

Introduction

High-quality child-led play is essential for children's developmental growth as it fosters cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Through this type of play, children explore their environment, practice problem-solving, and develop language and communication skills. It also enables them to build social competence by learning to cooperate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts with peers. Emotionally, play allows children to express feelings, manage stress, and develop resilience. Physically, active play supports the development of motor skills, coordination, and overall health. As a multifaceted activity, play serves as a foundational mechanism through which children make sense of the world and themselves.

Yet, across Australia, there is a concerning decline in play opportunities, particularly unstructured, child-led, and outdoor play. This decline has coincided with a rise in behavioural incidents, reduced social connection, and diminished student wellbeing. This report is based on child voice consultation efforts to understand the play experience and a

Play Action Plan at Waterford West State School. This school is location in Logan and has over 800 students, from Prep to Grade 6.

Context

A passionate principal at Waterford West State School (WWSS) recently committed to all students engaging with Rumble's Quest. Rumble's Quest is a digital assessment tool developed to measure the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of children, particularly in primary school settings. Designed as an engaging, game-like platform, it allows children to self-report on key aspects of their wellbeing in a way that is developmentally appropriate and accessible. It emphasises a child-centred approach, giving children a voice in understanding and improving their own wellbeing.

WWSS students were scoring as low as 1 (out of 100) on their Wellbeing scores, and the principal invited the Australian Institute of Play to the school, to collaborate on a Play Action Plan. The Australian Institute of Play (AIP) has worked with multiple schools in the past, to introduce Loose Parts Play and Neighbourhood Backyards to Queensland Educations settings with great success.

AIP was invited to the school in 2024, and work for WWSS's Play Action Plan started in 2025. The primary outcome of this PAP was to create and launch a new play space designed by students.

Method & Process

For Play Actions Plans to be successful, *everyone* must be part of the journey! That means students, children, families, parents, teachers, groundskeepers, everyone! The process takes place over 3 months and aid the design and launch process before the play space grand opening. Process items include staff professional development, community engagement and – most importantly – lots of talking to children and designing the space with them.

Engaging the end users (children) in the process enables the children feeling valued, heard, validated and acknowledged, thus growing the children's agency, which is a core aspect of play. It also created an opportunity to discuss the value of play with the children as well as assess their current levels, conditions and opportunities for play.

The process ends with a celebration, the launch of the new play space designed by children, for children. Open two days a week, during and after school. Below is a detailed list of the process including the multiple steps of child engagement.

This child voice report is essentially made up of two core parts including:

Play Audit - assessing children's current levels of play as well as current conditions and opportunities for play.

Play Space Planning, Naming, Design, Rules and Launch - children provide valuable input into the new proposed loose parts play space.

Below are the results of these two child voice processes conducted.

Date	Item
Nov 19th	Benefits of Play
Week of Jan 6th	Install Temporary Fencing
Week of Jan 6th	Loose parts collection
Week of Jan 13th	Loose parts collection
Jan 21st 9.30am to 10.45am	Playwork training pt 1 - Play Cycle & Loose Parts
Jan 21st 11.00am to 12.15pm	Playwork training pt 2 - Adulteration & Playwork Principals
Jan 29th 2.15pm	School Assembly 15min Presentation of WWSS Play Action Plan
Jan 29th 2.45pm to 3.45pm	Community forum (will bring the Playship and Playworkers to support loose parts play for the children of parents)
Feb 4th 9.15am to 1pm	Child Voice Workshop Pt 1 - Why is play important & What is a Community Backyard & Loose Parts Play?
Week of Feb 10th	Child Voice Workshop Pt 2 - Recap & Name the Space Campaign
Week of Feb 17th	Playworker recruitment
Week of Feb 17th	Child Voice Workshop Pt 3 - Launch event, Marketing Team and Maintenance Team

Date	Item
Week of Feb 17th	Playwork training pt 3 - Affordance, Play Value & Getting Started
Week of Feb 24th	Child Voice Workshop Pt 4 - Play Space Rules & Resources
Week of Mar 3rd	Playwork training pt 4 - Application of Playwork
Mar 19 & 20 Wed & Thur	School trial play days
Mar 21 & 22 Friday & Saturday	Launch event
Week of Mar 24th	Begin after school play sessions, community backyard model 3 days per week
Week of Mar 24th	Begin during school play, 4 days per week
School holiday play	2 days per week, 2hr play sessions Community backyard school holiday play
Term 2 onwards	2 days per week - big play break delivery - loose parts play sessions
Term 2 onwards	2 days per week, 2hrs 15min play session - Community backyard After School Play

Play Audit Results

Teachers and students were incredibly eager to take part in this process, with WWSS showing some of the most enthusiasm seen yet with a Play Action Plan. Over 30 teachers took part in a voluntary Professional Development at the start of 2025 with AIP.

