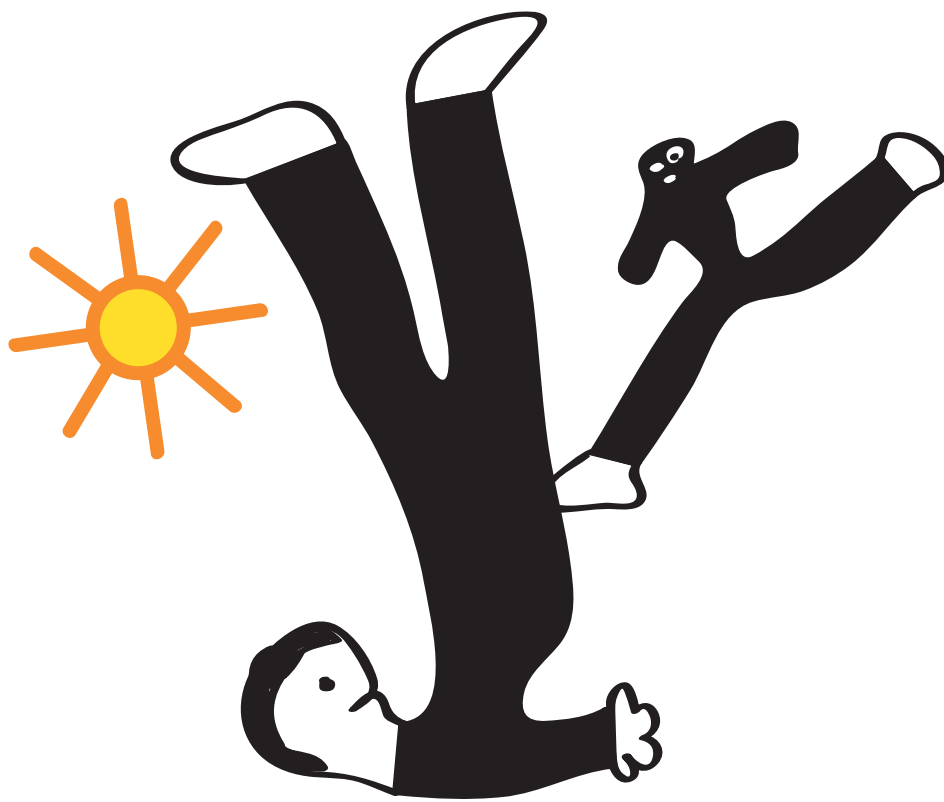


# Play and Folklore



**Project Play at Swanson School**

**Australian primary school playgrounds: the last play frontier?**

**Nature play for Natured Kids**

**Street play needs street signs**

**Outdoor playspaces for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

**Ethical Research Involving Children: Childwatch announcement**



## From the Editors

### *Play and Folklore* no. 61, April 2014

This issue of *Play and Folklore* has a special focus on children's outdoor play. We hear many stories about the constraints placed on children's play by adults – the growing number of 'bannings' include handstands, cartwheels, throwing things, playing with sticks, digging holes and rough-and-tumble play. Even simply touching each other is forbidden in some schools. In this issue we bring a more positive perspective on play by highlighting some of the ways in which children are being encouraged and assisted to explore, experiment, be adventurous and make their own fun.

Judy McKinty, June Factor and Gwenda Beed Davey

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# Project play at Swanson School

**Bruce McLachlan**

## The university study

For us at Swanson School it all began a couple of years ago when we were asked to take part in a joint research project undertaken by Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and Otago University. The study's aim was to determine if improving school playgrounds enhanced physical activity and reduced the prevalence of obesity and bullying among New Zealand school children. Apparently some studies show that as many as 50% of kids don't play every day and 30% of kids are less active on weekends than their parents were.

As a teacher, parent and ex-child I had always had an interest in children's play. The aim of the university study sounded worth exploring so I said yes, and as I am also wont to do, I started reading and scheming. Project Play, as it came to be known, was destined to have far-reaching consequences for us.

To the uninitiated, play is simply the term given to kids mucking around. The Welsh Government

Play Policy (2002), however, defines play as 'children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children, but also for the society in which they live.' It certainly seemed that play was worthy of more attention in the school than I had previously given it.

Children control the intent and content of their play. What kids do in their own time, away from the control of adults, is what they have always done: play. Today we might more accurately call it 'free play', to differentiate it from what it has become today: a much more 'supervised' activity. On many occasions a parent or teacher might 'reward' a child with an opportunity to play, or provide or allow a particular play experience. This unconsciously reinforces in adults the notion that they have an important role in the play experience. They don't.

Over the years the perception of good parenting has gradually

changed from hands-off to hands-on. 'Good' parents drive their kids to dance lessons and rugby practice while 'bad' parents tell their kids to go outside and play! Unstructured or 'free' play may not be so much a *lost* activity, but it certainly is a significantly *diminished* one. How 'helicopter' parenting and political correctness came to prevail is a question for the researchers to answer, but the effect of it has been that the play experience has been significantly modified for many children. Another reason is generational. Because we have been bubble-wrapping kids for a long time, some young parents were themselves cossetted when young, and that is simply all they know.

With the increasing sanitisation of the play experience by well-meaning adults, the opportunities for children to learn through play have been reduced. Play is how a child learns about risk, problem-solving, consequences and getting along with others. These learning experiences are arguably just as important as the traditional learning experiences schools

provide children. So it was with these understandings that we set out to change what we did.

Today, what we do at Swanson School is simply encourage free play to happen at recess. We do this by minimising the influence of adults in the play experience, and by challenging some long held beliefs. At recess, kids at Swanson can be seen to be building huts, riding every wheeled contraption that exists all over the school, climbing trees, play fighting, sliding down mudslides, using stair rails as monkey bars or just lying in the long grass and talking. The results have been very encouraging and we have received a great deal of national and international interest in Project Play, particularly since January this year.

## Evolution not revolution

The way we changed what was happening in our playground was by doing things slowly, little by little. The change was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. We essentially stopped saying no. We did not announce that from this day forth kids may do anything, we simply started turning a blind eye to anything they did which met the criteria of:

- It must not hurt someone else
- It must not damage someone else's property

We also had to ask ourselves a very hard question: why do we not allow kids to do this? If they were doing something which risked them getting hurt, or making a mess, or doing something which traditionally had not been allowed, we simply started letting them do it.

One day I dumped a whole bunch of junk in a 'loose parts pit' – car tyres, wood, pipes, even an old fire hose and just let the kids do whatever they wanted with it. Within a few days the junk was



Riding in a tyre  
Photographer – Bruce McLachlan

transported all over the school, and in the end we gave up trying to return it to one place! The fire hose migrated to an old jacaranda tree, along with a tyre which the kids used to hoist others up into the tree.

A 'wilderness area' was created in a place that was previously out-of-bounds, simply by letting the grass grow long and shaggy. The kids then built huts there using bits and pieces from the loose parts pit and anything else they could lay their hands on.

Looking back, we only made one formal announcement when we were in the process of loosening up the playground rules. On that occasion, after some discussion, we announced that kids would be allowed to ride their scooters

while at school. What happened next had me wondering if I had made the right decision! In our wisdom, (yeah right!), we had decided to limit scooter riding to one area of the playground, and as the day dawned it seemed like all 500 kids had brought their scooters to that one spot! Over the next few days and weeks, however, the novelty wore off. While some kids continued to scoot, perfect tricks and become amazingly skilled, others gravitated towards other activities. Now, several months later, kids scoot wherever they wish all over the school.

