

# BEDROCK

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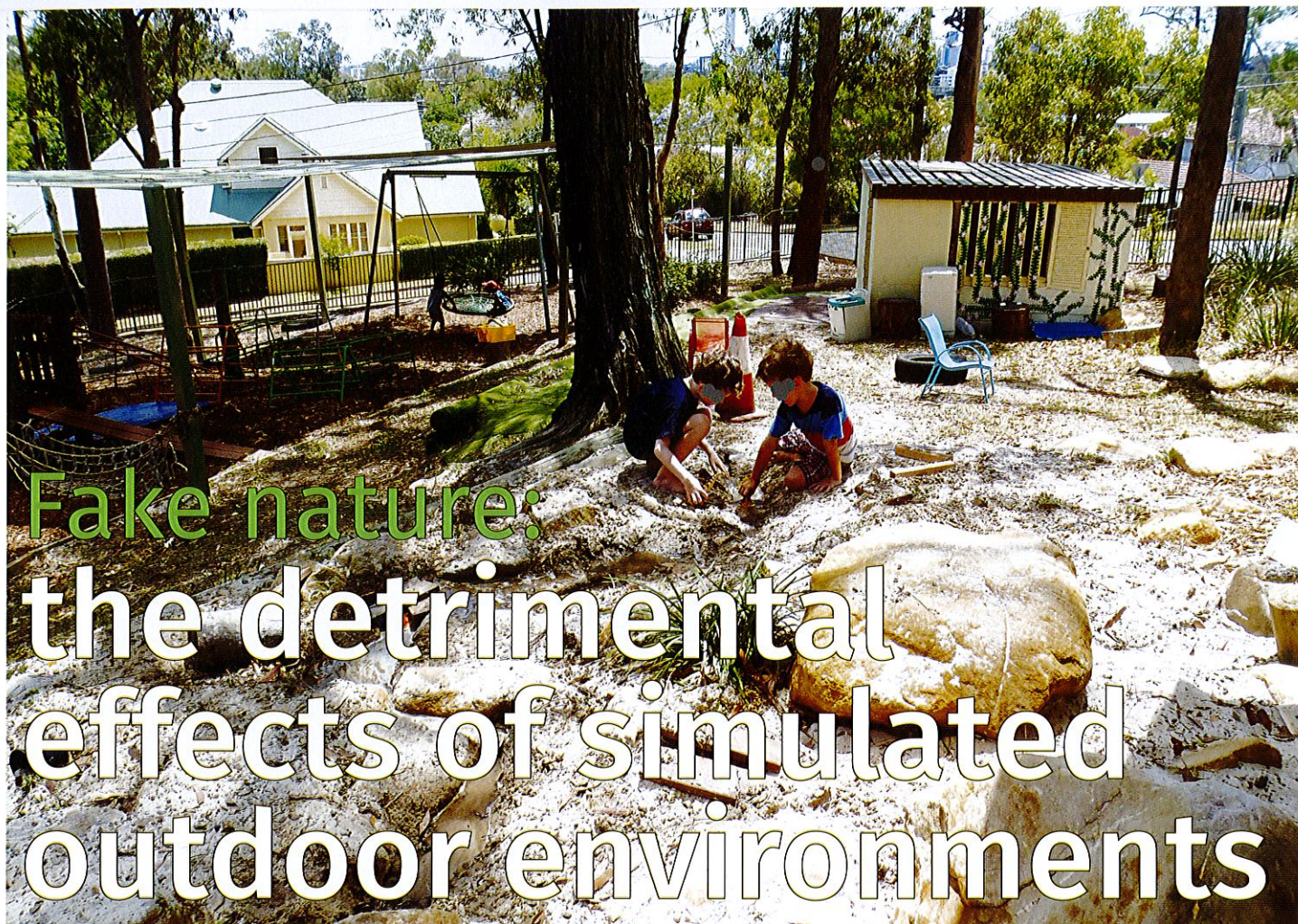
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**Three Melbourne early childhood education centres have been granted exceptions to national regulations regarding outdoor space – meaning children at these centres have no access to real nature or the outdoors on a daily basis. Journalist Sara El Sayed looks at how ‘fake nature’ can be damaging to children and the crucial role outdoor space plays in a child’s development.**

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations define outdoor learning spaces as a necessary feature of Australian learning environments.

