



***Learning through play
within the outdoor
environment***

The importance of learning through play



When children have fond memories of learning through play in early childhood they will develop a positive attitude to learning in future years to come. Furthermore, it is recognized that when children label their learning activities as play and not work they are happier and most importantly thrive in later education (Baras, 2013). Rose (2012) also agrees that play-based learning encourages children to develop enthusiasm and confidence for learning, as when they find an activity appealing and of interest to them personally, they are more willing to be engaged and learn.

When children engage in play it provides opportunities for all areas of development to be enhanced. During play, children are provided with many opportunities to enhance their social skills as they work in partnerships with others, take turns, make suggestions or happily follow suggestions from peers and engage in decision making. Play also encourages children to describe what they are doing, make predictions, discover, communicate, classify, and use their memory recall and more (Abbott, 1994).



The great outdoors

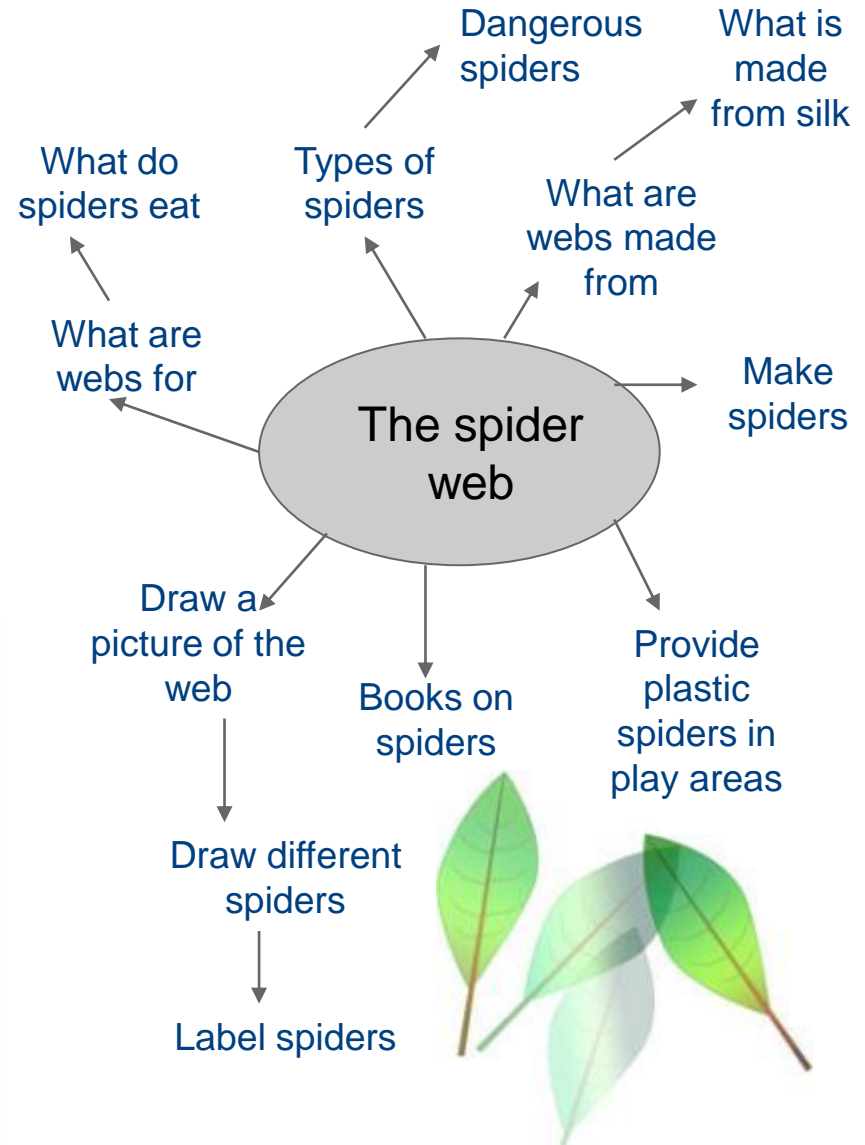
We are very blessed to live in a magical part of the world and at our preschool engaging with the natural environment is an important aspect of the preschools philosophy. Edwards and Mackenzie (2011, p.53) support this as they state “Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments, they offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors” . When you look back on your childhood memories I am confident that it will be the outdoor adventures that are your fondest memories, I know that this is certainly the case for me. Fond memories of the outdoors is recognised by Sandberg (2003) who believes as we get older it is the play in the outdoors that is remembered and makes the happiest childhood memories, furthermore, play in nature allows children to explore without restraints.



Learning possibilities of a spider web

The outdoors allows for children to develop an appreciation for the natural environment whilst they discover and become connected to other living creatures. For example when a child discovers a spider web in the yard there are many learning opportunities that can be extended, see diagram to the right of how this discovery can be extended, thus enhancing skills across all areas of development.

After Lacey observed a spider in the yard, she then chose to paint a picture of it. This activity enhances fine motor development, creativity and eye/hand coordination.



Taking risks to master new skills

Curtis and Carter (2000) believe children need opportunities to be adventurous and take risks so that they are less likely to engage in dangerous activities when they are older.

The monkey bars has been a popular activity amongst the children over the past two weeks. Here Matilda is determined to master the skill, although she is a little uncertain as she states “I’m scared but only a little bit”. She tries over and over again, before she asks an educator Kim for support. With a little help she successfully makes it into a sitting position and then goes for the ultimate manoeuvre of hanging upside down. Later that morning Matilda then helps a younger peer to master the skill also.