We had been freeing up the playground rules for a couple of years, and were starting to take things for granted, when we were visited by a journalist

accompanied by a videographer. How circumstances can affect children's play was perfectly illustrated as I accompanied the guy with the camera out into the playground. On one occasion, the videographer pointed the camera at a four-metre high netting fence beside a concrete ball court, where a child was climbing skilfully to the top. In a flash, a dozen other kids leaped onto the fence and started climbing rapidly to the top. This had the potential for disaster, as many of those kids had not slowly developed their climbing skills over time. On the contrary, they were simply showing off to the camera, and some risked falling off and hurting themselves. A few moments later as we noticed another great shot – some kids a long way up a very large tree, I insisted that the videographer use a zoom lens, so as not to risk kids showing off and potentially hurting themselves.

On a funny note, while the journalist's attention was focussed on kids playing naturally, I became aware of a child lying on the ground, supposedly hurt, with a growing circle of onlookers gathering. I quietly sidled over to the kid, quickly ascertained that he had been flattened by a truck tyre rolled down the adjacent slope and was actually just being dramatic. Through clenched teeth, I hissed, 'Get up. You are fine!' His only response was to writhe in pretended agony, screaming, 'My leg, my leg!' Just as I was thinking, 'How the hell am I going to play this one down?', one of the teachers on playground duty came over and perceptively took charge, allowing me to attend to the visitors who had the potential to make the situation look very much worse than it was!

What we have noticed over a long period of time is that many of our students have the

opportunity to develop their independence in the playground, quickly solving problems in order to get the most out of their play time. They have realised that if they stop playing in order to get a teacher to mediate, they are going to miss out on valuable play time. When you are absorbed in what you are doing who wants to be interrupted? Better to compromise and carry on. This, of course, goes for the bullies, as for everyone else.

Discussing the play initiative with a visitor who had come to see for herself, I looked out at the playground from my office window and pointed out two of the biggest potential bullies in the school. One of them was riding his bike at speed while towing the other one on his skateboard. I pointed out that we still needed to keep a watchful eye on bullying in the school in general and on those two in particular, but that they, like the other bullies, were too busily engaged in their choice of play activities to seek out a victim.

How did parents and teachers deal with the changes? It surprises many to learn that the teachers were more difficult to convince than the parents. Why? Because they were paranoid that they would get blamed if a child got hurt. Junior school teachers were more reluctant than teachers of senior students, no doubt because of an assumption that children need more care and direction the younger they are. Parents were only indirectly consulted, not because we wanted to exclude them, but what we were doing was for educational purposes and that, after all, is one of the reasons why parents send their kids to school – to be educated. We later learned that kids started coming home buzzing with what they were doing – whether it was

building a hut or riding a scooter. As the kids were coming home happy and, in many cases, physically tired, I think parents saw little reason to want to change anything. Ultimately, of course, parents can make the choice to withdraw their child from any school. Parents have always had that option if they do not accept the philosophical or pedagogical direction of the school.

When you look at our playground it can look chaotic and, at times, messy. From an adult's perspective it looks like kids might get hurt, but they don't. What they are doing is managing their own risk, rather than relying on adults or a modified physical environment to manage the risk for them.

Without seeing for themselves what we have created at Swanson, some assume that a playground without rules must result in bedlam. In fact, we did not end up hosting a sequel to *Lord of the Flies*. Bullying, conflict and serious injuries are down, while creativity, problem solving and concentration are up. Children are so busy, motivated and engaged during recess that they come back to class much more ready to learn. The time children get into trouble tends to be when they are not busy, motivated and engaged. Bored kids have a greater tendency to bully, graffiti and damage property. At Swanson School we no longer need to operate a time-out room at recess, and we have also reduced the number of teachers on playground patrol duty.

In short, the outcome of Project Play has been more engaged, happy kids, who are less bored and more ready to learn after recess. There is less bullying, less conflict and less accidents in the playground.





Playing with 'loose parts'  
Photographer – Bruce McLachlan

## International media attention

At the time of year when southern hemisphere schools are going back to school after the summer holidays, the media tend to look for education stories. In January I received an email from a journalist asking if I was prepared to be interviewed and photographed for a story in a Sunday tabloid. As a Principal I am immediately wary when approached by media, but after careful consideration this seemed to be a positive story and was an opportunity to promote the school. The result was a very encouraging article, accompanied by a photo, and on the front page!

In the next fortnight I did over 16 interviews with national and international news agencies

and individuals. I appeared on television in Australia and New Zealand, and was interviewed on radio stations in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Our story appeared in prestigious publications such as *The Independent*, *The Atlantic* and *The Economist*. And not just the official media showed an interest. To my knowledge over 120,000 people commented via social media – Facebook, twitter, blogs and comments on online articles. After three weeks of media interest I had responded to over 100 emails from all over the world.

This exposure made it clear to me that Swanson School is not the only school encouraging free play. I was told about schools doing great stuff around the world and

in New Zealand. It doesn't surprise me that there are a lot of schools out there who are doing similar things to us. The media tend to be more interested in a good story than the facts, and we just happened to be one of the fortunate ones to experience the positive publicity.

In my discussions with educators and journalists in Australia, Canada, the United States and Great Britain I was always at pains to point out that what we were doing at Swanson School was not necessarily easily transferable to other settings. The New Zealand Ministry of Education allows schools considerable freedom in the area of children's play. New Zealand also has a state-run universal insurance scheme administered



Using a fire hose hoist  
Photographer – Bruce McLachlan

by the Accident Compensation Commission, which covers medical costs if people injure themselves. This means that parents in New Zealand do not tend to sue schools.

The media attention has been interesting to say the least! On the plus side the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. The idea of allowing kids to be kids has resonated with people all over the world. Newspaper articles about what we were doing at Swanson School inevitably took the opportunity to ridicule 'state-sanctioned mollycoddling' and political correctness, and people have naturally enjoyed that. But as one newspaper columnist put it, 'it seems to be the most perfect crystallisation of common sense'.

You would have to be an idiot to ignore that there are safety

issues in a school playground where kids with a whole range of emotional and physical capabilities congregate, but equally, too much supervised free time can be more than suffocating. It can stunt children's learning. We want kids to be safe and to look after them, but we end up wrapping them up in cotton wool. Kids falling over, or even getting a few stitches or a broken bone is not all bad. While many adults look back on their childhood injuries as a rite of passage, no parent, caregiver or teacher wants a kid to get hurt on their watch. This is partly because we care about them, of course, but it is also because we don't want to appear to be neglectful. Like adults, children learn from their mistakes. It is all about managing risk. What we need to do is provide an environment where children have ample opportunities to learn from their

mistakes, to manage risk within reason and to figure out what works by trial and error.

While I am cautiously optimistic about this positive international media attention, I am under no illusion that this is the beginning of the end for playground rules across the world. The time when school playgrounds revert to the way things used to be will be when parents don't just comment positively on social media sites, but are willing to see their own children take risks and get hurt in the process. If too many controls are placed on play there is less learning. It is better for a boy to test himself at 8, up a tree or on a scooter, than behind the wheel of a car at 18. With tongue firmly in cheek I have said on a number of occasions: 'The best way for an adult to influence the play experience is to go inside, put their feet up and pour a glass of wine'.

*Bruce McLachlan is Principal of Swanson School, a state funded co-educational primary school situated in Swanson, Waitakere City, New Zealand. The school caters for around 500 students from 5 years of age, who attend from Year One to Year Eight.*

For further information about the school visit the Swanson School web site: <http://www.swanson.school.nz/Site/Home.ashx>

For articles, videos and interviews about the school's play policy simply search the web using the terms 'Swanson School New Zealand'.





