



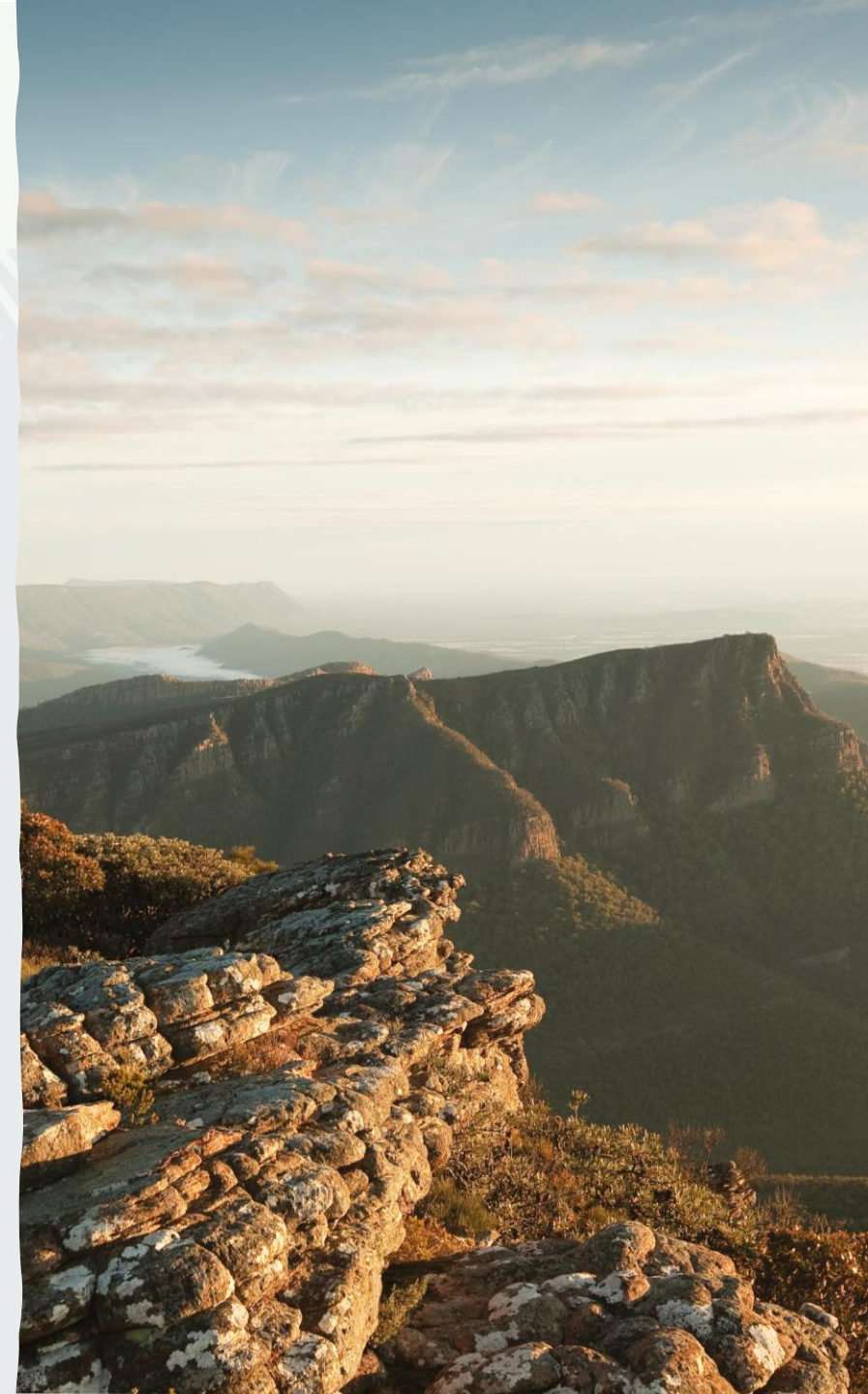
Bush Kinder Handbook

Supporting outdoor learning in early childhood

Acknowledgement of Country

Parks Victoria respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of what is now known as Victoria. For many thousands of years, Aboriginal people have lived in harmony with and carefully managed Country, with which they have a deep spiritual connection. Aboriginal people are proud of their ancestry and in addition to their inherent rights, have ongoing spiritual and cultural obligations to ensure that their ancestral land and culture is managed responsibly and appropriately.

Parks Victoria respects Traditional Owners' deep and continuing connection to Country and encourages all education groups to undertake an Acknowledgment of Country before commencing an excursion. An Acknowledgement of Country shows an awareness of, and respect for, the Traditional Owners of the land on which your excursion is being held. If you would like guidance on how to form your Acknowledgement, please visit [The Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria](#).



