Contact with nature is critical for our physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing. It has positive effects on our ability to concentrate, to learn, to solve problems, to relax and to be creative.
Acknowledgements

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.

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

Welcome! We’re so excited that you’re interested in getting young children out into parks and nature. It’s such a natural match – kids love the outdoors, it helps them learn better and to grow into healthy and happy people throughout life. That’s why Parks Victoria is committed to Learning in 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 green space such as a park, reserve 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, plan activities for minimum impact 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 are less disruptive, show improved social skills, motor skills and physical health, and develop resilience, self-awareness, self-esteem and independence (find out more, www.parks.vic.gov.au/about-us/healthy-parks-healthy-people/the-research).

Parks Victoria recognises the vital connections between a healthy environment and healthy people. Using the Healthy Parks Healthy People approach, park managers ensure people can access and connect with parks for their health and wellbeing.

The Healthy Parks Healthy People approach is underpinned by four principles:

1. Our health depends on healthy ecosystems
2. Healthy park ecosystems provide clean water, fresh air and pollination
3. Time in nature is good for our physical, mental and spiritual health and wellbeing
4. Parks build strong economies and healthy communities

Globally, there are growing concerns regarding the reduction in the amount of time people spend in nature and the impact on their health. Children are spending more time inside and less time playing outdoors. The reasons for this are many and varied, including increased parental and societal fear, reduced access to natural areas, increased screen time and concerns with risk and liability.

The role of early education services

Early education 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.

Learning outdoors in the Early Years Framework

**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 relieves children’s minds and ignites curiosity. Outdoor environments allow children to expand and refine their abilities, 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 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. 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.

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Finding the right park

Parks Victoria has an extensive network of parks and reserves perfect for outdoor learning. Visit the park locator map on Parks Victoria’s website and enter a post code and a kilometre radius to find your closest parks [www.parks.vic.gov.au/explore/parks](http://www.parks.vic.gov.au/explore/parks).

Different parks are managed for different purposes, so it’s important to find a park that suits your needs and respects these 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.

If there is a park near you that is not listed on the Parks Victoria website, it is likely it is managed by a different agency. Get in touch with your local council to find out more.

The Department of Education and Training offer additional advice on selecting the right site here: [www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/bushkinders.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/bushkinders.aspx)

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 little infrastructure is needed to run an outdoor session, a car park and designated meeting point close by will assist drop off and pick up. Access to shelter will also help outdoor sessions continue in poor weather.

In some cases, you might not be able to find a single site that meets all your needs. Having multiple sites to visit within the park is a great way to explore more sections of the park and reduce certain seasonal risks. For example, a site with nearby long grass might be OK in winter, but potentially hazardous due to snakes in summer. Having a selection of sites to visit also helps reduce the impact on a single site.

An initial on-site scoping and induction session with the park ranger is required to enable teachers to find sites that are safe, durable and accessible, while also ensuring minimal impact on the environment.

Photo thanks to Natimuk Kinder
Risks and benefits of learning outdoors

Outdoor learning and nature play does involve risks. These risks, however, are not unmanageable and should be weighed against the long-term health, learning and development, and wellbeing benefits for children, their families, communities and nature itself.

It is the visiting group’s responsibility to conduct ongoing site safety surveys prior to every visit and monitor changes in conditions within the park. For regular updates on changed conditions, visit the park’s individual page on Parks Victoria’s website www.parks.vic.gov.au.

Examples of outdoor risks and mitigation strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Mitigation strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insect bite or sting</td>
<td>Reduce skin exposure with long sleeves, pants, socks and closed toe shoes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stay on designated paths and tracks, don’t walk through undergrowth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always keep hands and fingers where you can see them</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apply insect repellent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Always have a suitable first aid kit available</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weather exposure</td>
<td>Check weather conditions before departing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure everyone has adequate water and appropriate clothing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider group placement in relation to sun, strong wind or rain</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have a suitable first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scraps or sprains</td>
<td>Ensure appropriate shoes are worn at all times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify areas of uneven or unstable terrain, apply caution when in these areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have a suitable first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall from tree</td>
<td>Identify trees suitable for climbing that minimise risk of high fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closely supervise children while climbing trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allow a small number of children to climb a tree at the same time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have suitable supervision ratios and first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit by falling branch</td>
<td>Avoid being stationary in forested areas in high winds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listen overhead for cracks and groans from tree branches</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have a suitable first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm by interaction with wildlife</td>
<td>Always maintain a safe distance from any wildlife</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not approach wildlife, they may try to defend themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not feed wildlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have suitable supervision ratios and first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost group member</td>
<td>Regularly conduct head count and move as a group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position supervisors at the front, middle and rear of the group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wear highly visible clothing while in the bush</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have suitable supervision ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger interference</td>
<td>Maintain constant supervision of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position group away from other park visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
<td>Choose site away from immediate water risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain constant supervision of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always have suitable supervision ratios and first aid kit available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo thanks to Natimuk Kinder
Support available from the Department of Education and Training

The Department of Education and Training has webpage for Bush Kinders to help service providers prepare for regular outings, including awareness of the types of risks in outdoor environments and how to prepare for these. See: www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/bushkinders.aspx

Support available from Parks Victoria

Park rangers have a wealth of knowledge about the parks they manage and can help 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.

Applications, licenses and permits

You may require a permit or license, depending upon the activities you wish to undertake, or if you’re a commercial operator.

In most cases, kindergartens and schools do not require a permit. Parks Victoria does, however, require groups to notify the local park that they will be visiting by submitting a Group Activity Statement.

