

Reshaping modern play spaces for children's health

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A world first review of the importance of nature play could transform children's play spaces, supporting investment in city and urban parks, while also delivering important opportunities for children's physical,

social and emotional development.

Conducted by the University of South Australia the [systematic review](#) explored the impacts of nature play on the health and development of children aged 2-12 years, finding that nature play improved children's complex thinking skills, social skills and creativity.

Led by UniSA masters student Kylie Dankiw and researcher Associate Professor Katherine Baldock, this study is the first to provide evidence that supports the development of innovative nature play spaces in childcare centres and schools.

"In recent years, nature play has become more popular with schools and childcare centres, with many of them re-developing play spaces to incorporate natural elements, such as trees, plants and rocks. But as they transition from the traditional 'plastic fantastic' playgrounds to novel nature-based play spaces, they're also looking for empirical evidence that supports their investments," Dankiw says.

"Our research is the first to rigorously, transparently and systematically review the body of work on nature play and show the impact it has on children's development. We're pleased to say that the findings indicate a positive connection between nature play and children's development.

"For early childhood educators, health practitioners, policymakers and play space designers, this is valuable information that may influence urban play environments and re-green city scapes."

Comprising a systematic review of 2927 peer-reviewed articles, the research consolidated 16 studies that involved unstructured, free play in nature (forest, green spaces, outdoors, gardens) and included [natural elements](#) (highly vegetated, rocks, mud, sand, gardens, forests, ponds and water) to determine the impact of nature play on children's health and

development.

It found that nature play improved children's levels of [physical activity](#), health-related fitness, motor skills, learning, and social and [emotional development](#). It also showed that nature play may deliver improvements in cognitive and learning outcomes, including children's levels of attention and concentration, punctuality, settling in class (even after play), constructive play, social play, as well as imaginative and functional play.

"Nature play is all about playing freely with and in nature. It's about making mud pies, creating stick forts, having an outdoor adventure, and getting dirty," Dankiw says.

"These are all things that children love to do, but unfortunately, as society has become more sedentary, risk averse and time-poor, fewer children are having these opportunities.

"By playing in nature, children can build their physical capabilities—their balance, fitness, and strength. And, as they play with others, they learn valuable negotiation skills, concepts of sharing and friendships, which may contribute to healthy emotional and social resilience."

More information: Kylie A. Dankiw et al, The impacts of unstructured nature play on health in early childhood development: A systematic review, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0229006](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229006)

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