



## Acknowledgement Of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, learn and play. We thank them for sharing their culture and knowledge through stories, language, art and song. We recognise the important role they have played for thousands of years and continue to play in caring for the land and waterways. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging.

## Partners

This survey report is a collaborative initiative of The Kids In Nature Network in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network, Manningham City Council, Parks Victoria, the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria and Westgarth Bush Kinder.



## Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who have participated in the survey.

For more information, visit [www.kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au](http://www.kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au) or email [info@kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au](mailto:info@kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au)

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### This initiative is supported by



**Cover illustration:** word cloud based on descriptions of outdoor nature-based activities for children provided by survey respondents

**Cover photos credits:** Hayley Black (UL), Christina Renowden (LL), Anna Francis (UR), Danielle Bain (LR)

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## Executive Summary

Active and self-directed play in nature and the outdoors is essential for healthy development, physical health, mental health and wellbeing for children.

This report identifies a growing and unmet demand for nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder programs in Victoria, Australia.

Our survey of 446 respondents included 330 respondents currently offering nature play, bush kinder and outdoor learning programs in Victoria and 116 respondents who are interested in offering such programs. Enabling the latter group and addressing their significant barriers and challenges could directly increase programs and participation rates by at least 25%. The report identifies key barriers and areas in need of support facing both groups of respondents.

Participation in nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder in Victoria is low, with 3.4% of kids aged 0-5 participating and 8.6% of kids aged 6-11 participating in programs, but the potential to grow is significant.

In current programs offered, the access and inclusion of children with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, CALD backgrounds, kids with a disability and kids with disadvantaged backgrounds is high. However, there is inequity in the distribution of programs and availability of opportunities for children to participate in nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder across Victoria. The vast majority of programs (over 95% of programs) operate in the Greater Melbourne Region, with 90% of programs delivered in Eastern Melbourne. By investing in key geographical areas, the opportunities for kids currently not participating can be increased.

In areas where programs are up and running, they offer significant opportunity for job creation, volunteering and training. The majority of programs in Victoria have been running between one to five years (45%), with a strong indication that the sector is rapidly growing: 28% of programs have only been running for one year or less.

A strong and sustainable sector will deliver proven health and wellbeing benefits for children and families and improves education outcomes. It offers valuable pathways for including Indigenous and CALD communities, vulnerable and at-risk children; and facilitates connection of children and their parents and educators with nature to support biodiversity protection and restoration goals.

# About this Report

## The Project

- Map the Kids In Nature movement in Victoria
- Identify what, where, how best support?
- Collaboration between seven organisations
- Overseen by a steering group
- Managed by Kids In Nature Network
- Executed by a research consultant
- Financially supported by DHHS

## Methods

- Online survey – Survey Monkey
- 40 questions, 30 minutes
- Questions about organisations, what, where, barriers, needs
- Multiple choice and open questions
- Distributed by email and social media networks of all partners
- Survey open between 14 Oct and 14 Nov 2016

## The Survey

In November 2016, Kids In Nature Network and partner organisations conducted a state-wide survey of nature play, bush kinder and outdoor learning providers and initiatives in Victoria.

We posed the following research questions:

- 1. What nature play, bush kinder and outdoor learning and programs are currently available in Victoria? (who is out there and what are they doing?)**
- 2. What are the key enablers and barriers for existing programs, and for new programs?**
- 3. How can these groups be better assisted to achieve their goals?**

The survey identified the broad range of programs that are currently offered across Victoria for children 0-11 years old. It also provided a deeper understanding of the obstacles, enablers and support needed to successfully establish and deliver these programs.

## Dataset

This report is based on the following dataset: Kids In Nature Network (2018), The State of Nature Play, Outdoor Learning and Bush Kinder in Victoria. Full data set, November 2018.

This is the most comprehensive dataset gathered on the sector in Victoria to date. Data supporting this report are available upon request for research purposes. For more information, visit: [www.kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au](http://www.kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au) or email [info@kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au](mailto:info@kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au)



Photo: Anna Francis



Photo: Christina Renowden

**446**  
survey  
respondents



**330**

offer nature play  
activities in Victoria



**116**

do not currently  
offer nature play activities



**393**  
separate  
organisations



**1,456**

nature play, bush kinder  
and outdoor learning  
programs offered per year

**20,324**

activities per year



**15,249**

Kids participated

**3.4%** of Victorian kids (aged 0-5)



**7,529**  
girls (aged 0-5)  
participated



**7,720**  
boys (aged 0-5)  
participated



**50,716**

Kids participated

**8.6%** of Victorian kids (aged 6-11)



**24,972**  
girls (aged 6-11)  
participated



**25,744**  
boys (aged 6-11)  
participated



Photo: Christina Renowden



Photo: Emily Barrow

# The Benefits of Nature Play and Active Outdoor Learning

Access to active and self-directed play in nature and the outdoors is essential for healthy child development, physical health, mental health and wellbeing. Recent systematic reviews of the scientific literature (Brussoni et al. 2015, Gray et al. 2015), a comprehensive expert position statement from Canada on active outdoor play (Tremblay et al. 2015) and the online library of the Children & Nature Network (USA) present an extensive, international scientific evidence base.

When children are outside, they move more, sit less and play longer. These behaviours are associated with improved physical and mental health and improved cognitive and social skills. Children are more curious about and interested in natural play spaces than pre-fabricated play structures. Children who engage in active outdoor play in natural environments demonstrate resilience, self-regulation and develop skills for dealing with stress later in life.

Outdoor play in minimally structured, free and accessible local environments facilitates socialisation and connection with peers, the community and the environment, reduces feelings of isolation, builds interpersonal skills and facilitates healthy development.

The benefits of being active in nature are acknowledged in the recently released Victorian Memorandum for Health and Nature released by the Victorian Government in April 2017. This document states: “Victoria’s parks and other open spaces provide critical settings that enhance our wellbeing and liveability by providing places for physical exercise, relaxation, play, learning and discovery. We know that being in nature enriches our minds and bodies, making us feel energised and alive.”

These benefits are also recognized in the Government’s key health and environment platforms: The Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019 and in Protecting Victoria’s Environment - Biodiversity 2037. The importance of outdoor learning for young children is also highlighted in The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the National Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. The importance of active outdoor play is also highlighted in Active Victoria.



