

CASE STUDY:

Observational Nature Play in an Urban Environment

Clarendon Children's Centre

August 2019



WHY?

Educator, Sujata, Reconciliation Action Plan Leader and leader of the two and three-year old room, posed the question: ***“How do children respond to and learn in a natural environment?”***

WHAT?

A small, local reserve was chosen within walking distance from the Clarendon Children's Centre. It's a small, modest space, has no play equipment, and sits next to a train line.

Only five children at a time go to the reserve so that the excursion can run as *observational*, rather than supervisory.

At the time of recording this case study, the excursion had been running weekly for five months.



HOW?

A risk assessment was carried out on the site.

The children and educators role-played scenarios for safety.

The Nature Play excursions are one of a suite of specified 'routine outings' and parents give their permission for children to participate in these at the start of the year. Families are advised that the excursion program is going to take place and any issues or concerns raised are discussed and worked through.

A Sociogram guides the educators' observations during the excursion, accompanied by photographs and comments by the children. This is all recorded in a book.

Initially, educators provided role modelling in the space as the children didn't know what to do and how to play there. However, after consulting with Dr Anne Kennedy (Early Years education consultant), educators were advised not to interfere, instead to let play

CASE STUDY:

Observational Nature Play in an Urban Environment

Clarendon Children's Centre

August 2019

occur and evolve on its own, even if the children found it difficult at first.

WHAT HAPPENED?

When they first arrived at the reserve, the children weren't sure what to do. "We feel a bit lost", said one child. "I don't know what to do", said another.

When they learnt that there was no play equipment, one child suggested "we can sing!".

"I can see sticks and leaves" one child said, then started building with them.

"I can make music with the sticks!" another discovered.

All sessions have seen Bunjil the Eagle (the 'Creator' in local aboriginal culture) spontaneously included by the children, either through making something or leaving something for Bunjil. One child left a note for Bunjil, another built a nest for Bunjil to rest in. This is something that does not happen back at the service, even though Aboriginal perspectives are thoroughly embedded.

On the way to the reserve each day, educators talk with the children to prepare and prompt their choices. The children now start their own play and are fascinated by the place. They move around bare-foot, play hide and seek, play with rocks, and enjoy lying on their backs meditating, watching the leaves move in the trees. And they are becoming more confident in climbing the trees.

The excursion still goes ahead when it's raining, wet and muddy.

When back at the centre, the children draw what they remember and reflect on what they did. "I saw birds", reflected one child.



WHAT WAS LEARNED?

Initially children didn't know what to do and how to play in the space. But allowing them to feel a bit lost and have to work to discover how to play there, resulted in a deeper, more connected sense of play.

The space itself seems to facilitate a deeper connection to Country. The children incorporate Indigenous culture and perspectives into their play without being prompted.

The way in which the children play and communicate in this space is different to back at the service. For example, the less developed players are comfortable to engage with the more confident players, whereas back at the centre this does not happen.

The children whose families visit natural places outside of the service emerge as the lead players in this natural environment. Whereas back at the service, they may not be a lead player.

Children spontaneously link STEM activities, learned in the classroom, to their nature play

CASE STUDY:

Observational Nature Play in an Urban Environment

Clarendon Children's Centre

August 2019

at the reserve, e.g. they use muddy puddles for floating and sinking experiments.

Marked improvements were observed for children with sensory processing challenges. When the excursion program began, there was a child who had never wanted to touch the ground with bare feet and would never sit on the ground – the child always required a cover between themselves and the ground. Flash forward a few weeks and this child was happily playing barefoot in the reserve and sitting on the ground, no cover required. This has been a revelation for both the child and their family and has served to educate the family and change their perceptions.

The children play bare foot and experience a free-flowing environment that enhances their senses.

Educators have observed in the children:

- Strengthened relationships.
- Improved social skills.
- Improved capacity for self-directed play.
- Increased social and physical resilience.
- Increased ability to negotiate risks.
- Increased creativity and imagination.
- Increased sense of responsibility.
- Reduced stress, anxiousness and illness.



LINKS TO VEYLDF AND NQS

OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

OUTCOME 4: CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

OUTCOME 5: CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS



This case study was based on an interview with Sujata Dalvi, leader of the two and three-year-old room and Reconciliation Action Plan Leader at Clarendon Children's Centre Co-op.

Clarendon Children's Centre is rated 'Excellent' by ACECQA.

Written by Verity McLucas, Sustainability Education Officer, City of Port Phillip.