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Forest School

Outdoor Adventures and Skills for City Kids

Naomi Walmsley & Dan Westall



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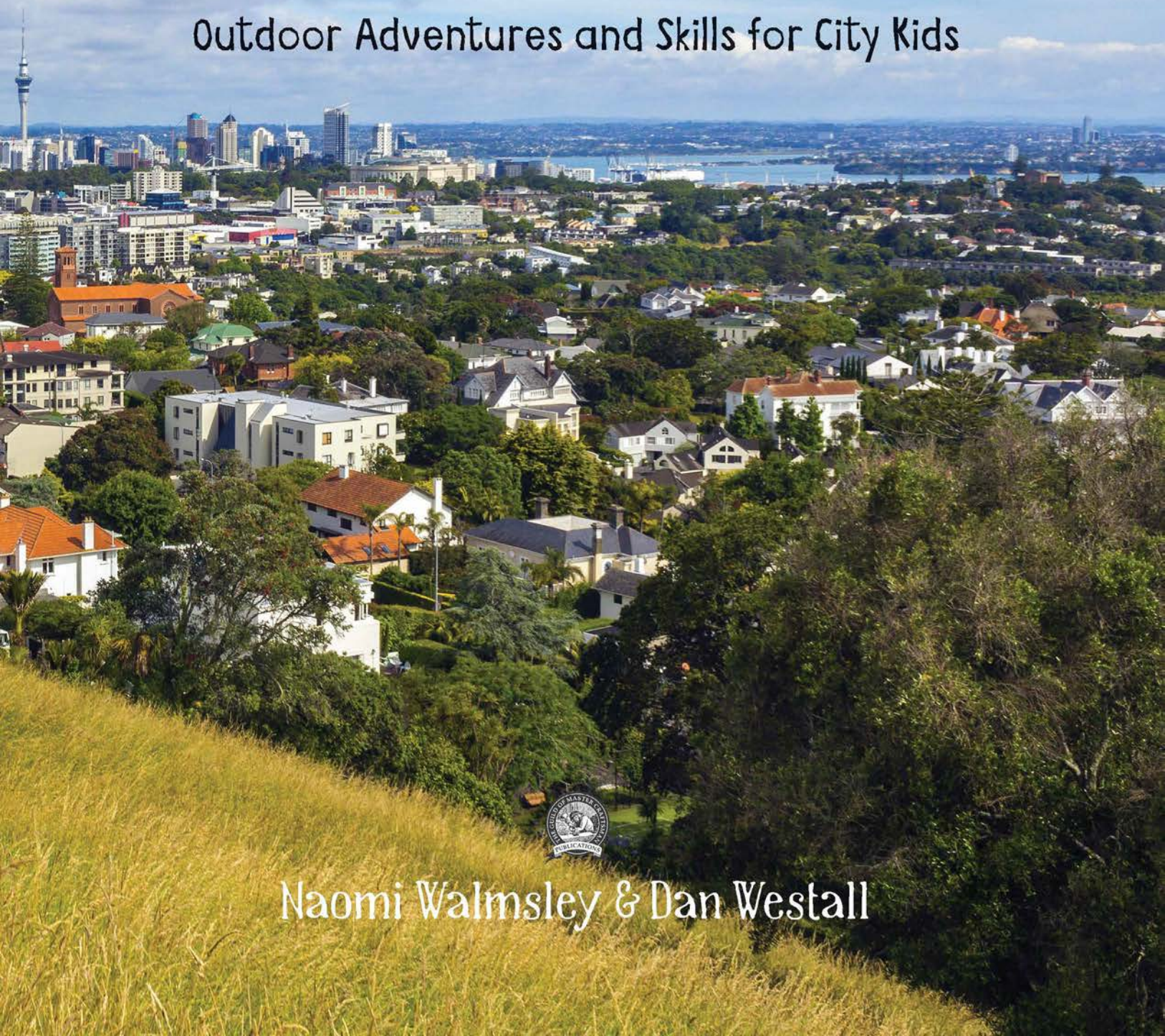
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What is urban forest school?

Forest school is all about connecting young children to their natural environment, creating opportunities to develop creativity, confidence, resilience and learning, as well as promoting ways in which children can experience risk. Therefore Urban Forest School is exactly the same, just with a few little creative tweaks, an extra dose of exploration, imagination and time taken to look around you.