Photo: Hayley Black

Photo: Dimity Williams



Photo: Tania Moloney



## Healthy Kids?

A collaborative and coordinated approach is required to counter alarming health trends in young people. Sedentary, urban lifestyles and the loss and degradation of nature, however, are making kids and young people sick. Too many Australian children are not doing enough physical activity to maintain good health. Over 70% of Australia's children and 91% of young people are not meeting the national physical activity recommendation of sixty minutes of physical activity every day (Tolhurst et al. 2016, Duggan et al. 2018).

In 2014–15, just over a quarter (27%) of children and adolescents aged 5–17 were overweight or obese (ABS 2015, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017). Of children aged 2–4, 1 in 5 (20%) were overweight or obese, with similar proportions of boys (7%) and girls (9%) in that age group being obese (ABS 2015). In Victoria alone, 324,500 children (28.6%) are overweight or obese (ABS 2015). Mental health statistics in Victoria show equally concerning trends.

## Healthy Nature?

At the same time, Australia has experienced the largest documented decline in biodiversity of any continent over the past 200 years (ABS 2010), and Victoria is no exception.

Biodiversity decline is the loss of variety in living systems: a simplification of nature. As the Victorian Memorandum for Health and Nature notes: “there is a strong connection between the health of the natural environment and human wellbeing.”

As a society and as individuals, we are poorer when we lose our connection with nature. A rich natural environment contributes to the emotional and spiritual well-being of individuals and communities; it is the life-blood that sustains rural and coastal communities; and it is fundamental to Indigenous people (ABS 2010).

Beyond physical and emotional health, nature experiences offer unique opportunities for children to experience moments of transcendence, amazement and wonder (Bezaire 2007).



Photo: Hlif Savage

## A Healthy Future

Nature play, bush kinder and outdoor learning programs for kids provide pathways to help counter alarming health and nature statistics. As demonstrated by the survey results presented in this report, these programs are part of a fast-growing, broad-based movement in Victoria, with leaders from many sectors and backgrounds. This report provides a snapshot overview of the “kids in nature sector’s” work, explores opportunities and provides recommendations for action.



Photo: Megan Njoroge

# Key Findings

## Barriers, Enablers and Opportunities for Support

### Support needed for new programs

Respondents currently not offering programs overwhelmingly requested support in all areas. All areas were selected as important (92% to 100% of respondents) with at least 63% of respondents saying that each area was very important. In particular, respondents need support with information on how to set up a nature play program, or ideas for activities. They also request assistance with capacity issues (skills, time, staff) to start a program and finding a suitable green space, assistance managing potential risks and safety issues and access to transport, permits and equipment. Lastly, they request funding support and assistance with building support in their community or organisation and assistance in finding peer support networks and relevant contacts.

