

# HEALTHY KIDS

Stacey Molloy



Wild time: Bridget Hartree, 5, left, Aiden Yaner, 6, and Elanor Witte, 5, enjoy the wild space at the Bold Park Community School. Picture: Robert Duncan

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## WILD PLAY

### Schoolchildren design their own play space

**Y**ou might be surprised to learn that a pride of wild lions roams free in its own, especially designed "Wild Space" at the Bold Park Community School in suburban Wembley.

Full of energy and enthusiasm, the "wild lions" are, in fact, a dedicated group of five and six-year-old students who are helping to construct their dream outdoor playground.

School principal Gillian McAuliffe said about 50 students aged four to six — including the self-dubbed wild lions class — started work last year to design their personalised wild space.

Still under construction, the new area will incorporate the children's top priorities for optimum adventure play: a limestone-encircled mud pit,

trees they can climb, winding bush paths and native plantings for exploring and hiding, a bamboo forest, a tunnel made of reclaimed tree branches and planted over with fast-growing creepers, a small free-flowing creek, a fire-pit for cooking and a hill large enough to roll down and provide views beyond the school fence to the Herdsman Lake foreshore which is just metres away.

Ms McAuliffe said the wild space was designed for maximum fun but would be used for maximum learning.

It would act as an outdoor classroom for a mix of students and would also host an outdoor playgroup for children aged 18 months to three.

"It's not a terribly large space and it doesn't need to be," she said.

"Usually playgrounds are constructed from an adult perspective but the process we went through was to observe the children and ask what they liked to do when playing.

"They loved the bush, wanted to roll down hills, play in mud and control water.

"They wanted to build forts and hide and they designed a space that is not about aesthetics but somewhere they can move rocks around, pick things up, be interactive and discover."

Ms McAuliffe said that while some parents might balk at the idea of a fire-pit and a running creek, the children's design was reviewed closely with health and safety concerns taken into account without removing the adventure.

"Our parents have been involved

at every stage and are helping with the construction along with the children," she said.

"We do risk assessments and if there is a hazard, it is removed but, at the same time, we still want risks that are manageable by the children so that they learn how to make better choices."

She said that the idea of a mud pit — while horrifying most parents initially — was not something new to the school of 240 students, with the messy play celebrated last year by the school community.

"Last year we did a whole project on mud and the seven and eight-year-olds designed and constructed a small mud hut and we had a school 'mud day'," Ms McAuliffe said.

"Some of the staff had been involved in sponsoring an orphanage in Nepal and they explained that the children there couldn't go outside to play in the mud because there wasn't enough money for soap and clothes.

"So our children raised \$1000 for them to have clothes and soap and volunteers constructed a mud pit.

"By the end of our school 'mud day' parents could see how much the children had gained from it and remembered just how much fun it is to play in the mud. We even have mud pit T-shirts."

Ms McAuliffe said the clay mud was specially sourced from a supplier and that parents helped by packing extra clothes for their children.

Five-year-old Elanor Witte, like many of her classmates, said her favourite part of the wild space so far was the boundary fence built from tree branches collected after a storm.

She pointed out that the fence and gate would also keep "little kids" out until it was safe and time for them to enter.

Class teacher David Burton said every part of the design and construction of the wild space was integrated into class learning.

"The fence took us a good couple of weeks to design and get off the ground and the children made miniature fences to see what the end product would look like and we had a busy bee where the parents helped out," he said.

Mr Burton said parents had been fantastic in their support of the project and understood the benefits to their children of creating and experiencing such a stimulating play and learning space.

While all the wild lions were itching to get their hands into the mud and water, he said most had already run to the top of the hill and admired the view before rolling back down.

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