



Nature-Based Education Programs Annual Report 2025

Pursuant to the 2023-2025 Grant Agreement between
the Department for Education and Nature Play SA



Connection • Wellbeing • Belonging



Wherever our adventures take us at Nature Play SA, we acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal Country.

We acknowledge Kaurna Miyurna (People) as the Traditional Custodians of the Adelaide Plains region where we are based and respect their Native Title rights to Country. We recognise Elders past, present and emerging and also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout South Australia.



Cultural Connection: A smoking ceremony held at Aberfoyle Park High School to commemorate the opening of a co-created Cultural Connections Garden.

Table of Contents

4.....	A Word from our CEO
5.....	Purpose & Outcomes
6.....	Reporting
7.....	Outcome 1.
11	Outcome 2.
15	Outcome 3.
19	Outcome 4.
23	Outcome 5.
26	Appendix



A Word from Our CEO

Jason Tyndall

As our 2023-2025 funding partnership with the Department for Education comes to a close, it is an important time to reflect on what has been achieved through this shared commitment to public education in South Australia.

Throughout the funding period, our team have embedded the Department's Areas of Impact into their practice, alongside the dispositions and capabilities in the prototype SA Curriculum for Public Education. These have been more than frameworks. They are powerful tools for designing and delivering learning experiences that support children and young people to thrive.

Over the past two years:

- We have engaged more than **18,000 students** and approximately **1,400 educators** in outdoor learning programs across over **200 public school sites**
- We have delivered professional learning and guidance to over **800 public school educators**
- We have completed seven 'deep dive' Thriving Learners programs, five of which focused on Category 1 to 4 schools or cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners

In a recent meeting with Departmental staff, we were asked: "What can you do that the Department can't?" The answer is clear. Nature Play SA helps to bridge wellbeing, curriculum, and connection to place through co-designed, nature-based learning. Our work does not replace departmental priorities. It complements and enhances them by bringing them to life in meaningful, real-world contexts.

Through our ongoing conversations with Departmental leaders, we have been continually challenged and encouraged to demonstrate the true impact of our work. This includes its influence on learners' wellbeing, their connection to the environment, their mental and physical health, and their sense of community, belonging, and ecological understanding. Throughout this report, you will read quantitative and qualitative data that shows just how far our work reaches.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Department for its partnership, and to the educators, students, families, and communities who have brought these programs to life. Together, we have created something lasting, and we look forward to the next chapter.

Ngaityalya (Thank you)

Jason Tyndall
Chief Executive Officer
Nature Play SA



Purpose

The purpose of our two-year partnership agreement (2023-2025) was to develop and implement nature-based play, and teaching and learning experiences that enhance student wellbeing and learner agency for improved student learning outcomes.

Funding of \$204,545 (GST exclusive) per year has been provided to support this partnership, with agreement terms and funding commencing in September 2023.

Outcomes

Students, as a result of nature-based learning, demonstrate improvement in (but not limited to) cognitive engagement; resilience; knowledge, skills, competencies and capabilities; meaning making; discernment and judgement.

This was achieved through three key methods:

- *Outdoor Learning Programs*
- *Professional Development*
- *Thriving Learners Initiative*

1. Engage with school communities using resources and learning programs underpinned by the department's 'Areas of Impact', as drivers and to use these as indicators of success.

2. Ensure teachers and students are active participants and integral in the intentional learning design of Nature Play SA education programs, informed by the context of their site.

3. Align nature-based learning resources and programs to the Australian Curriculum (version 9.0) and the Early Years Learning Framework.

4. Guarantee school communities have fair access, opportunity, resources and power to thrive, to ensure equitable outcomes for students - in the context of strengthening connection with nature-based environments, learning, play and conservation.

5. Provide focussed professional learning that best supports preschool/school leaders and teachers in the core aspects of their role.



Reporting

This report presents qualitative and quantitative evidence of Nature Play SA's contribution to the Strategy for Public Education in South Australia. It highlights:

- Positive impact for students across the Areas of Impact
- Positive impact for teachers and preschool/school communities
- Broad engagement - including participation across early years to secondary, with a focus on regional and remote sites, Category 1–4 schools and preschools, and schools with high Aboriginal enrolment



“I feel really calm in nature.”

Outcome 1.

Engage with school communities using resources and learning programs underpinned by the department's Areas of Impact, as drivers and to use these as indicators of success.

Outdoor Learning Programs in Public Schools	
18,000	Learners engaged
200	Sites engaged
439	Programs delivered
1,390	Educators engaged
435	Others engaged (including parents and guardians)
50	Regional and remote site visits

Outdoor Learning Programs

The Areas of Impact are deeply embedded in Nature Play SA's outdoor learning programs, delivered through intentionally designed incursions and excursions. Each experience is created to be safe, inclusive, and collaborative, fostering learner agency and wellbeing while nurturing dispositions such as curiosity, resilience, and creativity. Through open-ended, nature-based

challenges, children are encouraged to take developmentally appropriate risks, persevere, and problem-solve.

