

# Nature Play



Nature play fosters connections with the natural world and provides opportunities to learn in, through and about nature. Playing in nature nurtures creativity and imagination, empowering learners to explore and experiment with self-directed, freely chosen and self-motivated play. Every interaction in and through nature is building connections that enhance brain development and fosters holistic development.

***Holistic development is the social, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of learning and development.***

Nature is a sensory delight for young learners, visually appealing, and interesting to explore with an array of stimulus to engage tamariki physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The touch of sand, the feel of mud, dancing in the rain or observing the awe of a sunrise all foster connections with people, place and things. The natural world provides our tamariki with spiritual connections that are deeply embedded in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), and offers rich opportunities for investigation, physical challenge and emotional self-regulation.

Exploring Nature Play: <https://youtu.be/uDKbgbsErgk>

## Creating Nature Play:

Where is your local nature spot? Can you walk to a park, mountain, river, beach or forest? Try to choose a spot that you can revisit regularly so that you become familiar with it and observe the changes of the seasons. Placed based education (locally situated learning) and observing the natural rhythms of the earth can foster a sense of belonging for our tamariki that encourages a sense of stewardship, building relationships with mana whenua (Penetito, 2009).

## Preparing for Nature Play

Nature provides the biggest open ended resource for play and learning, requiring you to take little and leave only footprints. Remember there is no bad weather just the wrong clothes, so it is important to wear appropriate clothing for the season and take food, water and first aid supplies. Risk assess the area before you go and choose a meeting point that is safe and engaging for the group to gather.

## Ground the group with a karakia or whakatauki (Māori prayer or proverb)

*Ko Papatuanuku tō tātou whāea tō tātou mātua.  
The land is our mother, the embracing parent who nourishes  
and sustains us, when we pass, she folds us in her arms.*

Establish an agreed set of guidelines to follow, keep them simple such as:

Respect nature, respect each other and respect boundaries (personal, physical and relational).

Being in nature provides the opportunity to slow down, unwind and explore. Use your senses to ponder - what you can see, what can you hear, and what can you feel? Allow these observations to stimulate investigations and inquiry.

## Roles in Nature Play

In nature young learners can take the lead in exploration with adults learning alongside them.

Vygotsky a sociocultural theorist describes it “like a dance – the child leads and the adult follows, always closely in tune with the child’s actions” (Davis & Keller, 2009).

*Sociocultural theory considers human development to be social and cultural process, meaning all learning and development happens when the learner interacts with people, places and things.*

Collaborative inquiry empowers learner to investigate the world around them using open ended questions and observations. Learning together enables both the adult and the young learner to prompt and provoke inquiry. An infant may crawl over to the long grass, a toddler notices an ants nest, a young child leads a bug hunt or an adult proposes wonderings about the ecosystem of a river. Valuing learner contributions creates unique learning opportunities between adults, young learners and the natural world and supports mental, emotional and physical risk taking.

As kaiako (educators) our role is to encourage and support young learners to take calculated risk by knowing and trusting the learner. Young learners have an innate drive to seek challenges and push boundaries with nature offering an environment for risk taking opportunities. Whether climbing trees, jumping off rocks or rolling down banks risk taking can develop courage, resilience and determination. While we must remove genuine hazards such as something the young learner cannot see or is unaware of, when we slow down, step back and observe the learner with minimal support, we empower the young learner with the opportunity to overcome challenges, problem solve and grow.

1. Choose a local nature place
2. Risk assess the area
3. Wear appropriate clothes for the season, pack water, food and first aid
4. Slow down and use all your senses to explore and investigate
5. Support safe risk taking

Watch to learn more  
about risk taking

[https://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=smEwpYRPA08  
#action=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEwpYRPA08#action=share)

## Exploring nature

*Toitū te Marae o Tāne, toitū te  
Marae o Tangaroa, toitū te Iwi  
The Land endures, the Sea  
endues, we the People endure.*

As we ventured out in to nature to visit North head one of our local maunga, we met every week rain or shine for adventures exploring tunnels, beaches and forestry. Together we went on a bear hunts, dragon cave quests and pirate treasure explorations.



We learnt with our senses looking out around the mountain to gain a sense of where we were and what we could see - the moana/sea, the city, a church roof, the beach, a boat, people walking dogs and Takarunga maunga – home to our Playcentre; listening to the sound of the wind, the birds, and a helicopter; feeling the grass, the cave walls, the sand, the sea, starfish, red sponges, crabs, and sea snails; and smelling wild flowers and the sea air, enjoying the richness of Papatuanuku.



We jumped in muddy puddles, rolled down grassy banks, climbed up trees, built sand sculptures, dugged holes, walked, ran, skipped and swam. We encouraged each other, we led and enabled others to lead. We made friends, spent quality time with family, laughed, collaborated, worked through differences and discover new abilities.

We experienced walking in the rain, the warmth of a fire, the darkness of a cave and the energy of the ocean. We were brave, courageous, explorers, strong, team players, adventurers, creative, inclusive, preservers and happy. We developed understandings of how to be safe in the outdoors, to care for nature and care for each other.

### References

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Welcome to  
our Village

Playcentre 