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# Climbing Trees: Getting Aussie Kids Back Outdoors



A research report commissioned by

**PLANET ARK**

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# About This Report

In March 2011, Planet Ark commissioned an independent study to investigate childhood interaction with nature and how this interaction is changing. The research was conducted by Pollinate, a specialist communications research company, and was sponsored by Toyota Australia.

This report presents the results of this research but also draws on the work and key findings from the 2004 study, *An Investigation of the Status of Outdoor Play*, conducted by Rhonda Clements of Hofstra University, New York, which looked at the extent to which children in the USA participate in active outdoor play compared with the previous generation.

The Planet Ark commissioned research sought to replicate this American study in an Australian context, focusing on the levels of current childhood outside activity compared with the previous generation, as well as the perceptions of the benefits of outdoor activity, the barriers to outside play and people's understanding of National Tree Day.

This report also discusses the benefits for children that come from active outdoor play, drawn from the growing body of research around this field of study. Additionally, this report seeks to provide a range of practical solutions that parents and caregivers can integrate into a regular routine to help reunite children with nature.

## Acknowledgements

This research report was written and edited by Planet Ark staff Anna Bowden, Lucy Band and Brad Gray, with editorial input from Jodie Lewin.

The research was conducted by Howard Parry-Husbands and Bernard Visperas from Pollinate.

## Planet Ark

Planet Ark is an Australian not-for-profit environmental organisation, founded in 1992. In partnership with the public, businesses, councils and local community groups, Planet Ark works to achieve real and measurable results in reducing our impact on the environment.

Since Planet Ark's National Tree Day began in 1996, more than 16 million native trees, shrubs and grasses have been planted by over 2.5 million volunteers across the country. It is Australia's largest community tree planting and nature care event, as well as the largest single nature care activity in Australian schools. Each year, over 250,000 Australian school aged children take part in Schools Tree Day.

National Tree Day 2011 is Sunday 31st July and Schools Tree Day is Friday 29th July.

## Toyota

Toyota Australia is celebrating its 12th year as the Major Sponsor of Planet Ark's National Tree Day. Toyota has approached the partnership in a collaborative way and continues to mobilise its entire business network of dealers, staff and brand ambassadors to support, participate in and contribute to National Tree Day. Toyota's involvement in National Tree Day demonstrates its commitment to supporting the environment through community involvement, as well as ongoing innovations in technology such as the Hybrid Synergy Drive powered Prius and Hybrid Camry, the first commercially-available hybrid vehicle to be built in Australia.



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# Executive Summary

## The Decline in Outdoor Play in Australia

The research shows that there has been a dramatic shift in childhood activity from outdoor play to indoor activity in the space of one generation.

- 73% of respondents played outdoors more often than indoors when they were young compared to only 13% of their children
- 72% of respondents played outside every day as kids compared to only 35% of their children
- 1 in 10 children today play outside once a week or less.

## The Nature of Outdoor Play

As well as playing outdoors less often, the research shows that the nature of children's outdoor activity in Australia is also changing.

- 73% of respondents said they played on the street when they were young compared to only 24% of their kids
- 64% of respondents said they climbed trees as kids but less than 20% of their children participate in this activity.

## The Benefits of Outdoor Play

Even in light of this dramatic change in kids' activity, respondents have a clear belief in the benefits of active outdoor play.

- 92% of respondents agreed that outdoor play allows children to use their imaginations
- 93% of respondents agreed that outdoor play helps develop physical and motor skills
- 90% of respondents agreed that outdoor play provides an outlet for reducing everyday stress.

## The Barriers to Outdoor Play

The research shows that the collapse in outdoor play can be attributed to a number of real or perceived barriers.

- Crime and safety concerns, as a barrier to outdoor play, have seen the most dramatic increase with 33% of respondents indicating that this is a barrier today compared to only 9% who said it was a barrier when they were young
- Lack of time parents have to play outside with their children has also become a more significant barrier – 26% of respondents stated that this is a barrier today while 11% said it was a barrier when they were kids
- The amount of homework children have to do does not appear to be a barrier to outdoor play, with the reported time spent on homework remaining fairly consistent across the current and previous generations.