## Australian primary school playgrounds: the last play frontier?

*The problem is [schools] are trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past. And on the way they're alienating millions of kids who don't see any purpose in going to school.<sup>1</sup>*

Sir Ken Robinson

**Marylou Verberne**

### The state of play in Australian primary schools

As in many OECD countries, and also in Australia, impacts on our modern society have significantly restricted children's ability to access free, independent play, most significantly outdoor play adventures. Play experiences that many of us took for granted when we were young are now being radically diminished or at risk of disappearing entirely for children today. One key contributing factor is that we are now living in an increasingly risk-averse, litigiously fearful Australia. This, coupled with a lack of understanding of the role of play and 'play literacies', also means essential developmental life skills such as resilience, adaptability and creative thinking, all gained through play, are also being affected. We are seeing the emergence of a new phenomenon of 'play deficit

disorder' on Australian primary school playgrounds, where children are presenting at school with inadequate play skills to navigate the school playground successfully for themselves. More alarmingly, health statistics such as increases in childhood obesity, mental health issues, bullying and social disconnection are being directly attributed to the decline in free play and independent mobility for children and young people.<sup>2</sup>

Through playground experiences, both positive and negative, important social skills, character and resilience are formed which will see children through their adolescent years and on into adulthood. With so much changing in childhood in Australia today, the school playground is one place where children are guaranteed a certain amount of time daily to play freely outdoors with their friends. As a result, Australian schools are increasingly

beginning to understand the key role and importance of the non-directed time, or playtimes, for kids and teachers alike. This often overlooked part of the school day is now starting to be recognised as having an impact on students' development and their overall wellbeing and engagement in school and learning.

Central to this is the increasing recognition that playtimes are more than just times for kids to 'go outside and let off steam' as a break from the 'real learning'. There is a growing awareness among Australian educators that playtimes are in fact legitimate parts of the school day and that schools do better when catering for children's play needs as part of their overall educational needs. Yet few, if any, Australian schools have a formal play policy or risk management policy driving the culture of play to achieve this for the school community.



Inside the Play POD  
photographer – Fiona Basile

Our ethos, one shared by many, is that learning is not confined to the four walls of the classroom when a teacher is present, and that children are continuously learning – in the classroom, then out on the playground, then back in again into the classroom and so it goes throughout the day. The sum total of the learning day for them is (or should be) a seamless transition between these two learning environments. But many schools are finding playtimes increasingly problematic for everybody. Australian schools, on average, dedicate 25% of the school day to outdoor free play, although these non-directed times are not formally mandated by departments of education and can be reduced or modified as a school sees fit. In order to counteract the growing behavioural challenges and rising tensions on many school playgrounds, some schools are implementing a variety of reductive measures, such as shortening the lunchtime play to twenty minutes – down from the standard fifty minutes – segregating play spaces and banning touching, hugging, cartwheels or other forms of play.

Yet these reductive measures are not necessarily translating into

more positive playgrounds, or improving education outcomes and increasing a child's engagement with school. In our observations of school playgrounds, these types of measures are only compounding the problems, as they do not allow children to develop and master the crucial play skills they need.

There is another significant development currently impacting our school playgrounds which is, perhaps, uniquely Australian. In 2007, the Australian Federal government introduced a policy known as 'Building the Education Revolution' (BER), a large-scale infrastructure initiative whereby primary schools across the nation received a brand new hall, library or classrooms on their school grounds. Without any consideration given to the play spaces being affected, the BER buildings were often constructed over key play spaces which children had occupied and felt a significant connection to through their play. The old tree where Hide-and-seek had been played for generations was bulldozed; 'Tiggy' could no longer be played where the big new hall now stands. In some inner urban schools, up to a third of the playground was reclaimed for the BER buildings, with inadequate

provision for play made in the smaller, remaining space. Many of our school playgrounds are not faring well in a post-BER climate, where the large-scale destruction of playspaces has taken place across the nation. Without consultation with the people most affected by the loss of play space, the children, a large-scale form of 'play deforestation' has occurred without protest or acknowledgement.

## Creating more positive playgrounds in schools

Play for Life works directly with children and builds the capacity of teachers, families and the community to support the child's need and right to play. We work specifically to support schools to develop a culture of play and playfulness with a more holistic and tolerant attitude towards children's play. In the mind of the child, it is the playtimes which form the most important part of their school day, not maths, reading or science. From their perspective, getting playtime right leads to getting school right, the net result of which looks like this:

Love Playtime = Love Learning  
= Love School.

With all of this propelling us forward, back in June 2010 Play for Life embarked on an ambitious pilot project in Australian education – to see children's experiences of school and learning transformed by revolutionising their experience of the playground. Whilst predominantly an education initiative, Play for Life entered relatively uncharted waters by introducing internationally-proven principles of playwork onto Australian primary school playgrounds. In Australia, playtimes are supervised by teachers on 'yard duty', unlike their contemporaries in England, for example, where there is a

workforce of lunchtime supervisors who manage the playtimes while teaching staff take a well-earned break in the staff room. For most Australian teachers, it would be fair to say that yard duty is not the high point of their working day, particularly in schools where there are significant behavioural issues to be managed on the playground each day.

By fusing a new playwork approach with the supervision of the playground, Australian teachers are exposed to new professional learning to assist them in creating a rich play environment for children. But, unlike countries such as England or Wales, without a developed playwork sector in Australia there was a risk that the playwork concepts driving our work would not be supported by Australian teachers, in particular school Principals, the decision-makers. In addition, given the current focus in Australian education on numeracy and literacy and NAPLAN<sup>3</sup> test scores, what happens during the 'forgotten parts of the day', the playtimes, is not high on the list of education priorities for Australian schools. These were some of the challenges before us as we

launched a three-year pilot project of a new in-school program to trial a playwork approach to playground supervision.

Drawing on highly successful programs out of the UK<sup>4</sup> and the USA<sup>5</sup>, the *Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools Program* was developed over the pilot period, but calibrated to meet the needs of an Australian education system.

The Program fundamentally works on three equally important levels to bring about change on the playground:

1. Improving the physical space children have to play in;
2. Improving the attitudes to play and the prevailing culture of play in the school community; and
3. Improving children's play skills by providing more choice in their play.

## Physical space

The first lens applied to measure the state of play of a new partner school is a review of the outdoor physical space dedicated to play, with a particular focus on play spaces other than sporting ovals and/or spaces dedicated to ball games. In a sport-obsessed nation, many Australian schools

provide reasonably well for children interested in sports and ball games as their chosen playtime activity, but often with little or no provision for other types of play other than fixed playground equipment. This means children who are either not interested in sports or ball games or are less competent at certain types of loco-motor play are not catered for and their choices for play are limited as a result.

There are other considerations involved, including the physical layout of the playground and how spaces are dedicated to different types of play.

## Attitudes to play

The second lens applied to the school in assessing its state of play is the prevailing culture of play, held not only by teachers and parents but also by the children themselves. For example, what are playtimes for? Are they the low point of the day for everyone? Are children feeling unsafe on the playground? What reductionist measures have been introduced to offset this, such as reducing the time for play, segregating play spaces on the basis of age or confining certain types of play to specific areas or banning them altogether?

The attitudes to play and what determines them can be quite diverse and varied, driven not only by the prevailing risk-averse approach to governing play but also by the individual play histories and backgrounds of the teachers themselves, who supervise the play.

## Play behaviours

The third aspect of the Program considers the play behaviours exhibited by children on the playground, given the play spaces they have been provided with and the prevailing attitudes to play in



A tyre swing made by children  
Source – Play for Life





Balancing on a ramp  
Source – Play for Life

the school. These two environmental concerns have considerable impact on the way in which children play but, more significantly, on the play exposure children receive in their out-of-school hours.

Increasingly, Australian children are presenting as overweight or obese, or are experiencing bullying or poor mental health outcomes, all in exponentially higher levels in disadvantaged communities. Australian researchers<sup>6</sup> suggest a compelling common cause for these problems: a significant decrease in outdoor free play. Other research also suggests that today's children are suffering from over-scheduled and heavily supervised lives with an increasing amount of 'screen time' dominating their leisure time<sup>7</sup>. Typically, their day is taken up with a variety of things such as school, homework, clubs and formal activities. When you add these commitments to environmental restrictions due to increased traffic, the busy lives of parents and heightened anxieties over children's safety,

it all contributes to children becoming deprived of free and accessible opportunities for self-directed play.

