

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CHILDCARE CENTRES

Getting More From Your Outdoor Environment

Helping children, educators and communities
thrive outdoors

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Foreword

Since 1990, Urban Landscape Projects has been designing and constructing outdoor environments for childcare centres across Greater Sydney.

Over that time, we have worked alongside educators, centre directors, operators and children. We have seen how a thoughtfully created playspace can become much more than an outdoor area. It can support learning, wellbeing, confidence, connection and a stronger sense of community.

We have also learned that the landscape is only part of the story.

The real value of an outdoor environment is brought to life through the people who use it every day. Children bring curiosity, imagination and play. Educators bring knowledge, care and an understanding of where that play might lead. The landscape provides the possibilities.

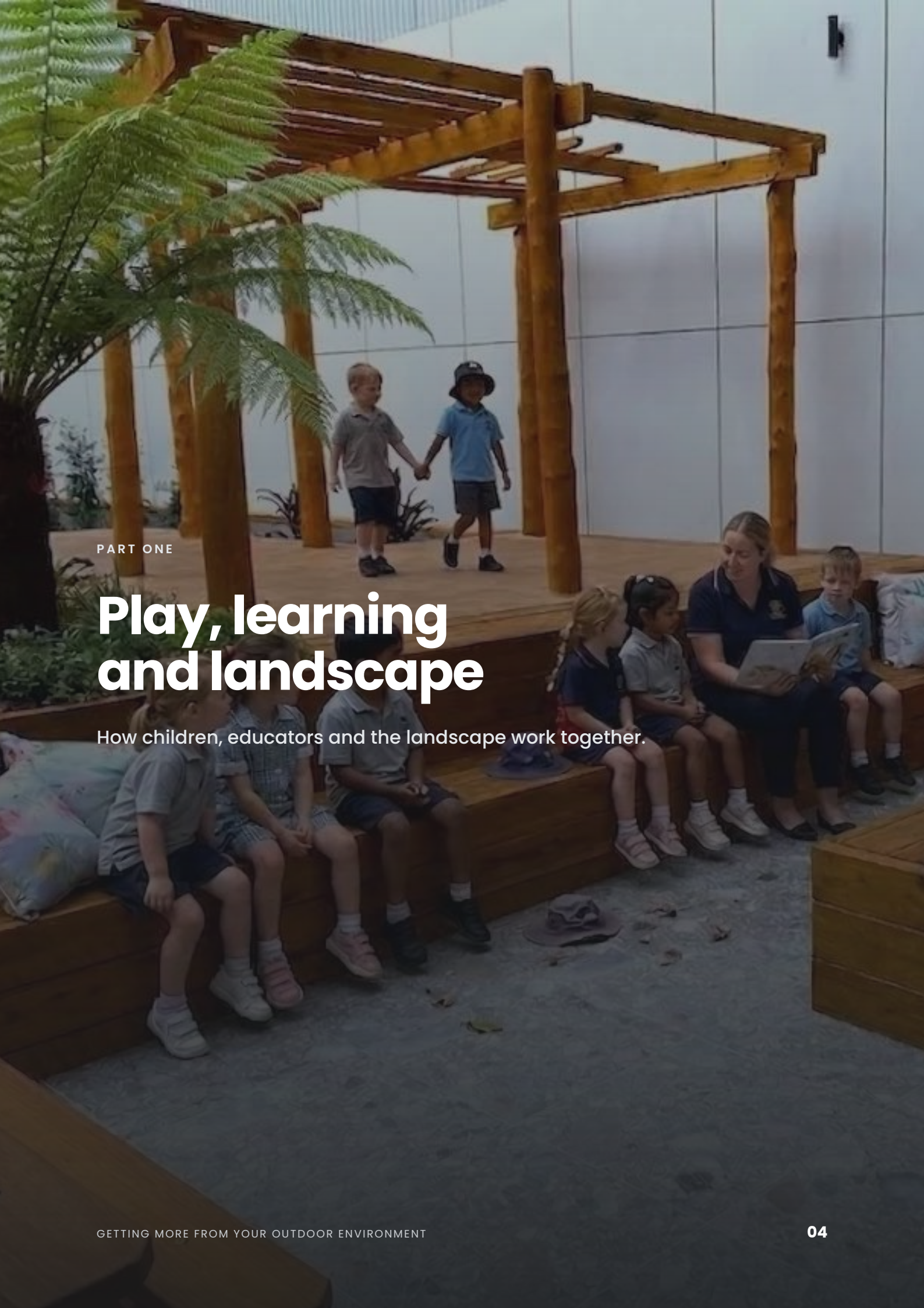
This guide brings together what we have learned through decades of designing, building, observing and discussing childcare environments. It is informed by recognised early learning frameworks, but grounded in the practical realities of everyday centre life.

