



Thriving Learners

Activating The Paddock: Outdoor Learning
at The Willows Children's Centre



The Paddock: A simple pile of dirt invites endless possibilities: climbing, digging, balancing, and leaping.

Overview:

The purpose of the Thriving Learners program is to develop and implement nature-based play, teaching, and learning experiences that enhance student wellbeing and learner agency for improved learning outcomes. Supported by the Department for Education, Thriving Learners strengthens the Areas of Impact by empowering teachers to implement co-designed, student-led outdoor learning in their contexts.

The Willows Children’s Centre (The Willows) is a Category Two site under the Index of Educational Disadvantage (DfE, 2012), indicating a high level of socio-economic disadvantage. The centre has a dedicated Inclusive Preschool Program (IPP) and community rooms for playgroups. The Willows is rated Exceeding in all seven areas of the National Quality Standards (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024).

Nature Play SA’s partnership with The Willows marked the pilot of the *Thriving Learners* program, providing a valuable opportunity to trial key elements, including co-design, impact documentation, and the Areas of Impact as measures of success.

Prior to the pilot partnership, The Willows had purchased an adjacent piece of land from the neighbouring primary school and named it *The Paddock*. The space had many established gum trees and featured two cubby structures, some branches and logs, and a mound of dirt that children enjoyed digging in.

Staff had been exploring options to develop *The Paddock* into a structured play space but were also interested in how it could be better utilised for flexible outdoor learning. During consultations, staff identified a need for support and inspiration in making use of *The Paddock* while upholding children’s voices and engaging families in understanding the benefits of nature play.



Flexible Spaces: Pop-up tables and loose parts like log rounds make flexible seating and work spaces.

A plan was developed to align with The Willows' goals and the Areas of Impact:

- 1. Building Staff Confidence:** Professional development, hands-on demonstrations, and co-facilitation opportunities.
- 2. Upholding Children's Voices:** Observing and documenting play to scaffold child-led learning.
- 3. Strengthening Community Collaboration:** Inviting families to engage in play and contribute to shared reflections on the benefits of nature play.

Over six weeks, NPSA staff facilitated weekly sessions in *The Paddock*. After each session, observations of play were documented and reflected upon, informing the resources and provocations provided in the following weeks.

It is well evidenced that nature play supports children's holistic development, including wellbeing, agency, equity, and learning. For example, nature play nurtures in children greater self-confidence, and better social emotional and physical development outcomes (Elliot & Chancellor, 2014). Outdoor play experiences for children illicit a wider range of emotions in children when compared to indoor teaching, and offer greater cognitive engagement, and reductions in physical dysregulation (Fiskum, 2012).

Children playing in nature experience greater engagement in learning and a sense of autonomy in the ways that they learn (Elliot & Chancellor, 2014). Additionally, children who spend more time outdoors with open-ended and child-led play have been shown to have an appreciation of the natural world. This appreciation encourages creativity and problem solving, and the active participation of children to make positive environmental change in their world (Davis, 2014) as well as cultivating hope (Li & Monroe, 2019).

Children's wellbeing can be impacted by the amount of time they are permitted to spend in nature. A decline in children's time to engage in child-led play, including play in nature, contributes to poor mental health outcomes for children (Gray, 2011). In contrast, a systematic review of literature found a positive correlation between contact with, and time in nature, and positive outcomes for children's physical and mental wellbeing (Fyfe-Johnson et.al., 2021).

Research indicates that nature play provides children with boundless opportunity for holistic development. Educational settings are considered vital in providing children with play experiences in nature (Maller, 2009). This case study intends to highlight how the DfE's Areas of Impact can be engaged through play with and in nature.



Messy Play: Flexible spaces like The Paddock provide room for messy play using natural elements.

Development of the Areas of Impact Observational Story

During our time at The Willows, we trialed and refined our observational tool: the *Areas of Impact Observational Story* (Nature Play SA, 2024). This tool is designed for use in nature play programs and experiences to inform pedagogical practice and identify and target the Areas of Impact.

Over six weeks, we used the Observational Story to document learning, revealing a broader

narrative of development for a child, Charlie. Charlie is four years old and is developing his communication and language skills while learning to self-regulate.

Below is an example of an Observational Story recorded during a session, followed by the reflective story* that emerged from regular use of the tool. Footnotes highlight evidence of the Areas of Impact.