Being outdoors and immersed in nature isn't just for people who live in the countryside. When you live in a rural area, it is easy to immerse yourself in nature. It's obvious, it's right there in front of you, shouting loudly at you to come and play. It's easy to forget that even when you live in cities and towns, nature is right there, just waiting to be found and enjoyed by you.

You don't need a woodland to be able to hunt for bugs. You don't need a garden to make mud pies, you don't need a vast green space to play games and you don't need fields and meadows to look for plants and wildlife. You can create your own nature space or, even better, spend some time searching it out. You may be surprised by what you see around you.

As you start to look, making time to take in the world around you, you'll see spiders building webs on car wing mirrors, grass and weeds growing through cracks in pavements, trees in their various seasonal splendour lining city streets, birds building nests in school playgrounds and plenty more. Nature truly surrounds us if we just open our eyes a little wider and know where to look.





Using this book

This book is both instructional and informative, teaching children (and adults) about their world, the trees, the bugs, beasts and creatures within it and how to find, explore, use and understand it. There are activities for all ages, from creative messy mud play for curious pre-schoolers to medicinal salve making and willow weaving for the more advanced age groups. You can dip into this book, using it in different ways: to identify plants, learn about the planet, its wildlife and its stars, read a story, learn how to make crafts or inspire you to take a night walk.

Begin your journey through busy towns and concrete cities, cloud spotting, identifying plants, looking deep into grass-filled cracks, hunting for bugs and foraging. Open up your imagination through step-by-step guides to crafting at home and find new ways of exploring your local park and garden. All of these will encourage you to look at your towns and cities in a new light. There are recipes to transform 'weeds' into delicious treats and healing medicines and games to bring on the fun.

As well as activities, this book also offers information about how to look after the planet and reasons why we should all do this, giving both adults and children a new and fresh perspective on the word 'nature'. There's even a section on climate change to help inspire everyone to take care of their outdoor environment. Intertwined throughout this book are moving and entertaining anecdotes collected from people who have special memories of interacting with or discovering nature in unexpected or urban environments, bringing this book alive with stories.

Where can I look for urban nature?

Look up

Observe the clouds, the birds, bees and butterflies. See the sunshine through the leaves in the trees; try catching rain on your tongue. What about looking up at night time? Study the waxing and waning of the moon's cycles. Can you see any stars?

Look down

Bugs don't just roam in gardens, they like to hide in pavements too. Find sticks and leaves on the ground to make into crafts or transform into a wand, a sword or a stick buddy just by using your imagination.

Parks

Parks are great for their playgrounds, but what's in the surrounding area? Is there a tree to safely climb, a stream to explore, a wooded area, an area of flowers to smell, touch, fill your eyes with colour?



Allotments

Many of us don't have a garden or outdoor area but maybe you could get yourself on a waiting list for an allotment or community garden. Growing up, our family allotment was one of my favourite places to spend time, helping to prepare the soil, tending and watching the vegetables grow and, finally, enjoying eating them. Although my favourite activity was raspberry stealing from my mother's prize patch while pretending to help pick beans!



Cemeteries

Who would have thought that a cemetery could be so full of life? Often, the most amazing wildflowers bloom, delicious blackberries grow undiscovered, hundred-year-old yew trees grow, their roots spreading overground. Stick to the paths though and be respectful of where you roam, as well as respectful to other people in these areas. They may be here to visit a loved one and hoping for a quiet moment.





Why is playing outside good for us?

There have been numerous studies on why we feel better outdoors. It's due to the fact that we're active and moving around and that we can feel the elements and breathe a little freer. We use our imaginations more when we are outside, we use our bodies and we use our hands. Playing outdoors encourages resilience, self-confidence, initiative and creativity to grow. It highlights the joy of movement, nurtures wild imaginations, experimentation, friendships and social connections, and helps develop positive behaviours.

When our outdoor experience includes nature play, we feel even better. We can see life around us, weaving webs, flying in the sky,



Are there any dangers?

There are always some risks, but without them I believe that we do not learn. It is not about removing these risks but how we manage them that makes the difference and keeps us safe from harm.