It is not intended to tell educators how to do their jobs. It is a collection of ideas, observations and possibilities to help centres make more of the outdoor environment they already have—through play, learning, nature, care and community.

We hope it helps you see your yard with fresh eyes and discover even more of what it can offer.

With care,

The Urban Landscape Projects team



PART ONE

Play, learning and landscape

How children, educators and the landscape work together.

Where play, learning and landscape meet

The richest outdoor experiences are created together.

Children do not wait to be shown how to play. They test ideas, invent worlds, repeat actions, seek challenge and make connections. Their play gives meaning to the places around them.

Educators add something equally important. They know the children. They can recognise when an idea is gathering momentum, protect it from interruption and offer the right word, question, material or encouragement at the right moment.

The landscape completes the relationship. Changes in level invite movement. A quiet nook invites closeness. Sand and water invite transformation. Planting brings texture, scent, habitat and the passing of time.

THREE PARTS, ONE EXPERIENCE

1. The child

brings curiosity and play.

2. The educator

brings knowledge and care.

3. The landscape

brings possibility.

None replaces the others. Together they create an environment where learning feels natural because it grows from real experience.

EDUCATOR TIP

When an experience is working beautifully, notice all three parts: what the child brought, what the educator supported and what the landscape made possible.



"The environment must be rich in motives which lend interest to activity and invite the child to conduct his own experiences."

Maria Montessori

Your largest learning asset

The outdoor environment deserves to be seen through the same lens as every other part of the program.

The yard is not where learning pauses. Every day, children use it to move, build friendships, negotiate, regulate emotions, solve problems, test theories and discover what their bodies and ideas can do.

Unlike a room that remains mostly the same, a natural landscape is always offering something new. The light moves. The wind changes. Leaves fall. Water travels. Plants grow. Creatures arrive and disappear.

These changes keep the environment alive. They give children reasons to return, notice more closely and build new understanding from familiar places.

A STRONG OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT CAN SUPPORT

- movement and physical confidence
- curiosity and problem-solving
- imagination and creative expression
- friendship, cooperation and communication
- calm, retreat and emotional wellbeing
- connection with nature, place and community.

EDUCATOR TIP

Think beyond what an area is called. A garden can also be a science lab, a storytelling place, a sensory retreat and a shared responsibility.

Play is learning

The learning is not added after the play. It is already inside it.

When a child redirects water through sand, they are exploring cause and effect. When children rebuild a shelter, they are working with balance, space, communication and persistence. When they create a game together, they are learning to express ideas, negotiate rules and understand one another.

Play gives children a reason to use their whole selves. They think, move, feel, communicate and imagine at the same time. Because the purpose belongs to them, the learning is meaningful.

LOOK BENEATH THE ACTION

- Repeating can be mastery.
- Collecting can be comparison and classification.
- Building can be engineering and storytelling.
- Climbing can be judgement, courage and body awareness.
- Quiet observation can be deep attention.
- Disagreement can become communication and social learning.

Seeing the learning changes the adult question from 'How should they use this?' to 'What is this play becoming?'

EDUCATOR TIP

The next time play looks simple, name three things the child may be practising, testing or understanding.

A photograph of a modern outdoor playground. In the foreground, a young girl in a red and white striped shirt is running towards the left. To her right, a large, light-colored plastic slide with two lanes is visible. A girl is sliding down the right lane, and another child is at the top of the slide. In the background, two more children are sitting on the grass. The playground is enclosed by a building with a corrugated metal wall and a wooden base. The sky is overcast.

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct.”

Carl Jung

Follow where the play leads

Children's interests can turn an ordinary moment into a lasting investigation.

