

# Bush Group Resource Guide!





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Thankyou to all the children who bring joy and excitement into our lives especially in all things to do with play and nature!



# Introduction



There is clear and significant evidence indicating engagement in outdoor play, and more importantly nature play, has significant benefits for young children and their families. Overwhelming evidence indicates that allowing children to engage in unstructured play in the natural environment assists in all areas of their development, emotional, social, physical, cognitive, language as well as spiritual.

With this in mind in October 2011, Glastonbury Community Services in partnership with Barwon Medicare Local and Active in Parks trialed a playgroup operating outside rain, hail or shine. The Colac Bush Group was designed to engage young children and their families in nature play.

Due to the success of the Colac Group, the Bush Group concept continued to grow with Glastonbury Community Services embracing the program as part of its early year's services. The initial two groups established were in Colac followed by Moriac; these continue to this day. Glastonbury staff have also worked alongside Forrest Pre-School and Primary School to establish the Forrest Kids Go Bush program.

Based on the learnings from the Colac and Moriac Bush Groups, guidance has been provided to the Golden Plains and Surf Coast Shires early years teams; City of Greater Geelong supported playgroups team; and a range of other early years setting providers.

The development of this resource guide has come about from the increasing interest and requests for support, in establishing Bush Groups. The intention of this guide is to provide communities and interested individuals with an understanding of the range of different bush programs, including Bush Group, Bush Kinder and a school based model. As well as giving an insight into the research behind the benefits of nature play, templates to use when setting up bush programs, resource links, and ideas. All aimed at assisting the development of low cost, bush programs offering increased opportunities for community engagement and the development of social networks for young children and their parents in a healthy environment.

This resource is a guide to support communities in setting up and maintaining a sustainable bush group; all circumstances and communities will be uniquely different in their approach, purpose and development of their own bush programs.

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# Outdoor and Nature Play

*"...a healthy start to life is one of the greatest gifts we can give to our children."* VicHealth 2014

*"Simply put, we're all sitting more and moving less, including our children... with many of our children spending too much time sitting each day and not enough time being physically active."* Two thirds of adults are overweight or obese in the Barwon region. ([Report Overweight and Obesity Report October 2013.pdf](#), VicHealth 2014).

The concept of outdoor play and nature play is coming to the forefront of Early Childhood Educators and practitioners thinking, encouraging all to get outside and engage with nature.

Outdoor play involves encouraging children to get outside and engage in play and physical activity:

- playing games
- creative play
- running
- helping in the garden
- going for family walks
- going to the local playground
- riding bikes and much more.

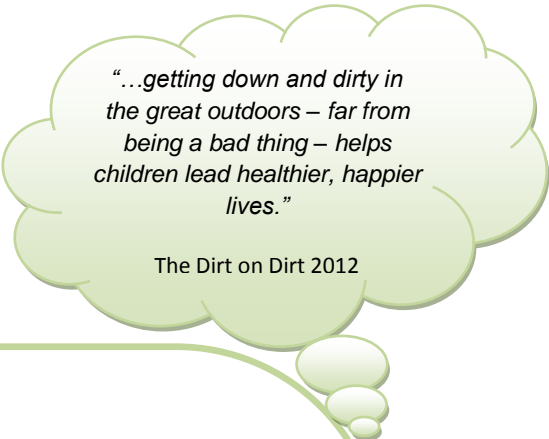
An extended concept of outdoor play is nature play, which further encourages children to undertake unstructured play immersed in their natural environment. Nature play encourages movement away from playgrounds and artificial resources allowing exploration in a natural setting, incorporating:

- mud
- dirt
- sticks
- tree climbing
- rock climbing
- beach combing
- connecting with nature.

There are real benefits for kids and adults getting outside and engaging with nature; providing the opportunity to explore, make their own rules, create stories, conduct experiments, get physical, and problem solve; in a setting that allows for taking risks.

