

Active Outdoor Play in Oceania: A review of policy, advocacy, and regional priorities.



The 2025 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

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Abstract

This narrative commentary presents an overview of the policy, advocacy, and practice landscape for active outdoor play (AOP) in the Oceania region, comprising Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. Framed within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 31 on the right to play, the review highlights the importance of outdoor play for children's physical health, mental well-being, cultural identity, and connection to the environment.

Across the region, children's access to AOP is increasingly challenged by urbanisation, climate change, digital displacement, and socioeconomic inequality. In Australia, a diverse and dynamic network of organisations and policies supports AOP across health, education, and planning sectors. While some jurisdictions have made significant advances, particularly in inclusive design and nature-based programming, there remains variability in coordination and long-term investment at the national level. New Zealand benefits from a more unified strategic approach, led by Sport NZ and Healthy Families NZ, and distinguished by the integration of Māori values and leadership. In the Pacific Islands, AOP remains embedded in cultural and ecological life, though rarely formalised in policy. Many children continue to engage in traditional, unstructured play as part of daily life, raising important questions about the relevance and appropriateness of externally imposed frameworks.

The commentary concludes with region-wide recommendations to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration, support Indigenous-led initiatives, improve equitable access to play environments, and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Oceania's contribution to the global AOP agenda lies not in the standardisation of practice, but in the diversity, resilience, and cultural richness of its approaches to play.

Background

This narrative commentary provides an overview of the status of active outdoor play (AOP) in the United Nations Geographic Region of Oceania, which includes Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. These countries and territories collectively encompass a vast region of the southwestern Pacific Ocean, spanning latitudes from approximately 50°S (southern New Zealand) to 5°N (northern Pacific nations), and longitudes from 110°E (Western Australia) to 150°W (eastern Pacific). Oceania includes 12 countries and 14 territories/dependencies, more than 10,000 islands, and covers a landmass of around 8.5 million square kilometres. The population is highly diverse, consisting of approximately 43 million people, including First Nations Australians, Māori, and a wide range of Pacific peoples with distinct cultural traditions and worldviews. Furthermore, over half of Australians are either born overseas or have an overseas-born parent.

Oceania's geography ranges from large continental landmasses (such as Australia) to small island nations dispersed across the Pacific Ocean. Climates vary widely, from the arid interior of Australia to temperate regions of New Zealand and tropical island environments across the Pacific. This diversity also shapes the challenges and opportunities for AOP. While many areas offer abundant natural settings conducive to outdoor activity, others are affected by urbanisation, limited infrastructure, environmental degradation, or climate change.

The region's human development indices (HDI) range significantly. Australia and New Zealand score highly on global HDI rankings, while many Pacific Island nations face greater development challenges due to geographic isolation, vulnerability to climate events, and economic constraints. Despite this, all countries in the region share a commitment to children's rights, and have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).¹ Article 31 of the Convention specifically recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, and play, including participation in recreational activities appropriate to their age.

The purpose of this commentary is to describe and compare the current state of AOP policy, advocacy, and practice in Australia (including national and state levels), New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. All sources of information along with relevant weblinks can be found in Appendix A. The commentary is part of a broader set of regional reviews that contributed to the 2025 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play (AOP10; as it is a 10-yr celebration of the 2015 Position

¹While Hawai'i is geographically part of Oceania, as a U.S. state it falls under a government that has signed but not ratified the Convention.

Statement). While the right to play is enshrined in international human rights instruments, recent societal and environmental trends are increasingly undermining children's access to AOP. In Australia, the 2024 Active Healthy Kids Report Card gave a grade of D for overall physical activity and D- for screen time, noting that just 14% of children meet recommended daily activity guidelines and over 80% exceed recreational screen time limits (Active Healthy Kids Australia, 2024). In New Zealand, the Active NZ Survey found that while 58% of children aged 5–17 were active for at least 7 hours per week, participation in informal, unstructured play had declined, with higher levels of inactivity among girls and young Māori (Sport NZ, 2023). The 2022 New Zealand Physical Activity Report Card also rated active transportation and screen time poorly, highlighting a continued shift toward sedentary behaviour (Active Healthy Kids NZ, 2022). Across the Pacific Islands, UNICEF and the Pacific Community (SPC) have documented rising physical inactivity and obesity rates among children and adolescents, with limited access to safe recreational infrastructure and increasing impacts from climate change identified as key drivers (UNICEF Pacific & SPC, 2023).

The cumulative effects of urbanisation, increasingly busy lives, safety concerns, environmental degradation, and digital displacement are reducing opportunities for spontaneous AOP. In many urban areas, especially in lower-income communities, AOP is restricted by traffic, lack of green space, or the absence of child-friendly public environments. In the Pacific Islands, children's traditional play environments are increasingly compromised by cyclones, sea level rise, and coastal erosion (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2023). At the same time, regional health data show rising levels of childhood obesity and mental health concerns, especially among Māori, Pasifika, and Indigenous communities (Ministry of Health NZ, 2023; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). These intersecting pressures highlight the urgency for a coordinated, region-specific response that integrates play as a critical pillar of public health and child development.