### Respondents requesting support for new programs

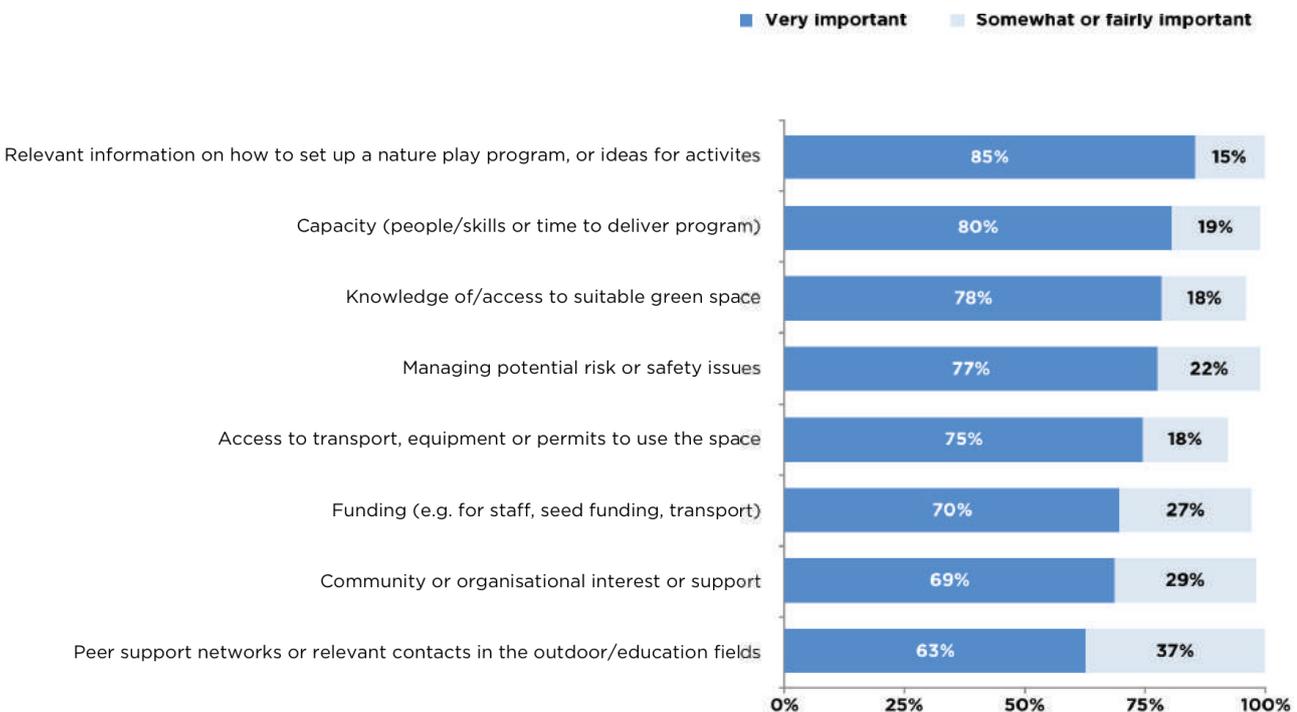


Photo: Hayley Black

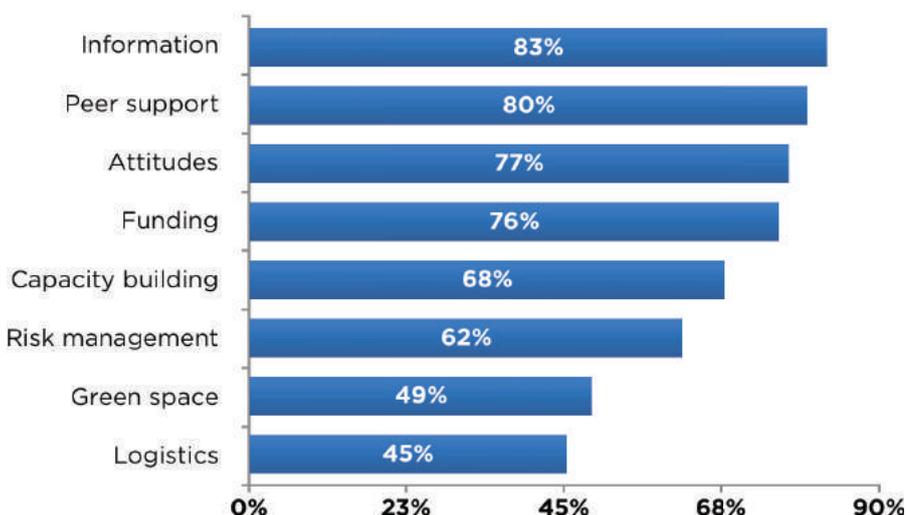


Photo: Emily Barrow

## Support needed for existing programs

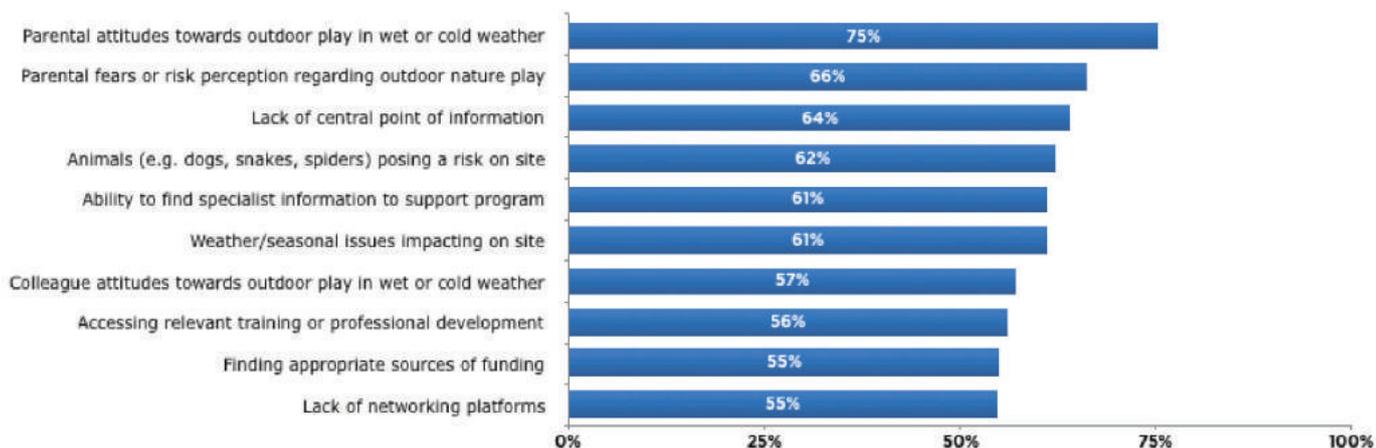
Organisers of existing programs were asked if they needed support for the following eight categories of barriers - yes or no. Support is clearly requested across all categories, especially access to information (83% of respondents needing support), peer support (80%), attitudes (77%), funding (76%), capacity building (68%) and risk management (62%). These categories were all identified by over 50% of respondents as needing support. Green space and logistics are also identified as barrier categories needing support for over 40% of the respondents.

### Respondents requesting support for existing programs



## Top 10 barriers for existing programs

The following table highlights top 10 barriers identified by 50% or more respondents currently offering nature play or outdoor learning in Victoria.



## Overview Of All Barriers For Existing Programs

The following table shows the full overview of identified barriers for existing nature play and outdoor learning programs in Victoria. All items that were identified by 50% or more respondents as a barrier are shaded in red and ranked. As is shown, key barriers are identified across all categories, but especially peer support and risk management.

	<b>Specific barrier</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No or NA</b>	<b>Priority</b>
<b>Barrier category</b>				
<b>Attitudes</b>	Parental attitudes towards outdoor play for children in wet or cold weather	75%	25%	1
	Educator or professional colleague attitudes towards outdoor play for children in wet or cold weather	57%	43%	7
	Lack of support for nature play in formal learning/educational curriculums	46%	54%	
	Attitudes towards nature play amongst parents/community	40%	60%	
	Attitudes towards nature play amongst professional colleagues	39%	61%	
	Engagement with Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander communities	35%	66%	
	Engagement with linguistically or culturally diverse communities	31%	69%	
	Lack of participation in the program or activity	30%	70%	
	Engagement with disabled community members	29%	71%	
<b>Information</b>	Information on outdoor learning in formal learning/educational curriculums	54%	46%	12
	Lack of documented examples of nature play programs or activities	53%	47%	13
	Difficulty finding where other programs are located	48%	52%	
	Lack of information on how to set up or establish a nature play program	42%	58%	
	Information and ideas on suitable nature play activities	40%	60%	
<b>Peer support</b>	Lack of central point of information	64%	36%	3
	Ability to find specialist information to support program	61%	39%	5
	Lack of networking platforms	55%	45%	10
	Lack of support for outdoor learning in formal learning/educational curriculums	55%	45%	11
	Lack of peer support in my local area	53%	47%	15
	Ability to contact land owners/managers	41%	59%	
<b>Funding</b>	Finding appropriate sources of funding (e.g. from grants or for special activities)	55%	45%	9
	Funding for staff (e.g. additional staff to run program)	48%	52%	
	Getting financial support to set up (establish) the activity/program	47%	53%	

