

Up a tree or in the mud: How nature-based free play contributes to the wellbeing of children

Dianne Hillsdon

Manning Adventist Bush School
dhillsdon@maschool.nsw.edu.au

with

Beverly J. Christian

Avondale University College
bev.christian@avondale.edu.au

Dianne Hillsdon is an experienced classroom teacher and administrator who has noticed a decline in children's wellbeing during the last 30 years. Most children live a highly managed life, full of structured activities organised and supervised by adults and while these activities may develop specific skills, they do not necessarily build confidence and resilience that transfer to new situations. Dianne notes that we live in a risk adverse society and so children are often not open to taking acceptable risk.

Dianne, who has just completed her Forest School training from the UK, has read widely on the topic of building confidence and resilience in children and has found that “children who play outside are more confident and resilient risk takers.” After introducing the principles and ethos of free play outdoors to her last school in Victoria, Dianne is now in the process of transforming Manning Adventist School, where she is Head Teacher, into a Bush School. Dianne says, “Bush School is an ethos that encourages the development of children's emotional and physical development through the outdoor space and activities including exploration in a bushland environment.” At Manning school, the children spend an afternoon each week learning in nature through free play, except when weather conditions are dangerous, such as high winds. Rain does not stop Bush School. There

is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes. The children engage in “bug hunting, mud play, shelter and den building, knot tying and other creative and imaginative situations.” As it is now winter, the children are learning to light fires with fire strikers (no matches here) and to cook over the campfire. This week they started learning the skills of whittling and tool sharpening. During this time the teachers act as facilitators rather than instructors. A few basic principles underlie the Bush School philosophy, including perseverance, trust, collaboration, team-building and resilience (Knight, 2013; Warden, 2012a & 2012b).

Dianne observes that confident children with high levels of resilience are also more likely to take acceptable risk. Acceptable risk is when the child learns to assess a situation, such as a tree, before deciding it is alright to climb; or a log, before walking across it. Dianne tells the students, “The risk that you take is something you have to sort out for yourself. If you climb a tree you have to get yourself down.” Students are supported by staff standing by while the children negotiate the challenge. Although this may sound radical, Dianne maintains that children are very good at assessing risk and do not put themselves in situations they cannot handle.

Mud play enables the children to feel the water and mud between their fingers. To create dams and form bowls, cups and spoons. The feel of the mud on hands is a wonderfully sensory experience. There are plenty of smiles during mud play time. Mud play makes you happy, and new research suggests that the friendly soil bacteria in mud actually helps the release of serotonin which is a mood regulator (Lowry, Hollis, De Vries, Pan, Brunet, Hunt, . . . Lightman, 2007). Just another good reason to get grubby!

What are the observable outcomes of this type of program? Dianne has observed changes in children's confidence and resilience in “a remarkably short time.” Some children take a little longer to feel the joy of outdoor experiences. More importantly, the attitudes and experiences from Bush School flow over into classroom learning. Dianne has noticed that

“The risk that you take is something you have to sort out for yourself. If you climb a tree you have to get yourself down.”

the children are more open to taking risks with their learning such as speaking up in group work and attempting difficult tasks. Other observed benefits include better communication skills, an improved ability to work as a team, and an open tolerance—listening to the ideas of others. Over the last few weeks the older students have been learning about negotiation and compromise as they build ‘their villages.’

Resilience is another outcome of outdoor play. “We talk a lot about persevering”, says Dianne. While this value can be applied to many activities, nature provides an ideal environment for children to develop resilience. One activity Dianne encourages is den or cubby building using natural materials. This can be a challenging and precise activity using correct lashings and natural supports.

Dianne points out that the ethos behind the Bush School philosophy is child directed. She says, “It’s about letting children have a look at the space and deciding what they may be able to do with it.” Dianne would advise schools to start small. Choose a playground space and make some loose parts available. Then wait and see what happens. Schools do not have to have a bush setting. The importance of the program is the ethos and principles. The bush is just the tool that we use to support the imagination and creativity of students.

And what do the children think of Bush School? Dianne observes sparkling eyes, deep questions and engaged learners, and has her answer. The students never miss school on a Tuesday. When questioned about their favourite time of the week, the answer is always ‘Bush School.’ They often ask to go to the Bush School area on other days. It is truly a place where the

senses are heightened, the imagination is let loose and creativity abounds. **TEACH**

References

- Lowry, C. A., Hollis, J. H., De Vries, A., Pan, B., Brunet, L. R., Hunt, J. R. F., . . . Lightman, S. L. (2007). Identification of an immune-responsive mesolimbocortical serotonergic system: Potential role in regulation of emotional behavior. *Neuroscience*, 146(2), 756-772.
- Warden, C. (2012a). *Nurture through nature* (2nd ed.). Scotland, UK: Mindstretchers.
- Warden, C. (2012b). *The potential of a puddle* (2nd ed.). Auchterarder, Scotland, UK: Mindstretchers.
- Warden, C. (2015). *Learning with nature: Embedding outdoor practice*. London, England: SAGE.
- Knight, S. (2013). *Forest School and outdoor learning in the early years*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.

Author information

Dianne Hillsdon is the Head Teacher at Manning Adventist Bush School on the beautiful mid-North Coast of NSW. She is interested in the well-being of students and developing creative and imaginative learners. She has just completed her Level 3 Forest Schools Leader Award from the UK and has described Bush School as the best thing in her 30 years of teaching. Research interests include psychological and physiological changes in children through the use of the Bush School ethos, and 21st century learning in ‘classrooms without walls’ using co-teaching.

Beverly Christian is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Business and Science at Avondale University College in New South Wales Australia. Her specialty area is classroom pedagogy and professional development. Her research interests include school culture and ethos, pedagogical approaches to learning and the role of nature in well-being.

Editor’s Note

For more information on this program please contact: Dianne Hillsdon - dhillsdon@maschool.nsw.edu.au

“benefits include better communication skills, an improved ability to work as a team, and an open tolerance—listening to the ideas of others.”



Figure 1. Xavier Boyd (Year 4) Learning how to use a Bush Saw safely. Students observing Left to Right: Dean Thrippleton (Year 4), Tasman Clare-Cox, Liam Thrippleton (both Year 5).



Figure 2. Asher Service (Kindy), Oscar Howard (Pre-Kindy) working in their Bush School Journals