Australia

National Initiatives

Within Australia, there is a lack of cohesive, well supported and implemented policy that promotes children's active outdoor play; although, the role of active outdoor play in children's physical activity and healthy development is recognised in some national guidance documents. In 2017 and 2019 respectively, the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care released the *Australian 24 Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years* (birth to 5 years) and the *Australian 24 Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People* (5-17 years). These guidelines support the promotion of optimal levels of physical activity, sleep and sedentary behaviour (within a 24-hour

period) and identify outdoor play as a key contributor to children's physical activity. An earlier programme by the Department of Health and Aged Care: *Get Up & Grow* (2010-2020), developed resources (e.g., parent brochures, an educator handbook) to promote physical activity through active play in early childhood (birth to 5 years). These resources are still publicly available online even though the programme is no longer implemented. More recently, the national government agency, Australian Institute of Family Studies, which publishes policy and practice papers, developed two papers that seek to specifically promote active outdoor play by summarising research and providing evidence-informed recommendations. These documents, however, are largely practice focussed and stop short of explicitly calling for policy surrounding active outdoor play. Examples include *Nature Play and Wellbeing* (2024) and *Why Are Children Spending More Time Indoors* (2024).

In contrast, Australia has a relatively active non-government sector working to protect and promote children's active outdoor play through community facing programs and initiatives, online resources, and advocacy to government. These organisations operate in various sectors, across education, public health, injury prevention, child development and parenting. In 2023, Early Childhood Australia (ECA), the peak advocacy organisation for the early childhood education and care sector (birth to 8 years), released a '*Statement on Play*' which reinforced play as a central right of all children. The ECA *Statement on Play* aims to guide governments around Australia on policy and investment for play in early childhood education, including outdoor and nature-based opportunities; and support the early childhood profession in advocating for a better understanding and promotion of play in formal education systems and in partnering with families to increase understanding of their child's play.

Other leading non-governmental organisations include Play Australia and Nature Play Australia. Play Australia actively supports and promotes active outdoor play for all Australians irrespective of age, culture and background and advocates for active outdoor play through national campaigns such as *Play Today* and *1000 Play Streets*; continuing professional education and training for people working in the play sector (e.g. playground designers, local government city planners); and online resources, such as the *Playground Finder*. Nature Play Australia is made up of four state/territory-based not-for-profit organisations dedicated to promoting children's outdoor play and learning, through resources, professional development opportunities, programs, and partnership opportunities for early learning centres, schools, families and local governments. Examples of Nature Play initiatives in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia are discussed below.

Across most states and territories (Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia) there is a non-governmental organisation representing the outdoors sector. These organisations, such as Outdoors Victoria and Outdoors NSW, provide education and training programs and resources for the sector, and advocacy to government for

outdoor recreation, outdoor education and adventure activities. Collectively these organisations are represented at the federal government level by the Outdoor Council of Australia.

Complementing these advocacy and community facing organisations are national-level public health and parenting organisations that provide evidence based online resources for families and educators to promote active outdoor play. A leading example is the Raising Children Network, which provides wide-ranging information and guidelines on a range of play topics including *Risk in Play*; *Rough and Tumble Play*; *Outdoor Play* and *nature activities*.

In the injury prevention sector, leading non-government organisation, Standards Australia, provides evidence-based standards that pertain to the design, development, installation and maintenance of playground equipment and playground spaces. These standards, aligned with the International Standards Organisation, provide guidance for ensuring products, services and systems are safe, consistent and reliable. Although not legislated policy, compliance with these standards in Australia is essential for obtaining insurance and compliance with government guidelines. Notably the standards for playgrounds recommend playground providers balance the benefits and risks of play outdoors, acknowledging the importance of risky and challenging play for healthy child development. Leading child safety organisation, Kidsafe, also provides resources and education to promote child safety during play outdoors.

State/ Territory-Based Initiatives

With a federated system of government, Australian states and territories also have government departments with policy portfolios that influence children's active outdoor play, including health, education, transport, and urban development. These portfolios cross over with local governments within each state and territory, which have oversight at a municipal level for urban planning, parks and recreation, etc. Within each State and Territory there are also vibrant and dedicated organisations in the non-governmental sector working at the community level to promote children's active outdoor play, often in partnership (i.e. funding support) with governments in their jurisdiction. Some programs, strategies and initiatives focus solely on active outdoor play, while others include active outdoor play alongside wider health promotion objectives. Select examples are provided below by jurisdiction:

- 1. Australian Capital Territory (ACT):** The ACT Government developed, in collaboration with health and education sectors, the *Kids at Play: Active Play Programme* - a professional development programme for early childhood educators that focuses on integrating physical activity and outdoor movement into daily practice. The programme explicitly positions active outdoor play as a key contributor to children's physical development and long-term health and promotes embedding movement opportunities into daily learning environments. *Nature Play Canberra*,

ACT works collaboratively with partner groups to encourage the community to value nature play, and support families to prioritise it in children's lives through nature play resources and programs such as *Nature Playlists*.

