



Best in class: a guide to
outdoor play and learning
spaces for schools



The real
potential
of your outdoor
spaces – for a thriving
and inspiring school
community

A new world of opportunity



A school's outdoor spaces and wellbeing-focused facilities are prized more than ever.

COVID-19 has forced a re-think of the educational environment, including more use of the great (and naturally ventilated) outdoors for teaching and learning.

But the benefits of well-planned and well-used outdoor facilities go well beyond safety. Research has proven that active play and outdoor classes can improve everything from strength and stamina to concentration and sense of belonging.

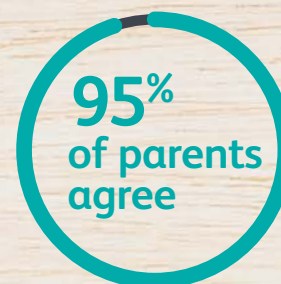
The why

When it comes to maximising and promoting the power of your outdoor facilities, let the facts tell the story. More than ever, thoughtful development and use of your outdoor play and recreation spaces will help your school stand out – and your students flourish. They can also be powerful examples of how your school is striving towards its principles, values and goals.

And parents will thank you... Research shows that, worldwide:



that children's learning would suffer without opportunities to play



that, without play, children cannot reach their full potential.



The facts

The trend towards risk-free, sedentary, indoor living transforms the experience of childhood, contributing to a wide range of issues, including:



Sensory deficits, clumsiness and underdeveloped balance



Lack of muscle strength and endurance.

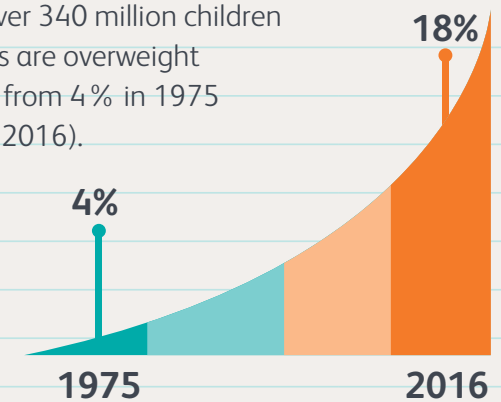


Lower self-esteem, confidence and social skills



Weight gain

According to the World Health Organisation's latest figures, over 340 million children and adolescents are overweight or obese (rising from 4% in 1975 to over 18% in 2016).



Play's potential



Once considered a break from ‘real learning’, the school playground is now considered an education essential.

Great playgrounds and outdoor learning spaces – used well – have a proven impact on children’s physical, social and mental development. Physical activity and outdoor learning also have the power to boost engagement, concentration and even academic results.

Let’s focus on a few of the key capabilities that are supported by a development-rich playground.



Climbing



Physical benefits

- One of the few activities that can be considered a true full-body workout, which is ideal for physical development during crucial periods of growth.
- Works the back, abdominals and leg muscles – as well as fingers, shoulders and arms.
- Improves stamina, muscle strength, stability, flexibility and agility.



Brain benefits

- Climbing nets are like puzzles requiring planning and patience.
- Develops concentration, determination and problem-solving skills.
- Helps to improve a child's confidence, creativity, independence and critical thinking.
- Many rope, net and climbing structures accommodate multiple children to boost social skills.



Examples

- Climbing units (**like our 2.7-metre Funnel Web**) are compact but action-packed, with a spider-web net hung on a slanting angle, with access up or down via the climbing chimney, rope ladder, rubber membrane belt or triangle climbing net.
- Vertically inclined nets and structures (**like the 5.3-metre Pirate Tower**) build student strength as they learn to lift their own weight.
- Flatter or horizontal nets and structures, such as monkey bars (**or this Titan 2 Unit**), offer excellent balance activities for kids, as they must evenly distribute their weight to keep from falling.



2.7-metre Funnel Web



5.3-metre Pirate Tower



Titan 2 Unit

Jumping



Flashtramp Pi – Starlight



Physical benefits

- Strengthens muscles from the feet to the core, helping in everything from play to sitting up straight.
- Improves coordination, flexibility and endurance.
- Provides a great cardiovascular workout to keep hearts healthy.
- Improves motor skills, reflexes and reaction time.
- Improves joint, tendon and ligament function.