A trail of ants may hold attention for two minutes—or become a week of drawing, counting, searching, storytelling and learning about habitat. A puddle may disappear by morning—or begin an investigation into flow, depth, reflection and evaporation.

The educator does not need to know where the interest will end. The opportunity is to notice what matters to the children and help the idea travel a little further.

A LIGHT WAY TO RESPOND

Notice

what keeps drawing the children back.

Wonder

with them instead of supplying the answer.

Offer

a material, word or question when it adds possibility.

Revisit

the idea later and see what has changed.

Sometimes the right response is active. Sometimes it is simply giving the play more time.

EDUCATOR TIP

If children return to the same place each day, pause before changing it. They may be building a relationship with that part of the landscape.

The hundred languages outdoors

Children have many ways to think, communicate and make meaning.

The Reggio Emilia philosophy speaks of the ‘hundred languages of children’: the many ways children express ideas beyond speech alone.

Outdoors, those languages become wonderfully visible. A child may explain an idea by building it, drawing it in sand, moving their body, arranging leaves, inventing a song, acting out a story or showing another child what to do.

THE LANDSCAPE CAN INVITE CHILDREN TO

- move, balance, climb and dance
- build, dismantle and begin again
- draw, mark, map and arrange
- tell stories, perform and imagine
- touch, listen, smell and observe
- collect, compare, count and classify
- work alone, beside others or together.

The aim is not to provide a separate station for every kind of expression. It is to create enough variety and openness for children to find their own language.

EDUCATOR TIP

When a child is not using many words, look for the ideas they are expressing through movement, materials, repetition and choice.

Let nature join the curriculum

The outdoors offers experiences that cannot be recreated in quite the same way indoors.

Jan White reminds us that good outdoor provision is not simply indoor learning moved outside. Outdoors has its own character: scale, freedom, weather, movement, living things, uneven ground and constant change.

A natural environment does not always provide a neat answer. That is part of its value. Children can observe, predict, test, wait and be surprised.

THE CURRICULUM MAY ARRIVE AS

- a chrysalis discovered under a leaf
- a bird collecting material for a nest
- water finding a new path after rain
- shadows moving across the ground
- a plant responding to heat or care
- seedpods, bark and stones that invite close comparison.

These moments connect science, language, movement, creativity and care because they are real, shared and happening now.

EDUCATOR TIP

Keep a magnifier, a few small containers and simple drawing materials within reach. They can turn a passing discovery into a closer look.

Natural play begins with nature

Natural play is more than a natural-looking style. At its heart, it is a child's access to the living world.

The term 'natural play' is often used to describe logs, timber structures and earthy-looking play equipment. These materials can be valuable, but using timber does not automatically create a relationship with nature.

Real natural play gives children regular contact with living systems. It is watching a bird gather material and return to its nest. Seeing butterflies feed from flowers. Finding a chrysalis, hearing frogs after rain, noticing new growth and recognising that the same garden feels different in every season.

For many children growing up in unit blocks, the childcare yard is their backyard. It may be their most consistent opportunity to dig in soil, care for plants, encounter wildlife and appreciate the natural world as something they belong to—not something separate from everyday life.

A PLACE WITHIN NATURE

A landscape that provides food, water, shelter and nesting opportunities gives children more than a view of nature. It gives them a place within it.

EDUCATOR TIP

Choose one living relationship to follow over time—a bird, butterfly, plant or patch of habitat. Repeated observation is where a passing encounter becomes understanding.

Habitat brings STEM to life

A habitat garden is a living laboratory—always changing, always offering another question.

Purposeful habitat planting turns the yard into a place where questions arise naturally. Children observe closely, make predictions, compare change, measure growth, test ideas and record what they find.

A bird building a nest can begin a conversation about materials and structure. Butterflies feeding from flowers can lead to questions about colour, pollination and food. Seasonal changes invite children to notice patterns, compare what has changed and wonder what may happen next.

STEM IS ALREADY GROWING IN THE GARDEN

Science	life cycles, seasons, food, shelter and the needs of living things.
Technology	using magnifiers, cameras and simple tools to investigate and record.
Engineering	exploring nests, insect shelters, water, structure and how living things adapt.
Mathematics	counting, sorting, pattern, measurement and change over time.

