



## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

### Natural Spaces

*Jodie Clarke*  
The Empowered Educator

# Natural Play Spaces - 5 Important Elements

In my experience most children are happier and calmer when outdoors. I know I am. It would drive me absolutely bonkers if we spent the majority of the day inside. Outside they can run and jump and yell, and expend some of the energy that is usually deemed inappropriate and often very annoying indoors.

I think it is so important that we lead the way outdoors for them. When we show an appreciation for the great outdoors, the children in our lives will follow our lead.

It is for this reason that not long after having our twins I began jotting down ideas for what I wanted to do to our backyard to provide a space they could grow and learn in. This was before I had even considered going back to the early childhood field and becoming a family day care educator again. That is how important I feel outdoor play is.

We are very fortunate to have the space that we do here but I would still have made the same effort if we had a tiny backyard because I don't think space and budget need to be issues if you think wisely and search for inspiration.

Perhaps you already love finding ways to encourage children to play outside but are looking for some more ideas or perhaps you want to get outside more but don't know where to start or your outdoor play spaces are not ideal. A wonderful outdoor area should be constantly evolving with the seasons and the children's ages and interests. It should grow alongside the children it welcomes to play and offer many opportunities for exploration, discovery, challenge and learning.

Whatever stage you are in while reading this mini guide I have **5 easy and budget friendly elements** that you can begin introducing to your space (big or small!) right now. If you already have some of these elements then take a look at the photos I have included in each element area for some extension ideas and simple invitations to play.

