

Bringing back WONDER in our kids

A worldwide movement is putting the emphasis on children playing outdoors and roaming free, writes Mercedes Maguire



Chelsea Wallis, 4, explores the rich outdoor playground at The Point Preschool; (inset) author Caro Webster. Picture: Justin Lloyd

Four-year-old Daisy was playing outdoors at her preschool when she witnessed a scene that left her open-mouthed with wonder. Alice, the chicken at The Point Preschool in Sydney's south, was laying an egg. Together with preschool director Catherine Lee, they collected the still-warm eggs, and so began nature's impromptu lesson on where baby chickens come from.

"Nature is the best teacher there is," Lee says. "And everyday nature provides many opportunities for children to learn, explore, discover, take risks and become enriched."

Sadly, it's a lesson not all children get. With our busy, highly scheduled lives, dependence on technology and fears about safety, children are not playing outdoors as much as they did a generation ago. Gone are the neighbourhood gangs of children getting around on their bikes, making mud pies by the creek, climbing trees, collecting sea shells and watching the clouds float by.

A UK study found three-quarters of English children spend less time outdoors than prison inmates, while in the US, only six per cent of children play outdoors on their own, according to a survey by the Centre For Disease Control and Prevention.

In Australia, the figures are not much better. Less than eight per cent of Australian children play outside each day, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Author Caro Webster, whose book *Helping Kids Find Wonder in the Everyday*, is released this month, blames busy lives and over-scheduling for the generational about-face.

"We tend to over-structure children and our own lives," Webster says. "We don't let kids out to catch rain drops on their tongue, tend the vegie patch alone or simply watch the clouds float by."

"When I ask adults to name a moment in their life when they were filled with wonder, they inevitably come back with something about spending time outside. It's not when they bought their first car or their first day at school."

"We don't let our children roam any more. There is a heightened sense of stranger danger but statistics show there is not more danger — it's just that we hear about it more."

A worldwide movement to get kids back to playing in nature is gaining momentum and parents around the world are (ironically) posting on social media using the hashtag



playoutdoors. Type it into Google and you'll find images of children on rope swings over a creek, splashing in puddles and running through autumn leaves. It's not rocket science, says Webster —

they are simple scenarios we have stopped taking for granted.

One of the biggest detractors to outdoor play is technology but Webster says there are ways to combine tech devices with being outdoors, rather than simply imposing bans in the home.

People say games and TV are the best babysitters, but mother nature is a much better babysitter," she says. "However, it's not enough to simply say, 'Turn it off and deal with it.' Instead give children alternatives. Take them out for a walk to take photos, ask them to make an iMovie outside or let them go Pokemon hunting in the street."

Mother-of-three and blogger Penny Whitehouse says creating an imaginative backyard will make children want to be outdoors. On the deck, she has shelves stocked with different-shaped leaves, gumnuts, sticks and tree nuts along with craft essentials such as glue and scissors for her daughter, Lacey, 8, and five-year-old twins Jasmine and Emily to get creative with. And for Christmas she installed a mud kitchen for them to play in, complete with a sink, shakers, different-sized containers and plenty of space to get dirty.

"They do like technology but I limit their screen time to two hours a day," she says. "You'll see how fast they get bored of hanging around inside once you switch their screens off."

"It's so important for them to have alone, unsupervised time outdoors so they can learn to be independent and take risks. Of course it