



Thriving Learners

Supporting Connection To Nature
with Findon Technical College

Overview

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

Findon Technical College's Early Childhood and Education pathway program (2025) supports 25 Year 10 to 12 students to complete their SACE and VET qualifications while gaining real-world early childhood experience. This Thriving Learners partnership was designed to engage year 10 students to increase their understanding of nature play and how it connects to wellbeing, both as learners and emerging educators. Throughout the program, several Year 11 and 12 students also chose to participate in sessions, showing genuine interest and commitment by giving up their own time to join in.

Today's learners, and the future workforce entering early childhood, often have a very different relationship with nature compared to previous generations. Many have grown up with fewer opportunities for unstructured outdoor play and longer periods indoors, which means their baseline connection to nature can be lower, not from a lack of interest but because their experiences have been different (Gill, 2014).

The focus of this partnership was not only on building technical skills for working with children outdoors but also on supporting emerging educators to rediscover curiosity, wonder, and a personal connection to nature. The project aimed to embed wellbeing practices that use nature to support resilience and regulation, foster belonging through shared outdoor experiences, build confidence in play-based, hands-on learning with natural materials, and encourage agency and creativity through co-designed activities and reflection.

In older adolescents, nature play has been shown to reduce symptoms and behaviours including worry, low self-esteem, social isolation, disengagement from school, and loss of hope (Gray, 2011; Tillmann et al., 2017). Play supports wellbeing by fostering problem-solving skills, autonomy, emotional regulation, and social connection. Emerging research also highlights that older adolescents benefit from playful learning, reporting greater engagement, stronger independence, and improved content recall when learning is hands-on, imaginative, and novel (Johnston et al., 2023).

Learners and staff at Findon Technical College participated in a full-day visit to Nature Play SA to set the scene for the project, followed by six immersive, experiential play sessions. These sessions informed a student-facilitated nature play program at Lockleys Precious Cargo, an employer partner of the school.



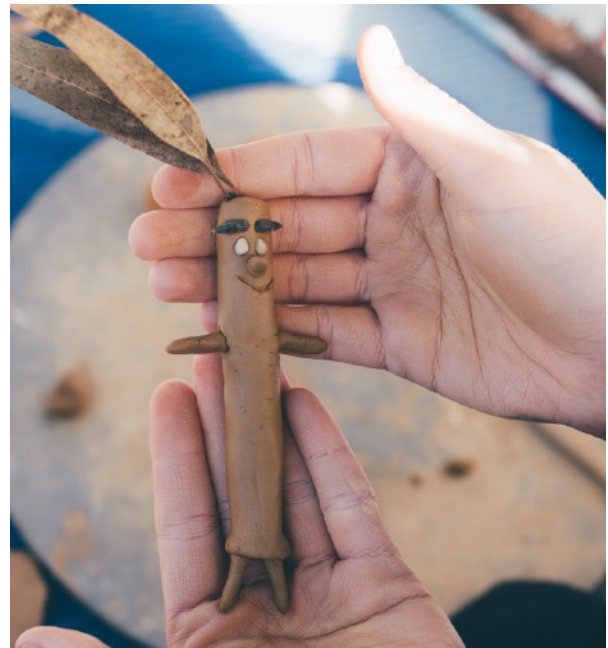
Assessments

The following assessments were used intentionally to inform the initial sessions of the program and respond to learners' needs and interests. Before the program began, students completed two baseline assessments to explore their environmental identity and connection to nature via early play memories.

The Environmental Identity (EID) Scale, developed by Clayton (2003) and revised for broader applicability, measures a person's connection to and interdependence with nature, including self-identification, pro-environmental attitudes, and positive emotions toward the environment.

Pre-data from the revised 14-item scale (below) showed that participants enjoyed and valued nature, particularly its beauty and restorative effects, and felt a sense of responsibility toward the environment. Scores were slightly lower for items reflecting a personal or identity-based connection to nature, suggesting that while participants appreciated and engaged with the natural world, their sense of being part of it was more moderate.

Participants' early memories of nature-based play ranged from beach days, tree climbing, muddy puddles, and hills walks to making cubby houses and mud pies. Many recalled sensory experiences like water, sand, mud, and rain, often linked with feelings of calm, fun, or adventure. A few described more structured or plastic playground settings, while some noted playing ball games in open fields. Together, these reflections show a mix of unstructured, imaginative outdoor play and social experiences with friends or siblings, with several participants identifying nature as a place of comfort or lasting positive association.