This brings the NQF learning outcomes to life: children connect with and contribute to their world, become confident and involved learners, communicate theories and discoveries, build wellbeing through nature, and develop a stronger sense of belonging to place. It also supports the environmentally responsible practice expected within Quality Area 3.

EDUCATOR TIP

Invite children to record one part of the habitat across several weeks. Drawings, photographs, counts and measurements help them see change that may otherwise go unnoticed.



**“The environment is the
third teacher.”**

A principle associated with the Reggio Emilia approach



PART TWO

Designing for every child

Balance, belonging, movement and inquiry across the yard.

Every child can find their place

A great playspace makes room for different personalities, abilities and ways of being.

Outdoor environments can easily become dominated by fast movement and the most confident children. But childhood is not one-size-fits-all.

Some children seek height, speed and company. Others are drawn to small spaces, careful collecting, sensory detail or watching from the edge before joining in. Both are valuable ways of participating.

A balanced landscape allows these experiences to happen alongside one another without one constantly interrupting the rest. That sense of choice helps children feel secure enough to explore and brave enough to grow.

BELONGING CAN LOOK LIKE

- joining a large, energetic game
- sharing a small nook with one friend
- returning to a familiar sensory place
- working quietly on a long construction
- watching until the moment feels right
- finding a role within a shared project.

EDUCATOR TIP

Look beyond the busiest part of the yard. Where do quieter children choose to be, and what does that place give them?

Outdoor rooms create possibility

A landscape becomes richer when it offers a collection of connected places rather than one open area.

ULP uses the idea of outdoor rooms to create different experiences across the yard. Planting, pathways, levels and edges can give each place its own feeling while keeping the whole environment connected.

This allows active play, imaginative play, sensory exploration, construction, gathering and retreat to continue without always competing for the same space.

Children begin to build a mental map of the yard. They know where to find activity, where to meet others and where to step away. Over time, each place gathers memories and meaning.

THE VALUE OF BALANCE

The goal is not to separate children. It is to give different kinds of play enough room to develop—and different children more ways to thrive.



EDUCATOR TIP

Notice where one kind of play regularly interrupts another. The issue may not be behaviour; the two experiences may simply need clearer space.

Movement, challenge and wellbeing

Children learn what their bodies can do by using them in many different ways.

Slopes, steps, uneven ground, changing surfaces and different heights ask the body to adjust. Children build balance, coordination, strength and awareness through real movement—not only through repeating a fixed route.

Challenge also brings an emotional journey. A child may watch, hesitate, try, retreat and return. Success carries more meaning when it has taken judgement and persistence.

