

Warrawee Care Centre

BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY

A case study on an Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) service in NSW
October 2021



Warrawee Care Centre is a not-for-profit OSHC service located on the grounds of Warrawee Public School.

In recognition of the service's innovative practices in outdoor programs, and exceeding in 7 quality areas outlined in the National Quality Standard (NQS), the centre has been awarded with an excellent rating, the highest rating achievable under the NQS.

The Centre focuses on incorporating play and learning in nature through its Kitchen Garden, its Fire Program and Forest Play program. These are the service's signature outdoor programs and experiences that allow children to discover, be curious, explore risk-taking and develop resilience.

WARRAWEE CARE CENTRE

OVERVIEW

Benefits of outdoor play

- Forest Play Program
- Fire Program
- Kitchen Garden

What made these outdoor programs work?

- Identify gaps in learning needs and leverage new and existing resources
- Include parents' and children's voices
- Access Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program
- Community engagement
- Staff's passion for risk-based learning
- Transparent communication



FOREST PLAY PROGRAM

Nature Play QLD is an organisation that educates and promotes the benefits to children of engaging in unstructured play in outdoors and in nature.

Warrawee Care Centre initiated the weekly Forest Play program in 2017, with inspiration from Nature Play QLD, the Forest School approach, and the Reggio Emilia Approach.

Children are considered as intellectual theory builders who have preferred learning styles, interests and curiosity, which inform the way sessions are planned by educators.

Younger children participate on school grounds in a space filled with large branches, sticks and logs. They immerse themselves by digging for bugs, building shelters and forts, tying ropes and sliding down the embankments. Older children participate off site where they dig, build shelters and set up ropes and zip lines.

Families have started to let their children stay at the Centre for longer so they can participate in Forest Play sessions. Some sessions are held at night, so children get to negotiate spaces in the dark and learn to appreciate different sensory aspects of spaces. They learn how to risk-assess, do safety checks, and arrange the equipment required.

The program also includes other concepts such as sustainability, community, art and first aid. Ultimately, children develop core skills, including problem-solving and reasoning, creativity, curiosity, risk-identification, self-regulation and social and emotional learning.

Forest School is a child-led approach that values risk-taking and exploration through play in nature.

The Reggio Emilia Approach sees children as capable and curious individuals who can drive their own learning and understanding of the world.

FIRE PROGRAM

The Fire Program offers a diverse range of activities around a fire pit that engages children across many ages. Families are also invited to participate. The program continues to grow and new activities are introduced every year.

Experiences on sustainability, fire safety, risk-taking, cooking and environmental discussions are offered within the program. In one instance, children cooked all kinds of food through experimenting with their own recipes using the camp oven; used hot embers from the fire pit to create ember bowls; and gathered and sawed fallen branches to be used throughout each week. The ideation of these experiences often originates from the children.





Indigenous perspectives are also included to develop children's understanding, through body painting, cooking traditional bush tucker foods, storytelling and enjoying music whilst sitting around the fire.

Through the Fire Program, children develop skills in creativity, problem-solving, perseverance and experimentation.



KITCHEN GARDEN

Kitchen Garden was developed in collaboration with the school in 2012 and was inspired by training with Claire Warden, an educational consultant who specialises in experiential learning. Each year, children harvest plants they have grown in this space. They investigate the roots of plants and the roles of soil and pest control.

The children learn about experimentation, sustainable practices, biodiversity, ecosystems and nutrition. It is a controlled yet flexible learning environment and educators learn alongside children as they encourage children's curiosity and experimentation.



What made these outdoor programs work?

1

Identify gaps in learning needs and leverage new and existing resources

2

Include parents' and children's voices

3

Access Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program

4

Community engagement

5

Staff's passion for risk-based learning

6

Transparent communication

1

Identify gaps in learning needs and leverage new and existing resources

The service constantly seeks opportunities to creatively fill gaps in children's learning needs outside of their home and school environments.