This can result in children manifesting 'play deficit' behaviours, which can be clearly observed during their time on the playground in a number of ways. It is also evident when examining school data such as yard incident reports. The occurrence of a 'yard incident' needs to be reported where a child's behaviour is significantly inappropriate to warrant formal discipline, usually resulting in time outside the Principal's office in the post-lunch period. Errant behavior on the playground can be caused by a number of factors, but we observe there can be a direct correlation between the reported behavior and inadequate play development or play skills in children, compounded by the school's low level of 'play literacies' and understanding of play behaviours.

### The Play for Life POD

A key component of our work is the Play for Life POD, which

operates as a central part of the *Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools Program*. The POD, as it is affectionately known by the children, is a modified shipping container filled with loose-parts play materials, thoughtfully selected to promote open-ended, self-directed play opportunities, should the children choose to interact with it. Referred to as 'POD Scrap', to the untrained eye the loose-parts are little more than recycled industrial off-cuts and other clean waste that would have found its way to landfill but for the POD. But to the children, the old car tyres, long cardboard tubing and sailcloth present a whole world of imaginative play possibilities not currently found on most Australian primary school playgrounds. The POD Scrap is carefully selected to help address the play developmental issues by promoting certain types of play experiences, and is changed over as children move through different play development stages.

Typically, the arrival of the POD in their playground generates an enormous amount of excitement in the children which, in some instances, if it were left unabated, could be likened to the frenzy of a Myer Boxing Day Sale<sup>8</sup>. These rapturous, welcoming scenes highlight most poignantly how inadequate many Australian primary school playgrounds are in meeting children's play needs or providing a rich play experience for them.

### Professional development

The Program also includes ongoing professional development training modules, relevant and up-to-date research on best practice and a 12-month action plan for the school to improve play on the three paradigms. Play for Life then maintains contact with the school via a Play Development Team recruited from professional staff





Playing on a makeshift see-saw  
Source – Play for Life

within the school. Through the school, Play for Life is able to access the parent community and delivers parent education sessions and workshops with similar messages.

### Benefits of a positive playground and evidence of impact

All children can benefit from the POD but, based on results from our Program and highly successful pilot programs in USA<sup>9</sup> and UK<sup>10</sup>, those likely to benefit most are children from non-English speaking, refugee or disadvantaged backgrounds, Indigenous children, those who feel isolated or bullied and children with learning difficulties and behavioural issues. The Program also benefits the more inactive children (particularly upper primary level girls), and those reluctant to return to class after lunchtime.

The impact of the Program is positively associated with children in the following ways:

- Increased physical activity participation<sup>11</sup>
- Increased likelihood of being a healthy weight
- Increased development of motor skills and physical motor fitness
- Increased learning and development (personality development, cognitive functioning, attitude and school behaviour)
- Improved mental health and management of stress, through the development of social and emotional capabilities such as empathy, self and other awareness and self-regulation, social interaction and development of affiliations
- Improved peer culture, which thrives when children find time away from adult supervision
- Improvement in children displaying challenging behaviours

and a reduction in bullying and anti-social behaviours

Our work with 24 Victorian primary schools during our pilot phase has revealed much about how play is faring in Australia. Much of our experience and findings to date reflect the outcome of research conducted both in Australia and internationally and also found in key issues determined by the General Comment handed down by the United Nations on Article 31 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

In addition to introducing loose-parts play to primary schools through the Play for Life POD, our principal focus will continue to be on increasing the 'play literacies' of teachers and parents in the primary school sector of education. There is much work to be done in Australia in providing teachers and parents with

foundational skills in play literacies to help them support rich play experiences for children. This needs to be achieved within a system of education which does not currently provide training for teachers, either at pre-service level or during their professional lives in order to achieve this. If this were able to be attained, we will see an era of education where playtime for children in our schools is no longer a 'yard duty' to be performed but rather a dynamic part of a child's development and the attainment of high education outcomes.

*Marylou Verberne is the Founder and CEO of Play for Life, a not-for-profit organisation working to improve play opportunities for children wherever they may be, but with a particular focus on play while they are at school. Its work is founded on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right to play, with the objective of ensuring that all Australian children have a rich and healthy play experience at school that enhances their educational outcomes and prepares them for life.*

To view the Play for Life POD in action, please visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpqclzO9Ylw>  
For further information visit the Play for Life website: <http://playforlife.org.au> or email: [info@playforlife.org.au](mailto:info@playforlife.org.au)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sir Ken Robinson, 'Changing Education Paradigms', talk given to the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), 16 June, 2008, viewed on RSA Events, timecode 33:25. <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/sir-ken-robinson>

<sup>2</sup> Hilary L. Burdette, Robert C. Whitaker, 'Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: Looking Beyond Fitness and Fatness to Attention, Affiliation, and Affect'. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2005, 159:46-50.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: The National

Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Introduced in 2008, it tests students' skills in literacy and numeracy and publishes online statistics for each school, prompting comparisons to be made between schools. <http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/naplan.html>

<sup>4</sup> Children's Scrapstore's 'PlayPod' program. <http://www.childreassocstore.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> Imagination Playground USA. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/imaginationplayground/>

<sup>6</sup> Burdette & Whitaker, 'Resurrecting Free Play'.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Martin, *Electronic Overload: The Impact of Excessive Screen Use on Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing* (Perth: Department of Sport and Recreation, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Editor's note: Myer is a large Australian retail company with department stores in many cities. Myer traditionally begins its yearly cut-price sales on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day.

<sup>9</sup> Imagination Playground USA.

<sup>10</sup> UK Scrapstore Playpod. <http://www.ukscrapstore.co.uk/>

[www.playpods.co.uk/](http://www.playpods.co.uk/)

<sup>11</sup> Lina Engelen, Anita C. Bundy, Geraldine Naughton, Judy M. Simpson, Adrian Bauman, Jo Ragen, Louise Baur, Shirley Wyver, Paul Tranter, Anita Niehues, Wendy Schiller, Gabrielle Perry, Glenda Jessup, Hidde P. van der Ploeg, 'Increasing Physical Activity in Young Primary School Children – it's child's play: a cluster randomised controlled trial'. *Preventive Medicine*, 56(5):319-325.



Rolling along inside a barrel  
Source – Play for Life

## Natured Kids: the nature of natural play

**Narelle Debenham**

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Elders, past and present, of all the lands on which our children live, play and learn today. I have immense admiration for our first Australians. I respect their history and value the contribution Indigenous people have made to Australian culture. For over 40,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived in Australia, 'their connection to the lands, waters, territories and resources were maintained by rules, law and lore'.<sup>1</sup> The Indigenous people have cared for the land for centuries, raising and educating their children via hands-on direct experiences in the 'bush' for millennia. Non-indigenous humanity can learn so much from our first Australians by sharing their traditional knowledge and embracing their ecological connection to the land.

The international trend to increase children's exposure to natural environments has generated a need for better understanding of the opportunities afforded by such outdoor play-based encounters. This article will highlight the

impact of regular connection with and contribution to nature, for families and their young children, during early childhood. The focus is on the potential influence of good quality, staffed outdoor 'play provision' on the lives of children, their families and the wider community.<sup>2</sup> Observations, semi-structured interviews and surveys were used to document the types of benefit created and experienced, as seen through the eyes of the key groups involved in the Natured Kids outdoor playgroup: children, parents, grandparents and community members.