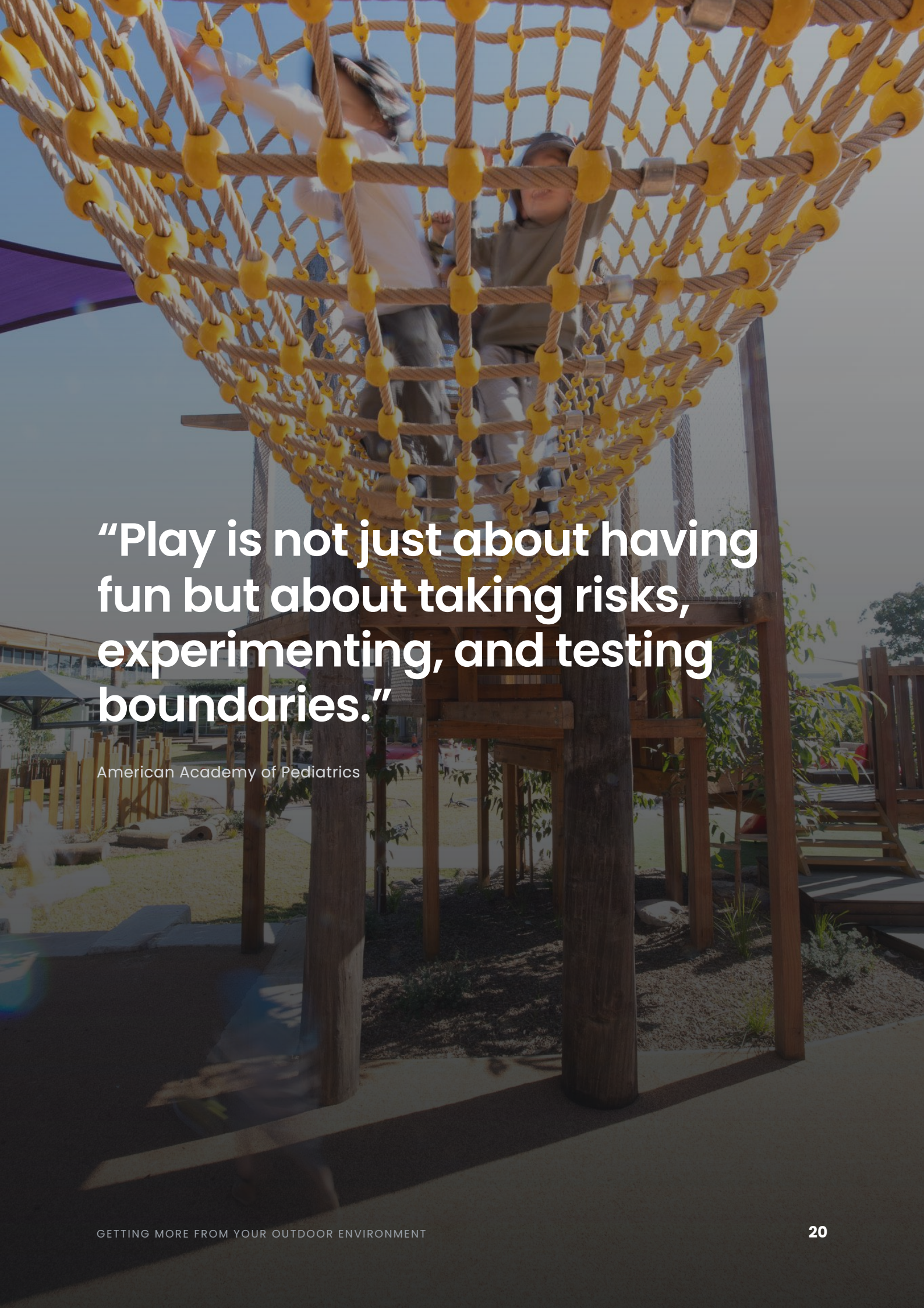
This does not mean removing boundaries. It means looking thoughtfully at both the possible harm and the developmental value, then supporting children within the service's policies and risk processes.

SUPPORT THE CHILD'S JUDGEMENT

- Give time to assess before stepping in.
- Use calm, specific language about what matters.
- Notice growing competence, not only the final success.
- Allow children to choose a different way or try again later.

EDUCATOR TIP

Instead of 'Be careful', offer useful information: 'Feel whether that log moves before you put your weight on it.'

A photograph of a playground featuring a large, complex rope net structure made of thick brown ropes and yellow plastic connectors. Two children are visible within the net, one in a white shirt and the other in a grey shirt. The structure is supported by dark wooden posts. In the background, other playground equipment, including a wooden fence and a slide, are visible under a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

“Play is not just about having fun but about taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries.”

American Academy of Pediatrics

Exploration becomes inquiry

Hands-on experience helps children form and test their own ideas.

Sand can be shaped, water redirected, soil dug, materials combined and structures changed. These open-ended experiences allow children to see the effect of their decisions and try another approach.

The learning becomes deeper when there is no single finished product. Children can ask their own questions: How can we make it stronger? Why did the water stop? Which objects roll? What lives underneath?

A SHARED INVESTIGATION MIGHT BEGIN WITH

- studying insects and the places they choose to live
- building a temporary bivouac-style cubby
- testing how water moves across different surfaces
- growing, harvesting and preparing food
- collecting natural materials and finding patterns
- watching a nest, chrysalis or seasonal change over time.

The subject may begin with one child, then grow as other children bring different ideas and skills.



Stories, ideas and communication

Outdoor spaces can give children a reason to speak, listen, represent and work together.

A stage may begin a performance. A cubby may become a home, shop or spacecraft. A circle of seats may hold a story, a planning meeting or a conversation between friends.

Communication also grows through practical cooperation. Moving a long branch, operating a water pump, building a shelter or caring for a garden asks children to share intentions and respond to one another.

