



Make Room for Nature Kindy

Safe, high-quality nature-based ECE needs a clear pathway in Aotearoa.

A long-running nature-based early childhood programme, Nature Kindergarten, connected to Play and Learn, has been cancelled after the ECE licence it operated under was cancelled. This has affected 58 tamariki and 15 staff.

While this is urgent for the Play and Learn community, it also highlights a much wider issue: New Zealand still does not have a clear licensing pathway for early childhood education where nature is the main place of learning.

#MakeRoomForNatureKindy

This issue is not new

In 2019, a submission and petition were brought to Parliament asking for a clear pathway for bush kindy, forest school and nature-based early childhood education. There was cross-party support at the time, but MPs changed, key people left Parliament, COVID hit, and the work lost momentum. The issue has not gone away.

Since then, nature-based learning has continued to grow across Aotearoa. Many ECE centres now run nature days, bush kindy sessions and outdoor programmes as excursions from licensed centres. Other providers are offering forest school, outdoor classrooms, nature play and outdoor learning experiences through community, private, school-based and charitable models. There is clearly demand from families, educators and communities. What is still missing is a proper pathway for primarily nature-based early childhood education.

What is the gap?

Current ECE licensing settings are built around fixed premises, indoor space and centre-based provision. Under the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008, centre-based ECE services must meet premises and facilities requirements, including Schedule 4 activity space requirements. For an early childhood education and care centre, Schedule 4 lists:

- indoor activity space: 2.5 square metres per child
- outdoor activity space: 5 square metres per child, or a minimum number of square metres per child determined under regulation 54(3)

These rules make sense for traditional centre-based provision, but they do not provide a dedicated pathway for an early childhood service where the outdoor environment is the normal place of learning. At the moment, centres can run nature days, bush kindy sessions and outdoor programmes as excursions from a licensed centre. But that is different from being able to establish a primarily nature-based early childhood service in its own right.

This means providers who want to offer safe, high-quality nature-based ECE cannot simply set up that model under a clear licensing pathway. They either need to operate through excursions from an existing licensed centre, fit within a premises-based model that was not designed for nature-based provision, or operate outside licensed ECE altogether.

That is the gap. The issue is not a lack of demand, a lack of quality, or a lack of safety practice.

The issue is that the current regulatory framework does not make room for nature-based ECE as a legitimate model of early childhood education.

What needs to change?

This campaign is not asking every centre to become a nature kindy. It is asking for provision, so families and providers who want safe, high-quality nature-based ECE have a clear pathway.

We are asking the Government to create a clear licensing pathway for nature-based early childhood education in Aotearoa. That pathway should recognise the outdoor environment as a valid learning environment, while keeping strong safeguards in place.

This should include clear expectations around:

- qualified teachers and skilled adults
- supervision structures
- risk management
- health and safety
- Te Whāriki
- parent communication
- emergency planning
- suitable outdoor learning environments
- Ministry oversight and accountability

Good regulation should protect children and support quality.

It should not shut the door on outdoor learning simply because the model does not look like a traditional indoor centre.

Why this matters

Nature-based learning supports movement, play, confidence, resilience, curiosity, relationships, wellbeing and connection to place. Across Aotearoa, tamariki are already learning through bush kindy, forest school, outdoor classrooms, nature play, EOTC, regular excursions and outdoor learning programmes.

This is part of who we are as a country. Aotearoa values the outdoors. Our education system should be able to make room for safe, high-quality learning in nature, too.

What people can do

You can help build momentum by:

- Sharing this campaign with your networks
- Using the hashtag #MakeRoomForNatureKindy
- Sharing your story about nature-based learning or outdoor education
- Writing to your local MP and election candidates
- Asking MPs and candidates to support a clear pathway for nature-based ECE
- Encouraging providers to complete the provider survey
- Invite MPs to visit your programme
- Attending or supporting the Save Nature Kindergarten community event on Friday, 24 July, 4pm, at Long Bay
- Connecting the campaign with people who may be able to help, including media contacts, political contacts, parent networks, provider networks and education leaders

If you run a nature-based or outdoor learning programme, one of the strongest things you can do is invite your local MP or election candidates to visit. Let them see what this looks like in practice. Let them see the learning, the relationships, the risk management, the confidence, the joy, and the way tamariki come alive outside.

Core ask

Create a clear licensing pathway for safe, high-quality nature-based early childhood education in Aotearoa.

Make room for Nature Kindergarten. Make room for nature-based ECE.

#MakeRoomForNatureKindy

Contact

Celia Hogan
Little Kiwis Nature Play
Email: celia@littlekiwisnatureplay.com
Phone: 022 158 2113
Website: www.littlekiwisnatureplay.com

Key regulatory references

Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008, Regulation 45 and Schedule 4:
<https://www.legislation.govt.nz/regulation/public/2008/0204/latest/DLM1412501.html>

Ministry of Education: Indoor activity areas:
<https://www.education.govt.nz/education-professionals/early-learning/starting-early-learning-service/compl-ying-premises-and-facilities-licensing-criteria-indoors/indoor-activity-areas>

Ministry of Education: Premises and facilities for centre-based ECE services:
<https://www.education.govt.nz/education-professionals/early-learning/licensing-and-certification/licensing-criteria-for-centre-based-ece-services/premises-and-facilities/general>