All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is instinctive for children.<sup>3</sup> 'Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities'.<sup>4</sup> In this modern world, children face many barriers to active, outdoor play.<sup>5</sup> Adults have a crucial role to provide the physical and social space needed in our public places<sup>6</sup> that were once rich play territories for young people. If we are to 'reverse the trend of recent

decades and return to children the freedom of the outdoor world'<sup>7</sup> so they can 'encounter, traverse, construct and perceive their sense of place'<sup>8</sup> in their environment, we need the gentle guidance and presence of responsible adult advocates, acting as 'play partners'.

Natured Kids provides outdoor play opportunities for children aged 0-6 years and their families to explore, connect with and care for their nearby nature.<sup>9</sup> Operating since 2007, Natured Kids attracts up to 50 families, who meet each week during school terms on a Tuesday or Wednesday at a wide variety of natural venues on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Australia. Grandparents, parents, carers and their children play together in places which include flora and fauna reserves, local beaches, community parks and gardens, wetlands and bird hides, galleries, sculpture parks and agricultural farms,<sup>10</sup> making meaningful connections with their natural environment.

Natured Kids aims to enhance the health and well-being of children, has adopted and works within the



United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*<sup>11</sup> and is staffed by a registered teacher. This play program is currently un-funded, but families happily pay a small fee to cover running costs of the program. The adults and children in the families also make positive contributions to the natural environment within the public realm, such as:

- \* creating creature habitats for butterflies, lizards, birds, frogs, bats and other insects
- \* planting indigenous plants in bushland and beside waterways
- \* investigating, playing in and cleaning up natural bushland reserves
- \* learning to grow and harvest food in a local community vegetable garden.

*Parent: 'We love where we live even more, and feel like we really belong to our community by discovering, playing in and contributing to these local natural resources'.*

*Three year-old child: 'I like to visit my tree and see which animals live there'.*

*Parent: 'We live in a unit, so these play dates give us the opportunity to explore natural places in our*

*community in safety and with the company of others. We do not have a backyard to play in or grow veggies in – we do it at our playgroup's community garden plot'.*

*Four year-old child: 'I love eating the food we grow...we get lots of time to play and get dirty. I want to do it every day'.*

Natured Kids' activities encourage wider public engagement with parks, nature reserves and 'friends of' groups, which has a regenerative effect on neighbourhoods. Making positive contributions to their area helps families develop a sense of place and belonging,<sup>12</sup> and they can learn valuable skills while developing a local support network. Such connections enhance social capital<sup>13</sup> by extending and diversifying opportunities for children to 'play freely outdoors by unlocking the potential of public spaces and giving families the confidence to use them'.<sup>14</sup>

Parents and grandparents are big supporters of these staffed opportunities to play in different natural environments. They are keen to share their stories of how

these 'play dates' have changed the lives of their children and themselves, and led to a greater sense of belonging. Parents' narratives show that they are aware of the mix of socializing, learning and the health benefits that come from playing outdoors together. Also acknowledged is the enhanced sense of place<sup>15</sup> that emerges from the contributions they make to their natural environment within their local community<sup>16</sup>. Many families comment that as a result of participating their lives are transformed, and they are confident to independently navigate these outdoor local spaces, knowing they have play potential. Hence, nature play has become an integral part of their daily lives – it is where their children want to be. Through interviews and surveys, families were asked, 'What are the benefits of staffed weekly Natured Kids sessions for you and your children?' Their answers reveal the positive impact of the outdoor play program on the health, wellbeing and environmental awareness of the participants – both adults and children.

*'We love discovering local places in nature and doing things that we didn't know about'.*

*'These weekly activities in the great outdoors give us a reason to break from routine, turn the telly off and venture outside in the fresh air'.*

*'I love the natural venues we visit. They give me the chance for one-on-one contact and quality time with my kids, without interruptions such as the phone/doorbell/emails'.*

*'These play dates with other families are good as they give me confidence to explore the places we go together on my own again with other family members on the weekend'.*

*'Natured Kids helps us take more notice of the things around us*



Autumn leaf fun at the late Dame Elisabeth Murdoch's home, Cruden farm, Langwarrin





Worm hunting with parents and grandparents in the George Street 'Food Forest', Frankston

*Five year-old child: 'We laugh a lot. I am allowed to do lots of fun stuff like climb trees'.*

*Three year-old child: 'I cooked sticky marshmallows on the fire'.*

Their comments also indicate that they appreciate the extensive variety of opportunities, challenges and experiences for play, from climbing trees, hunting for bugs, building cubby houses, making and cooking on a fire and water play to 'hunting and gathering' (harvesting produce). This staffed play provision is presenting possibilities for young children in currently under-used parts of the natural public realm that hold great potential for healthy, happy family recreation.

*and the wonderful things nature constantly has to offer'.*

*'Their play is so creative outdoors. These play sessions motivate me to get out of the house. We slow down, relax. The kids are better behaved and calmer outside'.*

*'Fresh air, exercise and sunshine makes us all happy and healthy'. 'We get our daily dose of Vitamin D, reduces depression! It is the only time in the week where I feel truly alive! (I suffer post-natal depression.)'*

*'A great way to explore the world around us, and for my little one to understand where we fit in the grand scale of things'.*

*'Natured Kids' activities turn all my intentions into action!'*

*'We learn together. My daughter counts the sleeps until we go again together to have fun in nature with our new friends'.*

*'My "older" family (husband and school-aged kids) love an update at the tea table of my little 3.5 year-old son's recollections of the day's events – so exciting as always a different outdoors venue. His language has improved out of sight from 're-telling' these experiences. He now knows about and can identify and name many creatures*

*that we see while we play outside'.*

*'Natured Kids' play dates inspire and motivate me to be the best mum I can be. We love sharing discoveries together. We love having fun outdoors, all weather, all seasons, all year round, even when it rains. We feel healthier after being outdoors running around having adventures'.*

*'I have outdoor play memories from when I was a child. I want my grandkids to have them too. Natured Kids makes memories to last forever!'*

*'Natured Kids gives me great opportunity to have fun playing outdoors and share what I know with my grandkids'.*

Comments from young children show that they delight in having the significant adults in their lives away from routine chores, sharing quality time with them and partnering in their often 'risky' play:<sup>17</sup>

*Three year-old child: 'Singing with my nan makes me happy'.*

*Five year-old child: My granddad is good at helping me find worms with a shovel. I love finding bugs that wiggle away'.*

The Natured Kids play program is designed so children can experience both connection to and contribution to their world. It also builds on families' knowledge and respect for Australia's long Indigenous habitation and history<sup>18</sup>. A local Aboriginal artist, Adam Edwards-McGuinness, was invited to take participants on a nature walk and talk about the surrounding area – its history, foods, stories and language – explaining how Aboriginal people have cared for the land for centuries. Those in attendance learned an enormous amount and the session changed attitudes and enriched environmental understandings, while enhancing respect for Indigenous cultures.

The Natured Kids outdoor playgroup demonstrates that staffed play provision can be fundamental to the broader network of support for children and families to live better lives, achieve more positive outcomes and belong, in a very real sense, to a prospering local community<sup>19</sup>.

*Parent: 'Before Natured Kids, I forgot about nature and how it has relevance in our lives. There*





The butterfly habitat garden, one of the Nured Kids plots at Groundswell Community Garden in Frankston.



Aboriginal artist Adam Edwards-McGuinness sharing a cultural walk and talk

*is so much to do inside I forgot about outside. I didn't know it could be fun for my kids. They love it!!! Now we borrow books from the library about the things we discover each week – birds, bugs, vegetables'.*

Such 'intergenerational experiences'<sup>20</sup> while playing outdoors clearly benefit a child's healthy cognitive, physical, social and emotional development,<sup>21</sup> while 'stimulating

awareness about and care for the environment where they live'.<sup>22</sup> Children's regular contact with nature via such early play possibilities is contributing significantly to the future health and wellbeing of both our children, their families and our planet.

