

Bush Kinder: Challenging our notions of preschool provision

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Key points

1. Forest preschools: An overview
2. Research studies: Benefits and some challenges
3. Forest preschool: A visual narrative
4. Bush Kinder: Evaluative study and findings
5. Conclusion

1. Forest preschools: An overview

The forest preschool approach originally established over 50 years ago in Scandinavia, has become an international movement with forest preschools emerging in the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and New Zealand over the last decade.

Current resources

- Key publications by Sarah Knight, Claire Warden, Jane Williams-Siegfredsen
- Insideout Nature: tours, training, resources
www.insideoutnature.com
- Outdoor Preschool Norway
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp4Nny_rliw

But, what is forest preschool?
There is no one view or interpretation of
what is forest preschool.....



Danish Forest Preschool Principles

- A holistic approach to children's learning and development
- Each child is unique and competent
- Children are active and interactive learners
- Children need real-life, first hand experiences
- Children thrive in child-centred environments
- Children need time to experiment and develop independent thinking
- Learning comes from social interactions.

(Williams-Sieghfredsen, 2012, pp. 9-10)

Multiple interpretations around a theme

...the key underlying feature of the forest preschool approach is that children spend long and regular periods of time in unstructured play in natural forest or beach environments, ranging from weekly visits over a preschool term to an everyday all year round occurrence

(Elliott & Chancellor, 2012, p.7)

Local interpretation of key elements

Context: Natural settings including bush and beach

Ecoliteracy: Understandings of the context, plants, animals, cultural and indigenous histories

Practicalities: Policies, regulations, toileting, clothing, communication (tools?)

Pedagogy: Images of children, relationships, community connections, interpretations and documentation, risk management

All of the above interlinked and developing within local communities and broader policy/regulatory/curriculum frameworks

Bush and beach kinder and school programs are now emerging in Australia.....

- Balnarring Kindergarten
- Coburg Children's Centre
- Cornish College ELC
- East Brunswick Primary School
- Jacaranda Kindergarten
- Westgarth Kindergarten
- Woodleigh School ELC

2. Research studies: Benefits and some potential challenges

- Increased confidence, motivation and concentration, increased social, physical and language skills, deeper conceptual understandings and respect for the natural environment (Borradaile, 2006; Massey, 2004; Murray, 2004; Murray & O' Brien, 2005; O'Brien & Murray, 2008; O'Brien, 2009)
- Increased social and imaginative play (Fjortoft, 2001; 2004)
- More varied risk-taking behaviours and positive dispositions towards risk and challenge (Waters & Begley, 2007) .

- Teachers understandings of and relationships with the children are deepened, while families and wider community attitudes towards natural places for play and children's risk management can be enhanced (Borradaile, 2006; Knight, 2009; Murray & O'Brien, 2005; O'Brien, 2009)
- Positive outcomes for many diverse communities including disadvantaged or challenging youth, children with autism and drug addicted adults (Knight, 2011)

Some potential challenges or questions for reflection...

- Is forest preschool more than simply taking young children outside to play in nature?
- Are tools and explicit teaching of skills essential?
- How do we deal with practicalities in ways that reflect our philosophy and local cultural practice?
- Is it about children surviving outdoors?
- What images of children and pedagogy underpin our approaches?

‘a sustainable participatory culture with children, leading to the construction of knowledge through shared reflection and collaborative enquiry’
(Waller, 2007, p. 404)



3. Forest preschool: A visual narrative

Thanks to the following services for their inspiration and these photographs:

Arhus Forest Preschool, Denmark

Fussingo Nature Kindergarten, Denmark

Hondruphus Nature Kindergarten, Denmark

Laerkereden Age Integrated Centre, Denmark

Note photos removed for USB version.

4. Bush Kinder: Evaluative study and findings

- Pilot from May –December 2011 with one of Westgarth Kindergarten's four-year-old groups.
- Children attended the centre for two 6-hour sessions and the Bush Kinder for one 3-hour session per week, a total of 15 hours per week.
- The Bush Kinder venue is located 2.5km from Westgarth Kindergarten in the Darebin Parklands, Alphington. Parents collect and drop children at the venue.
- The site was carefully chosen taking into account proximity, risk management, play possibilities, accessibility and parkland management support.