Social skills

The outdoor environment provides ample opportunities to enhance social skills. One of the most popular activities in the outdoors is pretend play. Over many years theorists have researched the value of different types of play. When looking at the cultural-historical theories of play we can refer to Kravtsov and Kravtsova who believe as children engage in image play, they take on different characters. This type of social play allows children to engage successfully in plot-role play. During plot-role play children take on roles in imaginary situations such as chefs at a restaurant (Fleer, 2013). Plot-role play is typically what we observe daily within our outdoor environment. Most days we will have groups of children role playing chefs in the mud kitchen, mums and dads in the home corner, engineers in the sandpit or shoppers and shopkeepers at the petrol station. It is during these social interactions that children must negotiate roles and ideas as they develop an understanding of reciprocal relationships. This also reflects Kravtsov and Kravtsova's model of play where children must follow rules for the play to be successful as they must take turns and share (Fleer, 2013) .



Mason and Alana are playing in the home corner, together they discuss who will be the chef and who is the customer. During the activity they are negotiating roles, communicating and taking turns.



Evidence of social skills

Charlie and Miles are busy creating a “spaceship”. They discuss ideas and negotiate where they will place certain items. The activity is exciting and as a result encourages more peers to join. With support from a near by educator Charlie and Miles happily allow the others to enter the play and assign them tasks so they can help. →



Edward and Archer realised when they filled the tub, that it was too heavy to carry alone. Problem solved they carried it together!



A make believe trip to Dreamworld. We pretended to see tigers and ride a roller coaster. Lots of opportunities to interact together.





Literacy skills

Being aware of letter sounds, communication, spelling and awareness of print are all known as literacy skills, development of these skills are important to become successful readers and writers. There are many ways during play that children's literacy skills can be enhanced.

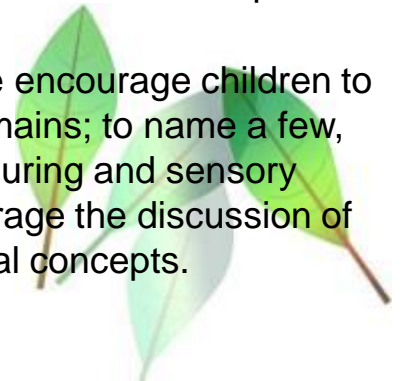
Ben and Shamira are developing pre writing skills as they draw a plan for the new sandpit.



After heavy rain we discovered a blocked drain had created a huge puddle. We took our shoes off, rolled our pants up and waded through. A great opportunity to use descriptive words.

When children are provided with authentic literacy experiences that replicate real life activities such as letter writing, reading shopping lists etc they will have a clearer understanding of how literacy works within their community and wider world, thus enhancing a clearer knowledge of how literacy works overall (Raban, Brown, Care and Rickards, 2009). Raban et al (2009) also advocate that introducing children to activities found in formal schooling (such as stencils) too early is dangerous for their development. Bodrova (2008) agrees that preschool education should follow the Vygotskian approach by encouraging children to become competent in new skills through play.

Within our outdoor environment we encourage children to enhance literacy skills in many domains; to name a few, activities such as mixing and measuring and sensory activities i.e. goop/mud that encourage the discussion of descriptive words and mathematical concepts.



Evidence of literacy skills

A kookaburra in the yard inspires Samara to draw a picture. As the photo shows she also wrote her name, a great example of learning through play and own interests.



What is the purpose of stencils?

It is a common question if the preschool prepares children for school through the use of stencils and work books. Extensive research shows children are more likely to develop literacy skills such as letter recognition and spelling by engaging in writing activities that interest them rather than through the repetition found in stencils (Van Hoorn, 2003).

Furthermore, stencils take away opportunities for children to be creative and can often lead to them losing confidence in their own abilities (Kolbe, 2007).



This piece of artwork was inspired by *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* book. A great example of how encouraging children to be creative can be successful without stencils and structure.



Mathematical concepts



Providing children with measuring cups and spoons of different sizes encourages mathematical conversations such as volume, size, amounts.



Becoming familiar with numbers on the cash register.

After stacking the wooden tree pieces into a pile, Laura then counted how many there were.



For children to become thriving mathematicians, we need to demonstrate to them that maths is fun but at the same time a valuable skill to possess. When children enjoy an activity they are more likely to persevere (Perry and Dockett, 2001). Therefore learning maths through play is most favourable. There are many opportunities for children to develop mathematical concepts in the outdoors.



Problem solving

Educators are thoughtful about providing a variety of resources in the environment that children can use to investigate, make predictions and problem solve with. The type of equipment available to children is critical for their development (Lambert, 2001).



During this activity of construction there were lots of conversation about how to match the pieces up so they would stay connected.



Henry is discovering how to block and unblock the sink on the mud kitchen, he gave instructions to his peer above the sink as he also added what was happening under the sink. "Put more dirt in the plug hole too much water is coming out".



Collaborating as the children discover how to work the equipment out.



Conclusion

The educators at our preschool are passionate about children's development and advocating for play, therefore we spend the better parts of our day engaging with children and documenting their learning. Observations, conversations and documentation then direct our future programming. We value children's input into the program and ensure that their voices are evident in the documentation. Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, and Farmer (2008) support this as they believe it is important for children to be active constructors of their own learning and for their voices to be acknowledged in documentation.

In supporting children's learning we endeavor to scaffold their knowledge and skills, which in turn improves learning opportunities. Where possible educators are intentional in challenging children's thinking and ask purposeful, open ended questions.

I hope you have gained resourceful information from this presentation and trust that the information has supported your understanding of the importance of play and how play promotes school readiness.

Thankyou Kerrie



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