Brain benefits

- Strengthens the vestibular system, which includes the parts of the inner ear and brain that help control balance and eye movements.
- Improves spatial awareness and boosts mental alertness – a bonus in the classroom!
- Requires the right and left hemispheres of the brain to work together, developing neurological connections important for skills like reading.



Examples

- **Trampolines** are perfect – and have revolutionised for the school playground, with safer in-ground options that are simple to install with no concrete foundations necessary.



Balance



Physical benefits

- Improved ability to hold the body upright and steady during a task – whether sitting at a table, walking the balance beam or stepping up onto the footpath.
- Better able to maintain controlled positions during both static and moving activities.
- Improved endurance and less fatigue during tasks.
- Lower risk of injury, with appropriate postural responses as needed (like putting their hands out for protection when they fall).
- Balance and bilateral coordination can support a child's vision system for reading, posture for taking notes from the whiteboard, and attention.
- Better mastery of motor skills required for hopping, skipping, catching, riding a bike and swimming.



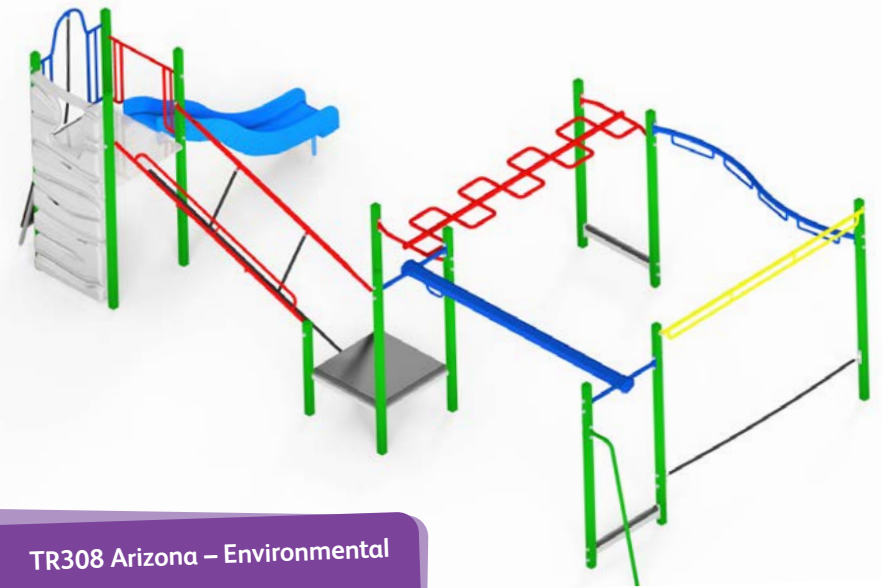
Brain benefits

- The ability and willingness to join in and enjoy essential gross motor activities (eg playing in the playground, running, jumping).
- More confident about playing sports which contributes to self-esteem, friendships, fitness and lifelong wellbeing.



Examples

- The opportunities are endless for balancing fun in the playground, with **compact units** that combine sliding, balancing and climbing, to **activity trails**, balancing logs that can standalone or be incorporated into other equipment, and wobbly wood climbing units.



TR308 Arizona – Environmental



Activity Trail FV2



Strength and stamina

Muscle Buster Fitness Station



Log Bridge Fitness Station



Physical benefits

- Muscle strength and endurance are vital building blocks for a healthy body.
- Crucial for everyday functions like carrying bags, walking, running and playing sport.
- Contribute to high metabolism, reducing the risk of obesity.
- Improve posture and build stronger tendons, ligaments and joint health, reducing injury risk.
- Boost persistence and resilience.



Brain benefits

Children with low muscle strength and endurance will often have problems with:

- writing and drawing for long periods
- self-care (eating, dressing, cleaning teeth)
- holding and using cutlery, pencils and scissors with control
- postural control and alertness
- balance, coordination and fine motor skills.



Examples

- Monkey bars, like our **Crazy Bars Fitness Station**, are fantastic for building stamina and can be used for modified 'pull-ups'. On this one, the parallel bars wobble: testing and honing agility and fine and gross motor skills.
- Our wobbly bridges and **log bridges** provide unstable surfaces to master: requiring significant effort and increasing overall body strength.