Evaluative Study

- The purpose of the evaluative study was to inform further development of the pilot program and support other centres wishing to establish programs.
- The study focussed on the impacts of pilot program, the challenges experienced and factors perceived as critical to ongoing success.
- This study was conducted in 2011 at the end of the first year of operation and involved interviews with teachers, questionnaires for parents and a teacher/parent focus group.

Key findings

- Overall, the collated responses offered a clear and highly positive consensus about the value of the Westgarth Kindergarten Bush Kinder pilot program.
- The following slides specifically identify the positive impacts of the program for parents, teachers, children and the community.

Positive impacts for parents

- Learning about their children
- Opportunities to slow down and be involved in different ways
- They became keen observers of their children's play at Bush Kinder
- Parents overall seemed reinvigorated about the 'value of unrestricted outdoor play' and were keen to follow up with 'more opportunities to explore nature' such as visits to parks or camping holidays
- Relationships between parents and children may have been enhanced

Positive impacts for parents

- Many parents and some grandparents shared stories of their own childhood prompted by the children's Bush Kinder experiences
- Some parents actively participated in the program sharing knowledge and skills, for example making pancakes on a camp stove
- Parents reported a strong sense of ownership as trailblazers of this new initiative

Quote from a parent

'I love mud cakes and the glee of jumping in puddles. I saw how much fun it is to be a kid and how much as a parent we can learn from them. I learnt to trust, give space and time to her and myself'

Positive impacts for teachers

- For both teachers the Bush Kinder experience promoted professional growth offering ‘an opportunity to push myself’ or ‘new life in my teaching’
- Multiple aspects of professional growth were noted: technology, media, snake training!
- Confidence in one’s abilities as a teacher was important as Bush Kinder was described as a ‘deeper experience that challenges all your teaching’

Quotes from teachers

'I haven't felt this great about coming to work in a long time'

'It's all about relationships, belonging and community ... the difference is there is no stuff, so the relationships are intensified, your role as a teacher is freed and you become stronger without clutter, it is really quite empowering'

Positive impacts for children

- The teachers' comments about the impacts on children focused on play, particularly changing types of play, group dynamics and relationships, physical skills and observation skills
- Teachers noticed that children played in different ways at Bush Kinder compared to the home kinder and linked this to the expectations implicit in materials offered at the home kinder
- Children's attitudes towards nature and knowledge about nature appeared enhanced

Positive impacts for community

- Children became visible in the local community
- Families described accessing Darebin Parklands more often, particularly revisiting to show other family members or friends where the children played at Bush Kinder
- A high level of local interest in enrolment for the 2012 Bush Kinder program

Positive impacts for community

- The Bush Kinder also supported various professional community member, departmental and media visits
- Links to the Darebin Parklands Park Rangers and Management Group

Challenges and changes

Six themes arose from the collated data:

1. Policy
2. Media
3. Teacher's role
4. Parent engagement
5. Location
6. Funding

These themes have pertinence not only for the ongoing development of the Bush Kinder pilot program, but also for others wishing to establish similar programs in local natural settings.

Future directions

1. Advocacy and representation to DEECD
2. Review current WKBK policies
3. Develop strategic communications policy
4. Create opportunities for teachers to critically reflect about pedagogy and philosophy
5. Review strategies to promote ongoing parent engagement
6. Create site selection criteria
7. Assess economic viability
8. Instigate further research

5. Conclusion: A final quote

She would wake up and ask if it was going to be a bush kinder day, every day for the first 10 weeks! She loved the mud and the freedom. She loved learning to climb trees. Discovering bugs and fairies. Excavating and hanging out with friends. She loved the space and the softness. The open air, the weather, the rainbows, nests and especially the rocks and jumping.

(Parent participant at focus group)

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