# Natural Play Spaces - 5 Important Elements

## 1. Recycled Materials

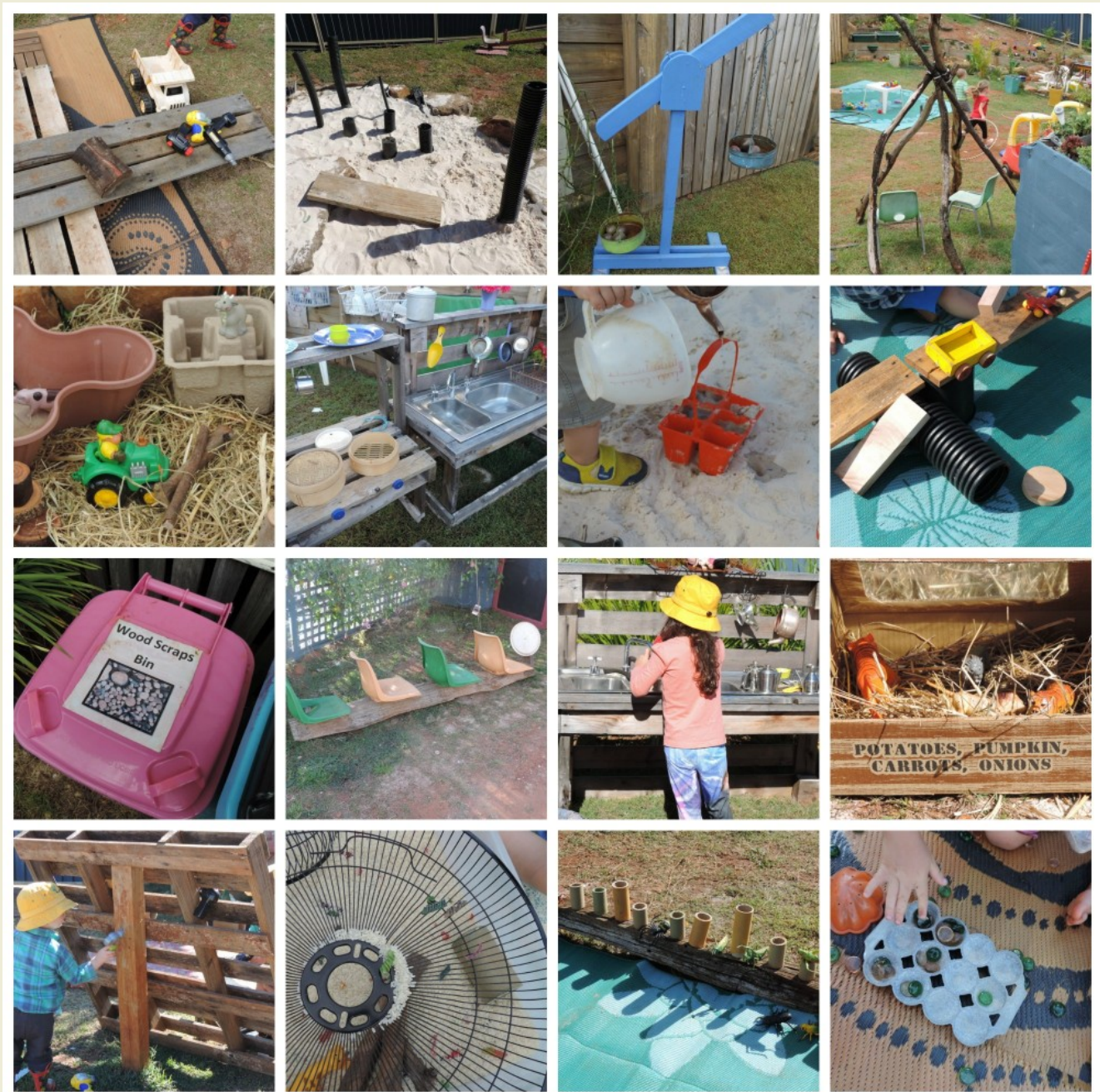


There are so many things you can do to incorporate them into your outdoor play area and give them a new life. My obvious favourite is pallets and I also love wooden spools and plastic piping. Cooking equipment and other treasures from the op shops and market stalls make perfect outdoor play resources!



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If you are short on money but like thinking outside the box then the outdoor play area is the perfect place for you to get creative with recycled materials. Their use throughout the outdoors provides children the opportunity to see the important role and effects of upcycling and recycling in action as well as engaging and offering them the chance to also explore, use their imagination and find ways to use these everyday materials themselves in many different ways.





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## 2. Water

If you have a water tank or other form of water collection system then try using that for the kids to access for water play. If not provide some water safely close by (with supervision always) Explain that you aren't going to keep refilling it as that would be wasting water. They will learn to conserve what they have after the first few times of going through it to quickly and not receiving more! I have recycled some of the large water containers that have the taps on the front. The older children turn them on when they need water for their play and off again when finished. Again, if it runs out it is finished for that sessions play.



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When watering the gardens or vegetable patch the children have a water tub they fill their watering can from and they learn how to make sure they have enough water for all areas that need it. Even my toddlers now use their watering cans so carefully – *we must give children opportunities to be responsible before we can expect them to act responsibly.*



Outside play with water provides many rich experiences for exploring this further. The use of water in the outdoor area can be a fantastic tool for learning and discovery as well as the obvious sensory benefits. It can lead to discussions about drought, water conservation, why the plants need water to grow, ecosystems and so much more. Try not to dismiss the use of water in your play area just because it might be deemed as 'wasteful'. There is always a way to turn a resource into a responsible yet fun learning experience.



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## 3. Sand, rocks, pebbles, natural materials.

Endless opportunities for them to be incorporated into play – the children will show you how! If you don't want them in your yard permanently why not fill a shallow tub or large pot with different sized pebbles and rocks. They are also fantastic to use as maths and language resources.

