



# Nature Play SA

TURN PLAY INSIDE, OUT.

## EVEN BABIES NEED THE OUTDOORS

### WHY BABIES NEED THE OUTDOORS?

As humans, we are hardwired to respond to the natural environment. It's why being outside can shift our mood, help us cope with the pressures of life and generally make us feel better. Breathing in fresh air, being exposed to sunlight and enjoying the stimulation of bird sounds, weather, temperature, textures and colours helps us feel more open and connected to our world outdoors.

Infants and toddlers benefit from being outside as much as older children or even adults. Babies and young children learn all the time. They don't have words to describe what they encounter but they learn about their world by touching, tasting, smelling, seeing and hearing. Babies are aware and mesmerised by sounds and movement and there's a plethora of unique sounds, colours, lights, sensations and textures to take in and experience outdoors - the crunch of dry leaves underfoot, the rustle made by grass or leaves blowing in the breeze, the sensation of wind or grass on skin, the interest provided by flowers that can be smelled and picked, the texture and smell of the garden after a rain.....

When these experiences are shared with a loving adult who can share a baby's sense of newness, wonder and awe, the entire experience is enjoyable and memorable. It is also critical to babies' brain function, overall development and to the early experiences of achieving a positive sense of self.



## WHERE TO VENTURE?

Your garden offers the perfect environment for babies and children to find challenge, wonder, beauty and joy. The space doesn't need to be perfect but it should be interesting and offer different sensory experiences for your child as it grows from baby to toddler, pre-schooler to young adult.

It is here that your children should first learn:

- An appreciation of the natural world
- A sense of wonder and exploration
- An understanding of patterns and life cycles
- A place of relaxation and beauty
- Somewhere to experiment with creativity, imagination and problem solving.

Ensuring babies' safety is paramount. Removing obstacles that can cause young children to stumble and fall is common sense. Mouthing is an important developmental and learning milestone for babies, so paying attention to what might be a health and safety risk for your baby is critical. But, don't let this prevent you from exposing your baby to the outdoors and spending time in it. The benefits far outweigh any risks. Even dirt is something we shouldn't be afraid of. Research tells us that playing in the dirt exposes children to a myriad of bacteria, and microbes that strengthen babies' immune system and help them become more resilient to sickness and infections as they become older.

As you plan for your babies' exploration and learning of the world, consider if your garden provides:

- Plants they can taste (herbs/vegetables/fruit trees), touch (textured leaves, bark, petals), smell (flowers, herbs), hear (rustling, crunching), see (colour, height, depth, shapes, textures), experience (hide in/under, crawl/walk on, climb, shade, pick)
- Places to eat and relax in the shade
- Spots to crawl safely

- Small rises and slopes to challenge mobility
- Sturdy ledges and items that allow babies to pull themselves up
- Short tunnels and peek-a-boo places
- Seats at different heights
- Safe water, sand, mud play stations
- A swing under a tree (if you have trees in your yard).

These features will help your baby safely learn about their different surroundings and make them feel more comfortable in the world around them.

Let your baby's first experiences outdoors be in your arms relaxing in your back yard, or being put on the grass for some tummy time. If you don't have access to the garden, then visit your local park, oval or playground or put your baby in the stroller and go for a walk around the local neighbourhood. Your baby will begin to associate being outdoors with happy, fun times and will want to be outside more and more. Not only will they enjoy the stimulation provided by the outdoors, but it will be good for you too.