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Outdoor learning in early childhood

Welcome! We're so excited that you're interested in supporting young children to play and explore in nature. It's such a natural match – kids love the outdoors, and it helps them learn better and to grow into healthy and happy people throughout life. That's why Parks Victoria is committed to *Learning for Nature* and has been using our *Healthy Parks Healthy People* approach for more than 15 years.

Outdoor learning in early childhood involves visiting a local space such as a park, reserve, beach or bushland during regular teaching hours. The activities involved in outdoor learning are incredibly varied, ranging from free play, climbing and experimenting, to guided walks and more structured sessions. Despite differences in delivery style, unifying principles of outdoor learning are to encourage child-led learning, enquiry and play.

This handbook is designed to help early childhood educators locate an appropriate park or reserve, tread lightly during your time outdoors and know who to contact for more information.





Why take the classroom outdoors?

Parks and reserves are fantastic places for children to run, jump, explore and learn. Research shows it's good for them. Children who learn outdoors can be less disruptive, show improved social skills, motor skills and physical health, and develop resilience, self-awareness, self-esteem and independence.

Early childhood services are uniquely placed to re-invite nature into the lives of young children by routinely taking their services outdoors. Outdoor sessions allow children to engage in a variety of activities, scenarios and demonstrations not typically available in the four walls of a classroom. In addition, children who learn outdoors improve their nature-literacy, becoming more confident and empathetic towards the natural world.

Shifting the classroom outdoors will help children connect with nature, building the future generation of advocates and custodians of healthy parks for the benefit of all.

The Department of Education (DE) encourages the use of natural areas for learning. The importance of learning outdoors is clearly identified in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF), the Early Years Framework, and the National Quality Standards for Early Childhood.

Information and resources about delivering Bush Kinder in Victoria is available on the [department's website](#).



Learning outdoors in the VEYLDF

Identity - Children develop a sense of security with familiarity. Regular sessions learning outdoors helps children build and explore their identity.

Community - Through firsthand experience children develop an awareness of their impact on the local environment and can get involved in caring for nature.

Wellbeing - Regular contact with nature ignites curiosity. Outdoor environments allow children to expand and refine their abilities, both mentally and physically.

Learning - Ever changing outdoor environments invite hypothesising, imagination, interaction, problem solving and experimenting.

Communication - Children can share stories, use natural materials to create art and interact with each other and their surroundings in new ways, even to create drama and music.



National Quality Standards for Early Childhood

A child's ability to access nature and learn outdoors is fundamental within the National Quality Framework and National Quality Standards. Learning outdoors promotes a child's health (Quality Standard 2) through relaxation, physical activity and spontaneous experiences. By placing children in a natural outdoor setting (Quality Standard 3), they have the opportunity for independent exploration and to participate in real-life projects and care for the environment they live in.

Finding the right location

Parks Victoria manages over 3,000 diverse parks, reserves, beaches and waterways. These parks and protected places make up 18 per cent of Victoria's landmass, 75 per cent of Victoria's wetlands and 70 per cent of Victoria's coastline. Parks and protected places serve a range of purposes, from protecting the natural and cultural environment to providing recreational opportunities, so, it's important to find a park that suits your needs and respects our special places.

The spaces most suited for regular outdoor learning are metropolitan parks, regional parks and visitor sites within national and state parks. Wilderness parks and nature conservation reserves are primarily reserved for the protection of significant plants and animals and in some cases, may not be suitable for regular visitation.

Call 13 1963 to ask for recommendations on suitable locations from a ranger in your area. If there is a park near you that is not listed on the Parks Victoria website, it is likely managed by a different agency. Get in touch with your local council to find out more.





Qualities of a good outdoor learning site within a park

An ideal outdoor classroom is an open space amongst natural bushland with low grass and minimal ground cover. This allows children to explore independently while remaining within the supervisors' line of sight. It also allows easy identification of any ground hazards and minimises trampling, which can damage the undergrowth.

While minimal infrastructure is needed to run an outdoor session, a car park and designated meeting point close by will assist drop off and pick up for Bush Kinder programs that start and end at the designated offsite location. Access to shelter will also help outdoor sessions continue in poor weather (although we believe there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing!).

In some cases, having permission to use more than one site is beneficial. This helps to reduce the impact on a single site, allows you to explore more sections of the park(s) and reduces certain seasonal risks. For example, a site with nearby long grass might be okay in winter, but potentially hazardous due to snakes in summer.

Treading lightly

National parks, reserves and marine protected areas form the core of Aboriginal cultural landscapes, which have been modified over many thousands of years of occupation. They are rich in Aboriginal cultural heritage, holding social, spiritual, and ceremonial significance. They also provide important homes to many species of plants and animals, some found in only a few areas, and others nowhere else in the world!