## National Tree Day

National Tree Day was recognised by 77% of respondents as a positive way to encourage children to play outdoors and explore nature.

# Survey Methodology

## Collection Method

The survey was conducted online and was approximately 15 minutes in duration. The survey was conducted between March 28 to April 4, 2011

## Survey Sample

1,002 Australians aged 14-65 years of age responded to the survey. The sample is nationally representative of the Australian population in terms of age, gender, location and metro-regional characteristics.



# Part 1: From Outdoors to Indoors

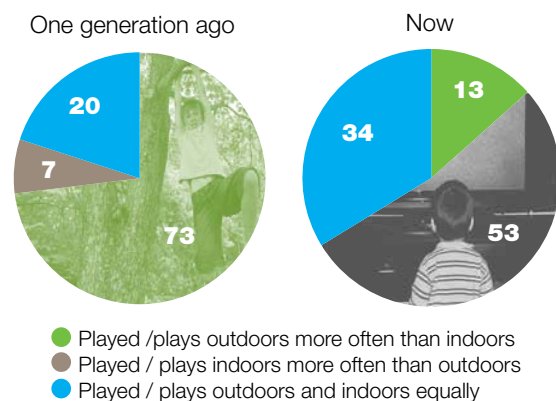
## The Decline in Outdoor Play in Australia

Australia is a nation defined by its outdoor environments – the red centre, golden beaches, the bush and clear blue seas. However, our research reveals that one in ten Aussie kids play outside once a week or less. We have become a nation of indoors, not outdoors.

*One in ten Aussie kids play outside once a week or less.*

The landscape of childhood has changed. In a single generation, we have seen a profound shift from outdoor to indoor play, with 73% of respondents indicating that as children they played outdoors more often than indoors compared to only 13% of their kids. Additionally, 72% of survey respondents indicated that they played outside every day when they were young compared to only 35% of their children.

### Kids' level of outdoor vs. indoor activity



Base is those who have any child currently aged between 3-12 years, n=246

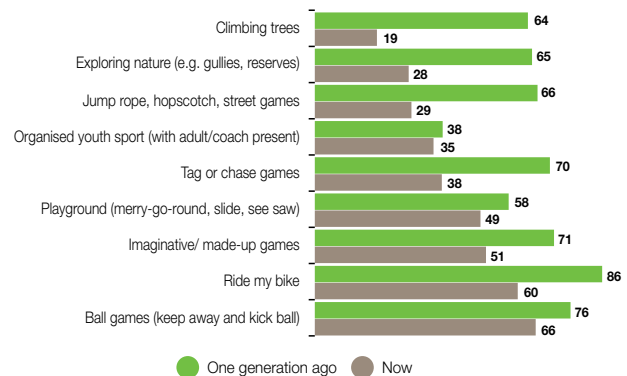
*Kids don't climb trees anymore – less than 20% of respondents said their kids participate in this iconic outdoor activity.*

## The Nature of Outdoor Play

Not only is the frequency of outdoor play changing, the nature of outdoor activity in Australia is also changing. Ball games are declining but still popular and organised youth sport remains nearly stable at 35%. Where we see change is in children's participation in games like tag, hopscotch and street games, along with the general exploration of nature, all of which have declined significantly.

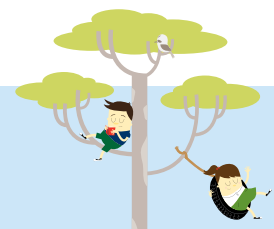
Kids don't climb trees anymore, with less than 20% of respondents indicating their kids participate in this iconic outdoor activity. This is a staggering drop from the 65% of parents who were climbing trees during their childhood.

### Outdoor activities



Base is those who have any child currently aged between 3-12 years [for PARENT] who played outdoors, n=244 & [for CHILD] whose child plays outdoors, n=243

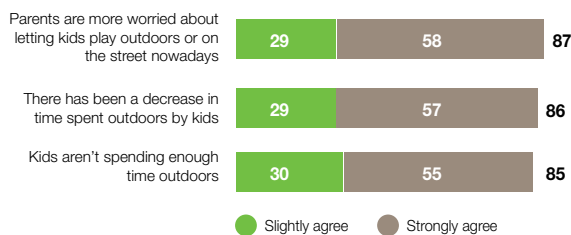
The most common arenas for outdoor play are still the backyard and local parks. But playing on the street has declined greatly, with 73% of respondents agreeing that they played on their street as kids compared to just 24% of their children.



