Nature’s learning curve

Teaching children to assess their level of risk aids emotional growth

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Education Editor

Every fortnight, rain or shine, children from Moerina School set off for their alternative classroom — a patch of virgin bush in the Beelier wetlands.

For several hours they explore, fossick for insects, collect plants and climb trees. If it’s raining they wear wet-weather gear and build themselves a tarpaulin shelter.

And even though they are not filling in worksheets, they are learning the whole time.

Their small school in Mt Claremont is one of many around the world finding ways to include nature in the school day.

Claire Warden, an international expert on teaching children outdoors who is visiting Perth this week, said “nature pedagogy” was a method of teaching that linked students’ classroom learning with their outdoor experiences beyond those four walls.

“It’s not just nature play, though it gets tagged as that, it’s more than that,” she said.

The founder of two nature kindergartens in Scotland who advises the Scottish Government on risk in learning, Ms Warden will present workshops in Perth before speaking at the Early Childhood Australia national conference in Darwin next week.

Ms Warden, who recently set up the International Association of Nature Pedagogy to connect educators and to lobby universities to introduce the method to teacher training courses, said it was suitable for children of all ages. It could include any form of nature-based learning, ranging from spending a few hours a week outside to the Scandinavian model in which kindergarten children spend 100 per cent of their time in the wild.

She said learning to cope with risks found in wilderness spaces was an important part of nature pedagogy.

Without some element of risk, children become fearful of pushing their own boundaries.

“If you don’t have any physical risk there is a greater emotional risk,” she said. “You need that physical challenge in your life to understand what your body is capable of.

“If you’re scared of your own shadow, you don’t try new things and you don’t have that inner emotional resilience to push yourself in any way.

“We’ve become so risk averse in our work, that we’re actually wrapping children in cottonwool and then they’re so fearful of pushing their own boundaries, whether that be intellectual, physical or emotional, that they sit in a very safe place. That means they’re not optimising their potential.”

Ms Warden said it was important to include children in the process of assessing their own level of risk, such as gauging the thickness of a tree branch before putting their weight on it.

Children were also taught to use real tools from a very young age and even to light fires, helping to empower them and develop their confidence.

“We never use matches, because that’s too dangerous, what we would do is always use a flint,” she said. “That means the two-year-olds would have to physically get any form of spark.”

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Teacher Maria Marsh

Curriculum, particularly in the early years,” she said.

learn a lot about how young people’s learning beyond the classroom.

“It’s not a back to the bush thing; it’s a carefully thought out way of engaging learners and extending their thinking,”

Mr Gorman said schools assessed the benefits and the risks of outdoor activities and children’s safety was paramount at all times.

Moerina School teacher Maria Marsh said she stepped up her focus on nature pedagogy after being inspired by a week-long forest schools course she attended in 2011.

She takes students from Years 1 to 6 to a natural bush site in the Beeler wetlands for a day once a fortnight during the cooler months, when snakes are dormant and the vegetation is lush.

And in the warmer months they go to “beech school.”

“Kids don’t learn by sticking to the paths,” she said. “They learn by getting in amongst it and exploring — touching, smelling, feeling, collecting.”

Ms Marsh said children who spent a lot of time outdoors changed significantly.

“They become braver, more adventurous and more robust,” she said.

“The children develop a very deep respect for fire. They develop better muscle tone, greater fine motor co-ordination.

“They pay attention to seasonal changes and the cycles of life as they come and go.”

Ms Marsh said tasks such as building a shelter helped improve children’s problem-solving skills because they had to solve complex challenges using natural materials of different shapes, sizes and tensile strengths.

“The changes to children’s co-operative skills are huge,” she said.

“They debate intensely, they all have different ideas and suggestions but ultimately they have to work as a team and co-exist together.”

Ms Marsh said it was vital to carry out benefit-risk assessments and to explicitly teach students the skills needed to work outside but Moerina parents strongly supported the aims of the program.

“I do know many schools face difficulties with overly conservative school principals and parents who themselves are terrified of the natural world or who cottonwool their children against any risk whatsoever,” she said.

Moerina School students Phoenix Comiskey, Ben Comiskey, 10, and Ned Moors-Robert, 8, enjoy climbing trees in Mt Claremont. Picture: Mogens Johansen

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Ms Warden said separate studies had found that children were not getting enough physical exercise and many were increasingly stressed.

“There are lots of little bits of research around the world which now are coming together to make a very strong argument for nature-based outdoor learning,” she said.

An increasing number of WA schools and childcare centres are embracing the trend towards nature-based teaching.

The Association of Independent Schools of WA has taken about 60 school leaders and teachers to work with Ms Warden in Scotland as part of three study tours it has hosted in the past five years.

AISWA deputy director Ron Gorman said it had mapped nature-based lessons against the WA Curriculum.

“Very few teachers are finding is that this is not an ‘add-on’, it is a means of actualising the WA Curriculum.”

Claire Warden with Moerina School students. Picture: Mogens Johansen