

Australian Association of Environmental Education (AAEE) Tasmania

Submission to Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

The discussion paper (TASMANIA'S CHILD AND YOUTH WELLBEING STRATEGY), <https://wellbeing.tas.gov.au/discussion-paper> begins by acknowledging that; "Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples' health and wellbeing has been and continues to be based on a deep and continuous connection to family, community and the land, sea and waterways." It is essential that these connections to family, community as well as the land, sea and waterways are vital for everyone's wellbeing, especially for the future of our children and youth. While connections to family and community are well covered, the need for connection to the wonderful, health-giving natural world of Tasmania, to its land, sea and waterways (and air) is not explicit enough. We therefore have some recommendations on how to include more healthy, natural connections for our young ones.

While we recognise that much is being done in Tasmania for the wellbeing of children and youth, fortunately, according to the Wellbeing Framework, page 5: - "Service providers are encouraged to develop additional descriptors to help the framework to develop over time.". We have the great good fortune in Tasmania to live in nature-rich environments but we could use this good fortune to better advantage our young people. We find that the descriptors for each of the six domains need expanding. The land, sea and waterways (and air) need to be integrated into the whole strategy. We based our input on the Wellbeing Framework https://www.strongfamiliesafekids.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/5549/1-Tasmanian-Child-and-Youth-Wellbeing-Framework-Web.pdf as we can make practical suggestions around the descriptors for each of the domains. (Edits are suggested in capital letters).

DOMAIN 1 – being loved and safe

"feel safe, secure and protected at home and in the community" AND IN THEIR ENVIRONMENTS. Planning natural environments throughout urban areas have been shown to increase feelings of social safety and to reduce crime and aggressive behaviours (Kuo & Sullivan 2001).

On a different note, many young people do not feel safe in the wider world due to existential worries about environmental degradation. Can we really say we are keeping our kids safe if we are not acknowledging and actively involved and taking care of the of the ecological systems that support life on earth? Policies must strive to protect healthy environments and mend damaged ones and include children and youth in this process.

DOMAIN 2 – having material basics

"have access to education and training materials" AND FUNDED ACCESS TO DIVERSE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS.

DOMAIN 3 – being healthy – *needs lots of expanding*

"are mentally healthy" There is a rise in existential angst in teenagers which can be alleviated by many nature-based approaches to mental health such as wilderness therapy, treehab,

ecotherapy, ecopsychology and adventure therapy. These have all been shown to reduce the risks of ill health. There is a great return on investment compared to digital resources – recent research showed that for every \$1 invested in nature programs, there was an almost sevenfold return in mental health savings. Read more here;

https://www.deakin.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/310747/Beyond-Blue-To-Green-Literature-Review.pdf

The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recently issued a statement emphasizing the importance of outdoor active play in promoting healthy development and many are writing nature play prescriptions instead of Ritalin.

“are physically healthy” Children who spend joyful time outdoors are likely to have greater physical benefits as a result, including: a healthier body mass index; more vitamin D and better bone density; less myopia; better developed gross motor skills and significantly reduced attentional deficits to mention just a few of the physical benefits of playing outdoors. Sitting is now considered the new smoking in its risk to health. <https://www.openculture.com/2015/08/why-sitting-is-the-new-smoking-an-animated-explanation.html> The Australian Dept of Health recommends that children 5 – 12 years old have at least an hour a day of physical activity, preferably several hours a day while many Paediatric Occupational Therapists recommend three hours of outdoor play daily.

“are emotionally well, happy and supported” The links between INCREASED CONTACT WITH NATURE and the meeting of emotional needs have been shown by many researchers ((Friedmann and Thomas 1995, Frumkin 2001, Katcher and Beck 2006, Maller et al 2006, Wells and Evans 2003, Wilson 2001). There is a growing body of research showing the positive impact that being in nature has for children with ADHD or those who have experienced trauma in their lives. Just being surrounded by bountiful nature inspires, rejuvenates and restores us. Studies show that the restorative effect played by nature is useful in enhancing children’s cognitive functioning (Wells & Evans). In order to focus the attention of young people, nature journaling can be beneficial to directly address their poorly developed connection with the natural world.

