age groups, are exceeding the current national recommended guidelines for screen time⁷
- 1 out of 3 preschoolers, 2 out of 3 primary school-aged children and almost all Australian teenagers have their own mobilescreen-based device. ⁸
- 1 in 10 kids play outside once a week in Australia. This means kids today play less outside than any generation in history!⁹

Why being in nature is sooo good for you

There's something that we all know, on some level. Some of us know it for a fact, some of us just know it in their gut. But we all know it: Kids do better outside. Physically, mentally, emotionally and socially; kids do better outside.

While not being a magical solution for all our problems, a vast and growing amount of research shows that 'Access to active and self-directed play in nature and the outdoors is essential for healthy child development, physical health, mental health and wellbeing.'¹⁰

Outdoor play in minimally structured, free and accessible local environments facilitates socialisation and connection with peers, the community and the environment, reduces feelings of isolation, builds interpersonal skills and facilitates healthy development.

When children are outside, they move more, sit less and play longer. These behaviours are associated with improved physical and mental health and improved cognitive and social skills. Children are more curious about and interested in natural play spaces than pre-fabricated play

structures. Children who engage in active outdoor play in natural environments demonstrate resilience, self-regulation and develop skills for dealing with stress later in life.

When we started KINN in 2011, the first bush kinder in Victoria was being set up in Westgarth. In 2018 KINN published The State of Nature Play Report, mapping the kids in nature movement in Victoria summarised outcomes of a survey representing 393 organisations and an estimated 1,456 nature-based programs for kids across Victoria each year.¹¹ By the time of this survey there were over 200 bush kinder or bush playgroups in Victoria alone.

The survey found that some of the biggest barriers to nature based outdoor play were parents fears, risk perception towards outdoor play and potential risk of animals on site, as well as parents and educators/ professional colleagues attitudes towards children's outdoor play in cold and wet weather.

In short: Physically, mentally, emotionally and socially; kids do better outside.

When children run and play in natural light and fresh air it is not just better for them; it is better for their families, their communities, their society, economy and planet. But just because we all know it doesn't mean we all do it. Some of us don't have the confidence. Some of us don't know where to start. Or how. A lot of us think it is harder than it really is.

What is nature play & what can you do in nature?

Nature play is a term used to describe the creation of simple play opportunities in the natural environment. Nature play encourages kids and parents to see the natural environment as a place to enjoy, play, imagine, relax and explore.

The beautiful thing about nature play is that it can be as simple as going to the local park with a group of friends or neighbours and letting the kids run free. Nature play isn't about adults prescribing outdoor activities with rules for children to follow. Nature play is about taking kids into nature and allowing them the time, space and freedom to explore, discover, and find wonder in the natural world. Please be mindful that we share the world with other animals and remember to act with empathy and respect with the emphasis on observing.

Nature play can be anything from

- Adult-free nature play spaces, school programs
- Tree spotting workshops, climbing trees, cubby building
- Playing in mud puddles, Mud pie cook-off, Fungi discovery workshop
- Sculpture building on the beach, beach scavengering, discovering the world inside a rock pool,
- Cloud watching, Stargazing, Fire under the stars: Sleeping under the stars, Big Camp Outs, Hearing the forest wake up
- Nature Scavenger hunts: how many species can you find/record? Discover play right where you are, Pop-up parks', Bug hunts...
- Nature Art: Make an installation in your local park, a nature photo competition, Song writing about nature: write and perform the song, Stick puppets, make your own bio-degradable toys from what you find, Sand sculptures, shells on beach or autumn leaves mandala

- Nature play for all ages, Adult play space: reconnect with your inner kid, Grandparents and grandchildren walks, Kids teaching kids (and adults) about nature,
- Outdoor storytelling, Indigenous stories, dressing up as your favourite creature, making flower crowns, a Barefoot March, waterplay outside, Bring nature inside...

...and the list goes on and on and on.

There are playgroups that are specifically focussed on nature play such as the Bush playgroups that are put on by various kinders and child care centres such as Yarralea, community bush play groups such as Huntly Nature Play Playgroup and the Merri Bush playgroup and Royal Botanical Gardens' Little seeds Playgroup at the The Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden.

And you might know Playgroups Victoria's wonderful initiative of Nature Month for playgroups in September. KINN collaborates with Playgroup Victoria on that again later this year, so you can revisit a lot of the ideas you have gotten here and put them into action.

Nature Play Week

Nature Play Week originated when we extended an open invitation to our network to develop a joint initiative. Nature Play Week grew out of these sessions.

Now in its sixth year, Nature Play Week (NPW) is a signature event that celebrates initiatives of all shapes and sizes that reconnect kids with nature and the outdoors. The last few years of NPW featured over 150 events put together by more than 70 organisations in Victoria and beyond, and we hope to have a similar response this year. The week includes unique nature play experiences for kids and workshops for parents and educators. This year's Nature Play Week runs from April 17-28.

Our challenge for you is to organise a nature play activity for Nature Play Week. Be part of this empowering movement that allows kids to reconnect with nature. We have put together a leaflet with some really simple to organise nature play activities that you can put on. You are the portal for them to explore and love the natural world.

If you don't want to organise an event, you could join one on the calendar. Most groups organise events throughout the year. NPW just puts a spotlight on the April events.

For more information about Kids in Nature Network please see our website:
kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au or contact info@kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au

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Sources:

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