In the past decade, the local area saw an increased number of apartment style accommodation, with many families having limited access to backyards and green spaces. Staff at the centre saw a strong need to enhance existing programs to include natural spaces and offer a different setting to learn outside of classrooms.

Staff identified not only gaps in children's learning, but also actively leveraged new and existing resources as opportunities to enhance the outdoor programs. Fortunately, the school had some natural spaces that had not been developed and were available for use.

Consideration was put into budgeting, particularly for non-consumable and open-ended sources that allow unlimited ways to provide an outdoor experience that has a long-lasting positive effect on children. Reflecting and assessing children's developmental needs is an ongoing process for the service. This underpins how the program continues to grow and adapt.

2

Include parents' and children's voices

From program initiation, parents' and children's voices are involved wherever possible in session plans and educators' critical reflection, the service actively invites collaboration by creating channels, conversations and moments for feedback.

Families are invited to provide feedback on Story Park, a platform where the centre uploads children's learning stories. Parent's voices are also included through their participation in the fire experiences at the end of their day, if they wish to chat or cook around the fire pit.

The fire program has evolved to be child-initiated and child-facilitated. Around the fire, an A3 sheet is placed on the ground to capture children's perspectives on what worked and what they would like to do next time. Educators summarise, discuss and reflect to form the next session plan.

3

**Access Commonwealth's
Inclusion Support Program**

Various measures are implemented to make sure outdoor programs tailor to children with additional needs so that they are not set to fail from the start.

Through the Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program, the service has engaged an inclusion support professional to improve suitability and appropriateness of program practice so it is inclusive of all children.

Children with additional needs may attend outdoor programs for shorter timeframes and participate with a younger cohort. Additional staff are available to observe and assist closely when needed. Sufficient resources are available so that if children with additional needs wish to use their own equipment they can. These measures allow children to participate with reduced barriers and feel like they are a part of the experience.

4

Community engagement

Staff participate in immersion training at different locations in Australia. A few educators spent three days in Alice Springs, immersed in different communities.

Resources and materials such as Aboriginal art, sculpture and woodwork were purchased directly from those communities and formed part of the programs for play and learning.

Children participated in the annual blanket drive this year. They prepared and packaged books and blankets to be sent to Alice Springs for distribution. One parent joined the fire experience on an evening to play the didgeridoo.

The centre has also delivered forest play training with other schools and looks to continue to educate others on the benefits of outdoor play and risk-based learning.

5

Staff's passion for risk-based learning

Training provision is a challenge, in particular with coordinating high-risk experiences. There are different staff that run Forest Play Programs. They complete their own program plan and work alongside educational leaders to determine plans and actions.

Staff critically reflect alone and with others on practices that have worked and identify those that require improvement. Training ensures that staff develop confidence, understand expectations and know how to collaborate with other staff.

Their passion and willingness for children to take risks and learn is crucial for maximising children's engagement and allowing them to genuinely and freely enjoy their time in the programs.



6

Transparent communication

Transparent communication and relationships with school, teachers and parents are essential to make these programs work. Through meetings and documentations, the service communicates with the school and teachers on what the programs involve, resources used and outcomes delivered for children's learning.

Some adjustments may need to be made to the programs in order to fit with the school's philosophy, which is a part of being respectful of the relationship with the school. Teachers and educators are able to communicate closely via email to share information about children's learning.

