

## GET DOWN AND DIRTY OUTSIDE!



There are so many possibilities for play, learning and exploration outside. We are blessed in Australia with a beautiful natural environment – rivers, oceans, mountains, bush, and desert – as well as some wonderful urban and suburban areas. One of the values that most parents and others who care about children want to instil in children is a love of nature and enjoyment of the outdoors. It isn't actually a matter of instilling however – it's more a matter of nurturing and supporting the interest in the natural environment that very young children already have. Birds, butterflies, rain, puddles of water, leaves blowing in the wind, flowers, stones, dirt, sand, mud and grass are all sources of wonder and interest to babies and toddlers.

Sometimes the outdoors is thought of, in relation to young children, as mostly a space where there is lots of room for "letting off steam" or running around. The outdoors is indeed a stadium for the athletic pursuits of under three year olds, whether it is:

- creeping through the grass on hands and knees,
- mastering the tricky business of maintaining balance while manoeuvring the little mounds and dips of the back garden,
- pushing a small pram in a reasonably straight line along the footpath,
- getting the hang of catching a ball or running and stopping,
- or simply moving around freely in a large space because it feels so good to be able to do it by yourself.

The outdoors is so much more than a space for "big body" activities however. It is a laboratory for eager babies and toddlers to experiment and find out about the world. It is a gallery full of beautiful, engaging and mysterious objects to admire; it is a concert hall filled with intriguing sounds.

If it is cold or rainy, or if there are several young children, it takes a bit of energy on the part of the adult to get children outside. The outdoors is a ready-made setting for children, changing constantly through seasons, so your child can be assured to find something new. Encourage them to listen, look at and do. It sometimes makes things more interesting when you add something to what is there such as:

- containers for collecting leaves,
- spades for digging in the mud,
- trolleys to push.

Often the experience of being outdoors is enough in itself. What is required of you on these occasions is to slow down to baby and toddler time, try to open your eyes and ears to how children experience things. What they find interesting and engaging often it isn't the same thing that you find interesting or expect children to be impressed with.

Whether it is the garden at home, a walk to a nearby park, or a walk to post a letter or buy something at the local shops, children are much better than adults at finding things to marvel at, explore, and be interested in. The sticks on the ground may be a much greater fascination than the bulldozer in operation, the small puddle of water infinitely more fascinating than the waterfall in the distance, the ladybird more worthy of attention than the plane in the sky.

Almost any experience is more fun when it is shared with someone else who is sensitive and sensible. Adults sharing children's experiences need to be involved in a way that still lets the child be in charge of the experience. While there is so much potential in the outdoors for meaningful learning experiences, adults must not be pre-occupied with making everything into a "lesson". Sometimes you just need to be there, showing interest, talking about what is happening, sharing in the surprise, discovery, amusement, and satisfaction. These are wonderful ways to assist children's learning.