



Finding hope in the ashes

How bush kinder is helping children
and educators cope with trauma

Talking about spitfires (sawfly larvae) helps the children to self-assess risk. The next week, the children remembered this clump and went to investigate, noting the clump was no longer on the tree and the area was safe.



Black Saturday still haunts the community of Kinglake, where 120 lives were lost in February 2009. While trees have grown back and many houses have been rebuilt, trauma is never far from the surface.

In 2016, Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre was at a crossroads. Educators were observing 'extreme levels of very challenging behaviour' in children across the centre, and knew it was time to make a change.

Bush kinder is born

Through critical reflection, educators identified bush kinder as a program that would support the development of strong mental health in children. The centre launched its bush kinder pilot program in January 2017 with an opt-in or opt-out option for families.

A rise in resilience

Educators have been 'absolutely astounded' by the growth in children attending the bush kinder program. Adopting a 'guidance approach' instead of outdated behaviour management techniques has been a key to success. Teacher Linda Price says, 'Children have developed the ability to keep trying in the face of adversity – they fall over and get back up, and they help and encourage each other.'

Educators have also been pleased to observe a rise in mixed-gender play, with children at bush kinder interacting outside of their normal social circles. 'Many parents have commented on the emotional growth of their children, and one of our local primary schools has noted the increased resilience and overall school readiness of children who have attended bush kinder,' says Linda.

The benefits of the bush

The great outdoors has many learning experiences to offer. 'Through close observation of the natural world, children are noticing tiny details in the environment, from a dew-laden mosquito, to the crackling of dry leaves under their feet,' Linda explains. 'As their observations become more detailed, so too do their drawings.'

Linda says bush kinder has created a space for children to flourish. 'Each child's vocabulary has expanded significantly. Children are applying learning from one context to another in ever-complex ways. They are learning how to resource their own learning and play with loose parts. Through this process, their level of creativity and problem solving strengthens from year to year.'

These anecdotal observations are reflected in data. Before 2017, children from the Kinglake Ranges lagged behind state and national averages in all developmental domains, according to Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. Things have definitely turned around since then, with the same census in 2018 placing children from the community above state and national averages and, in some instances, significantly above these averages.

Fostering strong community connections

The centre has a strong working relationship with Parks Victoria, which provided critical advice about their choice of site and environmentally sustainable activities. Linda explains, 'We are in touch with Parks Victoria each week and their local team is an invaluable asset. They have come to our sessions, worked with the children, taught us all about looking after our parklands and helped to instil a love of the land. In turn, the children have passed on their learning about bush tucker and bush medicine to our rangers and forged community connections that they otherwise would not have.'

Learning about bushfire recovery

Bush kinder has given children the chance to establish a positive relationship with fire. Linda explains that children learnt about Wurundjeri ways of managing Country with fire during a visit from Dixons Creek Primary School. Inspired by *Parent Trees Are Talking* – an ebook the school created with Uncle Dave Wandin – educators and children took the opportunity to explore the parklands, identify the damage caused by the fires and observe how the trees and bush were regenerating.

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Going on a poo walk! Using our tracking skills and a handy booklet to compare the scats, habits and habitats of different animals. Here, Isla has reasoned that the poo belongs to walert – the possum.

Linda says, 'We spoke about "good smoke" (white, cool, low smoke) and "bad smoke" (black, damaging, hot smoke) and how Australia's First Peoples have used good smoke to look after the land, keep it healthy and prevent damaging bushfires. We learnt about upside-down trees, a term used in the book to explain the standing dead trees left from the fires – these trees look like someone has flipped them upside-down so their roots are in the air. Our Parks Victoria ranger explained the importance of protecting the tree bark as it is crucial to their recovery. This kind of learning is a great way to work positively and with optimism after bushfire devastation.'

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives

Thanks to bush kinder, the children exhibit a strong connection with the land. Linda explains that their interest in Aboriginal cultures and perspectives has taken the centre on a wonderful journey of learning, which expands year on year. 'Through the Taungurung Language App and other cultural resources, we have integrated Taungurung language into our day, and this is now being embedded into all levels of our service. Families are mentioning how children are coming home from bush kinder and teaching them what they have learnt, including Taungurung and Wurundjeri language.'

Bush kinder highlights

- ✓ The children constructing an Acknowledgement of Country, which is now embedded into the daily routine at bush kinder
- ✓ The children advocating for wildlife through submissions to parliament and a social media campaign to help drought-affected possums
- ✓ The children tackling pollution in our national parklands by creating posters asking others to take their rubbish with them – this was entirely their idea, their words and their thoughts, and the community feedback has been extremely positive with many people commenting that 'there is hope for the future with amazing children like this around!'



Exploring 'nature's showers' – shaking the water from the trees. Looking at the shape of the leaves and the size of the water droplets, we are hypothesising whether the shower will result in a little sprinkle or a thorough soaking. Pure joy to be had!



The centre is proud to see the ripple effect of their efforts in their community. 'We're beginning to achieve the cultural inclusion and respect for diversity that we were striving for,' says Linda.

Bush kinder today

Three years on, the centre has integrated bush kinder as a standard part of their four-year-old kinder program. They are piloting bush kinder with three-year-olds and exploring options for incorporating 'beyond the gate' bush play for all children, including babies.

There have also been some unexpected benefits for educators. 'We're more resilient,' Linda explains. 'Our mood has lifted, our ability to deal with the unexpected has improved, and our improved mental health has enabled us to be more present and supportive for children undergoing strong emotions – this is critical for anyone working with young children.'

From Black Saturday to the Black Summer

The Black Summer of 2019–20 was characterised by catastrophic bushfires, with eighty per cent of Australians impacted. Linda says, 'As early childhood educators, we are in a unique position to support children and families through challenging times.'

There are many resources, professional services and grants to help us achieve this. However, one of the most impactful and practical ways we can help support families and children is to look after ourselves. In the words of Dr Stuart Shankar – international self-regulation expert – "Be kind to yourself... We need you to recognise that if you are over-stressed, if you are in a state of low energy, high tension, it's going to be very hard for you to help a [child] who needs your help. So, start with you."



Resources

Parent Trees Are Talking ebook

www.schools.aidr.org.au > Disaster resilient education > Resilient Australia School Award > Firestick Project > Parent Trees Are Talking

Taungurung Language App

www.vaclang.org.au > Resources > Apps > Taungurung