

CASE STUDY 7

Transitioning from Structured Play to Unstructured Nature Play

OSHC:Payne Road OSHC
Contact: Susie Berkhut
Location:The Gap
Age of Children: 5 to 12 years
Number of Children Involved:
 170 registered kids / Up to 80 per day
Nature Play QLD Involvement:.....
 Nature Play Passports, Licence to Play Outdoors,
 Nature Play QLD Forums, Nature Play QLD
 Symposium



Payne Road Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) meets national best practice for outside school hours care, and Nature Play QLD has helped them do this.

Centre Coordinator Susie Berkhut says, "Being aligned with Nature Play QLD and having access to the evidence and resources they have produced has made my job so much easier. It has also given me a wider understanding for explaining our purpose for how we operate at our service."

Ms Berkhut says that Payne Road OSHC used to be "quite prescriptive about what children were allowed to do when they were in care, and we were very much in line with long daycare."

Over the years, Ms Berkhut and fellow staff have worked hard to change this culture, and have utilised – and even helped develop – some of the Nature Play QLD's resources.



Nature Play Resource: Licence To Play outdoors

"We started using the passports right at the beginning. We did that for the first couple of years, and we reintroduce it every now and again over holidays. It was really a great way to introduce the children to finding things to do outside," says Ms. Berkhut.

"The children were a bit lost in the beginning, because it hadn't been allowed here before," she says, "but it widened our knowledge base around what we could do and how it could look".

"The kids got very excited. They decorated their own pages, and would go and do one mission after another after another, which meant they spent lots of time outside, and it was a big turn around for how play looked here," she adds.



Nature Play Resource: Licence

The Nature Play QLD Licence to Play was developed in consultation with Ms Berkhut as a way to better integrate the Passports into a learning facility. Ms Berkhut says this resource has helped evolve their practice into what it is today.

"It made children a lot more creative in their thinking," says Ms Berkhut, adding that "the passports were good because it gave us some clear things the children could do, but the licences were the next step which allowed children to think for themselves."

"Nature Play gives parents that evidence and that backing for why they're letting their kids run wild, and not do structured things. That's my opinion of what needs to be pushed, because parents need that."



Benefits For Children

The shift to a more unstructured nature play setting at Payne Road OSHC has brought with it many benefits for the children, including improved behaviour, increased independence and self-awareness, and a shift in the service's culture.

Improved Behaviour

"Some of the really clear outcomes that have come from nature play, for me, have been a very big reduction in behavioural issues," says Ms Berkhut.

"I can't remember the last time we put a child in timeout as such. We use lots of redirection, and I don't hear 'I'm bored' much anymore. And if we do hear that, we've also been given the tools to deal with that through nature play. All those articles about how being bored is really good – we use all of those things," she says.

Self-Awareness

Whilst Ms Berkhut rarely hears children say they are bored anymore, when they do, she uses it as an opportunity to teach them that "it's okay to sit and do nothing, and be bored."

"I love when a child comes to me and he's bored, and I say 'That's great! There's a really nice shady tree over there. Sit down, take some deep breaths, be bored and I'm sure you'll come up with some good ideas of what you want to do next,'" she says.

Breeding Independence

The staff at Payne Road OSHC have worked on building trust with the kids, even allowing them into play spaces where they could not be seen by the staff.

"Kids are allowed to be kids without someone hovering over them all the time," says Ms Berkhut.

"Over time, we found areas that are close by where we can see them, and allow children into those areas where there wasn't a staff member standing on top of them continuously, and our staff were very much upskilled in what active supervision looked like," she says.

Changing Family Culture

"I'd have to say that the confidence building nature play has given parents is one of the biggest assets that nature play has had within our community. It's talked about constantly; they talk about letting their children do that; they use that language, the whole nature play language, and they understand all of that," says Ms Berkhut.

"They really have the best intentions for their children, and I just think that they need to be given that confidence again. Nature play gives parents that evidence and that backing for why they're letting their kids run wild and not do structured things," she says.



Benefits For Ms Berkhut

"Having Nature Play behind me – and I'd be really sad if it wasn't there – has given me a lot more confidence. It's a really important thing for us to be able to say that we are behind this issue, and for good reason, and this is the research that they've found, this is what they're doing and look at the results," says Ms Berkhut.

"Now I'm very confident in getting up and saying in front of parents, 'Don't expect your kids to come home with any art projects. They purely come to us to be part of the village that raises your child and to have access to fun activities,'" she says.

Moving Forward

"I think within three years, the message has got out there really well, but I think some of it needs to be more shock material. I think they're really powerful messages that people need to hear," says Ms Berkhut.

"I think parents need to hear harsh realities of what helicopter parenting does – we really tiptoe around a lot," she says.

"The number of kids that are having to see Occupational Therapists, and early onset of Osteoporosis because they're not doing any outdoor hanging stuff anymore. We need parents to ask themselves what sort of things are their kids going to be allowed to do in their life, and how are they going to be able to be risk averse if we don't allow them to mitigate risk now."

