

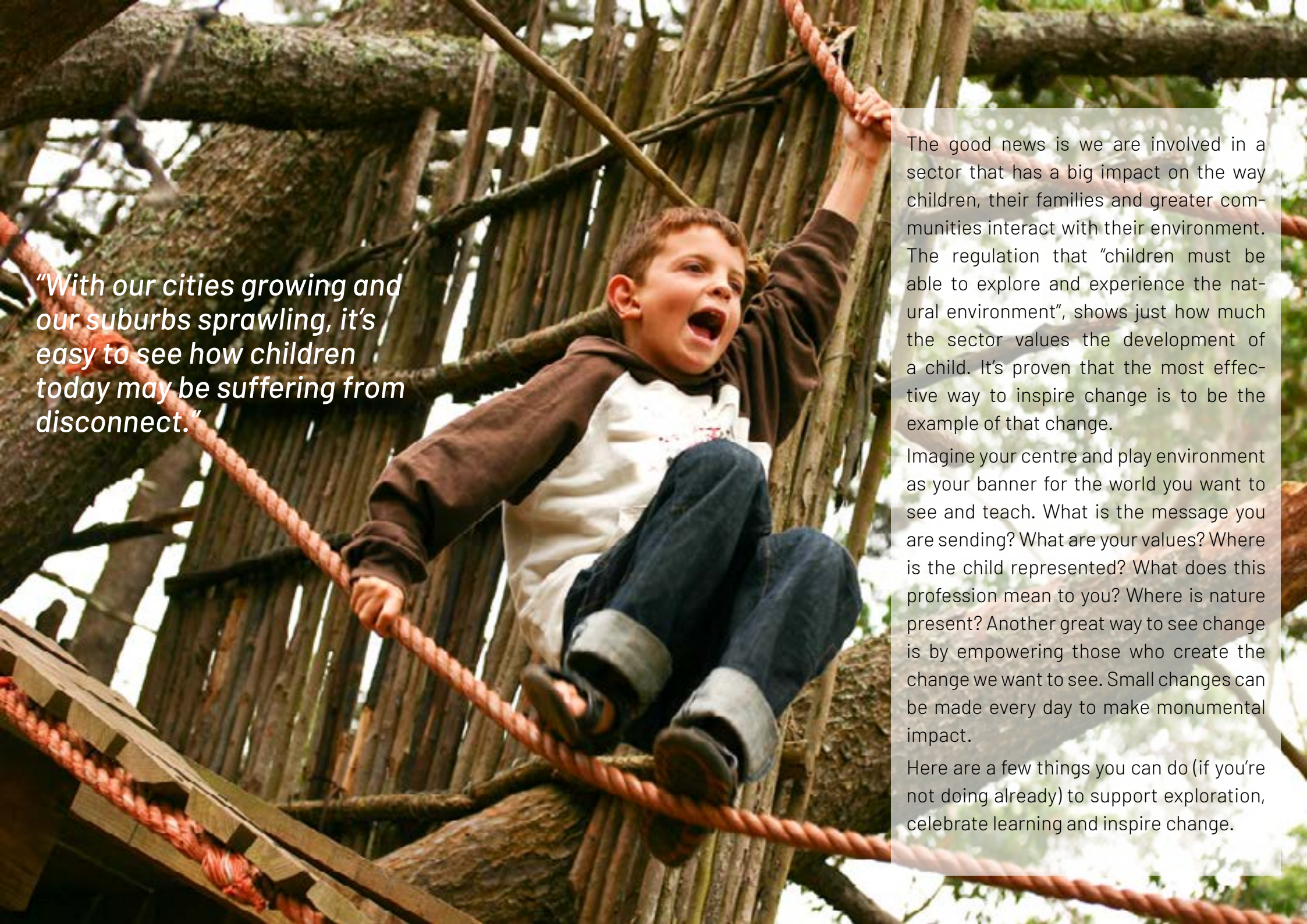
THE VALUE OF NATURE

by Lukas Ritson

The challenge children face today is their increasing disconnect with nature. This is perhaps caused by the density of housing where they live, lack of natural materials they interact with or limited time they spend outside. With our cities growing and our suburbs sprawling, it's easy to see how children today may be suffering from disconnect. Less space to play, busy parents, plus the ease of screen time - it's no wonder children are lost when it comes to forming a relationship with nature.



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A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a brown hoodie over a white t-shirt and blue jeans, is climbing a rope structure on a treehouse. He is looking up with an open mouth, appearing excited or shouting. The structure is made of thick wooden poles and ropes. The background shows a blurred green forest.