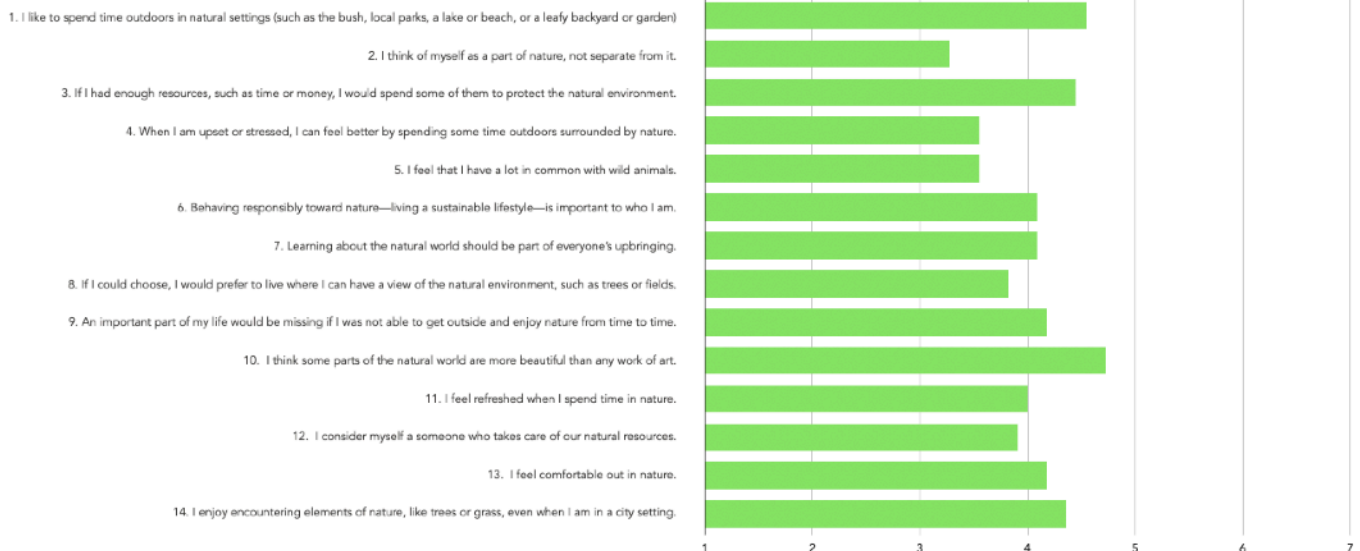
Creativity: Students use picture books as provocation to create clay creatures using natural materials foraged from the local environment.

Documenting Impact:

In addition to quantitative assessments, the program was documented using a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), incorporating a range of formal and informal tools to centre the voices of children and capture the diversity of learning throughout its duration. This approach allowed us to be adaptable, inclusive, creative, and responsive. We used the following informal and qualitative methods:

- Anecdotes
- Photography
- Samples of student portfolios
- Student and staff reflections

Revised Environmental Identity (EID) Scale - Pre Program





***Muddy Chef:** Students explore sensory play by creating a banquet with natural elements*

Rhythm of the Program

The opening session at Wittunga House focused on building relationships and exploring the future direction of the program based on student interests and skills. Students and staff connected with nature through a welcome around the fire pit, an Acknowledgement of Country, and a Wonder Walk through the Wittunga Botanic Gardens. They then explored play spaces, genres, and experiential learning through playground audits, small and large loose parts challenges, and sensory activities such as Muddy Chef, concluding with reflection and a farewell.

The partnership was designed to conclude with a student-facilitated nature play session at a local early learning centre partner. Over six weeks, students engaged in a range of play experiences that built their knowledge and confidence in supporting nature play with children. The sessions focused on:

- **Risky Play:** Whittling
- **Construction and Collection:** Loose Parts Play
- **Mindful Play:** Weaving and Nature Tables
- **Risky Play:** Fire and Damper
- **Creative Play:** Making Paint from Natural Pigments

Throughout the program, students engaged in guided reflections after each session, exploring what they had done, what they enjoyed, and how the experiences might support children's learning and wellbeing. These reflections revealed emerging thinking about play, safety, and developmental outcomes.

“I really enjoyed the experience with Nature Play, especially the fire making activity. It was exciting to learn how to safely build and manage a fire, and I could see how much the children were engaged and curious throughout the process. The activity helped build their confidence, teamwork, and understanding of safety in a hands-on way.

For me as an educator, it was a great opportunity to support risk-taking in a controlled environment and to see how nature play can spark learning and connection. It also made me feel more confident in planning outdoor experiences that are both meaningful and fun.”

