



Many schools encourage kids to follow their natural curiosity. Photo: MGGS

# Early learning guide

## Fostering curiosity through play and nature



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# Putting children and environment first

By Peter Lenaghan

Early learning providers are connecting children with their environments in innovative push to support their growth and boost resilience.

After the disruption of the COVID-19 years, educators say young people are embracing a connection with the world around them, while also building a solid foundation to thrive in their primary school years.

Strathcona Girls Grammar is one early learning provider with a new learning space in the heart of Melbourne's eastern suburbs. The school has converted three buildings into an Early Years Campus.

At the centre of the space, which integrates the early years students with those in prep and grade 1, sits an established gum tree.

"The initial brief was around light, space and time - we wanted those to be the guiding words," Lisa Miller, Strathcona's head of Junior School, says.

"The playground is all natural timbers, logs, rocks, and it really is a beautiful urban landscape in nature, integrating those two together.

"Our young families go to these beautiful parks in Melbourne, and we wanted to represent those parks, and that's what it is - it's really beautiful. Even the birds are coming in!"

In Melbourne's western suburbs, Westbourne Grammar School is harnessing local First Nations knowledge to help its children develop a strong connection with the local environment and sustainability.



**FROM LEFT: Children at play at Westbourne Grammar School; Lisa Miller, head of Junior School at Strathcona Girls Grammar.**

In collaboration with the Bunurong Land Council, the school has developed an early years program called Mark Making, which features an Indigenous artist in residence.

"It's really focused on developing children's understanding of local Indigenous culture," Teagan Collins, Westbourne associate principal, says.

"We've been working with the children around Indigenous symbols and representative drawings of nature.

"The intentionally crafted experiences and thoughtful provocations have engaged families in our Reconciliation Action Plan, which has provoked a lot of wonder and thinking about how they can



*'Our young families go to these beautiful parks in Melbourne, and we wanted to represent those parks, and that's what it is - it's really beautiful. Even the birds are coming in!'*

Lisa Miller

meaningfully connect with the Bunurong First Nations community."

For Westbourne, this is tied to helping the children develop their senses of awe and wonder for the world around them, while also developing foundations for academic learning.

"These play-based experiences provide children a meaningful context for the construction of their knowledge and understandings," Collins says.

"This deepens their thinking processes and is an opportunity for self-regulation of their learning environment, which is a beneficial skill as they move throughout their educational journey.

"Something we're finding increasingly so with our diverse community -

regardless of their race, religion, background or ethnicity - is their desire to be involved and understand First Nations culture. It is quite remarkable."

Like Westbourne, Strathcona's approach is heavily influenced by the Reggio Emilia principles of education, with children at the forefront of their learning experience, Lisa Miller says.

"What we've created is this seamless journey from three-year-olds right through to year 1 that are really well connected in terms of the pedagogy and play-based learning," she says.

"But also having intentional teaching of numeracy and literacy, we're able to scaffold that quite closely between the ELC, prep and year 1."



NATAGE T002



St Peter's Early Learning Centre at St Kevin's College is a coeducational Catholic early learning environment. We are a small setting with a big heart. Working in partnership, we are committed to instilling values of family, community and social justice.

At St Peter's ELC, we believe in setting the right foundations for school readiness through a play-based learning environment. We pay particular attention to the children's early stage of 'learning how to learn', guiding this through the principles of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project's view of 100

languages, which considers the interests and curiosities of the children. Our program also utilises Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence, which looks at how different modes of learning can benefit each child.

Educators spend time ensuring that the learning stimulus and provocations are meaningful for the children. The aim of all learning activities is to stimulate curiosity, inquiry and learning to extend and nurture each child's development.

We believe the foundations made in the early years strengthen the children's social and emotional intelligence and provides confidence so that they are ready to learn in the formal settings of school.



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# Phonics-based literacy in the spotlight

By Nathan Scolaro

How children in Victoria learn to read is set for an overhaul, with all government schools teaching the same type of reading lessons from prep to grade 2, a shift from the current system which allows principals to choose their own approach.

Centring on structured phonics, the model teaches children the sounds of the English language and the letter combinations that make them.

It also requires the use of explicit instruction, which promotes direct teaching over student-led or inquiry-based learning.