Spending time in nature is an excellent way for children to develop positive environmental values and to learn more about the world they live in, and how humans and nature interact with each other. By following our *Treading Lightly* practices on the next page, you and your students can learn in and about our amazing natural places while helping us to protect them.

Our *Treading Lightly* practices have been adapted for an early childhood education audience from Parks Victoria's more in-depth *Minimal Impact Guidelines for Schools*. These guidelines are available on the Parks Victoria website and can be referred to if you need further information regarding how to manage specific activities for minimal environmental impact.



Following Parks Victoria's Treading Lightly practices during nature play will help your group to protect Victoria's precious natural places too

Know before you go	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learn more about the Traditional Owners' living culture and prepare an Acknowledgement of Country for when you arrive on site.• Use the Parks Victoria website to find out about the park you are going to visit, what you can do there and what facilities will be available when you arrive.• Check for changes in park conditions leading up to and on the day of your excursion by visiting the specific park webpage.• Monitor the weather in the lead up to your trip and make sure everyone has the right equipment, clothes and footwear with them and understands emergency protocols.• Take a first aid kit, plenty of food, water and sun protection.• Have a discussion with your children about caring for the bush, how we can tread lightly and how to reduce rubbish.
Keep nature wild	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take photos, drawings and memories, and only leave footprints.• Finding and categorising natural objects based on size, shape, colour and texture is a fun way to incorporate maths and language into outdoor learning. However, the natural objects you find might also be used by animals! You can help to respect animals' homes by leaving plants, shells, logs and rocks where you find them – never take them home with you.• View animals from a distance so they don't become frightened.• Protect wildlife by using biodegradable detergent or soap and be mindful to dispose of your wastewater at least 50m away from waterways.• Let animals eat their natural food because they are healthiest when we don't share our human food with them.• If you intend to have a fireplace, please seek advice from your local ranger to find out if and where this is possible.• Take any rubbish and waste with you when you leave the park.
Climbing trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Climbing a tree is a great way for a child to test their risk management skills and coordination. However, some trees are better for climbing than others. The suitability of a climbing tree depends on the strength and height of its branches, and the type of ground cover below the tree. Rangers can help you identify good climbing trees near your bush kinder site and provide some tips on how to minimise your impact on the environment when climbing.
Building cubbies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating cubby houses from sticks is a fun way for children to use their imagination and ingenuity, and to work as a team. Looking for sticks that have already fallen onto the path is a great way to minimise your impact during cubby building. Remember to take down any cubbies at the end of the session.• In some areas, fallen sticks and branches create important homes for animals and protect the soil and young seedlings from exposure and erosion. If you want to build cubby houses check with the ranger to see if this is a suitable activity in your park.

Let us know you're coming

Once you've got a park in mind, you can organise an on-site scoping and induction session with a park ranger. Meeting with a ranger builds good rapport and will help to ensure you've selected sites that are safe, durable and accessible, while also ensuring minimal impact on the environment.

Park rangers have a wealth of knowledge about the parks they manage and can also ensure you identify site-specific potential hazards in the area and appropriate emergency evacuation routes. Rangers are available to provide an initial induction to the park and assist in preliminary site safety surveys. To contact local park staff, call 13 1963 or email education@parks.vic.gov.au.

The next step involves registering your bush kinder through ParkConnect.





Safety and care during emergencies

ParkConnect is Parks Victoria's online database for emergency management and communicating trip intentions. You can let us know you'll be visiting with your kinder by registering your visit schedule through the [Bush Kinder Activity Plan form](#) on ParkConnect. Registering at least one month in advance helps us to better understand your planned visit(s) and keep you safe by organising a coordinated emergency management response with local ranger teams and government departments if required. User guides are available on the [ParkConnect Education page](#) if you need help with setting up a ParkConnect education account or submitting your form.



Permits for protection

Travelling in smaller groups helps us all to tread lightly on the environment; that's why Parks Victoria recommends an upper limit of 100 children moving in a group at any one time. Our parks and waterways are governed by sets of specific rules, which at times require permits to undertake activities. These permit processes are in place to ensure bush kinders know how to limit their impact and protect Victoria's special places too. For bush kinders, permits are usually required when you are planning to run activities with more than 100 children in one location. For more information about permitting, please visit our [Event Permit](#) webpage. If you are still unsure if your group will require permit, you can email events@parks.vic.gov.au or give us a call on 13 19 63.

If you are a commercial/private run bush kinder operator, you will need to apply for a license. You can read more about the license application process on our [Licensed Tour Operators](#) webpage.