Reflection, Kirstie



“After finding out about nature play, I learned that teaching through nature is very beneficial to children’s mental and physical wellbeing, and it can help develop their cognitive skills a lot.”

- Reflection, Louise

Portfolio Reflection: Annalise

In the final session at Precious Cargo Lockleys, Annalise facilitated a potion-making activity, drawing on her own experiences and observations from previous nature play sessions. She noted that the activity supported children’s wellbeing by allowing them choice and agency in their play. It engaged multiple developmental areas, including creativity and imagination, early science skills, physical coordination, sensory exploration, social and emotional growth, and language development.

Annalise also demonstrated emerging pedagogical awareness through planning and implementing safety measures and preparing appropriate materials for the activity. As Annalise reflected:

“This activity helped build creativity and imagination as children experimented with their own mixtures, while also developing early science skills by exploring cause and effect. Physical skills were strengthened through actions like scooping, pouring, and stirring, and their senses were engaged through the different textures, smells, and sounds of nature. Social and emotional growth was encouraged as children worked together, shared ideas, and expressed themselves through play. At the same time, their language skills expanded as they described their potions and explained their ideas, and they developed a stronger awareness and connection to the natural environment.”

The Centre Director also reflected on the experience and its impact on both the learners and the centre staff:

“The visit from Findon Technical College students, alongside Nature Play SA, was such a beautiful experience for our centre. The students brought a calm and thoughtful presence, patiently supporting the children as they built confidence to explore the nature play stations. It was heartwarming to see them use gentle, inviting language and open-ended questions to guide the children’s play and discovery. As the morning unfolded, each child became deeply engaged in their own way. It was wonderful to watch the entire group exploring, creating, and problem-solving with curiosity and joy.

For our educators, it was just as inspiring. Being part of the experience helped us reconnect with the simplicity and richness of loose parts and nature play, and sparked ideas we’re excited to bring back into our own learning environment. We’re truly grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with these future educators and with Nature Play SA.”

– Tarni Veen, Centre Director





Outcomes and Post-Program Results:

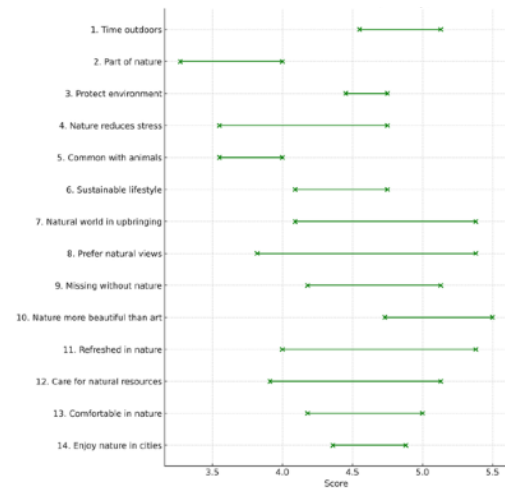
The EID pre- and post-data (below) suggest that the Thriving Learners program strengthened students' connection to nature and supported the development of values and dispositions that are important for their future roles as educators.

Today's learners, and the future workforce entering early childhood education, often have a different relationship with nature compared to previous generations. Many have had fewer opportunities for unstructured outdoor play and more time indoors, which helps explain the moderate baseline scores. The increases in items such as feeling part of nature (3.27 to 4.00), comfort outdoors (4.18 to 5.00), and enjoyment of natural elements in urban settings (4.36 to 4.88) show that the program supported students to rediscover curiosity, wonder, and a personal connection to the natural world. This aligns with the partnership's intent to foster wellbeing practices, a sense of belonging, and confidence in play-based, hands-on learning with natural materials.