“With our cities growing and our suburbs sprawling, it’s easy to see how children today may be suffering from disconnect.”

The good news is we are involved in a sector that has a big impact on the way children, their families and greater communities interact with their environment. The regulation that “children must be able to explore and experience the natural environment”, shows just how much the sector values the development of a child. It’s proven that the most effective way to inspire change is to be the example of that change.

Imagine your centre and play environment as your banner for the world you want to see and teach. What is the message you are sending? What are your values? Where is the child represented? What does this profession mean to you? Where is nature present? Another great way to see change is by empowering those who create the change we want to see. Small changes can be made every day to make monumental impact.

Here are a few things you can do (if you’re not doing already) to support exploration, celebrate learning and inspire change.

1. Grow your resources

Before you start saying you 'kill everything' and stop reading - don't. I'm referring to the growth of children, not the growing of plants. Children being supported with what they need will guide you into creating an environment together. Ask yourself: what do children need to grow? And take action on that answer. It might be a positive relationship, room to move or space to stretch in the environment we create and plan. How are you growing?



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A child in a purple shirt and tan shorts is walking barefoot on a path made of old tires. The path is outdoors, surrounded by grass and trees, with a warm, golden light suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The child is walking away from the camera, and the tires are arranged in a line that recedes into the distance.

“What is the message we are sending to parents if the environments we create are full of plastic, rubber and disposable rubbish?”

2. Celebrate what matters

Since the 1840's when the phrase Kindergarten was first coined, the idea of “the garden for the children” was an important developmental resource. Educators have been building on the back of this theory by applying experience and research that states children need nature to learn and grow. However, what is the message we are sending to parents if the environments we create are full of plastic, rubber and disposable rubbish? Remember, we are not just educators of children. It's also our duty to guide parents to make well-informed decisions about their child's development. What story are we telling about the work we do and the effort we make?

So, let's celebrate the dirt, mud, sand and water that bind play and learning together. Give billboard examples on your walls of how recycled bits and pieces create open-ended learning experiences that go for days and weeks. Lastly, let's create an environment that parents today wish they got to grow with as children.



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3. Sit intentionally


I don't mean sit in the same way you would sit when arriving home after a big day. I mean actively sit, in your environment, with children and just be there to play and build relationships. Shelf your intentional teaching or scaffolding theory and just connect with the children.

It's much harder than it sounds. It takes confidence, persistence and a willingness to be the child's equal that will bring the walls down and allow a relationship that's based on respect to grow.

When we use a natural environment to sit, it makes for an even deeper connection. When a child's needs are being met and they feel supported, it helps the child to value what supports them: a tree they can climb, a bush they can disappear into, a stick they can swing or an adventure with friends. These all contribute to how they value their environment and the people within it. Commit to sit (intentionally and actively).

To learn more, visit us at www.wearthy.co
or contact us on 0432 654 315

Catch Lukas speaking about Embedding Sustainable practices and Risk and Play. Dates and bookings through [Centre Support](#).

A young child with blonde hair is sitting on a thick tree branch, looking upwards. The child is wearing a light pink long-sleeved shirt, green cargo pants, and orange Crocs. The background is filled with green leaves and a clear blue sky.

"When we use a natural environment to sit, it makes for an even deeper connection."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & WEARTHY

Wearthy are advocates of play and the sustainable development of children. Previously known as Own Grown Organics, we have been creating sustainable and organic outdoor environments since 2013. We are proudly making an impact on economic, social and environmental sustainability across Australia in the shape of edible landscapes, community gardens, urban greenspaces and natural and risky play. We work within the early childhood development sector to improve the standard of education by creating children-focused, natural play environments.

Lukas Ritson is fondly known as The Outdoor Educator; a sustainability educator, father of two and the founder of Own Grown Organics and Wearthy. More importantly, Lukas is passionate about the outdoors, community sustainability, children's development, permaculture and good quality, chemical free environments.

If he's not out creating natural learning environments, you will find him teaching educators on all aspects of sustainability and risky play. With a background in early childcare as an Outdoor Educator, Lukas has developed and implemented successful outdoor programs that nurture sustainable development. Today, he shares these learnings with educators at seminars, conferences and private trainings across Australia, and most recently at the Council for Creative Education Symposium in Finland. Using industry experience in education and outdoor environments, Lukas supports centres through the creative transformation of inspiring and purposeful outdoor environments. Lukas is dedicated to helping centres meet standards and regulations and achieve their goals and desired outcomes for the children and the educators of the Centre.

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