In an urban setting especially, like wastelands or urban parks, there is a greater risk of coming across things like needles and broken glass. Rubbish can be a big issue in built-up areas and can leave them not only untidy looking but occasionally can be quite dangerous, if touched. Even if you feel like you want to tidy up, it's advisable not to touch anything. Contact your local council if you feel like it's a big issue or come back with thick gloves and a long-armed litter picker. Talk to children about the things they might see that they shouldn't touch and explain why they might pose a danger.

Road safety

Walking is by far healthier than going by car, so try to explore by foot if you can. By knowing the rules of the road you can make sure you stay safe while out and about. Follow these simple guidelines:

- Always walk on the pavement or path if there is one – never stray on to the road.
- If there's no pavement, walk in single file on the right side of the road facing the traffic.
- When you need to cross the road, find a safe place to do so.
- Keep looking and listening for traffic before and while crossing.

What to do if you get lost

Don't go out on your own and when out with others stay together.

Of course there is always a small chance you might find yourself separated from your group and get lost. To help make sure this doesn't happen, have a plan in place, know your route and where you are heading and communicate with one another while out.

If you are walking somewhere, walk in pairs so that you have a partner at all times. Have a well-known, safe spot to go to (away from the main road) and wait there if you find yourself lost. Then you'll know where to go and your friends and family will be able to find you.

Respect your urban environment

- Leave only footprints
- Take only photographs
- Take your time
- Leave no trace

flowing, rustling and moving. It makes us feel good to be a part of it. When I hear the word nature it conjures up images of mountains, wildlife, meadows, forests, waterfalls and lush green trees. Maybe it does for you too. But nature isn't all about the grand picture. Nature play can be any activity that gets children active or thinking actively outdoors.

When we interact with nature, when we notice it, play with or in it, we take a moment to reconnect ourselves to our own roots. It's so easy to spend time on a computer or watching television and yes, probably fun too, but there are so many opportunities outside to feel energized, creative and peaceful.

I love the simplicity, the ease of what being outdoors offers for children. Knowing where the best mud is to make mud pies, foraging for wild strawberries, making bug houses, finding ladybirds, drawing with chalk, making potions and perfume out of petals: the list is endless.

Every time we go outside, we are learning to cherish nature, to respect it, to pay attention to it and learn from it. It is during these moments that we grow, develop and learn as well as feeling happier and more content, so why not go looking for it?



Embracing the weather

Fair weather playing is easy; the sun is out and it automatically feels good to be outside. It's getting out in the wind and the rain where the adventures often can be found. In the rain, there are massive puddles for stomping through and opportunities for bug watching, seeing the slithering and interesting bugs that come out to hydrate. The rain makes great mud for building, sculpting and playing in. Or what about the wind? Simply just putting your arms out and flying in the wind, flying a kite on a hill or a leaf-kicking windy walk will make you feel blustery and alive.

I believe it's just as important to experience all the seasons outside as it is to play in all weathers, even if it's just for a short while! As long as you are dressed appropriately, you will have a great time.



Some simple ways to embrace the weather

Make a kite Get a paper bag with handles. Decorate it by sticking on lots of leaves. Cut about 5yd (5m) of yarn or string. Find yourself a straight-ish stick. Wrap one end of the yarn round and round the stick and then the other end of the yarn on to the handles of your kite, bringing them both together. Now fly in the wind, unwinding and letting it out as the wind demands!

Experiment with rain painting Find some thick card, crushed-up chalk, powder paints, pencil sharpener shavings of watercolour pencils or broken-up watercolour paints. Dot the crushed colours all over the card and leave it out in the rain for the drops to perform an art attack!



Nature kit

All the children and adults in our family love to go out on adventures. We love both major and micro adventures, from epic hikes up mountains to visiting a local park to hunt for giraffes, bears and spiders, whatever the favourite of the week may be. We have got it down to a fine art now; we grab a snack, a drink and the nature bag, which in theory is kept in the same place ready to go. Of course it always has the memories of the last trip sticking out of it, packed full of leaves bigger than our heads, interesting shaped or textured rocks, the occasional stick that played its part in a game and more than likely a pine cone or two as an obligatory item to collect when we're out and about.

My children also love to pack new random apparently 'essential' items in there. A wooden snake has made its way in, there's a mini teddy to hide and find and a book on ladybirds to refer to – these essential items change regularly. But we do have a core set of things in there that are always useful. In this book you'll find everything you need to make your own nature kit.