These programs connect learners, educators, and families to rich learning environments, whether in national parks, coastal reserves, local green spaces, or within school grounds, where children explore, play, and learn in ways that foster a deep connection to nature and community.

While incursions and excursions are shorter than the ongoing experiences in Thriving Learners partnerships, they follow the same design principles and bring the Areas of Impact to life. The same patterns emerge: increased agency, self-regulation, engagement, and joy, supporting the development of key dispositions, knowledge, and capabilities that help children thrive.

Our outdoor learning programs are a powerful advertisement for what's possible when education is built around the Areas of Impact. Over the funding period, 170 public school educators provided feedback (see below). Their message is clear: these programs make learning meaningful and joyful, and they consistently exceed expectations.

Nature Play SA averages 4.9/5 stars for learner engagement, knowledgeable and engaging staff and overall program satisfaction.



Supporting Regional and Remote Schools:

Reaching regional and remote schools isn't always easy, but it matters. During the funding period, we prioritised visits to Category 1–4 public schools in locations such as Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Wallaroo and Mount Gambier, where distance and travel costs often limit access to programs.

In total, we engaged over **3,200 students** in **50 regional and remote schools** in outdoor learning experiences. Two Category 1 preschools in Whyalla and Port Lincoln also received in-person mentoring to establish ongoing bush and beach kindy programs, with continued support proposed through a distance-based Thriving Learners pilot.



Establishing a
'Kindy in the
Park' Program

Planning a
Beach Kindy
Program

“Our experience with Nature Play SA was truly transformative. Their expertise in nature play programs not only enhanced our current offerings but also inspired future initiatives, such as our upcoming beach program in 2026.”

— Park Terrace Kindergarten,
Port Lincoln



“NPSA staff were amazing with the children... Continuously engaging in meaningful conversations with learners and focusing their attention on things they can see, hear, and feel in the environment - reconnecting with the land and respecting our wildlife and plants.”

— McRitchie Crescent Children's Services
Centre, Whyalla

Outcome 1.

All children benefit from time in nature, but for those facing disadvantage, it can have an even greater impact.

Thriving Learners

Thriving Learners was developed to highlight the positive impact of outdoor learning on students, educators, and school communities when shaped by the Areas of Impact.

We invited schools to express interest via the Engagement and Wellbeing Directorate and our educator networks, receiving over 50 responses from sites keen to tackle place-based challenges through outdoor learning and play.

During the funding period, seven deep-dive programs were completed, with priority given to schools with higher levels of disadvantage or a greater proportion of Aboriginal students. Four of the programs focused on Category 1-4 schools, and one supported a cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

Thriving Learners Site Profile

7	Programs completed
4	Category 1 to 4 sites
1	Regional sites
12	Teachers directly engaged
185	Learners directly engaged

At each site, the student-led, co-designed, nature-based programs were mostly delivered through weekly sessions. Each site focused on an Area of Impact that complemented its specific goals and context.

At its heart, *Thriving Learners* is about creating the conditions for deep engagement, agency, and connection to place. These are not one-size-fits-all programs, they are shaped by context and purpose.

In the seven case stories shown below, we've tried to capture each program's depth, its impact on learners, and the joy of learning experienced by students and educators alike. These stories are available on our website, alongside resources and inspiration for educators and schools seeking high-quality examples of nature-based projects to adapt for their own context.



Thriving Learners

Supporting Cultural Connections
Belconnen in Aberfeldie Public High School



Thriving Learners

Activating Outdoor Learning Spaces at
Wandsworth Primary School



Thriving Learners

Reimagining Free Play at Elizabeth
Dunstan Primary School



Thriving Learners

Activating The Pedagogic Outdoor Learning
at The Wilkes Childrens Centre



Thriving Learners

Connecting Outdoor Learning to Walking
with Seaside Primary School



Thriving Learners

Supporting Connection to Place at
Chelms Down Primary School



Thriving Learners

Transformative Co-Design at
Hobson Grove South Primary School

Seven Thriving Learner programs have been completed with two more, at Findon Technical College and Upper Sturt Primary School, currently ongoing.

Elizabeth Downs
Primary School
Project: Reimagining
Loose Parts Free Play



Wandana
Primary School
Project: Activating
Outdoor Learning
Spaces



Findon Technical
College
Project: Supporting
Connection to Nature
through Outdoor Play
(in progress)



Upper Sturt
Primary School
Project: Caring for
'Heritage Bush'
(in progress)



Seacliff
Primary School
Project: Connecting
Outdoor Learning to
Wellbeing



Aberfoyle Park
High School
Project: Co-Designing a
Cultural Connection
Garden



Hallett Cove South
Primary School
Project: Transformative
Co-Design



Christie Downs
Primary School
Project: Supporting
Connection to Place



The Willows
Children's Centre
Project: Activating
Outdoor Learning in 'The
Paddock'



Outcome 2.