The reduced opportunities for children to be outside and physical are *"...affecting their health and wellbeing, school performance, self-confidence, ability to mix with peers – all with lasting consequences that can continue through adolescence and into adulthood."* (VicHealth 2014)





*"...getting down and dirty in the great outdoors – far from being a bad thing – helps children lead healthier, happier lives."*

The Dirt on Dirt 2012

## Benefits of nature play:

What the research says:

- Children who play regularly in natural settings are sick less often. Mud, sand, water, leaves, sticks, pine cones and gum nuts can help to stimulate children's immune system as well as their imagination
- Children who spend more time outside tend to be more physically active and less likely to be overweight.
- Children who play in natural settings are more resistant to stress; have lower incidence of behavioural disorders, anxiety and depression; and have a higher measure of self-worth.
- Children who play in natural settings play in more diverse, imaginative and creative ways and show improved language and collaboration skills.
- Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other.
- Bullying behaviour is greatly reduced where children have access to diverse nature-based play environments.
- Symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder are reduced after contact with nature.

<http://www.kidsafewa.com.au/naturalplay.html>

## Bush Programs

Bush programs are innovative and education based to support children and their families to spend more time outside immersed in their environment, connecting participants to nature for play. A relatively new concept within Victoria the ethos of bush programs are based on the Forest School Approach operating in European countries since the early 1950's.

Bush programs operate outside in all seasons and provide wonderful opportunities for discovery and imaginative play. Each program is unique to its participants, community expectations and natural environment. Programs can be replicated in any community with limited resources and effort, with the intention of motivating, engaging and inspiring children through offering experiences in natural environments.

Within Victoria there has been a significant increase in Bush Program models operating in a variety of communities; including Bush Kinders, Bush Groups (facilitated group for young children and parents to engage in nature together), Beach Kinders, come and try bush days, and School based initiatives.

In line with the Early Years Learning Framework through allowing the opportunity for children to participate in a bush program we are allowing an opportunity for them to build a sense of:

**Belonging** - *knowing where and with whom you belong – ...integral to human existence.*

**Being** - *the significance of the here and now in children's lives. ...the present, knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life.*

**Becoming** - *reflects process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasises learning to participate fully and actively in society.*

The Early Years Framework for Australia 2009

## Different models

### Colac Bush Group: (0-6 year olds, parents/carers)

Facilitated fortnightly by Glastonbury Community Services staff, the Colac Bush Group operates in town at Hugh Murray Reserve. Offering bushy parkland, the reserve is within walking distance of the town's center and in close proximity of a local kindergarten and school. Guided by Glastonbury's family centered practices, recognising parents/carers as the primary educators of their children, the group is aimed at parents/carers with children aged 0 – 6.

Offering a loosely structured program that changes on-site depending on the children's interest the facilitators guide initial sessions modelling to children and parents activities to undertake in nature; gradually scaling back involvement as parents and children become familiar with nature play. Limited equipment is used including tarp (acknowledging the need for parents to sit with babies); ropes, and implements for water play; structured activities are minimal. Children learn about the local fauna and flora during session time and participants are encouraged to leave the reserve as they found it.

Children are encouraged to climb trees, build cubbies, play with mud, and water; creep through long grass; play hide and seek, and roll down hills. The group operates under the philosophy of it is not the facilitators job to 'entertain' but to encourage, model and support children and their caregivers in the art of engaging with nature together.

Families' comment on how pleased they are to have been introduced to Hugh Murray Reserve and many would not have visited the park if they had not attended Bush Group. Bush surveys indicate that families look forward to sessions with one parent remarking, "*love the raw energy and sheer enjoyment of being outdoors*". Children also repeat Bush Group activities at home in particular water and mud play, "*All the time wanting to investigate outdoors and explaining to everyone what things are.*"

**Westgarth Bush Kinder (Four-year-old kinder children)** is located in inner suburban Melbourne; the Bush Kinder Program is run off-site from the Westgarth Kindergarten at Darebin Parklands and is described on Westgarth's Kindergarten website listed below.