*Names have been changed to maintain privacy

Areas of Impact: Observational Story for Early Years Learning Framework Version 2.0		Date:
Child/ren name/s:	Otis, Emma, Leo and Charlie	18/03/24
Age/s of child/ren:	4 years	
School/Kindergarten:	The Willows	Observed by: Amy
Areas of Impact: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tick applicable		
Wellbeing <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Belonging and safety safe to question, learn and be accepted <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Resilience and persistence cope with change and challenge <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cognitive engagement Engage in learning that can be tricky	Learner Agency <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Partners in learning Children learn with others incl. teachers, families, and communities <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Voice to agency Children direct their learning <input type="checkbox"/> Discernment and judgement Develop perspective and flexibility	
Effective Learners <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Changing and learning Transfer learning, problem solve <input type="checkbox"/> Critical curiosity Ask questions, seek to understand <input type="checkbox"/> Meaning making Connect learning <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Creativity Creative thinking, problem solving <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Strategic awareness Autonomy and planning ahead	Excellence and Equity <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inclusion Diverse learners and acceptance <input type="checkbox"/> Critical knowledge, skills, competencies, and capabilities Opportunity for autonomous learning <input type="checkbox"/> Breaking the link between background and excellence Empowerment and belief in all children <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal learners Cultural identity, skills and confidence nurtured	
Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tick applicable		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1. Children have a strong sense of identity Key words: safety, security, autonomy, interdependence, resilience, agency, knowledge, identity, self-worth, respect, care and empathy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4. Children are confident and involved learners Key words: curiosity, cooperation, creativity, commitment, confidence, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination, reflexivity, problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching, investigating, Learning: transference, connection, resource. Engage: people, place, technology, materials.	
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world Key words: communities, rights and responsibilities, diversity and respect, fairness, respect for environment, social learning and reciprocity.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5. Children are effective communicators Key words: verbal and non-verbal interaction, range of bits and media, engagement, meaning, ideas, expression, understanding of symbols and patterns, digital technology, investigation, information.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing Key words: Wellbeing (social, emotional, mental and physical), wellbeing literacy, personal safety, emotional and physical regulation.		
Play Type: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tick applicable		
<input type="checkbox"/> Solitary <input type="checkbox"/> Onlooker <input type="checkbox"/> Parallel <input type="checkbox"/> Associative <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cooperative		

Observation Record: What happened?
E.g. Describe setting, and people involved. Explain the play, interaction, conversation, actions observed. Elaborate on your role in the story. Make links to curriculum, learning and development.
Otis had an idea to build a "log cubby" from fence to fence. This came about after the large cubby they built fell over due to wind. Otis, Emma, Leo & Charlie joined in. Time after time the wind blew it down. Charlie yelled into the wind "GO AWAY WIND!" Problem solving led by Charlie to support the stick with large rocks. Emma hauled over logs. They built over and over again, rushing to hold it up. It kept falling. 5 mins left & the cubby half collapsed - Otis grimed & knocked it down. We decided to make a plan for next week: use more logs & rocks.
Child's voice: Encourage children to share their ideas, views, feelings and wonderings. You can explore here any ideas for future learning/play that children may have. Children may also wish to write here themselves or draw a picture to communicate. If more than one student, attach another sheet to this observation.
Charlie: "More logs." Emma: "More people holding it" Leo: "Maybe Bricks." Emma: "Maybe I got more sleep." Charlie hoped there wouldn't be any wind. Emma: "Drink more water."
PLAN Solutions focused. Coping with difficulty & disappointment. Agency and planning. Expression of emotions wellbeing: needs (sleep, water).
Teacher/Educator/Facilitator reflections: E.g. What did you notice or learn? Did anything surprise you? What went well? What might you like to change? How will this change your practice going forward? Can you extend on this student's learning with this information? What need? Anything to read, source, explore further?
Please fill out after you have collected children's voice.
Children surprised me with their unwavering persistence. 1.5 hrs of deep play. Lots of heavy lifting and hard work. Next week provide additional materials & provocations to support cubby (milk crates, more rope)



The Long Cubby

Charlie appeared quietly near me, grinning.

"I am happy to see you, Charlie," I said.

It was Week 3 of our sessions with the Willows Children's Centre, and Charlie was an enthusiastic participant. He was energetic, cheerful, and keen to explore. On this day, Charlie's peer, Otis, had a plan to build a "long cubby" stretching from one side of *The Paddock* to the other. Charlie worked hard on self-assigned tasks¹, engaging in both associative and collaborative play.

It was a very windy day. The wind picked up the cubby's fabric like sails on a ship and sent sections tumbling down. Charlie had an idea: he would support the cubby with logs and rocks². He sourced these supports from around *The Paddock*, adjusting them each time the wind knocked the structure over. This happened again and again.

Frustrated, Charlie shouted into the wind, "GO AWAY, WIND!" With this cathartic release, he persisted. For the full 90-minute session³, Charlie, Otis, and Emma worked tirelessly, determined to make the cubby stand⁴. It looked like a success, until a final gust of wind brought it down once more. They would try again the following week. Charlie decided more logs would help.

He also hoped it wouldn't be windy⁵.