The Geelong College Junior School began its journey to explicit teaching in 2020 as the “science of reading” movement was kicking off.

“There was a growing feeling within our leadership team that we needed a more consistent approach to the way we taught reading, based on the evidence of what works,” says the junior school’s head of learning and curriculum, Christie Barrett.

“Research, along with our own experience, tells us that explicit teaching helps build strong foundations in phonemic awareness and in turn encourages a love of reading and writing.”

In 2021, Melbourne Girls Grammar School also moved to an explicit teaching model, along with the introduction of the Initialit literacy program, which has seen an increase in staff and student engagement and literacy levels.



**ABOVE: Geelong College has embraced the “science of reading” movement.** Photo: Meg Read Photography.

**ABOVE RIGHT: Lola Ballis, a teacher at Morris Hall, MGGS’s Junior Years campus, with a student.**



“Following an evidence-based program, the correct sequence and code is taught,” says Sarah Gill, the school’s executive director, junior years and early learning.

“Beginning in prep, this allows us to make sure that the important core foundations about reading and spelling are laid during this critical year. This is then consolidated and extends students’ reading and spelling knowledge through to comprehension and fluency in grade 2.”

Barrett says some important considerations for teachers implementing explicit teaching include knowing how their students learn, keeping lessons to an appropriate length and level, and embedding hands-on and visual elements.

“When we introduced the Heggerty curriculum, our children embraced it with enthusiasm,” she adds. “They eagerly look forward to word games as part of their daily routine and [revel] in their abilities to identify rhymes and onset fluency with their peers.”

“Having teachers who understand the science and research behind explicitly teaching phonemic awareness and who can deliver it in an engaging way is paramount.”

Under the structured approach, students will be taught a minimum of 25 minutes of phonics and phonemic awareness each day.

This is in addition to the other ways that early learning centres encourage literacy in young people, such as daily structure reading time, weekly library

*‘It is vital that children are taught the essential core knowledge and foundations to become successful readers and writers.’*

Sarah Gill

sessions, oral language development, performing arts and music practice, and the writing and retelling of stories.

Gill says all of it is essential to helping children develop good reading habits early on.

“There is a misconception that children will learn to read effortlessly with minimal guidance – almost by osmosis,” she says.

“Research indicates that this is not true. Students require explicit instruction to develop their reading skills effectively. It is vital that children are taught the essential core knowledge and foundations to become successful readers and writers. It’s important to teach phonics alongside a rich literature and vocabulary component.”

Barrett adds that it is the duty of schools to ensure every learner is literate for life.

“Professor Pam Snow reminds us that reading is the key to students being able to access the entire academic curriculum,” she says.

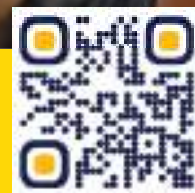
**AMICI** Westbourne’s Early Learning Centre

**IMAGE OF A CHILD**



**100 LANGUAGES**

The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based on the image of a child...who learns through the hundred languages that belong to all human beings.



[westbournegrammar.com/early-learning](http://westbournegrammar.com/early-learning)

# Kids have a natural love for bush kinder

Joanne Brookfield

The word “kindergarten” may conjure images of visually busy spaces with furniture, toys, books and artwork on the walls, but a “bush kinder” is the wide-open opposite of that.

As the name suggests, schools with early learning centres are increasingly educating their youngest students in the outdoors – or the “classroom without a ceiling” as Jeanette Russell, the early learning centre director at Cornish College, calls it.

Students at Cornish have a dedicated EcoCentre, which is for the benefit of all year levels.

“The EcoCentre is part of the 100 acres [40.5 hectares] of Bunurong natural parkland on which Cornish College is located,” Russell says. “This amount of land enables children to learn with, in, from and for nature.”

Here the youngest children have access to structured spaces like a chicken coop, vegetable gardens and an orchard. They learn to look after the animals, collect eggs and harvest vegetables and fruit that they then use in cooking.

“They can extend on ideas and knowledge they have learnt in the classroom as well as bringing back skills and understandings to the classroom,” Russell says. They also learn about the important cultural links the environment has to Indigenous and First Nations people.

