

## Brown Hill Bush Kinder, Ballarat, Victoria

Christine Sullivan, founder and director 2012–2018

I read an article about the Westgarth bush kinder and felt it was a great idea for our setting. We established the program in 2012 and usually it runs from the end of term one through to mid- to late term four, depending on conditions at the time such as bushfire risk and snakes. The children spend one five-hour session per week at the bush kinder site. My early morning site inspection informs my discussion with the children about any changes in conditions or observations before we leave the home kinder.

The children carry their own backpacks with food and drink and walk to the bush kinder as a group. The staff pull a trolley containing water, a camp toilet, tent, spare clothes, balls, magnifying glasses, bug catchers, bird and bug resource books and our emergency evacuation bag. On arrival one staff member sets up the toilet and another involves the children in a game while the teacher places the boundary tape around the site. Once the tape is in place the children discuss the rules and any special ideas for the day before heading off to explore the environment. One staff member stays near 'home base', where the toilet and first-aid gear are located. We are always staffed one above ratio.

The children are invited to have a snack whenever they choose, but the whole group comes together for lunch. After lunch we might go, as a group, to 'the rock wall' or look more closely at the river, explore another area outside the bush kinder boundary or the children might continue their play. The kindergarten is alongside the Yarrowee River, deforested in the gold-rush days and replanted over the years since with stands of eucalypts and acacias, and open grassed areas as well, so there are diverse landscapes for play.

Our preschool has always welcomed children with additional needs—including children on the autism spectrum, children with vision and hearing impairment, children with cerebral palsy and with significant medical conditions. Parents who were anxious about their child's ability to participate safely at bush kinder were usually reassured when we discussed strategies and safety procedures and when they were able to observe their child at bush kinder.

Over the years we have involved a range of community members including local birders, members of the Aboriginal community, friends and family members and Ballarat Council parks and gardens staff. Council staff partner with us each year to plant new trees and talk about birds, trees and spiders we might find in the area and they involve us when they notice particular things and in events such as when trees

are lopped. Friends and community members helped us with other special activities such as putting nets into the river to see if there were fish or exploring the area with a metal detector. Once we had some locals share their knowledge of gold panning in the river.

On some occasions we were fortunate to have a local First Nations person visit us and share stories and information about how First Nations People may have lived in the area in the past. She related her message to what the children might find or already knew including how to use the sap as a glue or medicine, and what the blossoming of particular plants or the sighting of certain birds might mean.

Resources, planning and routines have evolved in response to a greater understanding of the site and the way the children have engaged outdoors. I have been inspired by research shared by other bush/forest kinders and schools in Australia and around the world. I have attended a number of Australian conferences and professional development sessions and it has been a privilege to talk with and hear the experiences of people with similar interests. Being open to ideas and research (not always specific to early childhood or education) has always been a source of new knowledge that I have been able to share with the children and then strengthen their connections with learning in a natural outdoor setting.

We encourage children to assess risks and we ask questions to assist them do this, for example, ‘Look at the branches of the tree, are they bending?’ ‘Will they be strong enough to hold you if you climb them?’ I also reserve the right to say ‘no—we are not doing that or going there’, based on my risk assessment and the children appear comfortable with that.

We have a bush kinder book on site where children make drawings of things they find or do to document these. We also add photos which children can add captions to. We document individual and group activities and experiences in learning folios as well as periodically inviting children to contribute stories or ideas.



**Figure 11.1** Brown Hill Bush Kinder