Children have better executive functioning and emotional regulation with frequent nature contact. The skills that help us plan, prioritize, troubleshoot, negotiate, and multitask must be learned and practiced and to do this, children need unstructured time. They need time with other children to be allowed to make up their own games, figure things out, explore and amuse themselves. Being outside gives them opportunities to practice these important life skills. Interaction with nature assists children of all age ranges and their educators also benefit.

Domain 3 needs a 6th descriptor - CHILDREN AND YOUTH NEED AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR WORLD BY FREQUENT, LENGTHY, SUPPORTED OUTDOOR NATURE PLAY/LEARNING.

So much of our world is imperilled. If a child grows up never walking in the forest, digging in soil, growing food and eating the fruits of their labour, climbing a tree or a mountain, seeing animals in their habitat, playing in a creek or gazing at the endless horizon of an ocean, how will they really understand what there is to be lost? The future of our planet depends on our children; they need the chance to love their world before being expected to heal its wounds.

DOMAIN 4 – learning

Learning should promote resilience, adaptability and innovation to prepare learners for an uncertain future. Learning should be equitable for all. Kinaesthetic and naturalistic learners are better served in the outdoors rather than in the confines of the classroom. Nature play can also level the playing field for children from disadvantaged backgrounds

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/the-equigenic-effect-how-nature-access-can-level-the-playing-field-for-children/>

“are attending and **engaging** in education, training or employment.” They will be more likely to engage in education if it is engaging and stimulating. Education programs and pedagogy need to be informed by research. Child-led, age-appropriate, inquiry learning with lots of hands-on experiences including daily nearby nature learning has been shown to engage and educate learners more fully than top down, academic, abstract indoor learning. More professional development for educators and leadership teams is required for learning in and for nature. Regulatory oversight by DoE is needed to ensure that kids are receiving their outdoor learning. School grounds need transforming to include more diverse range of natural features. This leads to improvement in social behaviours and physical activity. (Dymet & Bell 2008, Haas & Ashman). We recommend that groundsman be upskilled to maintain a high degree of naturalness in school grounds.

Angela Hanscom, a paediatric occupational therapist, advocates strongly for children's wellbeing, sharing that; - “In order for children to learn, they must be able to pay attention; - in order to pay attention, they must have frequent opportunities throughout the day to move. They must play outdoors at least three hours every single day to reap the many developmental benefits offered there.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_hanscom_the_real_reason_children_fidget_and_what_we_can_do_about_it Like Hanscom, we recommend lengthening lunch times in schools to a full hour every day. We also advocate for schools to include weekly blocks of nature play/learning for every class. Education research tells us that immersion in hands-on experiential pursuits is how children learn best anyway so we are not adding to teachers' busy workload, just expanding the theatre of learning to include the great outdoors. Every subject can be taught in the outdoor classroom as well as the cross-curricular priority of Sustainability.

“are participating in early childhood education” WHICH IS WIDELY AVAILABLE FREE OF CHARGE. A popular program at the Sustainability Learning Centre is the Nature Play program for families. Parents want this guided nature engagement experience for their children but as it is only offered once a week, it is always booked out before everyone can register. This program needs to be offered at least three times a week.

Learning also encompasses agricultural understanding of both plants and animals (hortophilia) for food security and greater nutrition. Oliver Sacks MD describes the healing power of gardens on his patients as hortophilia; the desire to interact with nature and tend a garden and claimed that biophilia – the love of nature and living things is clearly part of the human condition. Practical experiences such as growing, cooking and eating food and understanding where it has come from, leads to better food choices in children as well as encompassing all subject areas including science and maths. Therefore, we recommend a greater emphasis on school veggie gardens with dedicated food and gardening programs in every school. Specialists who

are trained to manage the resource and contextualise learning should be appointed to run gardens. The 24 Carrot program is brilliant at this but needs to be extended to all schools.

DOMAIN 5 – participating

"are taking part in organised AND UNSTRUCTURED ACTIVITIES, including sport" - too great an emphasis on sport can distract from free child-centred time in the great outdoors. Children of all ages need lots of unstructured time outdoors to activate their curiosity (which as Einstein says, has its own reason for existing) to develop imagination, fitness and resilience, not to mention the joy and enthusiasm children exhibit in the outdoors. These open-ended experiences can range from splashing in mud for toddlers to building cubbies in a forest for children to leadership skills for guiding and overnight camping for older kids.