ELC students at Cornish spend a morning each week learning and playing in nature, which includes



FROM LEFT: The Cornish College EcoCentre sits on 40.5 hectares; there are no facilities at Lauriston Girls' School's bush kinder.

getting wet and muddy, and climbing trees, Russell says.

“They build resilience, learning that it’s OK to be wet and maybe uncomfortable, but that doesn’t stop you from having fun,” she says. “Once we return to the classroom, they change into dry clothes.”

ELC students have a similar experience at Lauriston Girls’ School bush kinder, which is set in a natural bush environment and doesn’t have any facilities, play equipment or even a toilet.

“The educators bring in all the equipment needed, for instance, a



portable toilet – however, children are encouraged to do ‘bush wees’,” explains Lauriston director of kindergarten Fiona Ireland.

The sessions take place from 9.30am to 1.30pm. Students can access ropes, tarpaulins, magnifying glasses and a set of fishing nets for when they go ponding, but the rest relies on their creativity, imagination, collaboration and sense of play.

“Research has told us that the two things children need is to be dry and to not be hungry and then mostly they can cope with anything,” Ireland says of how these planned play experiences

*‘They build resilience, learning that it’s OK to be wet and maybe uncomfortable, but that doesn’t stop you from having fun.’*

Jeanette Russell

build a number of life skills and a hunger for learning. “Immersion in the sensory and informational richness and dynamic qualities of the bush builds basic learning responses such as identification, differentiation, analysis and evaluation,” she says.

Examples she gives include children learning to distinguish a magpie from a duck, developing quantitative skills by counting flowers, gaining materials knowledge from playing in grass and mud, and even creating ephemeral art by using “all the treasures they find in the undergrowth”.

While it looks and feels like play to the ELC students, educators have a body of evidence which indicates that contact with nature remains vital to child development.

“A bush environment, a seashore or a forest is an immersive experience, engaging and challenging the whole child physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally,” Ireland says.

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– Fiona Ireland, Director of Lauriston’s Kindergarten

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Q LAURISTON ELC



# Inspiring children through Reggio Emilia

Larissa Ham

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education has become a worldwide educational movement embraced by many Australian early learning centres (ELCs).

But what does it mean in practice?

Caulfield Grammar School's two early learning centres draw on a range of different approaches, including Reggio Emilia.

"What we've done is take what really fits with our values," says the school's ELC head, Mary Grummet. "Embracing diversity is one of those, and inspiring creativity."

The Reggio Emilia approach is named after its city of origin in Italy's north. One of the founders was a young teacher who helped parents provide care for their children after the disruptions of World War II.

Central to the philosophy is the poem *100 Languages*, which symbolises the endless potential of children and their ability to wonder.

Grummet says it's based on the idea that every child has the right to quality education and should be seen as being curious, capable and creative – "not this sort of cute little child who just needs support and help with everything".

The philosophy also highlights the importance of the learning environment, so Caulfield Grammar's ELCs are designed to be highly engaging, beautiful centres that encourage various types of learning.

An example of the philosophy at work, Grummet says, was when a



Children learning under the Reggio Emilia system at St Peter's Early Learning Centre, above, and a Caulfield Grammar ELC.

teacher set up an easel and rested the book *Welcome to Country* on it.

"One of the children had opened the book and was starting to paint a replica of one of the pages," she says.

"The teacher and the co-educator saw her doing this and were fascinated by the detail and the way in which she kept referring to the page."

While the rest of the children were busy playing with blocks, drawing or doing puzzles, the educators were able to ask the girl deeper questions.

"That, for me, just absolutely captured the way in which the environment can act as the third teacher," Grummet says.

Projects are also a huge part of the Reggio Emilia approach.



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Mary Grummet

their learning via various media, such as photos, drawings, and oral and digital recordings.

That idea of the "third educator" is facilitated by a rich collection of learning resources presented in a stimulating environment – both inside and outdoors.

Brohier says the development of connection, and the building of partnerships and relationships, is a crucial part of the children's early learning journey.

For instance, students are "buddied" with students from year 4 who visit the ELC and join in learning and play activities.

There's also a music and movement specialist, a student-led music concert and close collaboration between the staff and their colleagues at St Kevin's.

And with the ELC located next door to a retirement complex, those close connections extend well beyond the school community, Brohier says.

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