The Nured Kids outdoor play program is only ONE example of many quality staffed outdoor play experiences provided for children and their families around Australia

today. Professionals, through their work, are currently promoting outdoor play in parks, gardens, community farms, after-school clubs and school holiday programs as well as adventure playgrounds, schools, childcare centres and pre-schools all around the country. These 'play rangers' have had a long history of helping children and their families find the 'extraordinary' in the 'ordinary', turning parks and other open natural spaces into potential playgrounds.

A website, 'Play Outside Australia', is being developed to encourage nature play as part of every day for families. A component of the website will be the option for communities to share their local outdoor play innovations. As the evidence base grows, it is important for easy access to ideas and program models via such a knowledge repository. It is hoped that this article will inspire others to reflect upon the evidence base of growing ideas, policies and program models, on a local, national and international scale, that are creating staffed early childhood opportunities for young children and their families to play and interact with nature. It is critical we enhance the provision of play experiences during the early years, enabling the children in our care, community or early childhood services opportunities to have regular contact with their natural surroundings for the health and wellbeing of all involved.

*Narelle Debenham is an environmental early years specialist and the Founder and Director of Nured Kids. She has a Bachelor of Education in Primary Teaching, a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and is currently*







All weather, all seasons, all year round.

completing her Masters at Monash University. She first fell in love with outdoors as a young girl, caring for pets, growing fruit and vegetables, exploring the bush near her home and playing with neighbourhood friends.

If you are an outdoor 'play partner' for children, operating somewhere within Australia, please contact Narelle through the Natured Kids web site: <http://www.naturedkids.com> to share your program details, which will be linked via the 'Play Outside Australia' project.

All photographs were taken by Narelle Debenham.

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<sup>1</sup> Monash University, RAP, (2013), 7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Beunderman, *People make play: the impact of staffed play provision on children, families and communities* (2010)

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<sup>6</sup> P. Christensen, 'Place, space and knowledge: Children in the village and the city' (2003), 13-27.

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<sup>12</sup> K. Malone, 'The bubble wrap generation: children growing up in walled gardens', (2007), 513-527.

<sup>13</sup> T. Bergdall, *Reflections on the catalytic role of an outsider in 'Asset Based Community Development'* (ABCD), 2003.

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<sup>15</sup> Christensen, 2003

<sup>16</sup> L. Chawla, *Learning to love the natural world enough to protect it*, (2006).

<sup>17</sup> T. Gill, *No fear – Growing up in a risk averse society* (2007).

<sup>18</sup> ECA, *Walking Respectfully: Exploring Indigenous culture and reconciliation in early childhood practice* (2008).

<sup>19</sup> L. Tsao, 2002; J. Watson, *Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world*, (2012).

<sup>20</sup> H. Monk, *Learning and development across the generations: A cultural- historical study of everyday family practices*. (2010).

<sup>21</sup> C. Maller, et al, *Healthy parks, healthy people. The health benefits of contact with nature in a park context: A review of relevant literature*, (2008).

<sup>22</sup> S. Elliot, *Outdoor playspace naturally: for children birth-5 years* (2008).

<sup>23</sup> S. Kellert, *Program in biophilic studies: To understand and enhance nature's role in human health, productivity and wellbeing* (2001); Knox City Council, *Seedlings – Early Years Education for Sustainability (EYefS) Pilot*, (2013); Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2008); D. Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia – reclaiming the heart in nature education* (1999).



## Street play needs street signs

**Matthew Debenham**

Hi, my name is Matthew. I am 10 years old and live in a quiet street in Frankston, Victoria, Australia.



My friends and I play outside a lot on the nature-strips and footpaths.



We play after school and on the weekends.



Sometimes the ball we are playing with gets stuck in a tree and we have to climb it to get the ball down.



One day when we were fetching a stuck ball, a car came around the corner of OUR street really fast. We all thought that the car was not driving carefully and he should watch out for us kids playing.





My friends and I talked about the signs to protect animals in a nearby street in our town. This one warns cars to drive carefully because there might be ducks crossing.



and this one so drivers are careful of koalas crossing.



Photographer – Narelle Debenham

In many parts of Australia, they have these signs to warn drivers to be careful of kangaroos and emus when driving...



Photographer – Matthew Debenham

We even have one to protect our snakes!



Photographer – Matthew Debenham

My mates and I decided that it would be a good idea to have a sign to warn cars that they are driving where kids live and play, because we are important too.

So my mum helped us look on the internet to find one we could put up in our street, to warn drivers to drive slowly and carefully because 'there are kids who live and play here'.

We found one in America like this:

But it wasn't quite right, because it looks like kids just play on their scooters outside.



We also found out about this one in Quebec, but it isn't quite right either as it looks like kids just play ball games outside.



Photographer – Anne Houghton



My Nana found this one in Balnarring (Australia), but it isn't right either as we want to play outside our homes, not just cross the road.



Photographer – Cathy Hope

We found one like this in Queensland (Australia) in a local street but it isn't right either, because these signs are usually found near parks, schools and on buses.



Photographer – Narelle Debenham

These signs you often see in caravan parks but us kids don't just want to play outside when we are on holidays, we want to play safely every day in our neighbourhood where we live, outside our homes.



Photographer – Narelle Debenham

My friends and I think this sign is really good because it slows cars down to a very safe speed, however it looks like children are something to be scared of.



There are also too many words. It is too complicated. We need a simple sign. So my friends and I decided to have a go at drawing our own designs.





We have thousands of designs because lots of local kids got excited about this idea of a sign to put up in quiet streets, where kids live and play, to remind drivers to slow down.

The sign designs came from my Scout group, my sporting groups, my primary school, my big brother's high school, some other Frankston primary and secondary schools.

All kids who play in the street where they live were asked to have a go at helping us with some sign ideas.

We had a display at the Mornington Peninsula Health and Family Expo in 2011. Lots of other families thought it was a good idea. They all want one in their street too.

The kids at the Expo had a go at designing signs. They looked like this:



My mum has helped us by taking our ideas to VicRoads<sup>1</sup>, to get them to listen to what us kids want. We hope they will use our ideas to make a trial sign to put up in a quiet street where kids play, somewhere in Frankston.





It is now 2014, we are still playing in our street, the cars are still going fast and there is no 'trial sign' to warn cars driving past that we like playing outdoors.

I hope there will be a sign one day soon, to help keep us safe. I hope it goes up in my street first, but there are many other streets wanting one too. These are my friends (below) in another Frankston street who also play outside a lot on their nature-strips and footpaths. They want a sign in their street to slow drivers down too.

Lots of other important people from all around the world have sent letters to VicRoads and my local council to support us kids with our 'kids@play' sign idea.

We just want drivers that drive where we play to be careful.

If drivers look out for ducks, kangaroos, koalas, emus & snakes, they should look out for kids playing too!

I am going to the International Play Conference in Turkey in May, to share our idea and get some more sign designs from kids in Turkey.

If you have an idea about what the kids@play sign design could be, or you might like to write a letter to help me get a trial sign up, please mail to :  
Attention: Matthew kids@play signs  
Email: oaks@bigpond.net.au

Thank you  
MATT ☺



## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: VicRoads is the Victorian state government authority in charge of roads, which includes road safety.





## Outdoor playspaces for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

**Judy McKinty**

For many children, going outside to play with their friends is a highlight of their school day, and visiting a public playground to explore the play equipment is a fun activity together with their families. But for children living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) the opportunity to play outside can sometimes be a frightening and confusing experience with significant challenges.