In response to Peter Gutwein's query on page 6 of the Wellbeing Strategy about "how children and young people can be active participants in addressing climate concerns", AAEE would like to highlight the urgent nature of the climate crisis and its negative effect on our young people's hopes, now and into the future.

"being able to have a say and have their opinion heard and valued" THE RIGHT TO ADVOCATE FOR A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT (such as the youth-led climate rallies) NEEDS TO BE RESPECTED AND SUPPORTED. We work from the cornerstone principle that children are citizens of the present as well as the future.

DOMAIN 6 – having a positive sense of culture and identity

The descriptor "are in touch with cultural or spiritual practices and have these practices valued and respected" needs to be expanded to include children's ecological identity.

CONCLUSION

Wellbeing is multi-dimensional. Healthy environments are closely related to human health, now and into the future. The current picture of wellbeing in the document needs expansion to give greater emphasis to connecting with a nature rich world in all the domains. We see the possibility of much improvement to the descriptors and the overall wellbeing strategy.

The biophilia theory tells us that participating in nature experiences is an innate necessity of human beings. Recent Covid experiences revealed the importance that people placed on spending time in nature, and the health benefits this brought. Children and youth need to be physically active in healthy, natural environments to develop their intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual and physical health. Children with frequent active outdoor learning even do better on standardised tests. Connection with nature creates a deeper sense of belonging within which connections to the family and communities are nested and a stronger sense of wellbeing is developed. Nature engagement is essential for resilience, health and for rejuvenation of mind, heart and body.

The ability to grow food and enjoy eating it, fits into the wellbeing framework vision of being healthy, learning and participating. Nature itself gains from this mutually beneficial approach to

human wellbeing, as children and youth come to understand the vital importance of actively participating in sustaining the earth. Encouraging a love of nature can in turn help to develop a sense of responsibility and custodianship for nature, which in turn will lead in a healthier environment for children to grow up in. Hope is important for the wellbeing of children and youth and involvement in environmental and sustainability projects can be an antidote to widespread feelings of hopelessness. Developing an ecological identity is an attribute of being healthy. This particularly important for the health and wellbeing of children of aboriginal descent as has been demonstrated by 2000 generations of Aboriginal people in Tasmania. Based on an interdependent relationship with nature, Indigenous people accept that all aspects of their health are reliant on harmonious relationships with the rest of the natural world (Salmon 2000, Wilson 2003).

With AAEE's vision of the Wellbeing strategy, the acknowledgement at the beginning of the discussion paper that peoples' health and wellbeing "continues to be based on a deep and continuous connection to family, community and the land, sea and waterways" will be a respectful attempt to continue Aboriginal ways of being in the world into the future.

FURTHER READING FOR THE WELLBEING BENEFITS OF NATURE CONNECTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The equigenic effect of outdoor play <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/the-equigenic-effect-how-nature-access-can-level-the-playing-field-for-children/>

Why sitting is the new smoking <https://www.openculture.com/2015/08/why-sitting-is-the-new-smoking-an-animated-explanation.html>

Every educator can teach and learn in the outdoors
<https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/turning-education-inside-out/>

The importance of nature in everyday life of children
<https://natureplayqld.org.au/blog/nature-play-in-early-years-education>

<https://www.miracle-recreation.com/blog/why-should-my-child-play-outside-benefits-of-outdoor-play-for-kids/>

Beyond blue to green: The benefits of contact with nature for mental health and well-being is well researched in Australia and internationally.

https://www.deakin.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/310747/Beyond-Blue-To-Green-Literature-Review.pdf See 4.2.1 Research linking nature contact with children's development, pg 24

Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_Child_in_the_Woods

PREVAILING THEORIES linking wellbeing with contact with nature:

Biophilia (Wilson 1984, Sacks 2009, Kellert & Derr 1998, Burls 2007, Nebbe 2006)

Attention Restoration Theory (Bodin & Hartig 2003, Herzog et al 2003, Wells 2000)

Stress Reduction Theory/Psycho-evolution Theory (Ulrich et al 1991, Velarde et al 2007)

Environmental Self-regulation Hypothesis (Bolderman et al 2004, Faber Taylor et al 1998, Korpela et al 2001)

Bio- ecological Model (Gottlieb 1991, Bronfenbrenner & Ceci 1994)