## The Benefits of Outdoor Play

Importantly, respondents recognise that children's outside activity and interaction with nature has significantly declined. The data showed that 86% of respondents acknowledged that there has been a decrease in time spent outdoors by kids and 85% of respondents agreed that kids aren't spending enough time outdoors.

### The change in children's interaction with nature



Base is total sample, n=1002

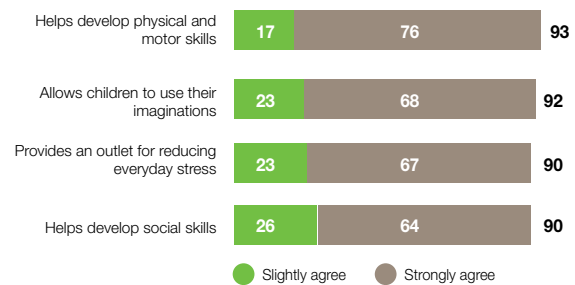
The respondents believe that active outdoor play delivers several benefits to children, for example:

- 92% of respondents agreed that outdoor play allows children to use their imaginations
- 93% of respondents agreed that outdoor play helps develop physical and motor skills
- 90% of respondents agreed that outdoor play provides an outlet for reducing everyday stress.

*85% of respondents agreed that kids aren't spending enough time outdoors.*

Essentially, the respondents believe that outdoor activities help children develop physical and cognitive skills, encourage them to use their imagination and help reduce stress. This belief is supported by a significant body of research as outlined in section 3 of this report - The Impacts of Indoor and Outdoor Play.

## Benefits of childhood outdoor activity



Base is total sample, n=1002

## Why Are We Playing Indoors? The Barriers to Outdoor Play

While this data shows there has been a collapse in outdoor play, that doesn't mean Aussie kids don't want to play. They are still kids and they love to play, it's just where they are playing that has changed. So why has an outdoors nation produced an indoors generation?

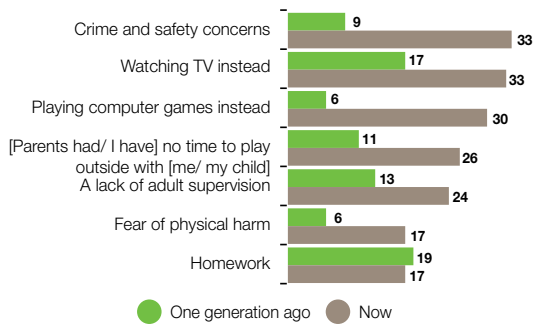
The data reveals that the change in levels of outdoor activity is not because of too much homework, which has remained at a similar level, on average approximately 15-30 minutes per day, from one generation to the other.

*Concerns about crime and safety have dramatically increased.*

Concerns about crime and safety have dramatically increased, with 9% of respondents stating this was a barrier when they were children compared to 33% who view it is an obstacle today. Lack of time that parents have to play outside with their children is also a more common barrier today than it was a generation ago. This implies that parents are too fearful, but also too busy, to let their children play outside.



## Barriers to outside activity



Base is those who have any child currently aged between 3-12 years, n=246

Sedentary activities such as watching television and playing computer games have also increased, with 90% and 75% of parents respectively indicating that their children engage in these two indoor activities. This suggests these modern pastimes are filling the space once occupied by outdoor play. Comparatively, a generation ago,

the most common after school activity was playing outside, as indicated by 91% of respondents with children.

However, routine opportunities for outdoor activity have also declined, such as walking or riding a bike to school. While 75% of respondents with kids indicated that as children they lived close enough to walk or ride their bike to school, only 37% of their children live close enough to do so. Conversely, 25% of parents surveyed said their children live close enough to walk or ride to school but are driven, yet only 10% of respondents who lived close to school when they were young were driven there.