These spaces invite open ended interactions, spontaneity, risk taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education.

However, according to Early Childhood Australia, children in Australia are currently experiencing an increasing disconnection with nature. Evidence for this disconnection is diverse – for example, a toddler who finds it challenging to place their bare feet on grass or a four year old who suggests that apples are manufactured in supermarkets.

This harsh reality highlights the importance of environmental education and why exposing children to the outdoors is crucial to their development.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) outlined by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) states that for every child in an ECE centre there must be at least seven square metres of unencumbered outdoor space.

However, the Victorian Department of Education and Training has signed off on waivers for centres in Highpoint, Collins Street and Melbourne Central, making them exempt from this standard due to limited access to suitable land for childcare services.

As an alternative, these centres have created ‘simulated outdoor environments’ which include fake trees made out of concrete pillars, synthetic plants and grass, sky and clouds painted on walls, and small sand pits in plastic shells.

These centres claim they cannot provide children with outdoor areas due to geographical location and space restrictions.

A rationale given by the general manager of one of the exempt centres was that the children would never be disrupted by Melbourne’s extreme weather if they played in indoor spaces.

Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Melbourne, Dr Kay Margetts, said the justification for these exemptions is inadequate.

“It is ridiculous to claim that children are better off inside because of the Melbourne weather,” Dr Margetts said.

“A rainy day is not an excuse to deprive children of outdoor spaces all year round.

“Being exposed to the outdoors – particularly the air and the sunshine – on a regular basis is critical to a child’s health and wellbeing.

“Research shows that exposure to sunlight helps children improve their ability to see long distance.

“In addition to this, regular outdoor play helps children develop kinaesthetic awareness, spatial awareness, social and cognitive development and supports children’s creativity.

“Outdoor learning is and should be an integral part of an educator’s program planning – making it critical to have an outdoor space in every centre.

“There is nothing you can do inside that you can’t do outside, but there are things you can do outside that you can’t do inside.”

Dr Margetts said there are alternatives for centres that struggle with space restrictions in city locations.



"Some centres built in cities have play areas that are located on the roof – the sky is the limit when planning outdoor space.

"If a centre cannot accommodate for the basic needs of children while in city spaces then that centre must be moved to a more appropriate location.

"National standards are a bare minimum and for any new centre being built there should be no exceptions to the bare minimum," Dr Margetts said.

While some centres avoid the minimum standards, others make outdoor space an integral part of everyday learning activities.

St Lucia Kindergarten in Brisbane use their outdoor space to its full potential by maintaining a vegetable garden that the children are regularly involved in.

This space helps the children learn about how plants grow, as well as giving the centre's educators an opportunity to have conversations with children about healthy habits.

The children have opportunities to connect with nature, learn about the environment and the impact they can have on it.

Director and teacher at St Lucia Kindergarten, Wendy Burton, said that having dedicated outdoor spaces for children is critical.

"We are finding that many children at our centre now live in units or houses with small backyards, making the need to help children create connections with nature all the more apparent," Wendy said.

"Our outdoor environment is a wonderful place for the children to learn and develop skills.

"They are able to learn about relationships with others and are supported to confidently make friends.

"Outdoor space is the best place for children to learn about the world and appreciate the value of the natural environment.

"It is also the most appropriate space for children to learn about physical activity and healthy exercise habits."

Wendy said her centre also aimed to teach students about the importance of sustainable practice.

"Educators at our centre work together as a team to ensure that we have programs in place that support and model environmentally friendly and sustainable practices.

"We are working to ensure that learning about sustainable practice is a planned part of the children's everyday experience," Wendy said.

Quality learning activities – such as those conducted by St Lucia Kindergarten – cannot be effectively implemented in centres that only provide children with simulated outdoor space.

While only three centres have been excused from meeting national standards, it is crucial that there is no further deprivation of outdoor space in Australian ECE centres – so children are able to learn in an environment that meets their developmental needs.

*"It is ridiculous to claim that children are better off inside because of the Melbourne weather."*

#### References

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