When school started back, all students were offered input into their new space with a Child Voice consultation. In total, 112 students took part in a massive child voice consultation run by AIP, with support from WWSS staff. Students shared what they like to play, where they like to play and who they like to play with!

The tables below illustrate the results of the children's answers to these questions.

Children's responses were themed according to commonalities.



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Table 1. The top 10 responses from children across all three questions

No.	What do you like to play?	No.	Where do you play?	No.	Who do you play with?
24	Tag & other physical fun games	37	School	58	Friends
22	Online gaming	35	Park	26	Extended Family
21	Play at Park	19	Home - inside	25	Siblings
20	Imaginative play	17	Home - outside	19	Pets
13	Sport	13	Theme parks	15	Mum & Dad
12	Bikes & scooters	11	Neighbourhood	8	Self
8	Gymnastics	9	Friends house	5	Neighbours
8	Swimming & water play	7	swimming pool	3	School friends
5	Handball	4	Family members house	1	Nature
5	Trampoline	4	Shops	1	No one

These responses highlight a diversity of play experiences, both digital and physical, solitary and social. Through further discussions with children, they also suggest a heavy reliance on school environments for play. This is consistent with other child voice consultations facilitated by AIP.

We can see that children want to play with others, with the top six play activities including primarily group activities that are highly physical. In total, 9 out of 10 activities are outdoors, and 7 out of 10 are group activities specifically.

Table 2. What I like to Play?