A measuring stick in case you need to refer to the size of something later in your reference books (see page 104).

A journal so that you can draw and record all your thoughts, drawings and interesting findings (see page 108).

A felted bag to keep it all in (see page 124).

A pencil and some string for tying up shelters and practising knots, and a pair of mini scissors to cut the string.

Of course you could pack it full of other useful things such as magnifying glasses, binoculars, identification books and more, but I like to travel light just with what I feel are my absolute essentials. Try it out though. Have an adventure. See what you need.

Garden memories

By Simon Naish

THE GARDEN OF MY CHILDHOOD WAS A SAFE, BOUNDLESS KINGDOM. I LOOKED AT MY SURROUNDINGS AS A RAINFOREST, THE BEDS OF SOIL AND EARTH AS BARREN DESERTS, HILLS AS MOUNTAIN PEAKS, THE LAND WHERE THE WILD THINGS HAD THEIR WILD RUMPUS. THE EARTH WAS WARM AND HEAVILY SCENTED, THE SKY SO VERY HIGH ABOVE. THE SURROUNDING FLORA KNEW OF NO CURRICULUM OR NEED FOR PAYING MORE ATTENTION. OFTEN I WAS ALONE THERE, THE FRESH SPIDER WEBS BREAKING ACROSS MY FACE, BUT NEVER LONELY.

I had a roller coaster, of course. (A plank resting on the rungs of a long wooden ladder leant against the apple tree.) It was genuinely thrilling – I'd charge my sister's friends one leaf to have a ride. There was no height limit and if the leaf was an unusual colour or shape, you could ride twice.

“One long, hot summer, the trench building extended to my cousin's back garden. Or ‘Belgium’, as we called it.”

Stories of the Grandfather I'd never met who survived the Somme during World War I fuelled the digging of a labyrinth of trenches along the far end of this kingdom. At night, planks would be placed over the defences and mud scattered on top to conceal their existence and prevent enemy occupation.

One long, hot summer, the trench building extended to my cousin's back garden. Or 'Belgium', as we called it. Combined efforts delivered a sizeable trench running the length of the double garden gates, beyond which ran the access gully. The usual camouflaging of the battlements were put in place each night using my uncle's plywood sheets, no doubt destined for something better. We were two young boys bound by the secret of this great toil and that made life good. Towards the end of the school holidays, the trench was significant and proportionate was our joy.

As the shadows lengthened and summer came to an end, I sat filthy and bruised bathing in the kitchen sink after a day of excavation when there came an aggressive knocking at the door. My dad turned down the grilling pikelets to answer it. My uncle stood there, clearly shaken. His face was wearing a strange

*“We were two young boys bound by the secret
of this great toil and that made life good.”*

expression I'd not seen before. It turned out to be the expression of a man who had decided to park his new car in the back garden. Reversing across a seemingly innocent patch of loose soil behind the garden gates had given rise to a loud cracking noise, followed by a sudden surge backwards and downwards as if the car was being swallowed up by the very earth itself

There were many other tales born of those back gardens, the enchanted places where myth and legend thrive. Nature forges the brightest moments in the setting of our memory.



Easel tree

My daughter and I love painting outside, letting nature inspire our artwork. The only issue is that it's quite challenging carrying our bulky easel around with us so that we have something to lean on. We came up with this quick and quirky idea as a solution.

AGE Any

TIME 5 minutes+

TOOLS A tree, paintbrushes

MATERIALS

Paints, sheets of paper, duct tape

Why not use a handy tree as your easel when you fancy doing a bit of al fresco painting? Find a suitable tree, one that isn't too wide to accommodate your sheet of paper and not so knobbly that duct tape won't stick to it. Just grab your paper, tape it to the tree and get painting!



More ideas

- Why not use the tree to do some bark rubbings with crayons too, while you are there?
- Find some leaves, put them in between your paper and the tree and rub over the top to make some leaf rubbings
- You could try to make stick rubbings too; just find some small twigs, put them in between the paper and the tree and rub over the top with a crayon to bring out some cool designs.
- Find some leaves, stick one on with some double-sided sticky tape and create your own woodland person, adding arms and legs, using the leaf as their body or head. Then rub over them with crayons as before.