A Group Activity Statement captures details such as intended dates, group size and your planned activities and is available from Parks Victoria’s website, www.parks.vic.gov.au/learn. This information helps us advise on whether your activities may require a permit or license and rangers plan for group visits and advise if there are any other activities happening in the park that might impact your sessions.


Tread lightly in parks and reserves

National parks and reserves are special places that are managed to conserve their beauty, biological diversity, and cultural significance. They are places for current and future generations to connect with nature.

Parks Victoria encourages children to be hands-on in parks, engaging all their senses. However, it’s important to make sure that your visit doesn’t impact on natural or cultural park values.

When planning your next outdoor class, follow these minimal impact guidelines to make sure you have a safe, fun time with minimal impact on the environment.

Know before you go

- Find out about the park you are going to visit and what you can do there.
- Check the weather before you go and make sure you have the right equipment, first aid kit, clothes and footwear with you.

Keep our parks wild

- Respect animals' homes by leaving plants, shells, logs and even rocks where you find them.
- Animals are healthiest eating their natural foods, so please don’t share your food with them.
- Never walk up to wildlife. It might become frightened and try to protect itself.

Leave no trace

- Leave everything as you find it. The best souvenirs of your adventure are your memories.
- Respect any evidence of the past that you might find. Parks protect our history.
- Keep yourself safe and protect the park by staying on walking tracks and not damaging vegetation.
- Take all food scraps and rubbish home to put in the bin or recycle.
- Only light fires in the fireplaces provided and always put the fire out completely.

Photo thanks to Kinglake Ranges Children’s Centre
Outdoor activity inspiration

There is a growing network of early education teachers and experts willing to share their ideas and experiences about outdoor learning. Link through to view activity ideas and resources, and be inspired by the kindergartens already visiting parks for outdoor learning.

Activity ideas and resources

- Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network http://earlychildhoodoutdoorlearning.weebly.com/
- David Suzuki Foundation: Connecting Youth with Nature http://getbackoutside.ca/#youth
- Parks Victoria educational resources www.parks.vic.gov.au/learn
- Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network https://earlychildhoodoutdoorlearning.weebly.com

Outdoor learning in action

Tree Planting at Churchill

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 Bone Seed 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 mud at Arapiles

Natimuk Kindergarten know how to embrace all seasons. In the rainy months, mud puddles at Mount Arapiles-Tooran State Park provide endless learning opportunities.

Children can investigate who’s living in the water, measure its depth, and predict how it 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.

Photo thanks to Reema Kinder

Photo thanks to Natimuk Kinder
Alternating sites at Kinglake

Kinglake Ranges Children’s Centre have two bush 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, letting them know each time they are visiting. This relationship means the kinder is always informed about the current conditions and park news before they arrive.

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Environmental considerations when exploring parks and reserves

Climbing

Climbing trees is a great test of children’s risk management skills and coordination.

Some trees are better for climbing than others, depending on the strength of their branches, height of branches and type of ground cover. Talk to the park rangers to see if there are any trees that are good for climbing near your bush kinder site.

The Royal Children’s Hospital provides some useful tips to reduce the likelihood and seriousness of a fall. [www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Preventing_Falls](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Preventing_Falls)

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Photo thanks to Kinglake Ranges Children’s Centre
Building stick cubbies

Creating cubby houses from sticks is a fun way for children to use their imagination, ingenuity and work as a team.

When building cubbies, it is important to only use sticks that are already on the ground and stay on the paths when collecting sticks.

In many areas, fallen sticks and branches are a fundamental part of the habitat, providing homes for small animals and protecting the soil and young plants from exposure and erosion. This is particularly important after fire or storms. Talk to the park rangers about collecting sticks to make sure it is appropriate at your site in the park.

Nature treasure hunts

Finding and categorising natural objects is a fun way to incorporate maths and language skills into outdoor learning.

Sticks, leaves and rocks can be categorised and sorted based on their size, shape, colour and textures.

Park and reserves are all no-take areas, meaning all the plants, soil, rocks and anything else found in the park must stay in the park. Pictures, photographs and drawings are a good substitute when you aren’t allowed to take items home. If visiting regularly, it’s also an exciting challenge to re-find any interesting items from previous visits.

Animal surveys

Parks are full of animals that children may not always see or experience in their neighbourhood.

Children can listen for calls and search for animal tracks or traces. Rangers will have a list of local species to monitor in the park and will appreciate any help keeping track of their occurrence and movements.

There are also a range of apps that help to identify and record different plants and animals. Some great apps include:

- Museums Victoria’s Field Guide app to Victorian Fauna
- QuestaGame
- iNaturalist
- ClimateWatch

It is important to never feed, disturb or approach animals in parks. Even if the animal doesn’t cause any harm, constant exposure to people may make the animal accustomed to close encounters, which may impact their feeding, breeding, or cause future harmful interactions for the person or the animal.

Photo thanks to Natimuk Kinder
Checklist

- Find a park near you
  www.parks.vic.gov.au/explore/find-a-park
- Visit the park to find a suitable outdoor learning site
- Submit a Group Activity Statement
  www.parks.vic.gov.au/learn
- Conduct a risk assessment including input from the park ranger team
- Receive an induction to the park by the park ranger team
- Get to know minimal impact principles and share them with your class
- Check park conditions on the day of your visit
- Have fun!

Contacts

For further information or feedback about education in parks, please contact education@parks.vic.gov.au or call 13 1963.