ASD is 'a lifelong neurological/biological condition'<sup>1</sup> which affects the way children perceive and process their world and the way they are able to interact with others. It is called a 'broad spectrum' disorder because it affects each person differently and to varying degrees. Around four times as many males as females are diagnosed with ASD.<sup>2</sup>

Children with Asperger's syndrome are 'on the spectrum', and many find it difficult to make friends and negotiate the interactions required for playing games, joking and 'mucking around'



The entrance to a fenced playspace

with other children. Asperger's syndrome 'affects how the brain processes information. It shapes a person's social, emotional and communication skills and behaviours.'<sup>3</sup>

In 2007, a report commissioned by the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders<sup>4</sup> estimated that an average of one child in every 160 children between the ages of 6-12 years (0.6%) had an ASD<sup>5</sup>. In 2010, the

Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders (AAB ASD) published a Position Paper – *Education and Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia*<sup>6</sup>. At the launch of the publication Jon Martin, Chairperson of AAB ASD said that 'Demographic data tells us that most people with an ASD diagnosis in Australia are of school age – and this number is growing. ASD prevalence more than doubles every 5 years.'<sup>7</sup> The current figure is now about one in





Spinning platforms

every 100 children, or about 1%,<sup>8</sup> and the number is increasing.

These figures suggest that it is time to rethink the way we approach the design and construction of outdoor playing spaces for children, to take into account some of the particular issues faced by children living with ASD. Some of the special challenges in the playground for children with ASD relate to sensory processing, speech and language and social interaction. The degree to which each child experiences these challenges, and the reactions they provoke, depends entirely on the individual.

## Sensory integration

Many children with ASD have great difficulty processing sensory perceptions – the ordinary sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures of everyday life can be very upsetting to them. Some children are unable to filter sensory input and experience everything at once, which can become overwhelming in a noisy environment such as a school playground. Hyper-acute hearing means the child is aware of all sounds in the vicinity, sometimes

even sounds undetectable to others. Other children are the opposite, preferring loud speech and noisy activities. Too much visual stimulation can also be disorienting, causing distress and often provoking a negative behavioural response. Odours in the environment, even those that are considered pleasant or barely noticeable to others can make some children feel nauseous and provoke a gag reflex. Other children are stimulated by sniffing or smelling objects, and even people, in their immediate environment.

## Language and speech

Children living with ASD may have difficulty understanding the meanings of words and spoken instructions. They may have limited verbal skills or be non-verbal, and they may have a very literal interpretation of spoken language. Jokes, puns, nicknames, banter and other verbal play usually has to be explained in detail. Communication in a typical school playground is often lively, loud and fast, with unfamiliar play terms, rules and actions to be grasped and requiring quick responses. A child with ASD can be excluded

from this type of play because of his difficulties in processing speech.

## Social interaction

Children with ASD have trouble reading facial expressions and body language, and do not understand the social cues used by people in their daily interactions until they have been taught how to interpret them and how to respond appropriately. They have to be taught the way to interact with other children, perhaps to ask if they can look at an interesting toy or join in a game. They find the nuances of typical playground games beyond their comprehension, especially in make-believe games, so they usually start off playing alongside, rather than with, other children. Some children prefer to play alone.

Feeling safe is very important to children with ASD. They like being in familiar surroundings, having regular, structured routines, and knowing in advance when something is about to happen. Some children are very distressed by changes in their lives, and need to be gradually challenged to help them overcome this and other fears. The constant movement and noise in a typical playground can make them feel very uncomfortable, so they may seek out secluded areas where they feel safe. The school library is sometimes a haven for these children during recess and lunch play times.

A child with ASD can develop an exceedingly strong interest in a particular subject – his ‘special interest’ – and acquires extensive knowledge about it. This can be his almost exclusive topic of conversation until he becomes interested in something else. Depending on what his special interest is, it can be an entry point into interactions with other children who have the same interest, for example Pokemon,



Harry Potter, Dr. Who, and his in-depth knowledge about the subject can often raise his status in the playground. Here I have used 'he', but this applies equally to girls with ASD.

## Outdoor playing spaces

The process of creating supportive outdoor playing areas for children with ASD needs to take into consideration the broad range of challenges experienced by the children, with the aim of providing interesting and welcoming spaces that offer diverse play and learning opportunities with a certain level of challenge. Given that each child with ASD responds in his or her own way to these challenges, identifying particular issues to be addressed can seem like an overwhelming task for anyone contemplating such a project.

The people with intimate knowledge and experience of the many outdoor play obstacles faced by children with ASD, apart from the children themselves, are their parents and carers. As part of a research project into the subject, the management team at Amaze (formerly Autism Victoria) posted a question on their Facebook page on my behalf, and the responses from parents and carers offer valuable insight into the kinds of play elements, situations and experiences that need to be considered if we are to provide safe, interesting, stimulating, non-threatening and enjoyable outdoor playing spaces for children with ASD. Here is the information from the Facebook page and a collated summary of the responses<sup>9</sup>, published with the permission of Amaze:

### Question

If you could design an ideal outdoor play space for your child with ASD – what would it look like?

This is the very question that children's play researcher, Judy



A 'bat' circular swing gives a self-propelled ride



A climbing cube has different levels of challenge.

McKinty, is looking to find out. She is interested in hearing from parents and carers about their children's favourite outdoor play experiences. What kinds of outdoor playing spaces appeal to them? What is it about those places that they find so enjoyable? What types of natural play materials (e.g. water, plants, sand, rocks, sticks) fascinate them most? We'd love to hear from you so start posting!

20 people 'liked' this question.

### Responses from parents & carers

27 individual responses were received, most with multiple suggestions. Here the comments and ideas have been sorted into different categories according to their function. Where several people offered the same single-word suggestion the total number is indicated. There were also 40 people who 'liked' the different responses. The issue with the largest 'like' response was the security of having a fence around the playing area.

## Climbing

Monkey bars (x 2).  
Climbing (x 3). Climbing structures.  
Rock climbing walls.  
Climbing frame (but low one as too high can be too freaky for them).

## Climbing equipment and swings

Structures for older kids high enough for kids to feel they are taking a risk (this is not just for kids with ASD, good for all kids – playgrounds got really boring for a long time); other structures accessible for younger kids.  
Good softfall if kids do fall from a great height.  
Something to climb, even a good old tree!  
Trees, but not too high as the kids don't always want to stop climbing.

## Enclosed spaces

Climbing/crawling spaces, eg. tunnels; padded posts close together to squeeze through, etc.  
A cubby house, as she can imagine it can be a castle, live in jungle – list is endless.  
Hidey holes like tunnels to 'escape' when over-stimulated.

## MANIPULATION

Anything she can push, like a peg board.  
Something with the alphabet and numbers, whether it is painted for decoration or one of those spinning block things.  
Another idea is to create a large bead through a wire-like path and the child drags the large bead through a maze of thick wires in and around the slide or climbing apparatus, for example, for their fine motor development.  
A magnetic sand art table under thick clear plastic, like a large etch-a-sketch board, with different colored magnetic sand that they lift with a pen for pincer development and could help with writing skills, and the pen is SECURELY attached to a rope or

safety wire, a thick one please, and have a few around the board to encourage social interaction with associative play.  
Or thick ropes with knotted notches in them, vertically placed and secured to the ground so they don't swing out of place; the child pulls it down with the help of the notches in the rope to build balance and strength in the hands – only pulls down a little bit not to choke any crawling children and so you can't wind the rope around your neck either. It could have two or more ropes next to each other and they balance each other out with the tension for the child's safety, and to make it awesome have a gentle-sounding bell at the top when you have pulled all the way down, as a reward.  
Please make one of these kinds of parks – the sooner the better! My

son would love it, and include shiny things and reflective things and mirror-like panels to encourage self identity.

## Motion

### Swings

Swinging hammocks (x 2).  
Swings (x 3). Swings and motion.  
Swings and varieties thereof.  
All types of swings, e.g. web swing, bungee swing, platform swing.  
With swings some of the baby swings with full backs and harness are great for little kids and low muscle tone, and some kids feel safer feeling more swing against their body.