Ensure teachers and students are active participants and integral in the intentional learning design of Nature Play SA education programs, informed by the context of their site.

Imagine how these students feel each time they walk into this space.

Nowhere is the impact of the *Thriving Learners* program more evident than at Aberfoyle Park High School, where a once-underused outdoor area has been transformed into a Cultural Garden, co-designed by Aboriginal students as a space for learning, gathering, and connection.

The project centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from Years 7 to 11 who, alongside school staff and members of the Aboriginal community, designed and co-created a native garden at the school's entrance. Students were involved in every aspect of the garden's design and creation—their drawings and stories inspired designs etched into stone and wood.

Nigel Lockyer, the school's Aboriginal Community Education Officer, observed a visible change in how students engaged. He saw greater

curiosity, confidence, and pride as they watched their designs come to life in a garden they visit every day. "I run a lot of programs, but this one's been the most impactful so far," he said.

"This all started with just planning, drawing on a piece of paper and simple ideas," one student reflected. "I had no idea how big and how good it would be until we really started working on it."

"The shield cutting was a cool part of the project, 'cause it's a nice part of Aboriginal culture that we can display here," said another student.

Principal Marion Coady emphasised the garden's significance as a place for cultural connection and active student participation. It has provided an opportunity for students who were previously hesitant to engage with their culture to explore it through co-creating the garden alongside others.

"It's the co-construction and the learning along the way—the workshops that they've done, the carving of the shield, the design, the selection of plants—they have been actively involved in all of the decisions about where we've got to and where we're going in relation to this development."

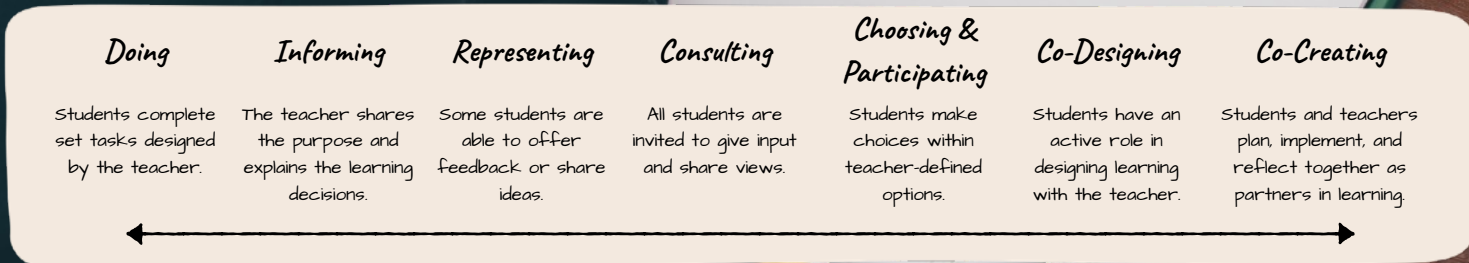




“Even though I’ll graduate, it’ll be like a part of me is still connected to the school.”

Connection to Place: *The carving of the Kaurna shield was a powerful cultural and creative moment. Led by Kaurna man and landscape designer Ross Alison, students took part in an ancient practice, cutting the shield from a River Red Gum in the garden site and gifted the final piece back to the school as a symbol of reconciliation and respect.*

Outcome 2.



The Co-Design Continuum

A key intention of the Thriving Learners program was to ensure that educators and students were not just participants, but active co-designers in shaping learning experiences for their context.

We view co-design as a continuum (see above), a natural extension of what educators already do. During a typical school day, educators move between these approaches, from *Doing* to *Co-Creating*, depending on the lesson's purpose, their school context, and students' readiness. Co-design is not a binary concept. It is a professional judgement that supports students to grow in capability and independence.

During our *Thriving Learners* programs, we also moved back and forth across the continuum, depending on the needs of each site. Pre-assessment surveys and nature drawings were used as forms of consultation. Real choice was embedded in every session. Many programs were co-designed with learners from the outset or developed week to week using a continuous planning cycle of observing, documenting, reflecting, and planning.

Use of Observational Stories for Intentional Learning Design

Play is the language of the child. When intentionally observed, it reveals how children understand the world, what they're capable of, and what they need.

To capture this, we designed, trialled, and refined the *Areas of Impact: Observational Story* tool. It includes a running record of what the child does and says, a section for their voice, free from adult interpretation, and a teacher reflection and planning space that places their experience at the centre of future learning.

In early years and junior primary settings, this tool supported child-led learning. Observation, paired with reflective practice, offered a developmentally appropriate way to listen to children and respond. Through play, and through conversation, children show us what they value, what excites them, their curiosities, and where they want to go next.

Over the page is a six-week summary of observational stories from The Willows Children's Centre. The story follows one child's self-directed learning, supported by intentional planning.