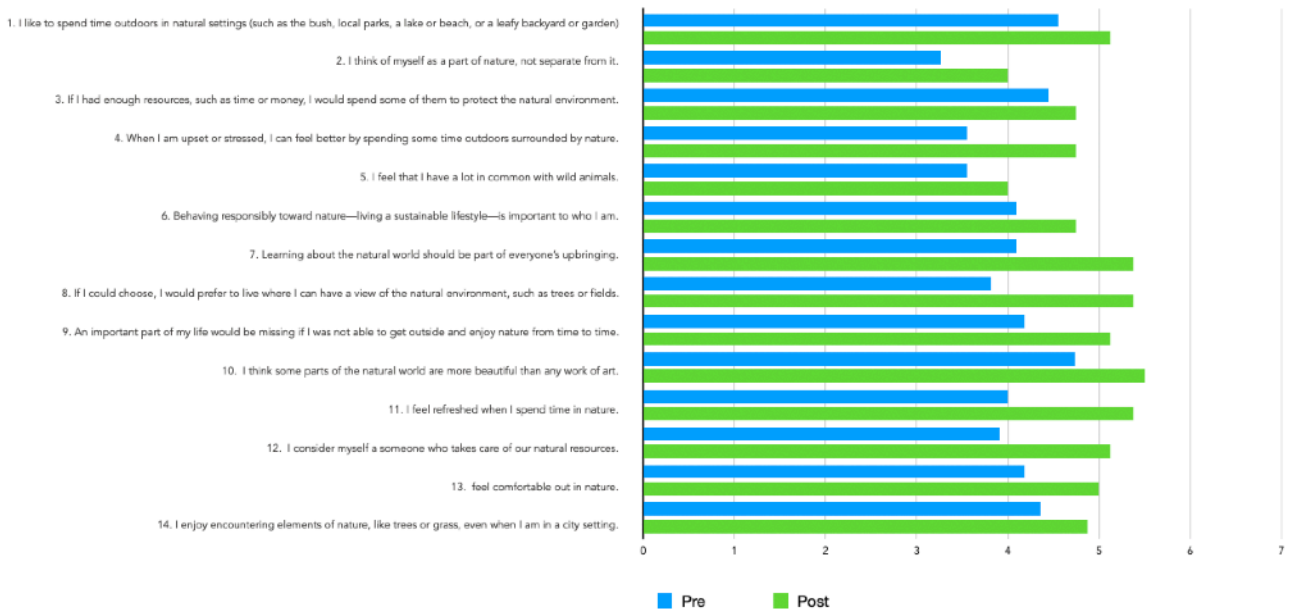
The ladder plot (right) shows a consistent upward shift across all areas of environmental identity, suggesting that students deepened their enjoyment of

nature and strengthened their sense of belonging, comfort, and wellbeing outdoors. The largest gains were in the restorative benefits of nature and in valuing natural spaces, which is significant given their limited earlier experiences. For emerging educators, this growing connection matters. It shapes how they notice, plan, and engage with children in nature and positions them to model curiosity, care, and confidence in outdoor learning environments.

Environmental Identity Scale (EID) Growth (Ladder Plot)



Revised Environmental Identity (EID) Scale - Post Program



Summary

This Thriving Learners partnership gave Findon Technical College students hands-on experience in nature-based play, boosting wellbeing, curiosity, and confidence in outdoor learning. Across immersive sessions and reflections, students strengthened their connection to nature and developed skills to support children's play and learning. Post-program assessments showed growth in environmental identity, comfort outdoors, and enjoyment of natural spaces. The experience fostered belonging, resilience, and emerging pedagogical awareness that students can carry into their future roles as educators.

Trainer Reflection

“Nature Play SA provided our early education students at Findon Technical College with a series of fun, hands-on and engaging nature-based learning experiences. This provided our students with the opportunity to increase their understanding of nature play and how it connects to wellbeing. The students were able to build their knowledge of the different types of nature play and the resources they could use to set up nature play learning experiences for young children, and you could see that by the end of the program they had built confidence in this area as educators. They were also able to experience the benefits of nature play for themselves as learners, learning about nature in nature and how this impacted their wellbeing.”

As the trainer for the Early Education and Teaching program, I have also benefited from being involved in the program with the students. I have developed a better understanding of the different types of nature-based learning experiences and resources for my teaching 'toolkit' so that I am much better equipped to deliver nature play programs to students next year and beyond. We will now be able to expand our teaching and resources on nature play to support the learning for our students in this area.

Being outdoors in nature for the duration of the program supported our students wellbeing in a holistic way; their positive engagement with the learning experiences and the opportunity to be out in the fresh air even in the middle of winter was a physical and mental boost for them, as they are often inside our building for most of the day.”

– Naomi Dingle, Early Childhood & Education Trainer

The partnership with Findon Technical College was so successful that three Year 12 students who had attended the sessions out of personal interest were invited to join the Nature Play SA team as Junior Casual Education Staff. These enthusiastic and highly skilled emerging educators demonstrated they were career-ready and joined the organisation in time for the annual Muddy Hands Festival, which engages thousands of families from across South Australia.



“When I attended the Nature Play sessions, I was immediately drawn to how it combined my appreciation for nature with my passion for early childhood education.” - Reflection, Hana.

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