	Funding for staff/facilitator training	46%	54%	
	Funding for transport to/from site	32%	68%	
<b>Green space</b>	Access to or lack of site facilities (such as toilets, baby change rooms, parking, walking paths)	51%	49%	16
	Knowledge about what places might be suitable for nature play	33%	67%	
	Knowing who to contact to get permission to use the green space	33%	67%	
	Finding a suitable green space locally	30%	70%	
	Locked areas or specific opening times on site	16%	84%	
<b>Logistics</b>	Weather/seasonal issues impacting on site	61%	39%	6
	Providing appropriate equipment (e.g. wet weather gear)	50%	50%	18
	Lack of public transport to/from location	32%	68%	
	Arranging transport (e.g. bus hire) to/from location	28%	72%	
	Negotiating with land owners or managers (e.g. council, park manager or private landowner)	24%	76%	
<b>Capacity</b>	Accessing relevant training or professional development programs	56%	44%	8
	Finding people with the right skills or training to deliver the activity	46%	54%	
	Having enough time (e.g. within a set program) to delivery the activity	42%	58%	
	Finding enough people (staff or volunteers) to run the program/activity	40%	60%	
<b>Risk management</b>	Parental fears or risk perception regarding outdoor nature play	66%	34%	2
	Animals (e.g. dogs, snakes, spiders) posing a risk on site	62%	38%	4
	Understanding and managing risk and/or safety issues around nature play	53%	47%	14
	Educator fears or risk perception regarding outdoor nature play	51%	49%	17
	Unsafe or unclean outdoor areas (e.g. cigarette butts, broken glass, needles, rubbish)	49%	51%	
	Risky play (e.g. injuries from falling)	44%	56%	
	Insurance or liability issues	24%	76%	
	Parental ability to easily contact children (e.g. mobile phone access)	16%	84%	

## Industry Sectors

The majority of respondents represented the education and training sector (41%) and child care services (39%).

Within education and training organisations, 85% (153) was represented by preschool. Within childcare services, 85% was represented by child care centres. Within interest groups, 68% was represented by play groups. Within government administration organisations, 87% of respondents (20) were from local government and 13%(3) from state government.

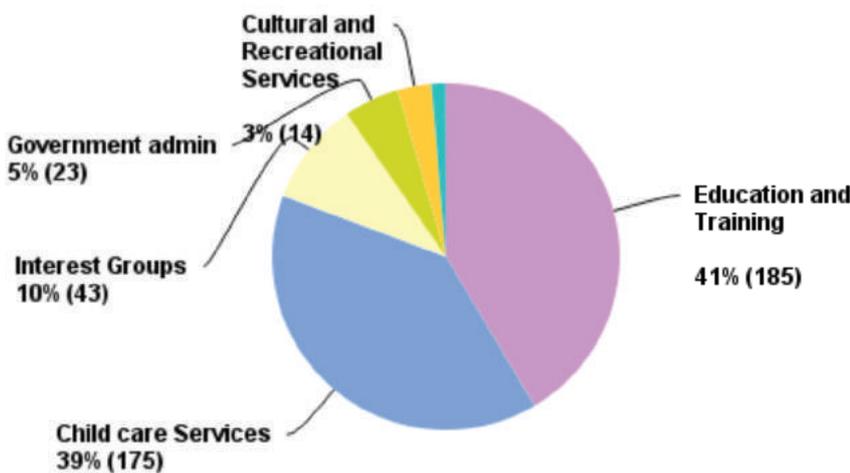
Within cultural and recreational services, 31% (4) was represented by nature reserves and conservation parks.

In total, 75% of all survey respondents represented early childhood organisations catering for 0-6 year olds: pre-school/kindergartens, childcare services (long day care, childcare centres, family daycare) and playgroups.



Photo: Dimity Williams

## Industry sectors represented by survey respondents

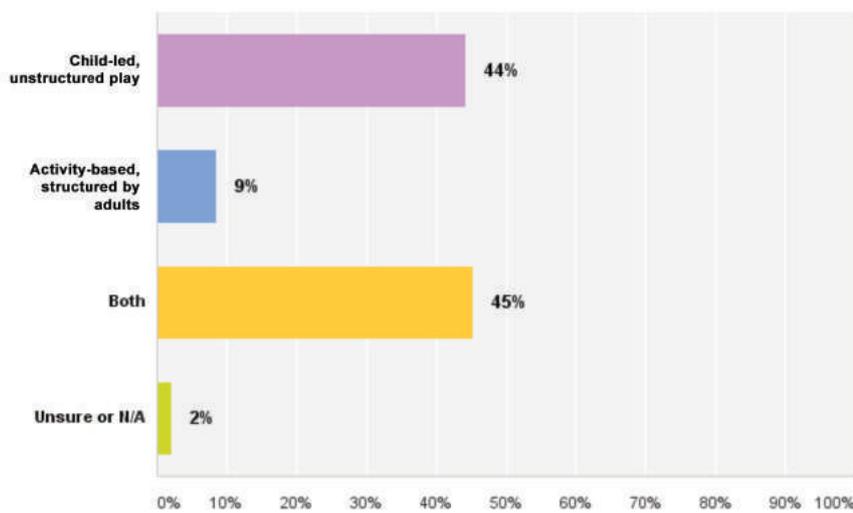


## Organisational Funding Model and Reporting

The majority of respondents represented not for profit organisations (60%), followed by Government service delivery organisations (19%), commercial, for-profit businesses (18%) and membership organizations (2%).

79% of respondents said that their work was administered by a government organisation. Of these, 80% report to the Victorian Department of Education and Training (275), 19% (66) of respondents report to local government, 14% (47) report to the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, 6% report directly to the Federal Government and 3% (10) to the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