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 (4-years old) 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 tasks^[1], 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 rocks^[2]. 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 session^[3], Charlie, Otis, and Emma worked tirelessly, determined to make the cubby stand^[4]. 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 windy^[5].

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 day^[6]. 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 them^[7]. They gathered in the long, now-shady cubby, looking through books they had sourced from a quiet reading space^[8].

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.

[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

Outcome 3.

Align nature-based learning resources and programs to the Australian Curriculum (V9) and the Early Years Learning Framework.

Outdoor Learning Programs

Over 18,000 public school students have participated in our outdoor learning programs during this grant period. Our education team leaders are qualified teachers with extensive experience across preschool, primary, and secondary settings. Our small but mighty team also includes 15 casual educators, many of whom are early career or pre-service teachers gaining valuable experience through their work with us.

Our flagship program is cubby building at Belair National Park, which has supported over 3,000 public school students in an immersive, full-day outdoor learning experience. But it's about more than just cubby building. While play underpins the program, as with all of our offerings, the learning goes much deeper.

What makes our outdoor learning programs so special is the storytelling — about endangered bandicoots, foxes, and the seasonal flora and

fauna that call the park home. It's the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, language, and song, generously shared with us by our Aboriginal Cultural Advisor, Kuawanu Tamaru (Kurna/Narunga Elder).

It's about creating a safe, supportive, and appropriately challenging environment where learners can engage in risky play. Where creativity, agency, problem-solving, and resilience take centre stage. Where dispositions, capabilities, and understanding come to life in experiences that spark awe and wonder.

Our outdoor learning programs connect seamlessly with the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and the *Australian Curriculum (AC)*, but we are particularly excited about the links to the prototype *South Australian Curriculum for Public Education*. The table below, aligned with our Belair program, illustrates how nature play and outdoor learning go far beyond simply building cubbies.

BE

Nurturing character and connection

- **Resilient learners:** Build confidence by tackling real-world design challenges and overcoming setbacks as a team.
- **Respectful interactions:** Explore cultural understandings with Kurna perspectives, fostering appreciation and care for Country and community.
- **Resourceful thinking:** Creatively use available natural materials, adapting to challenges and innovating along the way.
- **Responsible stewards:** Practise environmentally friendly behaviours, leaving spaces better than we found them.

DO

Hands-on capabilities in action

- **Collaborative teamwork:** Learners navigate ideas together, negotiate roles, listen actively, and support each other throughout the cubby-building process.
- **Problem-solving and critical thinking:** Engage in authentic, hands-on challenges, from designing and building shelters to testing and refining ideas through real-time feedback.
- **Physical literacy outdoors:** Gain practical skills, safely handling sticks, tying secure knots, and constructing structures that stand firm.

UNDERSTAND

Real-world learning through exploration

- **Connecting with place and wellbeing:** Through storytelling, exploration, and sensory experiences, learners deepen their understanding of place and cultivate a sense of belonging.
- **Environmental awareness:** Understand habitats, endangered species (like the Southern Brown Bandicoot), and the impact of human decisions on natural spaces.
- **Historical and cultural insights:** Explore the rich history and ecological importance of Belair National Park, appreciating its significance to the Kurna and Peramangk peoples and broader local heritage.

“Cubby building at Belair National park with Nature SA is designed to engage children with hands-on, outdoor activities that stimulate imagination and creativity. Our kids loved building cubbies and learning through play. The focus on nature not only nurtured their curiosity, but also encouraged teamwork, problem-solving, and resilience. We felt that the facilitators truly cared about each child's experience, ensuring that everyone was included and had fun. It's a perfect blend of learning and adventure, and we can't wait to return!”

— Hallett Cove School OSHC



Outcome 3.

Thriving Learners

Each of the seven published *Thriving Learners* case stories includes context-specific links to curriculum, the Department for Education's Areas of Impact, and research on outdoor and nature-based learning. They show how nature-based learning supports key outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework, the Australian Curriculum, and the prototype South Australian Curriculum for Public Education. They also highlight the role of intentional teaching, planning cycles, and authentic assessment.

One of the most meaningful ways we've captured the program's impact is through observational stories. The *Areas of Impact: Observational Story* tool was developed to help educators make learning in nature play more visible and purposeful by documenting how children engage with dispositions, capabilities, and the Areas of Impact in real time.

Three versions of the tool align with the Early Years Learning Framework, the Australian Curriculum v9, or the South Australian Curriculum, making links between nature play and curriculum outcomes both observable and actionable. Their design was informed by multiple meetings with teams across the Department's Curriculum and Learning Division to ensure relevance and alignment.

Areas of Impact: Observational Story

for the SA Curriculum: HPE Dispositions, Capabilities and Knowledge

Date: _____

Children's name(s): _____ Age(s) of child(ren): _____

School/Ste: _____ Observed by: _____

HPE Learning Standard Year 5/6:

By the end of year 6, learners comprehend their dispositions, including being resilient, respectful, resourceful and responsible in a range of health and movement experiences. They explain how different factors shape their identity and suggest ways to manage emotions and changes. Learners propose strategies to show respect, empathy and inclusion and explain how stereotypes influence rules and responsibilities. They explain how communication skills, protective behaviours and help-seeking strategies keep themselves and others safe online and offline.