We know that kids are still kids and love to play. The issue raised here appears to be that children need opportunities for safe and easy outdoor activity and exploration. We need to, and we can, get Australian kids back outside and climbing trees.



# Part 2:

## An International Perspective – Indoor Play: A Global Trend

The 2004 study, *An Investigation of the Status of Outdoor Play*, surveyed eight hundred and thirty mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 12 across America. The study investigated the mothers' active outdoor play experiences as children, as well as their children's play experiences today. This study produced strikingly similar results to the Australian research outlined above.

### The Decline in Outdoor Play

The American study showed that 85% of the mothers agreed that today's children play outdoors less often than children did a few years ago. Comparatively, the Australian survey showed a substantial decline in just one generation, with 73% of parents saying they played outdoors more often than indoors when they were young compared to only 13% of their children.

### The Nature of Outdoor Play

The change in the nature of outdoor activities was also reflected across the studies. While structured games like organised youth sports are popular, a significant decline is evident across both studies in the exploration of nature, climbing trees, imaginative games, and hopscotch/jump rope and other street games using child-initiated rules.

### The Benefits of Outdoor Play

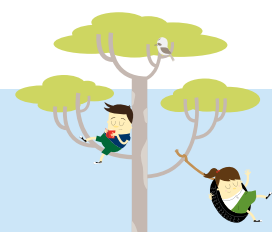
Importantly, this survey, as with the Australian results, showed that mothers are aware of the positive physical, cognitive and health impacts



that active outdoor play has on their child's development. In the American study, 93% of mothers indicated that outdoor play positively impacts children's physical and motor skills development, 97% agreed that outdoor play offers children an outlet for reducing everyday stress, and 92% percent indicated that outdoor play lets children be creative and use their imaginations.

### The Barriers to Outdoor Play

The obstacles to outdoor play strongly reflect the barriers identified in the Australian survey - crime and safety, watching television/playing games, parents' lack of time and a lack of adult supervision. When asked about the number one reason for the lack of outdoor play, the American survey showed that 85% of mothers identified their child's television viewing and computer game playing and 82% identified crime and safety concerns. In the Australian study, 77% of parents said they do not have adequate time to spend outdoors with their children and 61% identified a lack of adult supervision as a barrier.





# Part 3:

## The Impacts of Indoor and Outdoor Play

The analysis of both research studies clearly identifies a downward trend in children's active outdoor play, both in Australia and overseas. However, without understanding the impacts of this decrease, the full significance of this trend cannot be realised. While neither the Planet Ark research nor the American study investigates these impacts, there has been significant research into the outcomes of this trend.

### The Benefits of Climbing Trees

Children respond to their parents' fears and thus the attitudes of parents and caregivers will help to determine the activities that children choose to participate in, including outdoor play.<sup>1</sup> While parents understandably prioritise safety issues associated with outdoor play, what parents seem to be unaware of is that restricting outdoor activities also involves social and cognitive development risks. There are a wide range of benefits - physical, cognitive and general wellbeing – that come from outdoor play.

The term Nature-Deficit Disorder has been coined as a shorthand to describe the effects of this enforced alienation from nature, among them, children's diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. While Nature-Deficit Disorder is not a medical diagnosis, it provides a useful way to think about the problem that is presented and the possibilities for children when Nature-Deficit Disorder is reversed.<sup>2</sup> There is a growing body of research, which strongly indicates that the benefits of active outdoor play are profound. Reported benefits include:

### Physical

- Children who play outside every day have better motor coordination and increased ability to concentrate.<sup>3</sup>
- The outdoor environment allows children to move freely, placing fewer constraints on children's gross motor movement and less restriction on their range of visual and gross motor exploration.<sup>4</sup>

### Cognitive

- Greenery in a child's everyday environment specifically reduces attention deficit symptoms. While outdoor activities in general help, settings with trees and grass are the most beneficial.<sup>5</sup>
- While outdoors, a child is more likely to encounter opportunities for decision making that stimulate problem solving and creative thinking because outdoor spaces are often more varied and less structured than indoor spaces.<sup>6</sup>
- Children are more likely to develop responsible attitudes toward risk if they have experience dealing with risky situations.<sup>7</sup>
- Much of play is social. As such, play promotes learning about vital social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, negotiation and leadership.<sup>8</sup>