2. **New South Wales (NSW):** NSW Government Department of Planning and Environment developed the *Everyone Can Play Framework*, which offers a widely adopted set of design principles for inclusive public play spaces, ensuring children of all abilities can access and enjoy outdoor environments. NSW Department of Health developed the *Healthy Built Environment Checklist* which helps local councils integrate child-friendly planning considerations into new developments, ensuring optimal open space accessibility, natural features, connectivity and community safety. Another NSW Health initiative, *Munch & Move*, offers training and resources to educators working in NSW early childhood education and care services to support the healthy development of children birth to 5 years through active play and healthy eating.
3. **Northern Territory (NT):** Capitalising on the vast national parks in Australia's NT, the NT Government offers several child-facing programs to promote their engagement with the outdoors including the *Junior Ranger* programme and the *Parks resources and programs for schools* web-based resource.
4. **Queensland (QLD):** The *Australian Institute of Play* (AIP) is a non-government organisation based in the municipality of Logan, Queensland. The AIP's mission is to promote, enable and protect the right Australian children have to play, especially where they live. The community-facing work of AIP includes establishing neighbourhood play networks, loose parts play areas, pop-up play sessions and delivering playwork training. AIP also contributes to capacity building in the play sector through partnerships with QLD universities to evaluate their projects. *Nature Play QLD* is a collaborative organisation that supports children's outdoor play through participation programs, advocacy, and research. It provides events, workshops, and resources for families and educators all over Queensland. A key initiative is the *Nature Play Passport* – a hard copy booklet, similar to a real passport, that contains nature play missions, stickers and pages for children to document their experience in the outdoors. Alongside this, children can access the *Nature Passport app* to find hundreds of 'nature play missions'.
5. **South Australia (SA):** In collaboration across several policy portfolios, the SA Government developed the *Healthy Parks Healthy People SA Strategy (2021–2026)*, which explicitly links children's outdoor activity with broader wellbeing, urban greening, and liveability goals and includes the *Healthy Parks Healthy People framework*, which aims to help more South Australians benefit from contact with nature. Aligning with this strategy, SA Government developed the *Inclusive Play Guidelines*, which are a tool for local government, schools, and early

childhood settings to assist in planning and developing inclusive play spaces. A leading non-governmental organisation in SA, *Nature Play SA* offers programs, training and events for educators and parents to support time outdoors. Notable initiatives to promote active outdoor play include *Places to Go* and *Things to Do* online resources and the annual *Forest Festival* that celebrates children, nature, Aboriginal culture, the changing seasons and community.

6. **Tasmania:** The Tasmanian government provides the *Move Well Eat Well* program, which is a whole-setting approach to supporting children's physical activity in primary schools and early childhood services, and provides resources and toolkits for nature play, outdoor play and learning.

7. **Victoria:** The *Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network* in Victoria is a not-for-profit network of practitioners that facilitates professional development and training programs for early childhood educators to run nature-based programs like *Bush Kinder* in their settings. The *Kids in Nature Network* is another Victorian-based initiative focused on reconnecting children with nature through promotion of nature play through networking events, education and training, advocacy for nature play in early childhood settings, schools and urban planning, and hosting of the annual *Nature Play Week*.

8. **Western Australia (WA):** Led by The Kids Research Institute Australia in Western Australia, the *Play Active Programme – physical activity policy and training for Early Childhood Education and Care* is a nationally-scalable programme to boost energetic play for children aged birth to five years old in early childhood education and care (childcare). Recognising the state's vast geography, Nature Play WA and its partners have developed regional outreach programmes and digital resources such as the *Play in WA app*, to support outdoor play in rural and remote communities. Like its counterparts in other states, *Nature Play WA* offers a range of programs and resources to encourage children to spend more time outdoors, including the *Talk N Walk* programme for teenaged girls, *Outdoor Classroom Day*, a national event to celebrate and inspire outdoor learning and play, and the *Nature Passport app*.

Challenges

Australia faces several challenges in promoting active outdoor play in policy. At a federal level and in most states/territories, there is low policy salience for the promotion of play in general, and even less recognition of the role of active outdoor play in child health, development and wellbeing. As described above, there are national physical activity guidelines, developed by the Department of Health and Aged Care, which focus attention on individual responsibility for healthy behaviours but no corresponding national physical activity policy nor other sustained policy investment and accountability for creating supportive environments that foster children's active outdoor play. The national government agency with the closest policy portfolio is Sport Australia, which primarily invests in sport participation and athlete development, with relatively less focus on unstructured physical activities like active outdoor play.

There are also critical policy gaps in the education system with respect to the promotion of children's active outdoor play. The national curriculum framework for early childhood education (*The Early Years Learning Framework*) promotes child agency and play-based learning, including the potential for learning in outdoor environments that foster spontaneity, risk taking, exploration and connection with nature. However, education in Australia is delivered through the states and territories, and the corresponding state-based curricula frameworks do not necessarily carry these principles through. For example, the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* provides no more than a cursory mention of active outdoor play and the potential offered by outdoor environments. An associated issue in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia is the complex and conflicting policy and regulatory structures that shape the physical environments in centres, leading to insufficient allocation of outdoor space for children to play actively (Morrissey & Moore, 2021). Initiatives to promote children's outdoor play and learning in the early years (such as the *Bush Kinder* programs mentioned above) are primarily driven by the not-for-profit sector, which makes up less than one third of full-day care centre providers, with 71% of the market being large for-profit providers.

Similarly, education policy in Australia, shaped by the global education reform movement, has increasingly emphasised measurable academic outcomes in schools; particularly literacy and numeracy, reinforced through standardised testing (Reid, 2019). This narrow focus sidelines the developmental value of play, and children's wider health, development and wellbeing needs. In most Australian schools, play is perceived as discretionary and there is no policy stipulating a required amount of free time for children during the school day to play outdoors (Jerebine et al, 2024). There is also no policy guidance or standards regarding the minimum space per student in Australian schools, which continue to grapple with increasing student density and shrinking playgrounds (Jerebine et al, 2024).