Learners analyse health information to refine, motivate and achieve goals, by applying strategies that improve the physical activity, health and wellbeing of themselves and others. They explain community programs designed to improve health, fitness and health and wellbeing of themselves and others. They explain how personal and social responsibility, critical inquiry, and creativity enhance movement and health experiences. Learners use, adapt and transfer movement skills, concepts and strategies in various situations, increasing their impact on communities.

Learners explain how experiences in natural and outdoor settings help them connect with people and places, enhancing their sense of identity, identity, health and wellbeing. They explain how personal and social responsibility, critical inquiry, and creativity enhance movement and health experiences. Learners use, adapt and transfer movement skills, concepts and strategies in various situations, increasing their impact on communities.

SA Curriculum: Dispositions, Capabilities and Knowledge Tick applicable

Dispositions (Be)	Capabilities (Do)
☐ Resilient: Learners demonstrate resilience, perseverance, commitment, persistence, determination, positive attitude, and the ability to bounce back from setbacks.	☐ Personal responsibility: Learners demonstrate personal responsibility, self-regulation, and the ability to take responsibility for their actions and the actions of others.
☐ Respectful: Learners demonstrate respect for others, including respect for personal space, boundaries, and the environment.	☐ Social responsibility: Learners demonstrate social responsibility, including respect for others, the environment, and the community.
☐ Resourceful: Learners demonstrate resourcefulness, including the ability to find and use resources effectively.	☐ Critical inquiry and creativity: Learners demonstrate critical inquiry and creativity, including the ability to ask questions, think critically, and create new ideas.
☐ Responsible: Learners demonstrate responsibility, including the ability to take responsibility for their actions and the actions of others.	☐ Leadership: Learners demonstrate leadership, including the ability to lead others, make decisions, and take responsibility for the actions of others.

Knowledge (Understand)

☐ **Identifies, change and demonstrate:**
Learners identify, change and demonstrate their own and others' behaviours, attitudes, and values.

☐ **Influences decisions and actions:**
Learners influence decisions and actions, including the ability to make choices, take action, and be responsible for the consequences.

☐ **Movement and physical activity:**
Learners demonstrate movement and physical activity, including the ability to engage in physical activity, use movement skills, and understand the importance of physical activity.

Play Type: Tick applicable

☐ Solitary ☐ Onlooker ☐ Parallel ☐ Associative ☐ Cooperative

Notes:

Factors observed: Children on play site in the story: _____

Factors influencing play: _____

Change your practice: _____

Thriving Learners

Thriving Learners is a program funded by the Department for Education (DfE) developed by Nature Play SA to support the DfE's Areas of Impact.

Over the seven case stories, more than 50 observational stories were created by teachers and Nature Play SA staff. Stories like these are powerful because they capture what traditional data can't: the real, messy, joyful, challenging moments of learning. You'll find these stories woven throughout each case story, bringing children's voices and experiences to the forefront.



Kirra's Story



“I want to paint like my cousin. She's a teenager. It was an Aboriginal painting.”

The following is an example of an *Areas of Impact: Observational Story* from our *Thriving Learners* partnership with Wandana Primary School.

Observation: Nurturing a sense of self

Kirra had a plan for her painting¹. She worked to paint the canvas carefully in a bright pink colour, waiting for it to dry, then mixed a light pink paint². Kirra asked for support to get an accurate circle on her canvas³. We searched for something to trace.

Once Kirra had her circle, she added squiggly lines projecting from the circle¹⁰.

Kirra shared with me about her inspiration⁴: “*I want to paint like my cousin. She's a teenager. It was an Aboriginal painting.*”⁵ Using her light pink paint, she carefully painted dots around the canvas. Out of all the children, Kirra spent the longest time on her painting⁶. While painting, I asked Kirra how she was feeling, “*Confident,*”⁷ she replied.

Reflection

Kirra worked in an unhurried and purposeful way. She felt safe to express her Aboriginal culture⁸, and proudly shared her connection to family⁹. I reflected that this experience for Kirra met the hopes of her teachers that the program would nurture creativity, connection to place, and wellbeing¹¹.

1. Effective Learners: Strategic Awareness
2. Effective Learners: Creativity
3. Effective Learners: Changing and Learning
4. Wellbeing: Belong and Safety

5. Excellence and Equity: Aboriginal Learners
6. Excellence and Equity: Knowledge, skills, competencies, and capabilities
7. Learner Agency: Voice to Agency

8. General Capabilities: Intercultural Understanding
9. General Capabilities: Personal and Social Capability
10. Dispositions: Resourceful
11. Knowledge: Identities, change and relationships

Outcome 4.