The whole student



Learning



Engagement

- 88% teachers surveyed in the global Outdoor Classroom Day Survey (2017/18) said children are more engaged in learning when taking lessons outdoors – and the same number said that children are happier after playing outdoors.
- Outdoor learning and play create healthier kids: children come to school more often, can concentrate better, physically sit at their desks for longer, can see better and can learn more.



Lower impulsivity

A research study suggests that physical activity has a calming effect on impulsive children. Published in the Obesity Reviews, researchers showed that the brain manages inhibitory control – which, in turn, regulates impulsive behaviour.



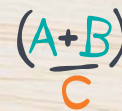
Attention and concentration

- A report from the Institute of Medicine concluded that children who are more active “show greater attention, have faster cognitive processing speed and perform better on standardised academic tests”.
- When children get physical activity breaks, they’re better able to learn for 30-60 minutes following the activity.
- A California Department of Education study found that fit kids scored twice as well on academic tests as those who were unfit (on standardised testing in maths and language arts).
- Research shows that getting outdoors results in better learning outcomes, across the board. Outdoor learning can create improvements across all academic disciplines, helping with problem-solving and enthusiasm for learning; and can contribute to improved test scores and grade averages.



Memory

- A recent study found that ‘proprioceptively dynamic’ activities – like climbing upwards or balancing on a beam – done over a short period of time, can improve working memory.
- Proprioception is the sense of knowing where your body part is in space (affecting balance).



Executive function

Exercise helps develop executive functions like sequencing, memory, and prioritising: important skills for school and life. Put simply, physical activity in school primes the brain for learning.

The whole student

Wellbeing



General

- Children feel better and perform better after they have been outdoors.
- Getting outdoors helps children feel calmer, helps process their day and builds resilience.
- In adolescents, creative play is correlated with coping skills, indicating play helps develop flexibility towards problems.



Social skills

- Playgrounds are where children meet, engage and learn from others. It's where children start building the social skills they'll need for their lives.
- Through play, children learn skills such as sharing, negotiating, leadership and empathy. These social skills are important because they improve self-confidence and reduce the likelihood of bullying.



Sustainability and stewardship

- A 2017 study from the University of British Columbia demonstrates that children who play outside are more likely to cherish and protect nature when they become young adults.
- There is an increasing demand for more natural play equipment that embraces and blends in with the natural landscape, like our own Nature Play and Wobbly Wood ranges.



Smart, hi-tech health

There's no getting around it: children are drawn to technology.

Fortunately, there's now equipment to create 'smart playgrounds' that integrate lights, sounds sequences, games and activities to create learning, movement and interactive play.

High-tech, high-activity outdoor play is a reality: engaging screen savvy kids, helping them learn (according to curriculum) while keeping them on the move.

An '**e-Wall**' is an easy set up 'plug & play' module using six sensors and a learning app that facilitates tailored teaching and physical activities.



How we can help



We have a proven reputation and track record across Australia, New Zealand, the Middle East and the world – all backed by international quality and certified safety standards.

Our leading playground equipment range and bespoke play solutions can take your school's outdoor facilities to the next level.

We can help you plan a new, or upgraded, playground that showcases best practice design and evidence-based, development-rich play equipment. Enjoy a flexible, options-based approach to ensure the best investment for your space and budget. We're also experts at incorporating diversity for all ages, abilities, backgrounds and experience.



Play:

Enticing, exciting school playground equipment – to promote wellbeing, connection and collaboration.



Fitness:

Smart fitness equipment to build strength and stamina – including a range of compact solutions with big student appeal.



Outdoor classrooms:

A choice of ingenious concepts for open-air learning to invigorate and engage students through a fresh approach to teaching.



Questions or advice?
We'd love to talk.

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Key sources:

- From muddy hands and dirty faces to higher grades and happy places: Outdoor learning and play at schools around the world (Cath Prisk and Dr Harry Cusworth November 2018)
- What makes a good play area for children? Dr Lisa Wood and Dr Karen Martin, The University of Western Australia.