## Types of Programs Offered

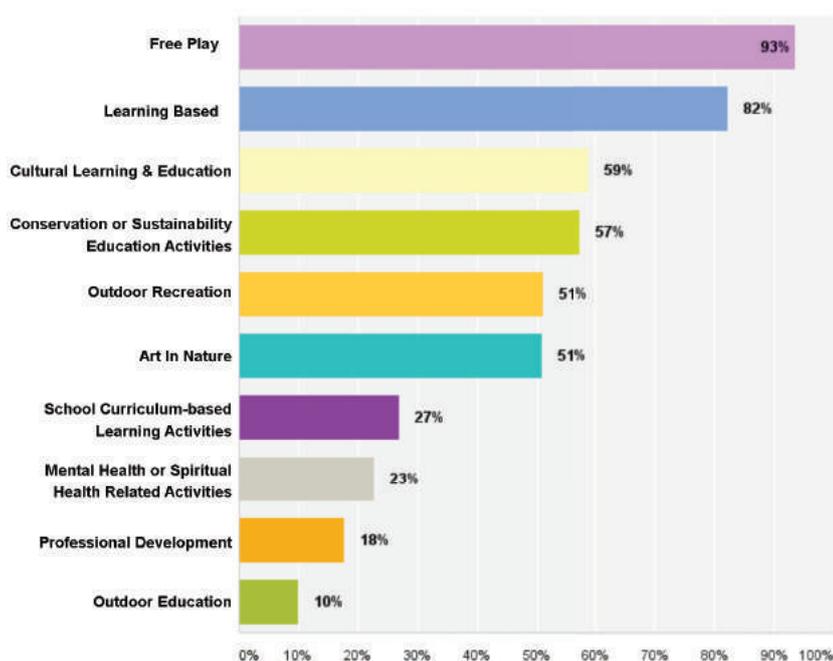


Most nature play programs being offered tend to be either child-led, unstructured play, or a blend of free play and activity-based programs structured by adults. A few respondents elaborated that they offered a mix of semi-structured and unstructured activities where teachers or experts supported child-led play. Opportunistic “spontaneous teaching moments” would arise from play initiated or led by the child, and depending on the goals of the program, adults would facilitate the child expanding their play.

## Nature of programs/activities offered

In terms of the kinds of outdoor ‘green space’ activities provided, respondents could choose as many categories as applied. Examples of activities listed as choices in the survey ranged from free play in parks and bushland; adult-guided walks, bird watching, habitat restoration, swimming, running and other non-competitive outdoor recreations; art and music in nature; school curriculum-based learning experiences; mental and spiritual health activities; and scout and school camps.

Given the profile of respondents (early childhood sector), results accord with expected outcomes being primarily a mixture of free play and learning based nature activities. Cultural education, for example connecting with Country, also had a strong response, followed by conservation and /or sustainability education, outdoor recreation and art in nature.



**Free Play:** (child-led, unstructured activities) e.g. free play in nature, child-led walks, cubby building etc.

**Learning Based:** (educational, adult-led) e.g. adult guided walks, gardening, wildlife watching

**Cultural Learning & Education:** e.g. Connecting with Country

**Conservation or Sustainability Education Activities:** e.g. citizen science/wildlife surveys, nature protection, habitat restoration, tree planting, community nature projects, identifying wildlife/plants

**Outdoor Recreation:** e.g. physical activities undertaken in open, outdoor spaces rather than competition (games set in nature, bushwalking, running, bike riding)

**Art In Nature:** e.g. outdoor photography, painting, music

**School Curriculum-based Learning Activities with exposure to natural environments** e.g. natural biology/math/nature field trips

**Mental Health or Spiritual Health Related Activities:** e.g. meditation, yoga, spiritual or religious practice

**Professional Development or Training for Adults**

**Outdoor Education:** e.g. school camp, scouts, YMCA

# Locations

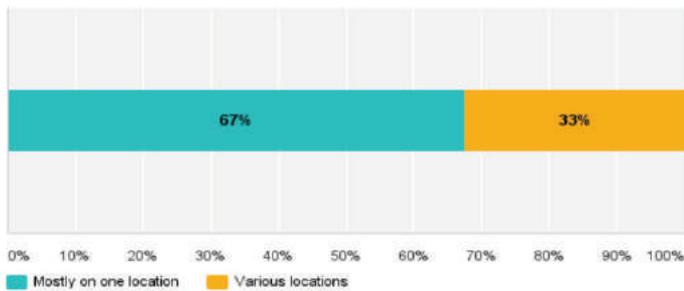
Most organised outdoor nature play activities are situated primarily in one location (67%, 195 organisations); where one third (32%) takes place in local council parks and reserves, another third (32%) in situ on childcare centre or school grounds, 15% of activities occur on Parks Victoria land, and the remainder on privately owned land (8%), in botanical gardens and zoos (7%) or on other public land, for example the beach (6%).

These findings have significant implications for the custodians and managers of green spaces used for children’s play activities, and also warrants greater attention being paid to the kinds of landscaping and facilities available at most childcare centres, kindergartens and schools as the main site of many children’s exposure to nature play on a regular basis.