Guarantee school communities have fair access, opportunity, resources and power to thrive, to ensure equitable outcomes for students - in the context of strengthening connection with nature-based environments, learning, play and conservation.

Nature play has an equigenic or 'levelling effect' that supports all learners regardless of age, ability, or socio-economic status.

Equity isn't just something we talk about. It shapes where we go, who we work with, and how we design our programs. Nature Play SA exists for the benefit of all South Australian children, but during this agreement, we prioritised our work with public schools, particularly those facing greater social and economic challenges, because that was where we have the greatest impact.

We committed to reaching regional and remote schools, focusing on sites that can face challenges accessing external programs. We supported unsuccessful Thriving Learners applicants with free resources, professional development, and in-person visits to help them continue progressing their ideas.

We backed innovative projects like the *Time2Play* initiative in the Felixstow 3 portfolio, offering free PD and prototyping programs to support schools with their next steps. We offered discounted program rates to low-category public school sites and supported inclusive learning settings through universally designed incursion programs for students of all abilities.

We are currently exploring a partnership with Seaton High School to support students with disability through our *Thriving Learners* program. We are also working with Findon Technical College to support the next generation of early years educators in understanding the value of play and time in nature.

This work, alongside our focus on Category 1 to 4 schools, cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, our growing bank of free educator resources, and published case stories, reflected our deep commitment to ensuring public school communities had fair access, opportunity, resources, and power to thrive.





I heard him call out to me for the first time, *"Amy, look!"*

Areas of Impact Observational Story: Matthew and the Rainbows

Matthew speaks Pitjantjatjara and is learning to speak English. I don't speak any language other than English, but I noticed this didn't stop Matthew from clearly communicating what was important to him. From our first session, he showed a strong affinity for rainbows.

During our pre-program week, Matthew shared that his favourite thing to do in nature was to ride in the car and look for rainbows out the window. At each session, he carefully selected the materials he needed to create a rainbow. Every time, he would seek out one or two adults to proudly share his creation. Matthew smiled broadly each time he completed a rainbow.

By Week 5, we noticed that Matthew was beginning to use many new English words with us. For the first time, I heard him call out to me by name: "Amy, look!" He had a big smile on his face. He had made a raft using corks and elastic bands and was demonstrating how well it floated in the water. He said excitedly, "Look what I made!"

Reflection

Matthew displays pride in his work. As he learns English, the creative mediums offered in our programs give him meaningful ways to connect and communicate.

His connection to culture is supported through the school's performing arts program, where students sing in Pitjantjatjara — reinforcing that his identity and language are recognised and valued.

Each week, Matthew accessed learning through play, often working alongside peers with shared interests or common challenges. His joy, persistence, and engagement suggest a strong sense of belonging, agency, and growing confidence in communication.

Outcome 4.

“You demonstrated so many practical ways that we can set up for learning in nature. Each Monday, you blew us away with the transformation of our garden area into a magical, engaging wonderland.”

— Teacher, Wandana Primary School

Thriving Learners

As our case stories show, wellbeing and connection to nature sat at the heart of every Thriving Learners program. These environments created space for all learners to shine, especially those whose strengths may be overlooked in traditional classroom settings.

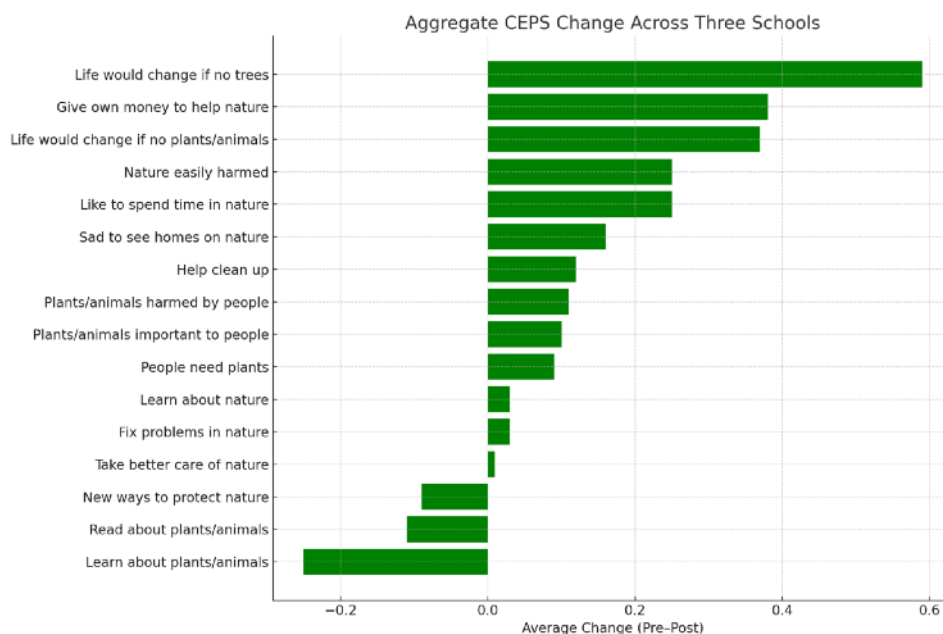
Students described feeling calm, safe and joyful outdoors, with nature-based environments supporting emotional regulation, resilience and social connection. Through hands-on experiences and supportive routines, children became more confident, collaborative and willing to take risks.