Opportunities

Australia has significant opportunities to expand and enhance active outdoor play through existing momentum in the non-governmental sector and policy reform to drive structural change in settings where children spend most of their time. There is a clear opportunity to develop a national physical activity policy that recognises active outdoor play as an essential part of childhood and prioritises the creation of physical and social environments that enable all children to play actively outdoors every day. Embedding active outdoor play in all early years curricula would provide formal permission and structural support for educators to take learning outside, while reforming policy and regulatory structures could ensure that early childhood education and care centres allocate adequate physical space for outdoor play, including opportunities for children to engage with nature. In the school sector, mandating at least one hour of play every day would help protect recess and affirm children's right to free, unstructured time during the school day. Finally, there is a need to advocate for sustained funding to support active outdoor play initiatives and programs, ensuring that successful, evidence-based models are scaled and maintained beyond the variability of federal, state, and territory electoral cycles.

New Zealand

New Zealand's AOP landscape is supported by a well-connected network of national and regional organisations, with shared leadership across government, advocacy, and community. At the centre of this network is Sport New Zealand – Ihi Aotearoa (Sport NZ), the Crown agency responsible for promoting physical activity and well-being through play, active recreation, and sport. Since 2019, Sport NZ has embedded play as a strategic priority, investing in dedicated staff roles within regional sports trusts (RSTs) and local councils, funding research and capacity building, and promoting the use of play principles across early learning, education, and community development. Their investment into local government is a recent but significant priority that differs from other national play approaches, such as the legislative approach in Wales where play sufficiency is a statutory duty for councils (Wood, 2017). The *Play Advocate Workforce Programme* in local government aims to make sure that play is someone's job. These staff are tasked with advocating for the value of play, increasing opportunities for children's voice to be heard, and ultimately increasing quality AOP experiences for children beyond the realm of traditional playgrounds. They have a broad mandate to influence internal change to improve play outcomes through council policies (any strategic documentation), procedures (i.e. the way council carries out its work, such as the use of benefit-risk assessment in risk management), programming (events and activations), partnerships (external relationships to support outcomes), physical environment (what is built and where), and pass on professional development on play to other staff.

Sport NZ's investment into RSTs is closely aligned with Healthy Families NZ. This is an initiative launched by Te Whatu Ora / Health New Zealand, that plays a complementary role, operating through a place-based, systems-change model in ten regions around the country. They have broad well-being goals, however their play-related work includes creating community-led play opportunities, reducing barriers to play relating to time, space, and permission, collaborating with councils, marae, and schools to improve play outcomes, and empowering families and children to advocate for play-enabling environments. Together, Sport NZ and Healthy Families NZ provide both top-down strategy and bottom-up community innovation.

Play Aotearoa, the New Zealand branch of the International Play Association (IPA), acts as a cross-sector convenor and advocate, promoting the right to play as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This developing organisation aims to bring together professionals across the early childhood, public health, planning, and education sectors, and provides policy advice, research translation, and national dialogue through conferences and forums. Additional support comes from agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, which contribute to funding, policy alignment, and implementation. Local government plays a crucial role in delivery, with many councils now employing play advocates or working groups and aligning their urban planning, parks development, and well-being strategies with national play principles. This multi-layered network allows for both consistency and flexibility, enabling New Zealand to develop a uniquely integrated and values-based approach to supporting AOP.

A number of key policies and documents guide national efforts to promote play. Sport NZ's *Play Framework* outlines foundational principles for play as freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated, and positions play as a critical foundation for well-being, particularly in the early years. An accompanying document, *The Importance of Play*, reinforces this framing, describing play as a universal and developmentally essential activity that fosters resilience, creativity, and lifelong physical literacy. These strategic statements are supported by targeted investment into local delivery mechanisms, including support for play facilitators within councils, training for community leaders, and partnerships with regional sports trusts.

The *National Play Impact Report*, published by Healthy Families NZ, showcases a systems-based approach to enabling play, with case studies demonstrating how local governments and community partners have embedded play into spatial planning, parks policies, and place-making strategies. These examples include projects that reallocate road space for neighbourhood play, amend bylaws to increase play-friendliness, and engage tamariki in co-designing play spaces. In parallel, New Zealand's *Good Practice Principles for the Provision of Sport and Recreation for Young People* offer guidance for creating developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and fun environments that support the

continuum from play to physical activity and sport. These policy and practice documents are further informed by national monitoring tools such as the *Active NZ Survey* and the *New Zealand Physical Activity Report Card*, both of which highlight participation trends and equity gaps across different age, gender, and ethnic groups. While New Zealand does not have a single consolidated national play policy, this growing body of evidence and guidance represents a coordinated, evolving strategy across health, education, sport, and local government systems.

A distinctive feature of New Zealand's AOP environment is the growing integration of te ao Māori (the Māori worldview) and kaupapa Māori (traditional Māori ways) practice. The independent and critical role of tākaro, which is the Māori word that most closely aligns with “play”, is clearly represented in the Sport NZ Play Plan titled *Kia Hīanga*. Traditional movement forms such as kapa haka (Māori dance), waka ama (canoes), and mau rākau (Māori martial arts) are increasingly recognised as valid and valuable expressions of play, with deep links to identity, well-being, and whanaungatanga (connectedness). Korikori tinana (physical movement) is a key concept promoted through initiatives such as *He Oranga Poutama*, a long-running programme funded by Sport NZ to increase Māori participation in sport and traditional movement through iwi- and hapū-led delivery. Māori health organisations, whānau ora collectives, and kaupapa Māori early learning centres are also at the forefront of culturally grounded tākaro promotion. These developments reflect principles of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) and partnership under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi – New Zealand's founding document), and position Aotearoa New Zealand as a leader in Indigenous-informed play policy. It is also being further supported by investment from Sport NZ in developing a dedicated tākaro workforce embedded in leading community organisations across the country. However, inequities persist, particularly for young Māori living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation or in urban environments with limited access to high-quality public play infrastructure.