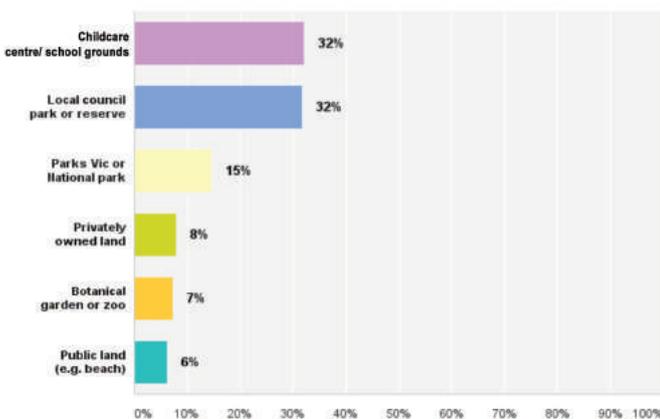


Photo: Anna Francis

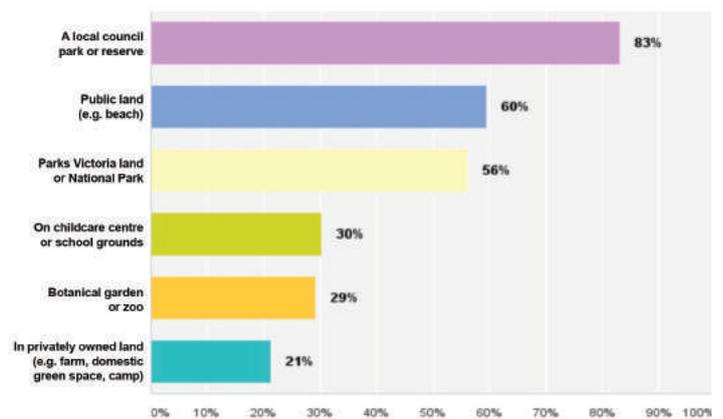
## Locations for nature play programs



## Groups accessing one location for nature play activities



## Groups accessing multiple locations for nature play activities

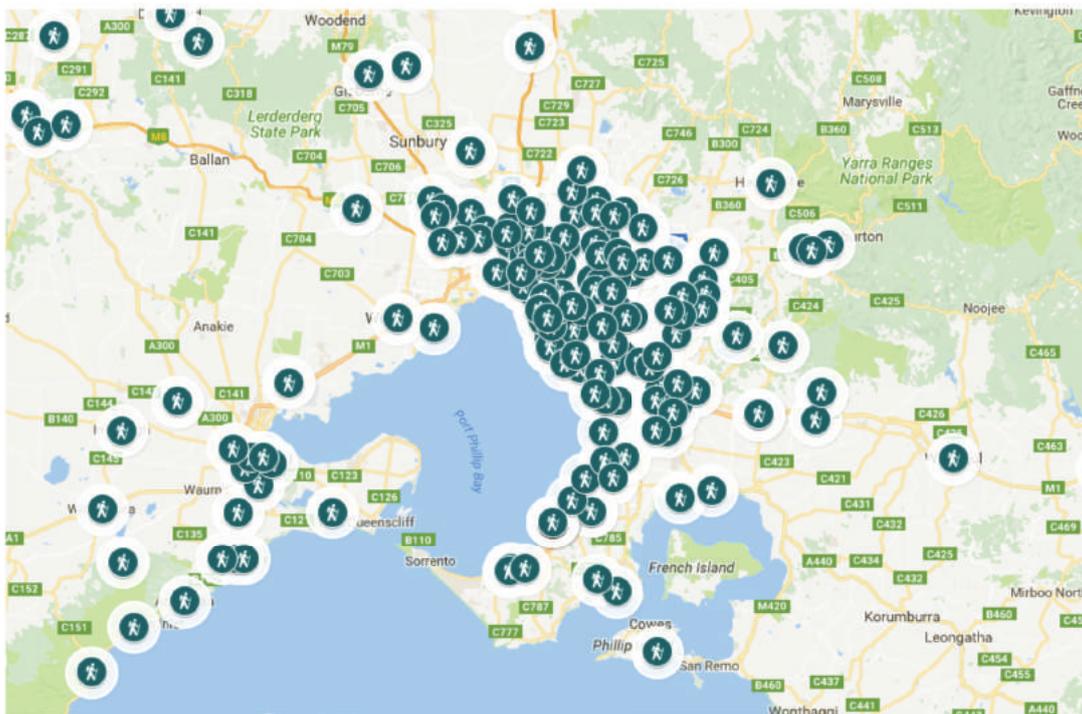


For groups that regularly access multiple locations, local council managed parks and reserves are also the number one location type used for children’s nature play activities (83%), followed by other public land such as beaches (60%) and land managed by Parks Victoria (56%).

## Locations used for nature play activities in Victoria by suburb



## Locations used for nature play activities in Greater Melbourne by suburb

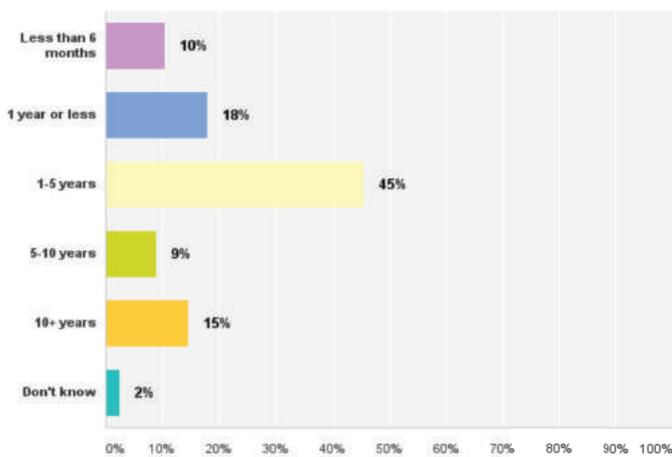


## Details on the Programs

The majority of children's nature play programs in Victoria have been running from between one to five years (45% or 131 respondents). There is a strong indication that the movement is growing rapidly, as 28% of programs have only been running for a year or less (18% established for a year or less, plus 10% running for less than 6 months).

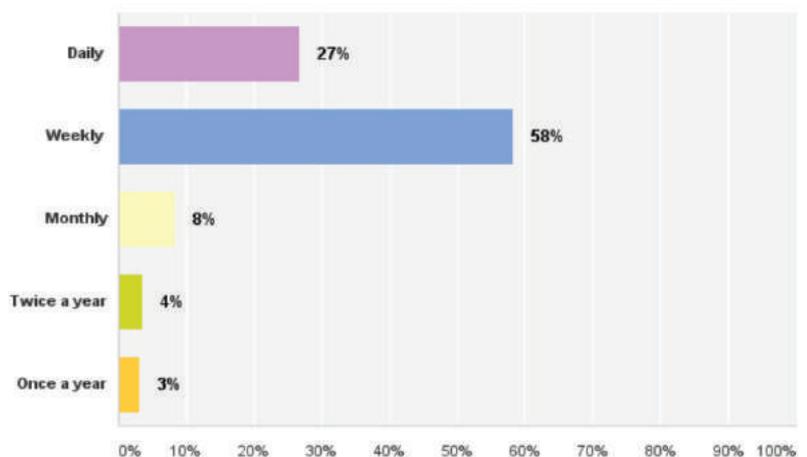
Most programs or activities are held weekly (58%), with almost a third (27%) held daily.

### Age of programs



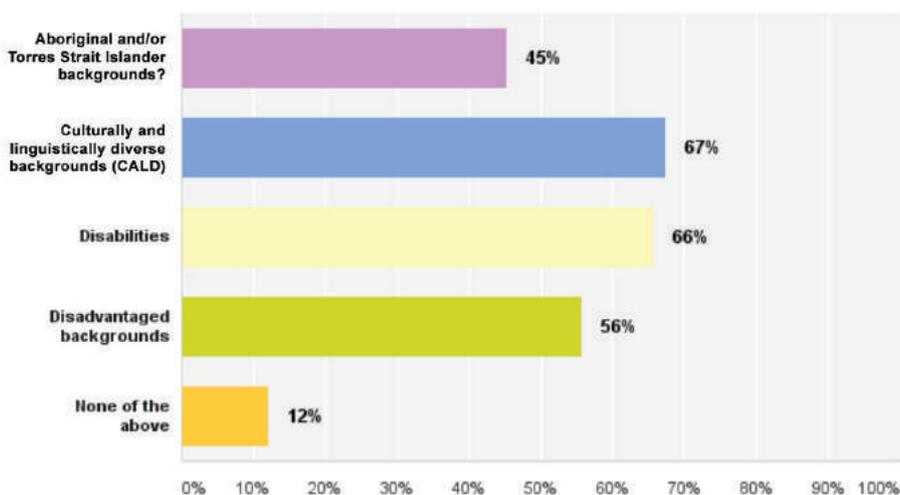
In number of years program has been running

### Frequency of programs



## Access and diversity

There appears to be reasonable representation across the programs in terms of diversity and accessibility, with 67% of programs being accessed by children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 66% by children with disabilities, and 56% engaging with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Almost half of all programs (45%) were accessed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, with only 12% not currently being accessed by any of these groups.



