



Let kids get down and dirty

Article by Michael Grose

The learning and development of Australian kids is under threat because they're not playing outdoors, engaging in constructive, creative play.

The nationwide Newspoll survey revealed that the average child is spending at most, just 10 percent of their free time playing outdoors at home. Alarmingly one in 20 parents (5%) admits when their children are at home they NEVER play outdoors.

Instead, the majority of Australian kids are spending far more time indoors, watching television, playing computer games or playing with toys.

Years of research show that constructive play is an essential part of fostering inquisitive and strong minds. Playing outdoors is therefore key to normal development and lack of exposure to this kind of experience may put some children at a disadvantage.

Getting messy is how children learn, explore and express their creativity. It also helps them to stay healthy by encouraging them to exercise and by bolstering their immune system. Importantly it is through play that children learn to explore.

The Newspoll study has revealed that the 'clean kid' syndrome is widespread. Two in five kids (40%) are permitted by their parents to get dirty no more than two or three times per week.

And, according to the research it's mainly because their parents are concerned about their child's safety, but also because they're worried about cleaning up any mess their kids make.

Almost all those parents polled (96%) said they wanted their kids to excel at school, in sport and socially, yet they're reluctant to let their kids get their hands dirty. One in four (23%) youngsters never get the chance to get messed up indoors either by cooking or doing craft activities.

It is clear also that Australian parents underestimate the benefits of free, unrestricted play for children as most would prefer their children to do homework than play outside.

So, just how restrictive has outdoor play become for Australia's youngest generation? Six in ten (62%) parents claim that as kids they spent more time playing outdoors getting dirty than their own children do now, including three in ten who spent more than twice as much time outdoors getting dirty as their children.

There is a clear need to rethink now how children spend their free time and how their lives are organised. Australian parents are a well-intentioned, anxious, misinformed group. We all care greatly about our children's futures however in an effort to give them the best possible start in life we run the danger of robbing them of the childhood that we are trying to protect. For too long Australian parents have been fed the message that they need to start their children on the educational track from an early age. So, kids from as young as two are routinely shunted from one organised activity to another to maximise their development.

Parents need to be encouraged to buck the 'clean kid' trend and be less anxious about their kids getting messy. But where to start?

Let's start by insisting kids turn off the TV or computer and get outside more often. Introduce some old-fashioned activities, such as: finger painting, making mudpies, leaf stencilling and generally mucking around all in the name of good clean fun.

Importantly, parents need to value the simple interactions that they have with children on a daily basis, such as, cleaning up a spill together. And, it would be good for the well-being of both parents and kids if they spent a little time getting down and dirty together.