Challenges

Despite having a strong national framework and growing cross-sector support, New Zealand faces several challenges in ensuring equitable access to AOP. Urban development in major centres such as Auckland and Wellington has led to declining access to informal play spaces, particularly in lower-income neighbourhoods where high-density housing and limited green infrastructure are common. Risk-averse school environments, driven by safety concerns and regulatory pressures, have also contributed to the decline of adventurous or unsupervised play. While play is broadly supported at the national level, delivery remains variable across local government areas, with some councils lacking dedicated resourcing or staff to lead play-related planning and activation. National survey data suggest that parental attitudes may also contribute to this variability. Although many New Zealand parents value risky outdoor play in principle, they often hesitate to allow their children to participate in such activities, citing concerns about safety and supervision (Jelleyman et al., 2019).

In addition, socioeconomic disparities persist, with tamariki Māori, Pasifika children, and those living in rural or underserved communities less likely to have access to well-maintained, inclusive, and culturally-relevant play spaces.

A further challenge lies in the political positioning of Sport NZ itself, which is part of the Sport NZ Group that also includes High Performance Sport NZ. Collectively, these have a mandate that spans grassroots participation through to elite sport performance. Although Sport NZ's unique positioning as a Crown Agency means that it is at "arm's length" from government ministers, it is not entirely apolitical in its function and operations. Furthermore, since its initial inception as the Hilary Commission and subsequent iterations as Sport and Recreation NZ (SPARC) and most recently Sport NZ, there have been ongoing fluctuations in how its mandate has been defined across the sector. Importantly, much of this variation has coincided with shifts in the political climate and power in Aotearoa New Zealand. While Sport NZ has championed play in recent times and clearly articulates its importance in current strategic documents, the inherent political nature of Sport NZ means that there is no independent centrally funded body with a consistent mandate to promote active play. This instability can potentially undermine long-term planning and capacity-building efforts at the local level.

Opportunities

New Zealand is well-positioned to build on its foundational strengths and take a leading role globally in the promotion of AOP. The existence of national play frameworks, funding mechanisms, and dedicated roles across regional and local government provides a strong infrastructure for scaling successful initiatives. Sport NZ's play principles are widely recognised across sectors, and capability-building efforts continue to strengthen the capacity of educators, planners, and health professionals to embed play into their practice. Programmes like He Oranga Poutama provide a powerful model for Indigenous-led approaches that centre identity, movement, and cultural connection. The growing influence of Play Aotearoa is helping to connect policy, research, and practice, ensuring a coordinated voice for play advocacy.

At the community level, Healthy Families NZ sites demonstrate how play can be embedded through systems change, from shifting bylaws and design standards to repurposing public space for tamariki. However, the momentum generated by these efforts would benefit from a more stable and apolitical institutional anchor. Without an independent government agency focused solely on play, long-term planning remains vulnerable to shifting political priorities. Strengthening the consistency of play leadership—while continuing to invest in liveable cities, mental well-being, and child health—would help ensure that AOP is not only valued in principle but supported in practice consistently over time.

Pacific Islands

The Pacific Islands region encompasses a diverse array of countries and territories with unique histories, geographies, and governance structures. Despite these differences, several key players contribute to the promotion of AOP across the region. At the regional level, organisations such as UNICEF Pacific and the Pacific Community (SPC) have played a prominent role in supporting child well-being initiatives that include AOP as part of broader goals around physical activity, nutrition, education, and resilience. In some countries, ministries of health or education have integrated AOP elements into early childhood development frameworks or national health plans, though resourcing and implementation remain highly variable. While most Pacific nations lack formal national bodies dedicated specifically to play, implementation often occurs through community-led initiatives, faith-based organisations, and school-based programmes. Regional coordination efforts such as the Pacific Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Partnership, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat's resilience strategies, and donor-supported programmes (e.g. through New Zealand Aid or Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) have also included outdoor activity as part of child health promotion efforts.

Policy and strategic documentation related to AOP is limited across most Pacific countries, but a number of important frameworks offer insight into current directions. The *Vanuatu National Early Childhood Care and Education Framework*, for example, explicitly highlights the importance of movement, outdoor environments, and culturally grounded play experiences for young children. In Hawai'i, the *Play Streets Kaua'i* initiative — while technically part of the United States — offers a compelling model of place-based play infrastructure, temporarily closing streets for safe, active play. At the regional level, physical activity and nutrition strategies such as the *Hawai'i Physical Activity and Nutrition Plan* and the *Pacific NCD Strategic Plan* recognise the need for movement-friendly environments, though they rarely prioritise play in its own right. Instead, AOP is generally positioned as a co-benefit of public health, education, or urban development efforts. This framing reflects both the cross-sectoral nature of AOP and the reality that play-related planning is often folded into broader well-being agendas.