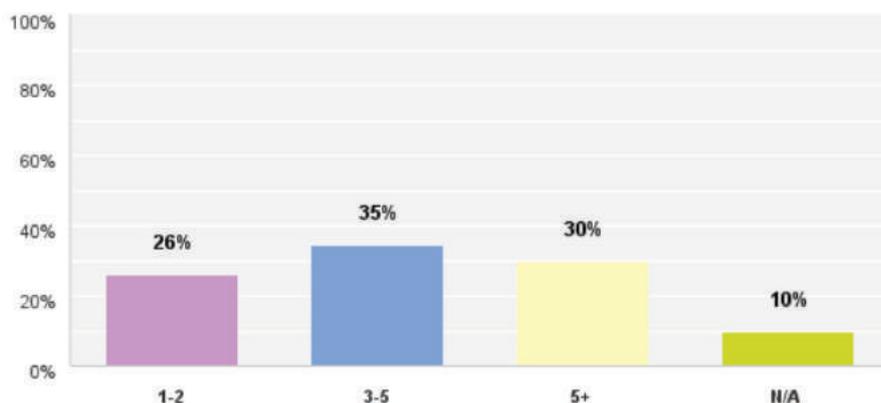
% of services responding have enrolled children from these groups

## Staffing and Volunteering

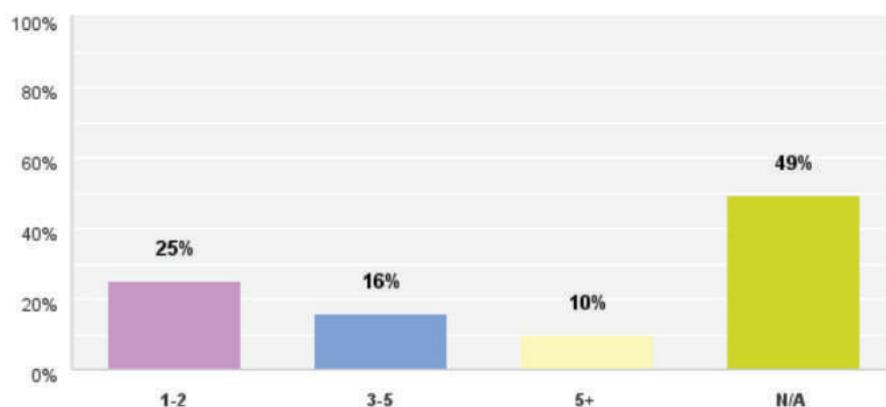
Paid staff and volunteers both play an important role in the delivery of nature play programs. Noting that there are on average 7 outdoor nature play activities/programs offered by each organisation, 26% of organised activities are delivered by 1-2 paid staff, 35% have 3-5 paid staff, and 30% have more than 5 paid staff to deliver all the nature-based programs offered by the organisation. 10% of groups had no staff.

Half of all respondents (51%) relies on volunteers for support and delivery of their programs. If volunteers were involved, 25% of these respondents worked with 1-2 volunteers across their programs, 16% with 3-5 volunteers and 10% with more than ten volunteers.

### Number of staff involved in organising/delivering the activities (across all programs/activities)



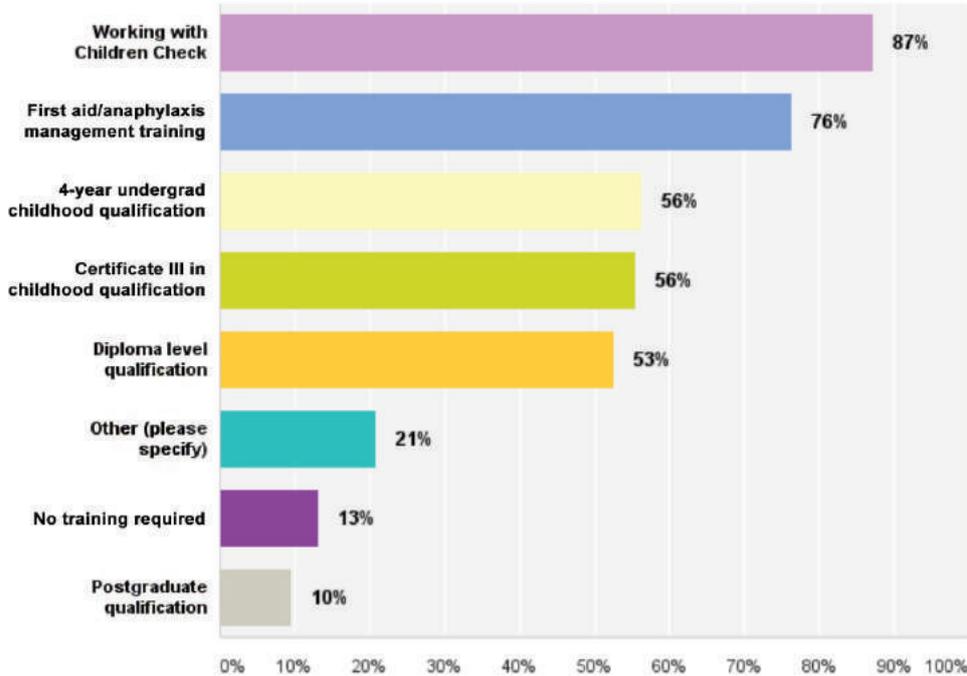
### Number of volunteers involved in organising/delivering the activities (across all programs/activities)



# Training and Qualifications

Respondents were asked to check as many answer choices as applied in regards to specific qualifications or training required to deliver nature-based activities.