### Slides

Slides (with steps for access, not rungs).  
My son also LOVES slides.



This flying fox is for all children





This maze has textured ceramic panels and see-through walls

Long, fast slides; hills.  
Imaginative slides.  
Slides (not tunnel ones).

## Flying foxes

Flying fox (x 3).  
Flying fox and twirling seats. My 2 boys love the motion.

## Spinning

Spinning wheels that the kids can lay/sit on and spin around.  
Spinning poles/seats.  
Anything that spins. Something to spin on.  
Spinning items; I think it's good to have things the kids are drawn to like spinning things but also things that encourage development.  
Rides that spin, toys that spin.  
Spinning seats.

## Bouncing

Trampoline (x 3).  
Trampoline or bouncing pillow;  
Ground-level trampoline. Low-to-ground trampoline.  
Something to bounce on like an in-ground trampoline.  
Opportunities to bounce, manually move things.

## Personal space

She needs wide equipment as she is too uncomfortable if someone

has to squeeze past her. She'll actually stop or not use the equipment. Not so much for slides (which is one way, and single file as a rule), but any ramps/ladders, pathways, etc., where others might overtake or be going in the other direction.

## Safety and comfort

### Fenced!!!

FENCE surrounding the entire playground...not a 6ft one but enough to help parents feel safe about taking their kids that are runners to a playground. Benches and tables on the inside of secure area for parents and kids to sit and picnic, and all of the above items [from previous comments].  
A fence around the play area as my son tends to run off without understanding why he can't.  
Fenced; shaded; seats/benches for parents.  
As already mentioned, fenced so no bolting!  
A completely enclosed area as already mentioned, with seating and tables within. Lots of shade.  
I prefer fenced as I have a runner and she can run faster than me, but please put some plants and trees inside the fence.  
...and most importantly fully-

fenced (x 2).  
Soft ground. Level ground.  
Soft ground to fall on and definitely a secure fence that's high enough for our runners.  
...and painting in a fenced yard with lots of trees.  
Lots of seats in shade with good visibility for tired mums!!  
Visibility! There's a few playgrounds where I have to follow my kiddo around, limiting their independence, because I just can't see much from one spot.  
Playground in zones – if kids are throwers (e.g. sand) you can steer them away from this.  
Also no gap a child can fall out from like the fireman's pole.

## Sensory

Water play (x 4). Water pumps!  
Water wall. Water table.  
Sandpit (x 3).  
You've already summarised it well – water, sand, rocks and sticks!  
We tend to stay away from rocks, sticks & sand as they can all be thrown.  
Real plants/ natural materials; trees; grass.  
Sensory pathway with different types of material.  
My son is very tactile so anything with different textures; rock climbing walls; mulch; different types of outdoor mats; paths made from different tiles or bricks; sandpits, etc.  
Ground level stepping-stones; sensory play areas like water tables, sand and stones. Water pump.  
Lots of sensory stimulation.  
Things that make noise or feel a certain way.  
Nothing that makes loud noises.  
Coloured, patterned paths.  
Musical play equipment. There are some great options available and they are a magnet for a lot of kids.  
Try a dancing floor that has a soft surface that may light up when standing on it or can also change colors, or maybe have images on them when danced on like emotional faces, or nature pictures



that may have been taken in the area before installing it and placed under their feet, so they could look for those images around them. And of course all in a fenced-in area please.

## Structures

Suspended swing bridges. They love timber structures. He loves the giant wooden pirateship at our local park, made of good old logs – its huge! Interactive structures – another park we go to has a 'blacksmith's shop'; anywhere there is a door and window is a cafe! And space to RUN and run! And yes, seats and shade for mums!

Although the number of people who replied to the question on the Amaze Facebook page is relatively small, their responses indicate that it could be a valuable exercise for anyone involved in the planning of new playing spaces, or the redevelopment of existing ones, to include parents, carers and the children themselves in the consultation process when aiming to design the best possible outdoor playing spaces for children with ASD and, indeed, for all children.

All photographs were taken by Judy McKinty.

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A colourful amphitheatre, decorated with ceramic shapes to explore

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Northern School for Autism, *Autism* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Amaze (Autism Victoria), *ASD Facts* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Better Health Channel, *Asperger syndrome*, State Government of Victoria (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah MacDermott et al, *The Prevalence of Autism in Australia: can it be established from existing data?* (2007).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> AAB ASD, *Education and Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia* (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Amaze (Autism Victoria), *National Position Paper on Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia* (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect), *Aspect Practice: What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?*

<sup>9</sup> Question posted at 11am, 16 December, 2013 on <https://www.facebook.com/autismvictoria>



## Ethical Research Involving Children: Announcement from the Childwatch International Research Network

The Childwatch International Research Network is a global, non-profit, nongovernmental network of institutions that collaborate in child research for the purpose of promoting child rights and improving children's well-being around the world. It was founded in 1993 as a response from the research community to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an instrument for changing the focus of research and for ensuring that the perspectives of children are heard. The Convention is the basis for the Network's common agenda.<sup>1</sup>

The following announcement was recently published on the Childwatch website:

***Now Launched: Ethical Research Involving Children – Childwatch and Unicef joint initiative***

Research is vital to understanding how we can improve children's lives and create a better future for all. Methods of research involving children are expanding rapidly and changing the way we think about children and what they have to tell us about issues relevant to their lives. But how can we ensure these research approaches are

ethically sound, children are respected and their views and perspectives gathered and reported with integrity? Faced with dilemmas and challenges, researchers often struggle to find adequate guidance and strategies.

While a range of guidance materials on research involving children is available, it was considered timely and important to bring together the best thinking internationally about key ethical issues and how these might be addressed in different research contexts. This extensive evidence is underpinned by an explicit emphasis on the important role of reflexivity, rights and relationships in progressing ethical research.

The Ethical Research Involving Children Project is intended to provide both guidance and a forum for discussion offering advice and possible solutions. A joint initiative by the UNICEF Office of Research, the Childwatch International Research Network, the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University and the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago, the Ethical Research Involving Children

Project avoids a prescribed approach and encourages greater consideration of ethical issues as part of a reflective process between researchers, children and other stakeholders.

Nearly 400 members of the international research and NGO communities have contributed to this project that has developed a range of resources to provide clear guidance on ethical issues and concerns that can be applied in multiple research contexts. The resources include:

- An International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children;
- A Compendium on ethical issues and challenges, including a collection of over 20 case studies as well as structured questions to guide ethical research involving children (called 'Getting Started');
- A website [www.childethics.com](http://www.childethics.com) specifically designed to provide a rich repository of evidence-based information, resources and links to journal articles to guide and improve research involving children and to provide a platform for further critical reflection and dialogue.



We hope that these resources will support you and your organisation to further develop, enrich and sustain high quality, ethical research that will contribute to improving the lives of children. Please join us in this effort and share your ideas and experience on [www.childethics.com](http://www.childethics.com).

## Anne Graham

Director, Centre for Children & Young People  
Southern Cross University

## Robert Gilligan

President, Childwatch  
International Research Network

## Gordon Alexander

Director, UNICEF Office of  
Research - Innocenti

## Nicola Taylor

Director, Children's Issues Centre  
University of Otago

Further information about the ERIC project is available from the following web sites: <http://www.childethics.com/>

<http://www.unicef-irc.org/>

[http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_70778.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_70778.html)

To download the Compendium go to:  
<http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/706>

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can be found at:  
<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The Childwatch International Research Network, 'About the Childwatch International Research Network', Published May 22, 2008 08:18 PM - Last modified Feb 5, 2014 03:00 PM. <http://www.childwatch.uio.no/about/>