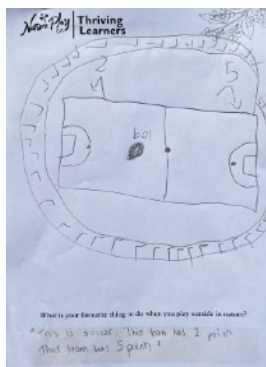
These shifts weren't just felt; they were observed and documented. To better understand them, we created and trialled a range of tools, including surveys, interviews, and drawings. All tools are available and referenced in Appendix 1, *The Wellbeing and Nature Play Toolkit*.

Connection to Nature

Across three surveyed sites — all upper primary classes at Seacliff, Hallett Cove South, and Elizabeth Downs — data (see below) from the *Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale (CEPS)* revealed consistent increases in students' emotional connection to nature, their preference for active and social outdoor experiences, and their motivation to learn in natural settings. Learners more frequently described feeling calm, safe, and happy in nature by the end of the program. Passive engagement, such as reading about nature, remained less appealing, while hands-on exploration with peers became increasingly valued. Students also reported feeling more focused and curious outdoors, suggesting a strong link between emotional wellbeing, social connection, and cognitive engagement in nature-based learning.

At Wandana Primary School, the *Biophilia Interview*, a tool used to understand children's emotional connection to nature, revealed important shifts in student wellbeing. Early responses showed hesitation toward messy, sensory play, with “*dig in mud*” rated lowest and many students linking their reluctance to parental discomfort with mess. In response, educators increased opportunities for hands-on outdoor learning and engaged families around its benefits. Over time, children's confidence and enthusiasm grew, especially in activities involving natural materials like sticks and leaves. These changes reflected more than play preferences. They signalled growth in self-regulation, resilience, and emotional safety.





- Nature: Nil
- Affect: Nil
- Social: Group (child is observer)
- Engagement: Indirect



- Nature: 2
- Affect: Positive
- Social: Pair (child is with a school friend)
- Engagement: Direct

Across two sites (Wandana and Seacliff), the *interpretation of children's drawings* revealed a clear shift toward deeper emotional engagement, personal connection, and hands-on interaction with the natural world. Students moved from depicting themselves as observers to active participants in nature (example above), with increased representations of joy, curiosity, and peer collaboration. These changes go beyond artistic development. They point to real growth in children's emotional wellbeing, confidence, and sense of belonging. Time in nature nurtures the conditions for student wellbeing, supporting emotional regulation, belonging, and readiness to learn.

The *NPSA Teacher Confidence Survey* was designed to measure teacher and educator confidence in using the Areas of Impact and in engaging in nature play. A 5-item Likert scale was employed to collect nuanced responses from teachers both pre- and post-program.

Opportunities to observe students during nature play, supported by the Observational Story tool, helped the teachers link what they saw to dispositions, capabilities, and curriculum knowledge. In post-program discussions, the teachers shared that seeing nature-based learning in action boosted their confidence and inspired new ideas.

Finally, the *Well-Lit 6 in Nature* survey used with Seacliff Primary School provides a structured framework for assessing children's wellbeing literacy in outdoor learning environments, ensuring their understanding is rooted in meaningful, nature-based experiences. It also aligns closely with the South Australian *Wellbeing and Engagement Collection* (WEC) survey, particularly in assessing dimensions such as vocabulary, knowledge, skills, and multimodal communication.

Students showed increased ability to use nature to support their wellbeing and express how and why it helps. For educators, the program demonstrated that even short, low-cost routines in nature can build wellbeing literacy, emotional language, and self-awareness in meaningful and lasting ways.



Outcome 5.

Provide focussed professional learning that best supports preschool/school leaders and teachers in the core aspects of their role.

Nature Play SA's professional development is delivered in three formats: conferences, PD days with a set theme, and tailored PD days for staff teams. During this funding period, we have engaged over 860 public school educators across 20 professional development sessions.

Our professional development offerings have reflected our commitment to the Areas of Impact, focusing on themes such as connection and belonging, curiosity, student agency, resilience, and creativity.

- **Taking Risks for Wellbeing:** *National Conference*
- **Creating a Sense of Belonging and Agency Through Nature Play**
- **Play to Thrive:** *Exploring the intersection between mental health, education and play*
- **Go Beyond:** *Establishing a bush kindy*
- **Permission to Play:** *Making time for curiosity, connection and curriculum outdoors*

Professional Development	
20	PD's delivered
860	Educators engaged

“This workshop not only supported my understanding of the importance of nature in education, but has inspired me to want to make a change in early childhood education.”