HELP IDEAS BECOME VISIBLE

- Invite children to draw a plan before or after building.
- Record the words used in a shared story.
- Photograph stages of a project and revisit them together.
- Offer signs, maps, puppets, fabric or mark-making materials when they fit the play.
- Make room for gesture, movement and making—not only spoken answers.



EDUCATOR TIP

When children are working together, listen for the planning and negotiation inside the play. That conversation is part of the learning.

Connection, contribution and care

Children build a relationship with place when they can influence it and care for it.

A living landscape gives children something real to contribute to. Plants respond to water. Produce becomes food. Compost returns to the soil. Habitat attracts insects and birds. Care has a visible result.

Shared work also connects children with educators, families and the wider community. A family may contribute a cutting, a recipe, a story or knowledge about a local bird. The yard becomes part of the centre's shared identity.

MEANINGFUL WAYS CHILDREN CAN CONTRIBUTE

- watering and checking the soil
- planting, harvesting and seed saving
- returning sand and loose materials
- collecting leaves for play or compost
- observing and protecting habitat
- helping decide what a shared area becomes next.

These are not jobs added after learning. Responsibility, cooperation and connection are the learning.

EDUCATOR TIP

Use the words 'care for our place'. They position children as capable contributors to something they belong to.

Add a little more possibility

A thoughtful addition can help an interest grow without deciding the outcome.

Temporary materials are most powerful when they respond to something already happening. They do not need to create a whole new activity. Their purpose is to open another door.

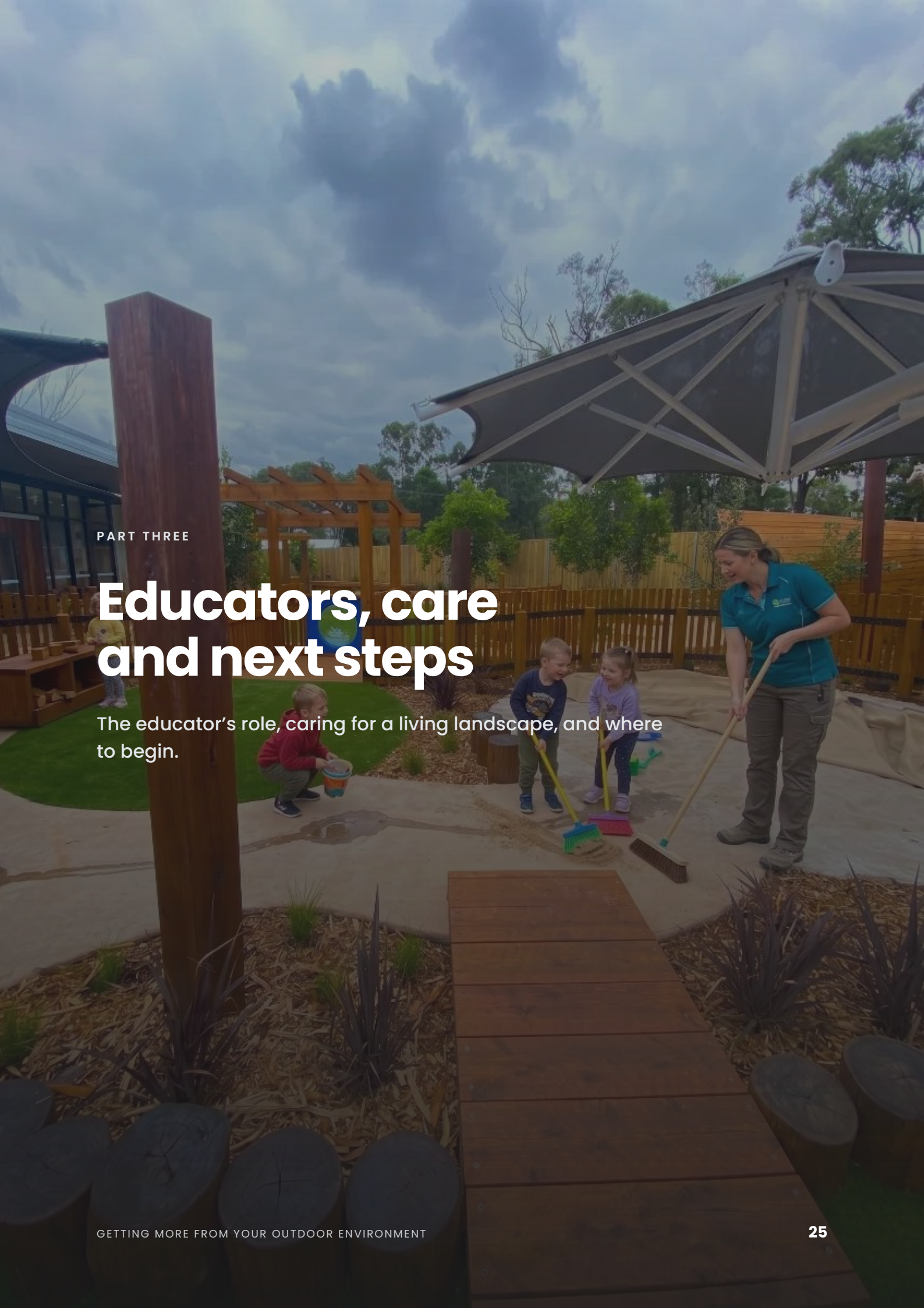
IF CHILDREN ARE...