Staying safe when taking risks

Learning to assess and manage risk is an important step in childhood learning and development. Nature play provides the perfect opportunity for children to assess, manage and take risks, however these risks should be weighed against the long-term health, learning and development, and wellbeing benefits for children, their families, communities and nature itself.

For the safety and wellbeing of your group, you should always conduct a site safety survey prior to the start of your session. You should also monitor the park conditions before each visit by checking the relevant park page on the Parks Victoria website.

The following table outlines some of the general potential risks while learning and playing outdoors, and some mitigation strategies to ensure that children can still assess and manage risks themselves in a more controlled situation.

Remember to always have suitable supervision, correct educator to child ratios, a risk assessment in place, and first aid kits available.

If you need further information, the Department of Education has also outlined [different types of risks that may occur in outdoor environments](#) and how to prepare for them.



Mitigation strategies for Bush Kinder risks

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Insect bite or sting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce skin exposure with long sleeves, pants, socks and closed toe shoes • Stay on designated paths and tracks, don't walk through undergrowth • Always keep hands and fingers when you can see them • Apply insect repellent
Weather exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check weather conditions before departing • Ensure everyone has adequate water and appropriate clothing • Consider group placement in relation to sun, strong wind or rain
Scrapes or sprains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure appropriate shoes are always worn • Identify areas of uneven or unstable terrain, apply caution when in these areas
Fall from tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify trees suitable for climbing that minimise risk of high fall • Closely supervise children while climbing trees • Allow only a small number of children to climb a tree at the same time

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Hit by falling branch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trees can drop limbs at any time. For this reason, avoid being stationary under trees • Listen overhead for cracks and groans from tree branches • Remember that as wind speed increases, the greater the risk of falling branches
Harm from wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy wildlife from a distance • Do not feed wildlife
Lost group member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly conduct a head count, and always move as a group • Position educators at the front, middle and rear of the group • Wear highly visible clothing while in the bush
Stranger interference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain constant supervision of children • Position group away from other park visitors
Drowning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a site away from immediate water risk • Maintain constant supervision of children

Learning in nature

There is a growing network of early childhood teachers and experts willing to share their ideas and experiences about outdoor learning. Follow the links below to be inspired and explore available resources:

- [Department of Education Bush Kinder](#) web page
- [Department of Education School Readiness Funding Menu](#) (search for programs for educators, and look for keywords including 'bush' and 'nature')
- [ACECQA National Law and Regulations](#)
- [Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network](#)
- [Kids in Nature Network](#)
- [University of Melbourne article](#) on the benefits of immersing young children in nature



Tree Planting at Churchill – a case study

Reema Kindergarten visit Churchill National Park every week. The children love the park and its natural bushland, and call themselves 'Eco Warriors'. Determined to make a difference, the class planted over 100 trees and removed countless Boneseed weeds with Parks Victoria rangers.

The children learnt how to plant the trees and why the trees are important habitat for the animals that rely on them. Since planting, children have been back to the park with their families to check on their trees' progress.

Rangers and park volunteer groups are often looking for assistance for environmental projects like tree planting and weed removal. You can browse volunteering opportunities via www.parkconnect.vic.gov.au or speak to the local ranger team to discuss any upcoming opportunities to get involved by emailing education@parks.vic.gov.au.



Playing in the mud at Arapiles – a case study

Natimuk Kindergarten know how to embrace all seasons. In the rainy months, mud puddles at Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park provide endless learning opportunities. Children can investigate who's living in the water, measure its depth, and predict how puddles might change each time they visit as water drains or evaporates.

Supervisors have an important role to play in monitoring changes in mud puddles, too. If soil seems to be disappearing or channelling, it's time to get the ranger to check if playing in the puddles is impacting the environment. If playing in puddles is having an impact, it may be time to explore a different area of the park.



Alternating sites at Kinglake – a case study

Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre have two bush kinder sites, one in Kinglake National Park and one in Frank Thompson Reserve. They alternate sites depending on weather conditions and potential snake hazard on the day.

The Children's Centre has a good relationship with the local ranger team, who assisted in their site selection and risk management. They communicate regularly with rangers. This relationship means the kinder is always informed about the current conditions and park news.



Bush Kinder checklist

- Find a park near you: call 13 1963 or check www.parks.vic.gov.au
- Visit the park to find a suitable outdoor learning site with a ranger, and conduct a risk assessment
- Register on ParkConnect and submit a [Bush Kinder Activity Plan form](#)
- Get to know the *Treading Lightly* principles and share them with others in your service
- Receive an induction to the park by the park ranger team during your initial bush kinder visit
- Check park conditions leading up to and on the day of your visit(s)
- Have fun!

Thanks to ECOLN for supporting the development of this Handbook, and for the Kinders that have kindly let us use their photos and case studies.