- Early years educator



SAFE ENVIRONMENT UNSAFE BEHAVIOURS

Our young people are showing us that they are identifying a safe environment to do unsafe behaviours.

So what are schools doing with this in mind?



***Play to Thrive:** Over 100 educators and allied health professionals attended our Play to Thrive Workshop, where Matthew McCurry, Principal of Hospital Schools SA, highlighted the role of cross-sector collaboration in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.*

Outcome 5.



“At the Felixstow 3 Portfolio meeting today, Principals, Preschool Directors and Wellbeing leaders were inspired by the benefits of embracing risky play into our settings. We finished off an afternoon of development by experiencing the joy and benefits of cubby building — hands on. There was lots of problem solving, creativity, trial and error, collaboration and laughter as we created our own village.”

— Surrey Downs Kindergarten and Occasional Care

We have provided free, whole-school, site-specific professional development to Thriving Learners partner schools, tailored to their Areas of Impact focus. These sessions are evaluated through surveys that collect both qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness and relevance of pedagogy and practice.

For example, an early years educator who attended our *Go Beyond: Establishing a Bush Kindy* workshop said:

“The workshop beautifully captured the essence of connecting children to nature in a hands-on, meaningful way. It provided a perfect balance of practical ideas, insightful theory, and a deep understanding of how to foster children's creativity, curiosity, resilience, and problem-solving for young children, which could be incorporated into a variety of 'bush kinder' settings.”



Appendix



Appendix 1: The Wellbeing and Nature Play Tool Kit

Observational Tools	Author	Purpose	Context
Areas of Impact: Observational Story for Early Years Learning Framework Version 2.0 (Ob Story EY)	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	Observe and measure play, Areas of Impact, EYLF connections. Record children's voices and encourage reflective practice.	Early Years
Areas of Impact: Observational Story for Australian Curriculum Version 9 (Ob Story A.C) and SA Curriculum for Public Education	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	Observe and measure play, Areas of Impact, Australian Curriculum connections. Record children's voices and encourage reflective practice.	Primary and Secondary
Documenting the Areas of Impact in Nature Play Settings (DAI-NPS)	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	Record Areas of Impact. Simplified for use in one-off programs such as incursions and excursions.	Early Years Primary Secondary
Companion Guide: Areas of Impact in nature play settings.	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	Support the identification of Areas of Impact in nature play. For use with DAI_NPS, Ob Story EY, and Ob Story A.C.	Early Years Primary Secondary

Professional Development Tools	Author	Purpose	Context/ Population
The Barriers to Nature-based Play and Learning	NPSA: Based on research by Dr Nicole Miller	Discuss perceived barriers, provide supportive messaging.	Teachers and Educators during professional development with NPSA
Play History Exercise	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	Explores educator's own history and experience of play, and how these experiences may influence work with children.	Teachers and Educators during professional development with NPSA

Surveys, Questionnaires and Assessments	Author	Purpose	Population
Biophilia Interview	Rice & Torquati, (2013). *	Measure young children's connection to nature. Conducted pre and post program.	Early Years: 2 to 5 years old
Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale	Larson, Green, & Castleberry, (2011). *	Measure personal interest, and attitudes to nature in children 7 and up. Conducted pre and post program.	Primary to early Secondary: 6 to 13 years old
Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale	Schultz, (2002). *	Measure connection to nature for anyone 7+ years. Conducted Pre and post program.	Teachers and Educators Primary students 7+ years Secondary students 14+ years
Love and Care for Nature Scale	Perkins, (2010). *	Measure teacher, educator or adolescent's emotional relationship with nature. Conducted Pre and post program.	Teacher and Educator Or 14+ years secondary students
Well-Lit 6 in Nature	Moore, (2024)	Measure student's wellbeing literacy. Adapted from Well-Lit 6. Conducted Pre and post program.	Primary Years from Year 4 to 12.
Wellbeing Engagement Census (WEC)	Department for Education SA, (2024b).	Measure children's wellbeing	Department for Education students from Year 4 to 12..
Interpretations of Drawings	Heimlich, Parsons & Salazar, (2020).*	May be used to measure nature connection and wellbeing. Children's voices.	All ages. Conduct pre and post.
Journaling	Lee & Ardoin, (2020). *	May be used to measure nature connection and wellbeing. Children's voices.	All ages. Conduct pre and post.
Nature Play and Wellbeing Mind Map	Saunders/ NPSA, 2024.	May be used to observe the interrelatedness of nature and wellbeing.	DfE site community: students, staff, families.
Teacher confidence survey	NPSA	Used to measure teacher and educator confidence in using the Areas of Impact, and in engaging in nature play.	Teachers and Educators. Conduct pre and post.
Areas of Impact Action Cards & Process Guide	DfE	Action cards make the Area of Impact domains more meaningful by using examples and learner actions and experiences.	Pre and Post data for Upper Primary & High School



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