Watching insects	add a magnifier, drawing board or simple habitat reference.
Building a shelter	offer fabric, clips, suitable branches or a way to record the plan.
Moving water	add vessels, short pipes or objects that float, sink and redirect flow.
Collecting	provide baskets or trays for carrying, comparing and arranging.
Following shadows	add chalk, translucent materials or a camera to record change.
Creating stories	offer cloth, signs, natural props or a place to perform.

The same material can become something different in another child's hands. That freedom is what keeps the experience open.

EDUCATOR TIP

Offer fewer materials with more possible uses. A simple piece of fabric can become shade, a costume, a roof, a river or a boundary.



PART THREE

Educators, care and next steps

The educator's role, caring for a living landscape, and where to begin.

The educator's part in the magic

Educators help children get more from the landscape without becoming the centre of the play.

The educator's knowledge is what turns a beautiful yard into a deeply responsive learning environment. You know when a child needs encouragement, when a group needs help to communicate and when an idea needs time rather than intervention.

This work can be quiet. Protecting an unfinished structure. Remembering a question from yesterday. Moving closer without taking over. Finding a book after the children have discovered something—not before.

FOUR HELPFUL MOVES

Notice

what has meaning for the children.

Protect

the time, space and relationships the play needs.

Enrich

with a thoughtful word, question, material or connection.

Revisit

so ideas can deepen across days and experiences.

The aim is not to keep children busy. It is to help their ideas become fuller, deeper and more connected.

EDUCATOR TIP

Before stepping in, ask yourself: Does this moment need my help, my curiosity—or simply my trust?

Care for a living landscape

Natural playspaces mature, change and become more beautiful when the community cares for them.

A living yard will never look untouched. Sand travels. Leaves fall. Timber weathers. Plants need time to establish and regular care to thrive. These changes are part of the character of the place.

Simple shared routines protect the environment without removing its magic. Children can sweep sand home, return materials, water suitable plants, collect leaves and notice changes. Adults can complete safety checks and make sure specialist maintenance reaches the right person.

ULP's maintenance guidance recommends clear ownership, especially while planting is young. New gardens need protection, deep watering and patient establishment before they can become the resilient, interactive places they were intended to be.

A USEFUL PRINCIPLE

Aim for a well-loved landscape, not a spotless one. Care should keep the environment healthy, safe and ready for tomorrow's discoveries.

EDUCATOR TIP

Make one small care ritual part of the day. Sweeping sand or checking the garden together builds pride as well as practical responsibility.

Learning outcomes brought to life

ULP landscapes aim to support services working towards Exceeding practice under the NQS.

The five EYLF and My Time, Our Place outcomes are not separate tasks to place around the yard. They are lived through the choices, relationships and discoveries a rich environment makes possible.

1 Children have a strong sense of identity

Different outdoor rooms allow children to choose where and how they take part, build confidence and find places where their personality can thrive.

2 Children are connected with and contribute to their world

Gardens, habitat, sand, water and shared projects create hands-on relationships with people, materials, living things and place.

3 Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

A balanced landscape supports movement, challenge, calm, retreat, inclusion and the secure feeling needed for immersive play.

4 Children are confident and involved learners

Open-ended places invite curiosity, experimentation, persistence, problem-solving and learning through doing.