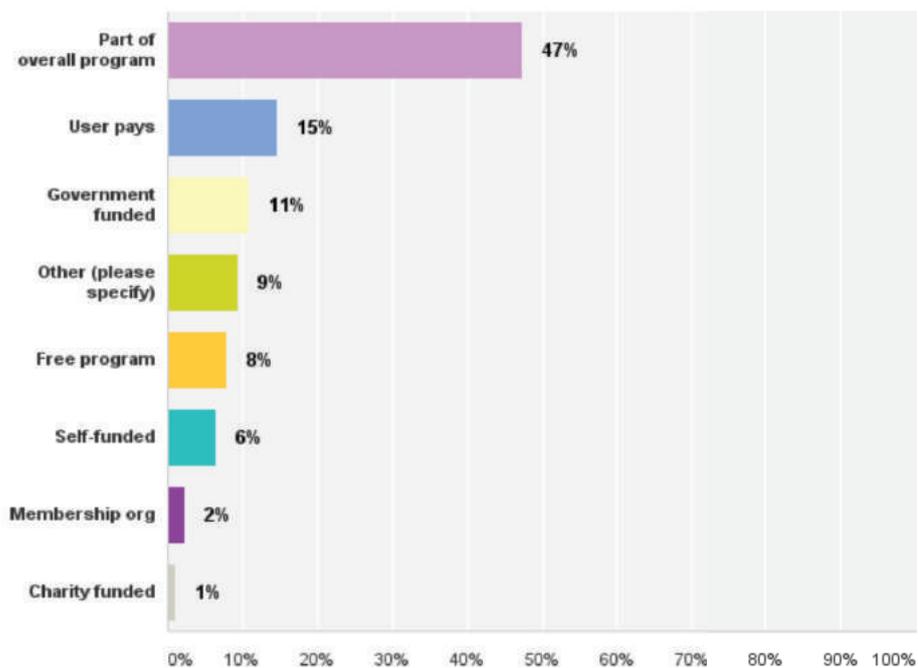
## Training and Qualifications required to deliver nature play programs/activities



# Funding for Programs

Almost half of all nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder programs (47%) is funded as part of a wider, overall curriculum offered by these organisations. As such, these programs are made possible by choices made by educators and program leaders to include nature play and outdoor learning in existing programs without necessarily having dedicated resources to do so. Only 15% of programs operates on a user-pays basis and 11% of programs is funded by government. Nine per cent of programs have alternative arrangements, 8% are free programs, 6% are self-funded, 2% are funded by membership and 1% are charity-funded. These numbers demonstrate the sector’s heavy reliance on the goodwill of program organisers, with possible implications for the sector’s longer-term sustainability.

## Program funding models



# Recommendations

This report identifies a fast-growing number of nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder programs in Victoria. However, both existing and new programs face a range of barriers and require dedicated assistance. This report identified key opportunities for support.

By addressing key barriers and investing in key enablers, there is opportunity to grow participation rates of kids in nature play, early childhood outdoor learning and bush kinder programs by at least 25%. Targeted support will improve sustainability of this sector and maximise the benefits programs provide for:

- health and wellbeing outcomes (active, healthy kids)
- the inclusion of Indigenous and CALD populations, children with disabilities, vulnerable children and disadvantaged children
- nature connection and biodiversity protection
- increased opportunities for jobs and volunteering
- education outcomes (happy, resilient kids)

There is spatial inequity in the distribution of programs across Metro Melbourne and Victoria and the availability of opportunities for kids to participate. Targeted support for programs can unlock the benefits for all Victorian kids, particularly in areas of need such as Western Melbourne and Gippsland.

To sustain and increase the participation of kids in nature play, bushkinder and outdoor learning programs in Victoria, we recommend strategic investments should be made in the following areas.

## 1. The Nature Play Hub: people, partners and increased capacity

- **Invest in existing Victorian organisations and community networks** to create a nature play hub that builds on an already strong, local collaborative base using a collective impact framework (developed by Stanford University).
- **Invest in network facilitators and overheads of existing Victorian networks.** This will build long-term capacity, relationships and collaborations across the sector. Important roles of Victorian networks include: building long-term relationships, collaborations and partnerships, collective capacity building, data collection and information sharing (e.g. this report), peer support, dedicated training and joint events such as Nature Play Week. These networks are currently largely voluntary run and at full organising capacity.
- **Investing in regional community facilitators**, supporting regional and local peer support networks so that access and capacity is established beyond eastern Melbourne, with a focus on areas in need, such as Western Melbourne and Gippsland.
- **Build on strengths of programs with universal access for all children.**
- **Investing in Country specific Aboriginal jobs** to support local bush kinder programs employing Indigenous staff and consultants focused on access and equity for Indigenous children and with a focus on sharing local Indigenous knowledge.
- **Investing in Victorian training programs and local trainers.**
- **Set up an inter-departmental/ cross sectoral community working group** to address key barriers and identifying pathways to school and community learning with a mandate to report back to the sector and state government.
- **Invest in key partnerships and pilot projects** that increase the collective capacity of the entire sector.

## **2. The Nature Play Hub: Online Interactive**

Invest in an online information hub, building the capacity of the 25% not currently running programs and increasing opportunities for more jobs and growth in the sector.

- Information on setting up nature play, early childhood outdoor learning and bush kinder programs
- Developing resources to address key barriers – including, film clips, memes to use etc.
- Training and curriculum resources
- Examples of nature play, outdoor learning and bush kinder activities
- Map with locations of programs and organisations
- Lists and links to organisations and contacts
- Hub for parents, e.g. family nature clubs, resources for kids
- Upcoming events across Victoria and PD opportunities

## **3. Green space hub: protecting, restoring and increasing green space**

- Fund to increase and restore green space in areas with limited or no access to local green space
- Fund dedicated nature play sites for preschools and primary schools
- Fund community, local and state government programs to help children connect with, protect and restore nature
- Boost funding for land management jobs on public land to ensure natural places and Victoria's biodiversity are protected for future generations
- Fund and mandate planning decisions to ensure safe travel pathways to public green space for children and families

## **4. Small grants program for local community programs (\$800,000 per annum)**

- Fund capacity building and training for local organisations
- Fund administration and operational cost
- Fund all weather gear and equipment

## **5. Creating pathways to school and community learning**

- Create a cross-departmental, education and community working group to ensure a coordinated approach to outdoor learning across early years, primary school and community learning across Victoria with a mandate to report back to the sector and state government.

## **6. Research to measure impact of interventions on kids, families and youth**

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