### Wellbeing

- Free play has the ability to improve many aspects of emotional wellbeing, including minimising anxiety, repression, aggression and sleep problems.<sup>9</sup>
- Mood may be positively affected not only by the physical activity itself but also by exposure to sunlight if the activity occurs outdoors.<sup>10</sup>

Not allowing children to play freely and explore their outdoor environment results in a single benefit - safety. But this benefit can be outweighed by multiple risks – including compromised development, decreased physical exercise, increased obesity and limited spontaneous play opportunities.<sup>11</sup> An alternative perspective to removing all risk from play spaces is that minor injuries like grazes, sprains and bruises are a universal part of growing up. But taking moderated risks, which sometime yield minor injures, is essential to healthy development.<sup>12</sup>



## Part 4: How Can National Tree Day Help?

If we're sure that kids love to play, and we know that active outdoor play produces healthier, happier and more resilient kids, then the issue we face is simply the finding opportunities for regular, safe and easy outdoor activities for children. We need to make outdoors, not indoors, the habit.

The Planet Ark research shows that 77% of people recognise that National Tree Day encourages children to play outdoors and explore. National Tree Day is Australia's largest tree planting and nature care event, where kids and their families can get outside and have fun. It's a safe day out for families, giving them the opportunity to do something positive for the environment with their local community. And by regularly revisiting the tree you planted, the veggie garden you are growing, or the spot where your seeds should sprout - you can make 'Every Day Tree Day.'

With thousands of sites at schools, parks, gardens and other locations across the country, National Tree Day and Schools Tree Day are the perfect first step to getting Aussie kids and their families back outside.

**For more information about National Tree Day, visit [TreeDay.PlanetArk.org](http://TreeDay.PlanetArk.org)**

*77% of people recognise that National Tree Day encourages children to play outdoors and explore.*



## Resources

Making outdoors a habit can be easy if you know how. Here is a list of simple ideas to try, adapt and add to, and many of them you can do right in your own backyard. These groups and activities are suitable for kids of all ages, so join your children and get outdoors!

### Activities

- Climb a Tree
- Play street cricket
- Ride a bike
- Go for a bushwalk
- Walk the dog
- Go swimming
- Do some gardening
- Camp in the backyard
- Watch the sunset



## Groups

**Community Gardens** – help provide fresh produce and plants, neighbourhood improvement, a sense of community and connection to the environment.

[CommunityGarden.org.au](http://CommunityGarden.org.au)

**Family Nature Clubs** (Western Australia) – help families get together and enjoy the beautiful state of Western Australia and each other's company, and encourage kids to enjoy the benefits that unstructured outdoor play can bring.

[NaturePlayWA.org.au](http://NaturePlayWA.org.au)

**Girl Guides** – is open to all girls and young women and aims to enable them to grow into confident, self-respecting members of the community.

[GirlGuides.org.au](http://GirlGuides.org.au)

**Green Gym** – is a program, mainly operating in Victoria, that engages people (ages 30-70) in practical conservation activities to benefit participants' health and wellbeing, as well as the environment.

[ConservationVolunteers.com.au/GreenGym.htm](http://ConservationVolunteers.com.au/GreenGym.htm)

**National Green Jobs Corps** – is an Australian Government training program for people aged between 17 and 24 years that provides young people with a combination of work experience, skill development and accredited training to ensure they are ready for employment in emerging green and climate change industries.

[deewr.gov.au/njgc](http://deewr.gov.au/njgc)

**Junior Landcare** – encourages young people to play an active role in ensuring the safe future of their environment.

[JuniorLandCare.com.au](http://JuniorLandCare.com.au)

**Nippers** – enables children to become confident and have fun in a safe beach environment. For Nippers, the beach is the classroom.

[sls.com.au/nippers](http://sls.com.au/nippers)

**Scouts** – provides young Aussies, aged 6 to 25, with fun and challenging opportunities to grow through adventure.

[scouts.com.au](http://scouts.com.au)

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