5 Children are effective communicators

Shared building, gardening, water play, storytelling and performance create real reasons to exchange ideas and work together.

EDUCATOR TIP

For reflection or QIP notes, begin with one real moment in the yard and connect the outcome to what the child actually chose, did and discovered.



“The outdoors is different to the indoors– and this is why it matters.”

Inspired by the work of Jan White

The ULP planning framework

We design through the child's experience—not from a catalogue of equipment.

Every centre is different. Its philosophy, children, staff, site and community should shape the environment. Our role is to translate that understanding into a landscape that works as a whole.

WE PLAN FOR

Belonging	places where different children can feel secure, capable and included.
Balance	active, quiet, social, sensory, imaginative and reflective experiences.
Connection	outdoor rooms that are distinct but remain part of one understandable landscape.
Change	nature, weather, seasons and materials that keep revealing something new.
Choice	open-ended places children can interpret and influence.
Challenge	opportunities that grow confidence, judgement and physical ability.
Longevity	supervision, access, maintenance, buildability and planting that can mature well.

The strength is not in any one feature. It is in the relationships between them—and in how well the finished landscape supports the life of the centre.

EDUCATOR TIP

When considering a future improvement, begin with the experience you want children to have. The right physical response should follow from that purpose.

Putting it into practice with ULP

Has this guide got you thinking about what your yard could be?

Every centre already has a philosophy, a community and its own understanding of what children need. The opportunity is to create an outdoor environment that makes those values visible in everyday life.

ULP creates and delivers childcare landscapes that connect the thinking in this guide with real outcomes. We look beyond individual items and consider how the whole yard can support play, learning, belonging, nature and the practical life of the centre.

OUR THINKING BECOMES

- outdoor rooms where different children and different kinds of play can thrive
- living habitat that makes nature, seasons and STEM part of everyday learning
- open-ended experiences that invite curiosity, imagination and communication
- meaningful challenge that grows confidence, judgement and physical ability
- clear relationships between spaces that support supervision and uninterrupted play
- durable planting, materials and construction that can mature with the centre.

Our designers, estimators, compliance specialists and construction team work together from the beginning. This allows educational intent, budget, buildability, safety and long-term care to be resolved as one connected project—not as separate decisions passed between different parties.

START WITH THE OUTCOME

A conversation with ULP can help your team identify what the current yard already does well, what experiences are missing and where the greatest opportunity may be.

EDUCATOR TIP

Begin with what you want children, educators and families to experience. ULP can help translate that vision into a landscape that works.

Create the conditions for something special

A playspace reaches its potential through thoughtful design, passionate educators and children who are free to make it their own.

For more than 35 years, Urban Landscape Projects has created outdoor environments for children and communities. We have learned that the best landscapes do more than look inviting on opening day.

They keep giving.

They give children places to test an idea, find a friend, feel brave, become absorbed, care for something living and express themselves in ways adults may never have planned.

They give educators a rich setting for relationships, observation, inquiry and meaningful learning. They give families a place that reflects what the centre believes childhood should be.

ULP brings learning, landscape design, estimating, compliance, construction and long-term care together through one integrated process. The result is not simply a completed yard. It is an environment ready to grow with your community.

BEGIN WITH YOUR VISION

If you are considering the next chapter for your outdoor environment, we would be pleased to visit your centre, listen to what matters and explore what might be possible.

EDUCATOR TIP

The most useful starting question is not 'What should we put in the yard?' It is 'What do we want childhood to feel like here?'

References and further reading

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- ChildCareEd. Creative Ways to Use Nature as Your Classroom.
- Eco Explorers. Nature Play Ideas and Activities in Your Backyard.
- Urban Landscape Projects. Maintenance Schedule: A Guide to Keeping Your Natural Playground Looking Great.

A NOTE ON USE

Use these ideas alongside your service philosophy, policies, procedures, risk assessments, local conditions and knowledge of each child. Framework links are illustrative rather than a complete assessment guide.

EDUCATOR TIP

A single page can be used as a starting point for team reflection. Share an example from your own yard and build the conversation from there.



Landscapes for learning.

Outdoor environments that help children, educators and communities thrive.

Urban Landscape Projects

Childcare landscape design & construction since 1990

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