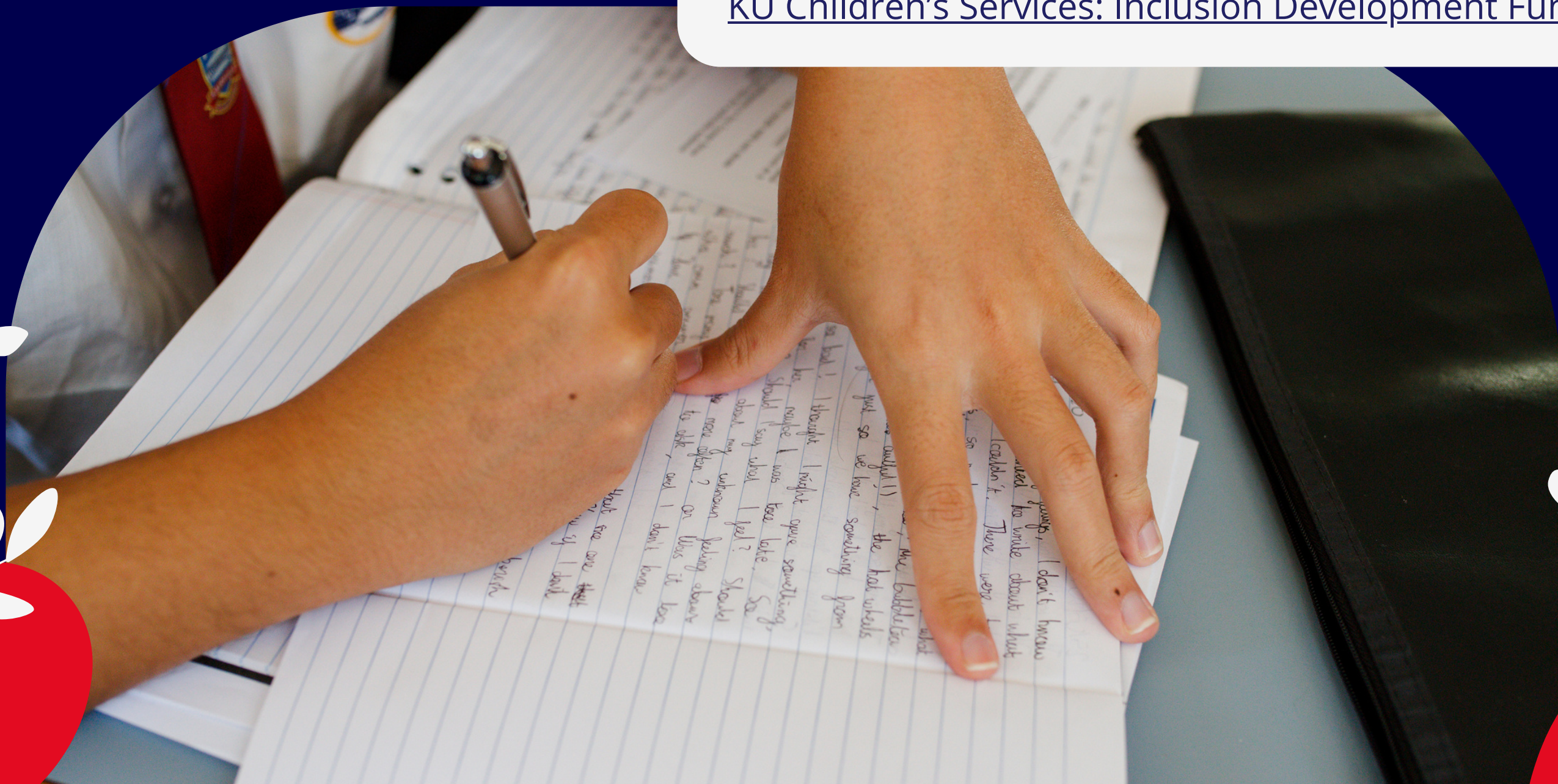
Warrawee Care Centre is transparent with families with every aspect of programs to address the challenge of communicating about safety. For instance, consent forms are signed by families for the Forest Play Program for senior children so they are fully aware of activities and risks involved. Senior children in this program also set rules and boundaries and sign off on them so they understand they need to abide by the rules in order to participate.

USEFUL RESOURCES

[Claire Warden: Educational and Experiential Pioneer](#)

[Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program](#)

[KU Children's Services: Inclusion Development Fund](#)





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