A further area for development in the Pacific Islands is the implementation of clear school recess policies that support active outdoor play. Research shows that break and recess durations in Fijian schools can vary widely, with some schools offering minimal time and others allowing more generous periods (Dorovolomo, 2014). This variability reflects a broader global trend of reducing unstructured outdoor time in schools, often under the mistaken assumption that more classroom time will improve academic performance. However, such reductions may undermine children's opportunities

for creativity, physical activity, and informal learning. Recess should not be viewed as idle time but as a critical context for promoting wellbeing, cognitive development, and physical activity. Well-defined recess policies that value and protect time for outdoor play are needed to counter this trend and support more balanced, developmentally appropriate school experiences.

AOP in the Pacific Islands is often deeply woven into cultural life, community rhythms, and ecological connection. Across many Pacific nations, play takes the form of traditional games, communal movement, oral storytelling, music, and hands-on tasks — all typically performed outdoors in shared spaces such as village greens, beaches, or bushland. These play experiences are often intergenerational, collective, and adaptive, using natural materials or whatever is at hand. Rather than being confined to a designated time or place, play blends seamlessly with daily life, family activity, and the seasonal environment. However, these practices are increasingly under pressure from environmental degradation, urban migration, and the encroachment of screen-based entertainment, especially in urban centres. Children growing up in informal settlements or densely populated areas may have fewer safe, accessible outdoor spaces in which to play, and these disparities are widening with climate disruption and development inequities.

In reflecting on the role of formal AOP policy in the Pacific, it is important to consider whether such frameworks are always necessary or appropriate. The concept of “play,” as it is defined and operationalised in Western contexts, does not always align with how childhood is experienced in the Pacific. In many communities, outdoor activity is not a scheduled intervention or health strategy, it is simply part of everyday life. Children accompany elders to fish, farm, cook, gather, or tell stories; they climb trees, swim, make toys from natural materials, and engage in communal celebration without formal equipment or programming. In this context, the absence of play policy may not indicate a policy failure, but rather the presence of cultural resilience and deeply embedded practice. Imposing structured frameworks or questioning the lack of formal strategy may risk misreading or diminishing this strength. Going forward, efforts to support play in the Pacific must be grounded in partnership, cultural humility, and a willingness to learn from ways of living in which play has never been separated from life itself.

Challenges

While the Pacific Islands region possesses deep cultural traditions of outdoor, community-based play, it also faces a number of structural and environmental challenges that threaten these practices. Climate change is perhaps the most pressing, with sea level rise, flooding, cyclones, and extreme heat making outdoor environments less safe and reliable for regular play. Rapid urbanisation, particularly in and around capital cities, has led to the growth of informal settlements and the loss of accessible green spaces. In these contexts, children may have limited opportunity for safe,

spontaneous outdoor activity. Resource constraints also limit the development of formal play spaces or recreation infrastructure, especially in rural and outer island communities. Few countries in the region have dedicated agencies or consistent funding streams for play promotion, and play is rarely included as a standalone priority in national strategies. In addition, Western models of early childhood education and public health are increasingly influential across the Pacific, sometimes crowding out traditional play practices or promoting structured, school-based models that may be mismatched to local ways of life.

Opportunities

Despite certain challenges, the Pacific Islands region has unique strengths that position it to advance AOP in culturally grounded and sustainable ways. Play is already deeply embedded in daily life through traditional games, storytelling, communal celebration, and intergenerational movement. Rather than creating entirely new systems, governments and development partners can build on these existing practices through supportive policy, community investment, and cultural revitalisation. Regional organisations such as UNICEF Pacific and the Pacific Community (SPC) have begun to integrate AOP into broader well-being strategies, and documents like the Vanuatu ECCE Framework and the Fiji National Sports and Physical Activity Policy show how elements of play can be embedded in health and education planning. Increasingly, there is also momentum for Indigenous-led and community-driven models of child development, which place play at the heart of connection to land, language, and identity. As global discourse on child well-being shifts toward holistic, place-based, and culturally-responsive approaches, the Pacific may offer not just a site for intervention, but a model of how play can be lived rather than managed.

Summary and Recommendations

This commentary highlights the rich diversity of policy, practice, and cultural meaning attached to active outdoor play (AOP) across the Oceania region. While Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands each face distinct social, environmental, and political circumstances, several unifying themes emerge. All three regions recognise the importance of AOP for children's health, wellbeing, and development, and many of the most promising initiatives are grounded in community-led or Indigenous approaches. However, the extent to which AOP is supported by policy infrastructure, institutional leadership, and sustained investment varies considerably.

In Australia, AOP policy is characterised by a patchwork of innovation and inconsistency. Some states and territories have demonstrated leadership through advocacy organisations, inclusive design standards, and curriculum integration, while others rely more heavily on grassroots or regulatory approaches. Although Play Australia provides national advocacy, there is no dedicated federal portfolio or coordinating agency for AOP, limiting long-term policy alignment and funding stability. In contrast, New Zealand has established a more coherent national strategy, with Sport NZ and Healthy Families NZ supporting play through cross-sector partnerships and community activation. The appointment of play advocates within local government offers a promising model of place-based leadership that could be explored further across the region, including through collaborative learning with Australian and Pacific counterparts.

In the Pacific Islands, AOP is not typically formalised in policy, but is often deeply embedded in cultural traditions and daily life. Children's play in Pacific contexts is interwoven with environmental knowledge, social connection, and intergenerational learning. However, as in Australia and New Zealand, emerging challenges such as climate change, urbanisation, and digital displacement are increasingly limiting children's opportunities to play freely and safely outdoors. Despite this, the strength of informal play cultures provides a vital foundation for low-cost, locally adapted strategies that centre Indigenous and community leadership.