*"Forest schools have been operating successfully in Northern Europe for over 50 years. Bush Kinder is the first of its kind in Australia."*

*Bush Kinder is a special part of a Westgarth child's total kinder experience. A model to suit our community's and children's specific needs. It recognises the place the bush has in Australian folklore and the significance of the land in aboriginal culture. It draws upon and extends existing philosophy and pedagogy of Westgarth kindergarten to offer a unique educational program.*

*No toys, No tools, No art supplies*

*The children and adults benefit from using only what nature has provided. "Outdoor spaces with plants, trees, rocks, mud and water invite open ended interactions, spontaneity, risk taking and a connection with nature (NQS<2010, Element 3 Physical environment)"*

*The program is held on Wurundjeri land at Darebin Parklands in partnership with Darebin Council and the Darebin Parklands management Committee. The Darebin Parklands is adjacent to the Darebin Creek in Alphington (approx 2.5km from the Home Kindergarten)."*

<http://www.wgkg.vic.edu.au/bush-kinder>

### **Forrest Kids Go Bush (Pre-school children 3 and 4 years up to Primary School children aged 8)**

Running on site at the local Forrest Primary School and Early Learning Centre in Forrest a small Victorian regional town with a population of 170, this alternative Bush Program operates for 2 hours a week in all weather types; incorporating the three and four year old pre-school children with the junior room students up to Grade 2 level.

Children are encouraged to learn from the natural environment, use their imagination, and be creative. They are allowed to play responsibly with sticks, ropes, and tools (junior hacksaws, shovels, hammers and hand drills) learning to problem solve and negotiate together. This program supports the children through free unstructured nature play to develop responsibility for themselves and others. It encourages early risk management strategies that will ensure children start to consider the impact of their actions on themselves and on others. In so doing, children learn to take on challenges and accept responsibility.

Children have an opportunity to explore the natural environment; with tree climbing, cubby building and mud baths being favourite activities. Educators believe it is important to encourage children to step outside comfort zones, in turn fostering self-esteem, team building, resilience and a sense of being. Hailed as a wonderful transition program, the Forrest Kids Go Bush program is highly valued by families, Learning Centre Community, and most importantly the children.

<http://www.forrestps.vic.edu.au/>

*"When climbing, young children generally only climb to a height that they are comfortable with – a height that poses a challenge to them but not one that is threatening."*

Jane Williams-Seigfredsen 2012





## Establishing a Bush Program

Getting outside and dirty with children supports health, well-being and all round peace of mind. Allowing children to get dirty and take risks within nature has life-long benefits, for children and their parents/carers as well. In making a decision to operate a bush program within your service things to think about and do include:

### STEP 1: Identify key stakeholders and determine interest for the bush group.

Key stakeholders may include:

- Early Childhood Educators, (kinder teachers)
- Children
- Parents
- Local Council
- Parks Vic
- Department of Early Education and Childhood Development
- Local Health Services
- Aboriginal services and community members
- Local Neighbourhood House
- Rotary
- Lions Club
- Men's Sheds
- Horticulturalists
- Gardening groups
- Friends of the Gardens
- Other local early years and family service agencies.

Through approaching local, community members you will be able to determine whether there is interest in exploring the establishment of a bush program in your area.

Once interested parties are identified, establish a Steering Committee/Working Party to undertake needs analysis, ensuring the workload is spread to undertake identified steps below. (*Terms of Reference template provided*)

### STEP 2: Research similar models (table of Victorian models on page 10)

Speak with others who have embarked on their own journey of establishing a Bush Program, investigate:

- learnings
- strengths
- how things could have been done differently
- what is working
- type of program they are conducting, for example Bush Kinder, Bush Group etc.
- the purpose behind the program
- costs
- site of operating
- who is supporting/key stakeholders
- who is responsible for what

### STEP 3: Identify if there an expressed need for a Bush program.

- who has expressed the need
- what evidence is there of the need
- are there other alternatives already operating in the community

Needs can be identified through survey or personally canvassing community, holding community forums, use of service providers and data.

### STEP 4: Investigate Site Options.

What site options are available in your community?