Biodegradable bird feeders

Whatever the weather, our feathered bird friends often need a little help to make sure they are well fed and energized. Not only are these activities a great way to lend a helping hand to nature, but also a fantastic way to learn about local wildlife. Best of all, if you do this in a park, apart from the string/twine, which you will have to collect at a later date, they are entirely biodegradable.

AGE 2+ (younger children will need some assistance)

TIME 15 minutes+



Hanging fruit and nut feeder

TOOLS Scissors,
apple cutter or knife,
darning needle,
metal skewer

MATERIALS Garden
twine, raisins,
monkey nuts, apple

Step 1

First, cut a length of string: about an arm's length will be plenty. Cut up the apple into sections. Using the skewer, carefully make a hole all the way through a piece of apple. Do this slowly as your apple will just break in half if you go too fast. Thread the string through the hole and tie a knot in the end to stop it sliding off.

Step 2

Do the same for the raisins, nuts and more pieces of apple in any order you like until you have almost filled up the string. Lastly, tie a loop on to the end of your string with any excess you have and hang it up.





Simple seedy bird treats

TOOLS Scissors,
apple corer

MATERIALS An
apple, pumpkin or
sunflower seeds,
string, a small stick

Step 1

Cut a length of string as long as your forearm. Tie one end of the string around the middle point of the small stick; an overhand knot (see page 17) will work fine. The birds will use this to perch on when they are eating.

Step 2

Using an apple corer, push a hole through the middle of the apple. Now all you need to do is push the sharp end of your seeds into the flesh of the apple, covering it as much as you can.

Step 3

Thread the string through the middle of the apple with the stick at the bottom. Make a loop at the top with any excess string and hang up.



Citrus feeders

TOOLS Knife, darning needle, metal spoon, bowl, scissors

MATERIALS Garden twine, scissors, 100% peanut butter (no added sugar or palm oil), whole citrus fruit, mixed birdseed

Step 1

Cut your chosen citrus fruit in half, squeeze out the juice and scoop out the flesh using a metal spoon.

Step 2

Mix the peanut butter and birdseed (1 tbsp of peanut butter per 1 cup of birdseed) together in a bowl. Spoon the mixture into the empty citrus halves, one spoonful at a time, squishing it all down so that it sticks together.

Step 3

To hang them up, cut a 1½yd (1.5m) piece of twine and thread it through a darning needle. Poke the needle through the outer skin on one side of the fruit, about ¾in (2cm) down from the top edge, and pull it through, leaving a small tail to tie off into a knot to hold it in place. Leave about 12in (30cm) of string for hanging. Do this twice more, so that you have got three lengths of string attached around the fruit. Tie the three strings together at the top and hang up in the garden or at the park, then announce to the birds that dinner is ready!



Tip

I find the type of feeder I choose to make will depend on what I have been using. So if I'm making orange juice, I'll make orange feeders from the leftover skin. If I'm making cakes with lemon juice in, the skins will make it to the garden as feeders and so on, so as not to create any additional waste.





Fat balls

TOOLS Bowl, grater

MATERIALS Lard, birdseed (two parts dry seed to one part lard), length of string approx. 18in (45cm), a small stick

Step 1

Put the birdseed in a bowl and add double the amount of lard. If the lard is solid and hard, use a grater to make it easier to mix in. Mix together with your hands until handfuls of mixture hold together solidly when pressed tightly.

Step 2

Tie one end of the string around the middle point of a small stick; an overhand knot (see page 17) will work fine. The birds will use this stick to perch on when they are eating.

Step 3

Now pick up big handfuls of your mixture and squeeze it on to your string, just above the stick. Keep adding, squishing and squeezing until you make a big lump of bird food.

Step 4

Using the excess string at the top, make a loop to hang it up.

Tip

If you make a large batch of birdseed fat balls, you can freeze any extra mixture until they are needed. In very warm weather, the fats can become rancid, so during the summer keep them in a cool shady spot.

Variation

You can make a vegan variation if you like. Instead of using lard you can use coconut oil to the same ratio (one part birdseed to two parts oil).

You can make fat balls without string to sit on the top of bird tables, or why not try to make a rustic willow hanging ball (see page 50) and pop a fat ball inside for the birds to enjoy?



1



2



3



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