Across the region, the need for an independent policy mandate for AOP is clear. Grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), such a mandate would ensure that children's right to play is protected not only in principle, but in practice, across early childhood settings, schools, public infrastructure, and neighbourhood design. This includes minimum standards for daily unstructured play time in schools, access to safe outdoor environments, and integrated planning across sectors such as transport, education, housing, and urban development. Strengthening understanding at the policy level of the role of play in physical activity, mental wellbeing, and child development is also essential. Many countries in the region share common barriers in the early childhood sector, including lack of outdoor space, variable teacher confidence, and inconsistent recognition of play as a pedagogical priority. A coordinated response is needed to elevate AOP as a core pillar of healthy, inclusive, and child-friendly societies.

To support the continued growth and protection of AOP, we offer the following recommendations:

1. *Strengthen cross-sectoral governance*: Encourage alignment between health, education, planning, and environment sectors to ensure that play is embedded in long-term systems, not left to ad hoc or project-based delivery.
2. *Support Indigenous-led and multicultural models of play*: Invest in the leadership, knowledge systems, and cultural practices of indigenous and migrant communities, and ensure these inform the design, governance, and delivery of play strategies.
3. *Address equity through local investment*: Prioritise funding and support for rural, remote, and low-income communities, where safe and accessible AOP opportunities are most limited.
4. *Stabilise play leadership infrastructure*: Create or empower independent agencies or coalitions that can provide consistent play advocacy and coordination across political cycles.
5. *Recognise and protect informal play environments*: Shift focus from formal infrastructure alone to also value parks, streets, bushland, coastlines, and community spaces where play already happens.
6. *Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions*: Honour the distinct cultural, ecological, and political contexts of each country or region. In the Pacific Islands especially, support should take the form of partnership, not prescription.

Oceania's contribution to the global conversation on AOP lies not in the uniformity of its approach, but in its diversity — from grassroots bush playgroups to national frameworks, from community-led street activations to land-based Indigenous movement practices. By recognising and resourcing this diversity, the region can lead the way in reimagining what it means for children to play well, outside, and together.

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Appendix A: Information Sources

Country	Document(s)	Description
Australia - ACT	Nature Play Canberra	Outlines local government-supported initiatives and community partnerships designed to increase children's access to natural environments and promote unstructured outdoor activities.
Link: https://www.natureplaycbr.org.au/		
Australia - ACT	Kids at Play Active Play	Provides guidance for early childhood educators and carers in incorporating physical activity and outdoor play into daily routines and curriculum.
Link: https://www.act.gov.au/directorates-and-agencies/act-health/health-promotion-and-grants/kids-at-play-active-play		
Australia - NSW	Everyone Can Play Framework	Establishes design principles and best practices for inclusive, accessible playspaces to accommodate children of all abilities across NSW.
Link: https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/policy-and-legislation/open-space/everyone-can-play		
Australia - NSW	Healthy Built Environment Checklist	Offers planners and developers a framework for evaluating how the built environment supports physical activity, including outdoor play.
Link: https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/urbanhealth/Pages/healthy-built-enviro-check.aspx		
Australia - NSW	Munch & Move	A NSW Health initiative that supports the healthy development of children from birth to 5 years by offering training and resources to educators working in NSW early childhood education and care services.
Link: https://healthykids.nsw.gov.au/		
Australia - QLD	Nature Play QLD	A state-wide initiative that promotes play in natural settings and encourages families and schools to support outdoor exploration as a core developmental activity.
Link: https://natureplayqld.org.au/about-us		
Australia - QLD	Australian Institute of Play: Playful Research	Resources that highlight current research and evaluation in child-led free play.
Link: https://www.australianinstituteofplay.org/playful-research		

Australia - NT	Junior Ranger and Park Resources and Programmes	Child-facing programmes delivered by the NT Government to promote engagement with the outdoors.
Link: https://nt.gov.au/parks/learn-and-be-involved		
Australia - SA	Nature Play SA	Offers programmes, training and events for educators and parents to support time outdoors.
Link: https://natureplaysa.org.au/		
Australia - SA	Healthy Parks Healthy People SA Strategy 2021–2026	A cross-sector strategy that connects public health outcomes with access to parks and nature, advocating AOP as a preventative health measure.
Link: https://www.environment.sa.gov.au/topics/park-management/statewide-park-strategies/healthy-parks-healthy-people		
Australia - SA	Inclusive Play Guidelines (SA)	Provides recommendations for designing playspaces that are accessible, culturally inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all children.
Link: https://inclusive.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/95461/Inclusive-Play-GuidelinesV2.pdf		
Australia - TAS	Move Well Eat Well	A whole-setting approach to supporting children's physical activity in primary schools and early childhood services, and provides resources and toolkits for nature play, outdoor play and learning.
Link: https://www.health.tas.gov.au/move-well-eat-well		
Australia - VIC	Kids in Nature Network Strategy 2023–2028	Strategic framework to expand outdoor play and nature connection through advocacy, cross-sector collaboration, and community initiatives.
Link: https://www.kidsinnaturenetwork.org.au/		
Australia - VIC	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework	Statewide curriculum framework endorsing play-based and outdoor learning approaches in early childhood education.
Link: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf		
Australia - WA	Play Active	A programme providing evidence-informed guidelines on the amount of physical activity and sedentary time (including screen time) children should do while attending ECEC.
Link: https://playactive.org.au/about/		
Australia - WA	Nature Play WA – Nature Passport	Mobile app co-developed with WA Health to encourage outdoor exploration through activity prompts and trails.
Link: https://www.natureplaywa.org.au/teaching-outdoors-with-nature-passport/		