- reserves and beaches
- local Botanic garden
- school grounds
- parklands
- backyards

Consider which is the best option, taking into account:

- accessibility
- is it a dynamic changeable natural environment
- tactile elements – grasses, pebbles, rocks
- climbing opportunities – trees, logs, rocks
- water, dirt, mud opportunities
- log – seating, sticks, branches
- local amenities and parking facilities

#### STEP 5: Preliminary costings including start up and sustainability:

- Will it be absorbed into current programming and staffing roles for example kinder setting?
- Can it be absorbed into current early years' service provider roles for example Local Council, not for profit organisations, current facilitated playgroups that are operating in the area?
- Do staff need to be employed? Financially how much will this cost?
- Is wet weather gear going to be provided for children?
- Do you need a portable toilet as site is isolated?
- Are you going to need tarps, tools, buckets etc?
- Will you use volunteers?
- Possible grant/funding options

#### STEP 6: What are the challenges?

Consider:

- Conducting a risk assessment (*template provided*)
- Conducting tree audits in partnership with Local Council.
- Insurance – how are you covered; through organisations current Liability insurance; Playgroup Victoria membership; early childhood settings insurance.  
**Please note:** check with your Insurance Provider to ensure you are covered for activities children will be undertaking in nature play.  
If investigating setting up your own local Bush Group with other families it is advised that you contact Playgroup Victoria and discuss your ideas including how insurance will cover your outside group to ensure you are confident that they will cover nature play activities.

Early Childhood Education and Care Settings informed by the National Quality Framework and Education and Care Services Act need to ensure they are operating under their current identified policies and procedures regarding off-site activities. Other policies to consider are:

- Health and Safety General
- First Aid including stings/bites/snake bites
- Accidents, Injuries and Near Misses
- Risk Management
- Smoking (if parental involvement)
- Duty of Care
- Mobile Phones
- Extreme weather an evacuation
- Water safety
- Dogs on leashes (including education of what is expected of children when dogs are off the lead)
- Appropriate clothing

#### STEP 7: Pulling it together.

Based on the above steps is it possible to establish a Bush Program in your area? If so which model is best in meeting your needs and who will be engaged to make it happen; determine purpose, responsibilities, time lines, professional development opportunities.

Some suggested aims/purposes may be:

- To provide children with the opportunity to engage in nature play and learning in the early years
- Provide the opportunity for parents to engage in nature play and learning with their young children in a supported environment
- Provide the opportunity for parents/carers and young children to increase their social engagement
- Provide the opportunity for increased understanding of the natural environment
- Provide the opportunity for increase physical exercise through unstructured play in the natural environment.

## Mentors & Peer Support

Name		Cost	Link
Karen Anderson	Balnarring Beach Kinder	\$150/hr	<a href="mailto:kla63@bigpond.com">kla63@bigpond.com</a> (03)5983 5803
Doug Fargher	Westgarth Bush Kinder		<a href="mailto:dougfargher@aapt.net.au">dougfargher@aapt.net.au</a> (03) 9486 4147
Kim Coulter	Bush Network		<a href="mailto:kcoulter@glastonbury.org.au">kcoulter@glastonbury.org.au</a> (03) 5231 4740
Bush, Forest & Beach School Education Australia	Facebook Group		<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/264277397011441/">www.facebook.com/groups/264277397011441/</a>
Nature Play Geelong Group	Advocacy and Support Group		<a href="mailto:cgordon@geelongcity.vic.gov.au">cgordon@geelongcity.vic.gov.au</a> (03) 5272 4819