The next week, Charlie ran into *The Paddock* and greeted me with a big smile. Otis and Emma joined us. We noticed that there was only a gentle breeze, and there was hope. Charlie and the others set about rebuilding the long cubby, applying everything they had learned on the windy day⁶. This time, the cubby went up, and stayed up.

With the absence of wind and the addition of the hot sun, the children turned their attention to a new goal: creating a shady space big enough for all three of them⁷. They gathered in the long, now-shady cubby, looking through books they had sourced from a quiet reading space⁸. I stood back, admiring Charlie's creation alongside his teachers and educators. They remarked that these relationships were new for Charlie. They also noted his unwavering persistence and flexibility.

Reflection

Charlie demonstrated patience, flexibility, problem solving and teamwork. He made new connections with peers and was able to express his frustration and share his joy. The flexibility of the outdoor space, and open-ended materials, supported Charlie's agency in his learning. The unpredictability of nature (the wind and the sun) offered challenge where he could safely practice feelings of disappointment, and experience persistence and patience not only in the short-term, but across weeks.

Charlie's smiles and excitement to play in *The Paddock* each session, indicated Charlie was experiencing a strong sense of wellbeing.



Resilience: Learners show persistence battling against the elements to build a "long cubby".

[1] Learner Agency: Voice to agency

[2] Effective Learners: Creativity

[3] Wellbeing: Resilience and persistence

[4] Wellbeing: Cognitive engagement

[5] Effective Learners: Strategic awareness

[6] Effective Learners: Changing and Learning

[7] Excellence and Equity: Inclusion

[8] Learner Agency: Partners in learning

Areas of Impact Observational Story: Considerations for Use

Teacher Time/Capacity

- How much emotional and mental capacity does the teacher have that day?
- Where would the teacher's time be best utilised?
- Are children settled? Do they need direct support or scaffolding?
- Can the observation be written retrospectively instead?

Consider Whether Your Observations Will Interrupt, Change, or Impede Learning

- Document from afar if possible.
- Students may feel more relaxed if you are also engaged in play. For example, you might do some painting nearby while listening to and observing children building a cubby.
- Notice children's body language - do they stop playing or speaking when you arrive? If so, consider the following points.

Communicating Intent and Respect

- Consider how you might explain to students that you are documenting their learning. For example: *"I am writing about how you are playing. This helps me learn what is important to you when you play."*

- If a child prefers that their learning not be documented, such as through a photo being taken, this should be respected.
- Offer children alternatives, such as documenting their own learning through photography, drawings, storytelling, or recalling their experiences to you later.

What to Document

- **Frequency** - Play types and themes that are often repeated.
- **Duration** - The length of time a child or group engages in play, relative to their development.
- **Change** - Shifts in behaviour, social and emotional development, or new ways of engaging in learning.
- **Meaning** - Something that may strike the observer as meaningful or significant, or a child may communicate importance to the educator.

How to document:

The *Areas of Impact Companion Tool* (Nature Play SA, 2024) provides examples of how the Areas of Impact may emerge within a nature play program. You may identify additional examples not included in the tool and add them as you observe them.



Scaffolding: A learner demonstrates persistence while practising fine motor skills to build a cubby frame.

The Paddock: Enhancing the built play space with open-ended, nature-based play that fosters creativity and exploration.



Pilot Project Impact and Outcomes

During our program, we learnt that the centre had come to a decision to keep *The Paddock* mostly undeveloped. They shared that the children's observed engagement in *The Paddock* during our programs, with minimal resources, supported them to see the importance of the space for children's holistic development.

The Willows held a celebration for International Mud Day on July 1st, 2024. Nature Play SA, along with Willows staff, children, and families, came together to celebrate the activation of *The Paddock* space with an ode to all things muddy. This follow-up session highlighted how *The Paddock* has become a highly valued and frequently used space for the children, enhanced by simple, cost-effective additions and intentional practices employed by the educators at The Willows.

Since the pilot Thriving Learners program ended, children are spending more time in *The Paddock*, engaging deeply with nature through play and exploration. Flower beds have been planted around cubby foundations to create a

living structure, and a theatre visit to see *Grug* inspired plans to build Grug's house in the space. Spindle tables, stones, and logs have been introduced as furniture, supporting imaginative play and encouraging children to adapt the space to their needs.



Mud play is expanding into cubby building, with children using trucks, digging, and fully immersing themselves in the experience. Educators are facilitating discussions on stick safety, particularly in relation to cubby construction and pretend campfires. Additionally, children have been exploring heavy work, balance, and collaboration using logs and branches.



Visualising Learning: *The Willows* has been documenting their nature play experiences.

This pilot project with The Willows was an invaluable learning experience, shaping the future of *Thriving Learners* programs. It highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of embedding nature play within early learning settings. From this partnership, Nature Play SA staff developed a range of measurement tools, guides, and resources to support deeper connections between children, educators, and nature.

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