Australia - National	Australian 24 hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (Birth to 5 years)	Evidence-based recommendations on daily physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep to support healthy growth and development in young children.
Link: https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/05/24-hour-movement-guidelines-birth-to-5-years-brochure.pdf		
Australia - National	24-Hour Movement Guidelines for 5–17 Year Olds	Comprehensive national health guidelines covering physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep, with emphasis on outdoor movement.
Link: https://www.health.gov.au/topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians/for-children-and-young-people-5-to-17-years		
Australia - National	ECA Statement on Play	Endorses play as essential to early childhood development, with particular emphasis on outdoor, self-directed, and imaginative play.
Link: https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ECA-Statement-on-Play-Oct2023.pdf		
Australia - National	Get Up & Grow	A suite of early childhood resources promoting healthy eating and active play in early years settings.
Link: https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/get-up-grow		
Australia - National	Australian Institute of Family Studies Policy and Practice Papers	These papers translate research evidence into practical guidance and policy insights to support the wellbeing of Australian families.
Link: https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers		
Australia - National	Play Today (Play Australia)	A nationwide advocacy campaign encouraging adults and communities to prioritise outdoor play as a daily activity for children.
Link: https://www.playaustralia.org.au/		
Australia - National	Standards Australia: Australian Playground Standards	Provides internationally aligned standards for playground equipment and surfacing safety. In 2017, a benefit-risk assessment approach was included in the updated AS 4685.0:2017, Playground equipment and surfacing – Part 0: Development, installation, inspection, maintenance and operation, which integrates assessment of the value or benefit of an activity into an assessment of any risks.
Link: https://www.standards.org.au/news/new-australian-standard-for-playground-safety		

Australia - National	Early Years Learning Framework	National curriculum framework for early childhood education that promotes child agency and play-based learning.
Link: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf		
Australia - National	Outdoor Play (Raising Children Network)	Provides evidence-based parenting resources to promote outdoor play for cognitive, social, and motor development.
Link: https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/play-learning/outdoor-play/outdoor-play		
New Zealand	Good Practice Principles for Sport and Recreation	Outlines ten principles for delivering inclusive, child-centred recreational activities that support fun, safety, and developmental outcomes.
Link: https://sportnz.org.nz/media/2012/good-practice-principles-for-the-provision-of-sport-and-recreation-for-young-people.pdf		
New Zealand	The Importance of Play (Sport NZ)	Highlights play as a vital contributor to well-being, creativity, resilience, and lifelong engagement in physical activity.
Link: https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1654/sport-new-zealand-play-principles-nov-2017.pdf		
New Zealand	He Oranga Poutama	A Sport NZ initiative to develop, promote and implement physical activities in a way that is culturally appropriate to Māori.
Link: https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/he-oranga-poutama/		
New Zealand	Kia Hīanga – Sport NZ Ihi Aotearoa Internal Play Work Plan 2022-2025	A strategic, bicultural framework outlining Sport NZ’s vision, principles, and system-level actions to enhance play opportunities for tamariki (children aged 5–12) through leadership, insights, practice, partnerships, and innovation across Aotearoa New Zealand.
Link: https://sportnz.org.nz/media/enwkgj1o/kia-h%C4%ABanga-sport-nz-play-plan-2022-final-1-compressed.pdf		
New Zealand	Healthy Families NZ National Play Impact Report	Assesses local play advocacy and systems-level change, identifying barriers, enablers, and community-led solutions for outdoor play.
Link: https://www.healthyfamiliesnz.org/files/ugd/44d27c_bad1a4526f914ebfa43e463de0f85ad4.pdf		

New Zealand	NZ Physical Activity Report Cards for Children & Youth	Presents national grades for several activity behaviours, including active play. Part of the Global Matrix on Physical Activity for Children and Adolescents administered by the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance
Link: https://www.activehealthykids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/New-Zealand-report-card-long-form-2022.pdf		
Pacific Islands	Play Streets Kaua'i Report	Evaluates a place-based intervention that temporarily closes streets to traffic to create safe, community-supported outdoor play environments.
Link: https://www.kauai.gov/files/content/public/v/7/government/departments-agencies/planning/play-streets-kauai/2023-psk-report_final-draft.pdf		
Pacific Islands	Hawai'i Physical Activity and Nutrition Plan 2030	A multi-sector strategy addressing chronic disease prevention through improved access to safe active spaces, including child-friendly environments.
Link: https://hhsp.hawaii.gov/assets/pdf/HHSP_PAN_Plan_WEB.pdf		
Pacific Islands	Vanuatu Early Childhood Care and Education Framework	Policy framework integrating AOP with early learning, family engagement, and inclusive access across diverse and remote communities.
Link: https://moet.gov.vu/docs/ecce-reports-and-policies/Vanuatu%20National%20Early%20Childhood%20Care%20and%20Education%20Framework.pdf		

Thank you!

Thank you for reading this global regional review on play in Oceania. This has been a passion project of our dedicated AOP10 leadership group - we thoroughly enjoyed putting this together and discovering and sharing this work! We also recognize that we haven't captured all outdoor play efforts. Consider this your invitation to reach out to us, let us know what we're missing and how we may work together to continue celebrating international efforts to promote active outdoor play across all ages!



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