## Suggested sites and opportunities in Victoria

Name		Date	Cost	Link
Westgarth Bush Kinder	Work experience placement	Term 2,3,4		<a href="http://www.wgkg.vic.edu.au/work-experience">http://www.wgkg.vic.edu.au/work-experience</a> (03) 9486 4147
Westgarth Bush Kinder	Bush Kinder Site visit			<a href="mailto:bushkinder@wgkg.vic.edu.au">bushkinder@wgkg.vic.edu.au</a> (03) 9486 4147
The Farmhouse Mansfield	Bush Kinder and Nature Site		\$25	<a href="http://www.thefarmhouse.net.au/">http://www.thefarmhouse.net.au/</a> (03) 5779 1842
Balnarring Pre School	Beach Kinder site visit		\$100	<a href="mailto:kla63@bigpond.com">kla63@bigpond.com</a> (03) 5983 5803
Colac Bush Group	Bush group site visit	Tuesday mornings		<a href="mailto:kcoulter@glastonbury.org.au">kcoulter@glastonbury.org.au</a> (03) 5231 4740
Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne	Bush kinder site			<a href="mailto:Mick.Robertson@rbg.vic.gov.au">Mick.Robertson@rbg.vic.gov.au</a> +61 3 9252 2300
Yarralea	Site visit – Alphington – Nature play environment		\$25	<a href="http://www.eeec.org.au/event_page.php?name=Centre%20Visits">http://www.eeec.org.au/event_page.php?name=Centre%20Visits</a> (03) 9499 2251
Moreland Community Child Care	Site Visit – community gardens - Brunswick		\$25	<a href="http://www.eeec.org.au/event_page.php?name=Centre%20Visits">http://www.eeec.org.au/event_page.php?name=Centre%20Visits</a> (03) 9386 0432
Inspired EC	Professional Development opportunities			<a href="http://www.inspiredec.com/international-uk-study-visit-2014.html">http://www.inspiredec.com/international-uk-study-visit-2014.html</a>



## Useful Frameworks and Websites

The development of Bush Programs is in line with State and Federal priorities and current research on physical and mental health, in particular:

- **Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2011 – 2015**, which lists early childhood and education settings as priorities for action and engagement.
- **Victorian Mental Health reform Strategy (2009 -2019)**, which has a key goal – giving children the best start possible.
- ***The 2014 Active Healthy Kids Australia Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Young People***
- **Commonwealth's Early Years Learning and Development Framework**, which promotes the importance of children being connected to family, community, culture, and place from birth. **Being, Belonging, Becoming.**
- **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework** provides early childhood professionals with a common language for describing outcomes for children, and describes practice principles to guide early childhood professionals to work together, with children and with families to achieve the best outcomes for every child.

### For ideas and activities:

- [www.Vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.Vichealth.vic.gov.au)
- [www.playgroup.org.au](http://www.playgroup.org.au)
- [www.forestschoools.com/bush-schools-ausraliasia](http://www.forestschoools.com/bush-schools-ausraliasia)
- [www.outdoorsvictoria.org.au](http://www.outdoorsvictoria.org.au)
- [www.playaustralia.org.au](http://www.playaustralia.org.au)
- [www.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.education.vic.gov.au)
- [www.activehealthykidsaustralia.com.au](http://www.activehealthykidsaustralia.com.au)
- [www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au)
- [www.deecd.vic.edu.au](http://www.deecd.vic.edu.au)
- [www.BeOutThere.org](http://www.BeOutThere.org)
- [www.childhood101.com](http://www.childhood101.com)
- [www.letthechildrenplay.net](http://www.letthechildrenplay.net)
- [www.dirtgirlworld.com](http://www.dirtgirlworld.com)
- [www.wildlifefun4kids.com](http://www.wildlifefun4kids.com)
- [www.naturedetectives@woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.naturedetectives@woodlandtrust.org.uk)
- [www.kids.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.kids.nationalgeographic.com)
- <http://www.glastonbury.org.au/userfiles/file/Active%20Play%20Kit.pdf>
- [www.letthechildrenplay.net](http://www.letthechildrenplay.net)
- [www.flightsofwhimsy-ece.com](http://www.flightsofwhimsy-ece.com)
- [www.notimeforflashcards.com](http://www.notimeforflashcards.com)

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National Wildlife Federation / 11100 Wildlife Center Dr,Reston VA 20190 “*The Dirt on Dirt*”,2012

Planet Arc, “*Missing Trees: Inside story of an Outside Nation*”, Report 2013

Raising Children Network – the Australian Parenting Website:  
[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/outdoor\\_play.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/outdoor_play.html)

VicHealth 2014, Active for Life, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia.

Victorian Workcover Authority

Western Australia Kids Safe: the child and accident prevention of Australia: “*Nature Based Playgrounds*”

Williams-Sieghfredsen Jane, “Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach Early Years Education in Practice”, Routledge, 2012

Wood L. and Martin, K. 2010, What makes a good play area for children? Centre for the Built Environment and Health, The University of Western Australia.

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