

# A Community Development Approach Connecting Geelong with Nature

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Muddy Boots and Sandy Hands (MBSH) is a nature-based club that encourages families to explore nature regularly. MBSH is an initiative by Leaders for Geelong, developed by representatives from the City of Greater Geelong, Parks Victoria, and a local health insurance company.

Children today spend less time at play than did the previous generation; they go outdoors less frequently, and when they do, they go for a reduced duration. MBSH was formed to turn this around. Families are encouraged to connect with the natural environment through informal activities and improved awareness. MBSH seeks to reach families with young children to encourage them to interact and engage with nature everyday. Children who learn to associate with nature are more likely to continue to do so and respect and protect the environment as adults. In addition, research shows that children are happier, healthier, and smarter with this nature connection.

Chronic diseases, such as obesity, are preventable and can be dramatically reduced through raising awareness and lifestyle changes (Maller et al. 2002; WHO 2003). According to a joint expert consultation with World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2003), a preventative approach that encourages physical activity outdoors is one of the most cost-effective and sustainable methods to treat chronic disease and improve physical health.

In addition to improvements in physical health, exposure to the natural environment has positive impacts on the mental health of

adults and children (Bird 2007; Maller et al. 2002). Natural space provides a place to be active, restore mental fatigue, find solitude, contemplate, reflect, socialise, and be respectful towards the natural environment (Maller et al. 2002). Overall, research has shown that children and families who engage with nature are likely to experience many positive outcomes, such as improved cognitive abilities, higher resistance to stress and depression, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, greater academic success, and more creative thinking (Louv 2008; Bird 2007; Johnson 2007; Wilson 1997).

MBSH was a project initiated in 2012 through the Leaders for Geelong programme that recognised the widespread problems associated with disassociation from nature. It sought to complement existing programmes by improving the connection between Geelong families and nature. Passionate community members had a vision to create and nurture a self-sustaining (and zero-cost) community interest group that would provide parents of young children in the Geelong region with information, discussion, and activities dedicated to positively connecting their children with nature and the outdoors.

MBSH aimed to:

1. Raise awareness in the Geelong region of the mental, social, and physical benefits of connecting children and families with nature.
2. Fill the “void” in the Geelong region of a network, group, or club that actively seeks to reconnect children and families of the Geelong region with nature and the outdoors.

To support these aims, a communication and group development strategy was developed that involved a number of platforms.

## Media Releases and Word of Mouth

Word of mouth, through existing networks and established relationships, was the first method used to raise awareness of the benefits of engaging with nature and to promote the development of MBSH. Media releases were developed and sent to a range of media outlets, early childhood centres, kindergartens, and primary schools. A communication plan was developed that informed the timely distribution of the releases and methods of distribution.

## Social Media Campaign

Early in the project, it became clear that MBSH would benefit from an online space where interested parents could connect with each other, share stories and photographs, and stay in touch with proposed activities. Facebook was selected as the online platform as it fitted well with the demographics of the target group, who are parents of 2 to 10 year olds in their late 20s to late 30s. A Facebook page was created ([www.facebook.com/MuddyBootsAndSandyHands](http://www.facebook.com/MuddyBootsAndSandyHands)). People who “like” the Facebook page are able to participate in discussions related to nature and activities with like-minded people and read the inspirational, educational, or interesting posts by the moderators on interacting with nature.

## Patrons

Five high-profile “patrons” were engaged to generate interest in the project and to support and provide networking opportunities and technical expertise. They included: Danielle Bain, a community member with significant interest in the topic; Mardie Townsend,

Associate Professor, School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University; John Jacoby, Director, Rapid Ascent Adventure Event Management; Dr. Rob Grenfell, National Director, Clinical Issues, National Heart Foundation, and Senior Health Advisor, Parks Victoria; and Elaine Carbines, CEO, G21 Geelong Regional Alliance.

### Website Development

A website ([www.mbsh.org.au](http://www.mbsh.org.au)) was developed to complement the Facebook page. It was launched in August 2012 with information related to MBSH, summaries of research about the importance of engaging with nature, links to research documentation elsewhere on the web, information about the patrons, a “bucket and spade list” of activities for parents to encourage their kids to complete, and a set of local destinations to inspire parents to explore the local region.

### Nature Activities

A series of activities was organised and run by passionate community members at no cost in order to ensure affordability. Initially, a few community members were primarily responsible for running activities. However, after hosting a series of events, additional community members were also identified and began to play a more active role in running the activities. Community ownership was a vital aspect of the MBSH succession plan.

### Participation Incentives

The MBSH team decided early in the project to include a variety of simple incentives to encourage families and young children to continue to participate. Information provided showing the importance of engaging with the nature seeks to encourage parents to return



1. Children get to approach creeks, explore ponds, and climb trees.



2. Parents and their children are encouraged spend more time outdoors.



3. Children are given “nature passports” to “stamp” when they participate in Muddy Boots and Sandy Hands activities.

to activities and increase their participation in outdoor activities. Participating children receive “nature passports” and are encouraged to draw pictures of their experiences after attending MBSH activities. During events, children wear the passports on lanyards and have them “stamped” at the end of the activity.

### Group and Club Development


MBSH has transitioned from a Leaders for Geelong initiative to a community-ownership model, where community members now continue to develop and implement its activities and promotion. MBSH will continue to promote active engagement with the environment by carrying out activities on a regular basis and promoting the benefits of engaging with nature.

Evaluation of the MBSH project was carried out through qualitative, quantitative, and observational research. A partnership with Deakin University’s School of Humanities and Social Science allowed student Lizzie Strickland to coordinate research activities. With the MBSH team members, she gathered and analysed data to assess the success of MBSH activities and the project as a whole. Strickland (2012) tested the success of the programme using surveys, web, and social media metrics and observational techniques. Her research demonstrated that MBSH has been successful in achieving the vision of creating and nurturing a self-sustaining community interest group that provides parents of young children in the Geelong region with information, discussion, and activities dedicated to positively connecting their children with nature and the outdoors. MBSH has raised awareness of the mental,

physical, and social benefits of engaging with nature and has been responsible for the increasing involvement of participating children and families with the natural environment.

Feedback from MBSH participants has also been extremely positive. The MBSH Facebook page and website have connected the Geelong community beyond nature and the outdoors, providing parents with information and inspiration to educate themselves more regarding the benefits of engaging with nature. People are more aware of the benefits of engaging with nature and the outdoors, although the degree to which MBSH has impacted this cannot be measured until greater evidence supporting awareness success is obtained.

Parents and children involved in MBSH activities have had high return rates to activities and have had a very enjoyable time. Participation rates have expanded extensively and there is a lot of support from MBSH community members to return. Whilst more research can occur to promote and analyse the success of this project statistically, there is no denying that MBSH has been an incredibly positive and successful community project.

MBSH has created positive relationships with key stakeholders, including Parks Victoria, City of Greater Geelong, key passionate community members and industry advocates, and, most importantly, the families of young children, ensuring the sustainability and continuation of MBSH beyond its inception through Leaders for Geelong. 

For more information: [www.mbsh.org.au](http://www.mbsh.org.au)

### References

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4. Exploring Buckley Falls.



5. Walking at Inverleigh Flora and Fauna Reserve.



6. Children get to approach creeks, explore ponds, and climb trees.



7. On a ramble at a rock pool at Point Lonsdale.