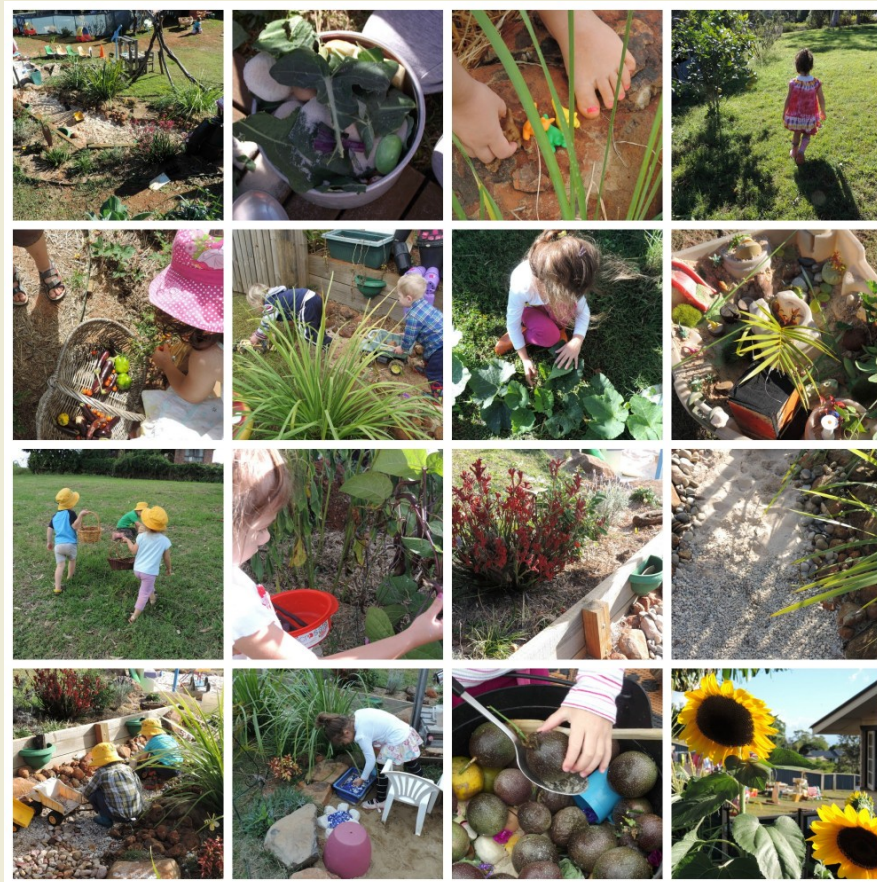


We use larger rocks and logs for climbing, balancing, dramatic play and investigation. There are smaller options that can be loaded into trucks and cars or other makeshift transporters and moved throughout the yard according to the needs of their play. They provide wonderful additions to sand or mud play and can also be used in creative activities. A day does not go by without them being incorporated into play somehow here – usually child led!

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## 4. Plants

Even if you don't have or want a garden a few little plants in pots around the yard will make such a difference and provide more opportunities for play. You can make little fairy gardens in the tub, hide things for scavenger hunts or decorate them for special event days.



Palms make great little shade plants and liriop grows fast from small seedling stock and turns a walk into a sensory experience as the children play. Herbs in pots or planted at the base of larger trees also offer opportunities for sensory play and we often use ours in our sand cooking. If you have flower gardens or a vegetable garden these can be great prompts for demonstrating the food cycle and how things grow and come to our plate. It is also a lesson in caring for things, helping them to grow and survive and show some responsibility.



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## 5. Adventure, risk, challenge

If you read my facebook page or blog regularly and look at the photos I post you will have noticed that I am not afraid to let the children explore some risk and adventure. They are learning to problem solve and practice their coordination and balance skills every time they play out there. I am always close by but I make a conscious effort not to derail their ideas and risky play if I can.



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We have rocks for climbing over, things to jump off, pallets and planks to move around the yard, loose parts for building, uneven terrain, and hills to climb and run down! I assure you I adhere to relevant safety requirements and regulations, as should you, but I always find ways to still incorporate risk as I feel it is something missing from much of their play today. When talking about risk assessment and management in outdoor play I think it is also important to *explore the benefits*.

Often the benefits of allowing the play to proceed far outweigh the perceived risks. It is up to you as a parent or qualified educator to make these judgments in your play environment but please do not dismiss them. Are you inspired to get outdoors and see what you might be able to change or include in your space? Remember to start small , add something and see how the children respond, then add something else or move a few things around. What are the children interested in at the moment? Perhaps you could use one of the elements above to extend on this interest?

Are you inspired to get outdoors and see what you might be able to change or include in your space? Remember to start small , add something and see how the children respond, then add something else or move a few things around. What are the children interested in at the moment? Perhaps you could use one of the elements in this mini guide to extend on this interest?



# Empowered Educator Mini-Guide

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