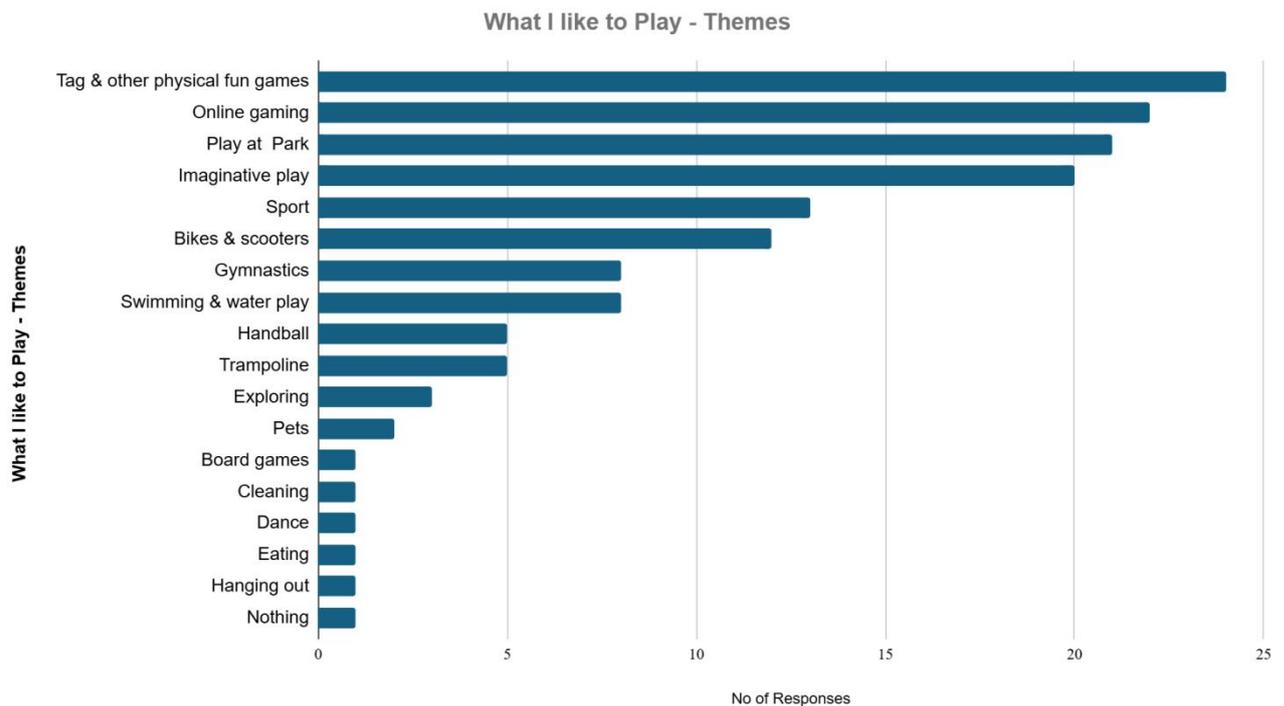
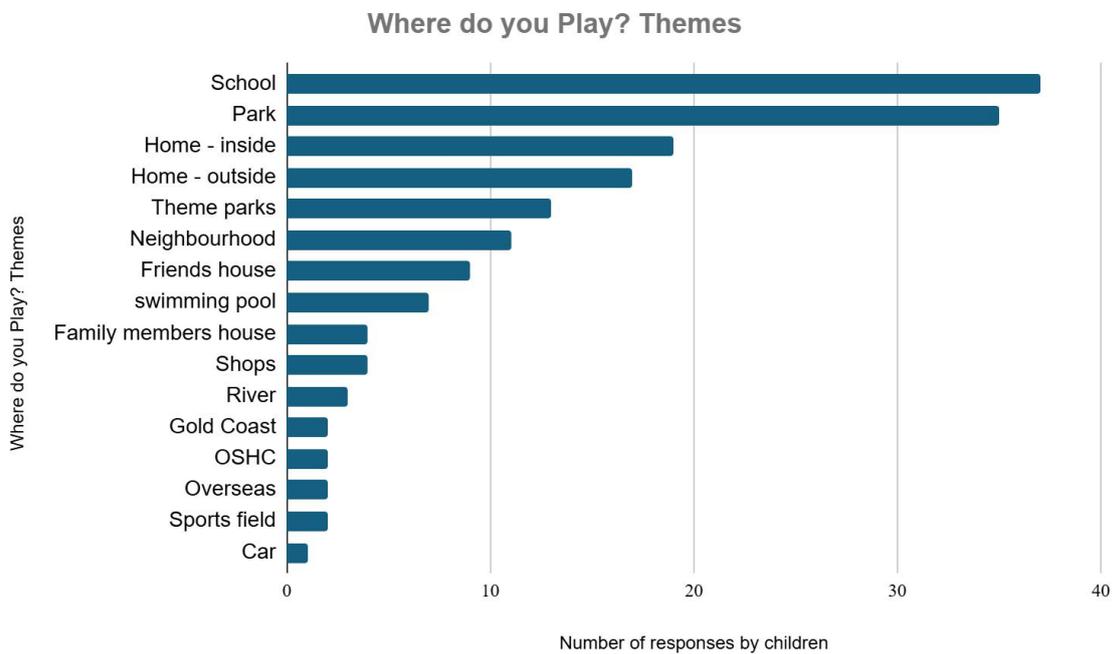
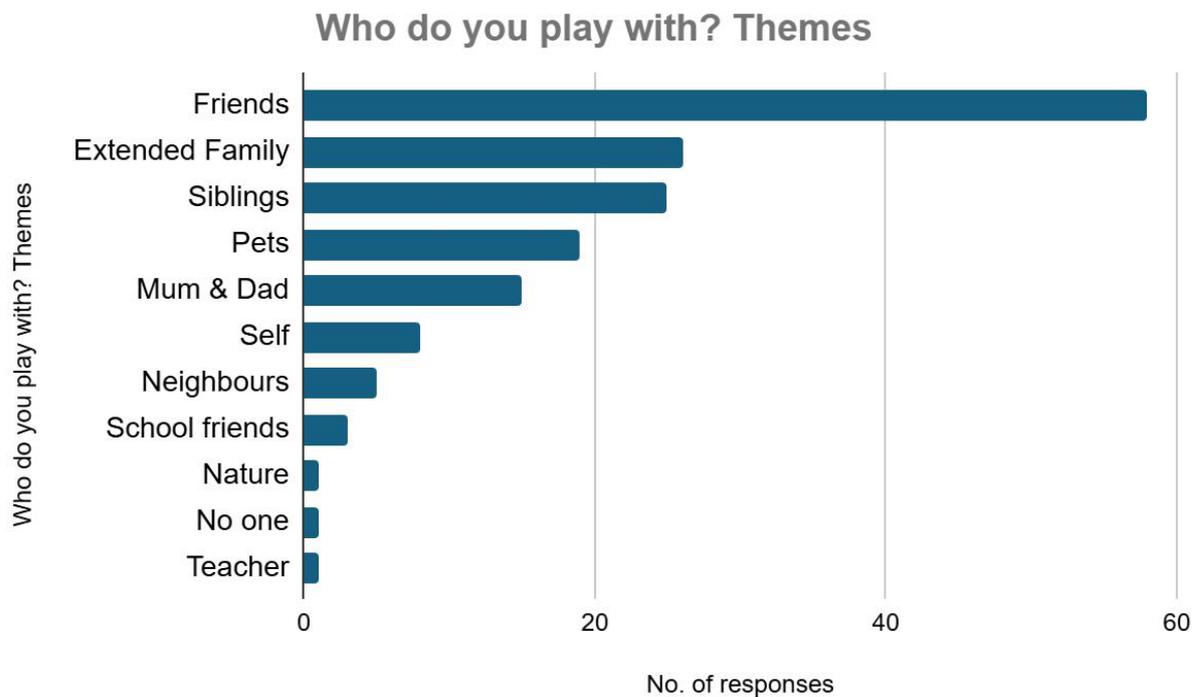


Table 3. Where do I play?



They are limited to where they can play. Most children identified access to spaces they can be supervised, like school, home, other houses and school. Children do enjoy going to parks, but not all are able to access these parks independently.

Table 4. Who do you play with?

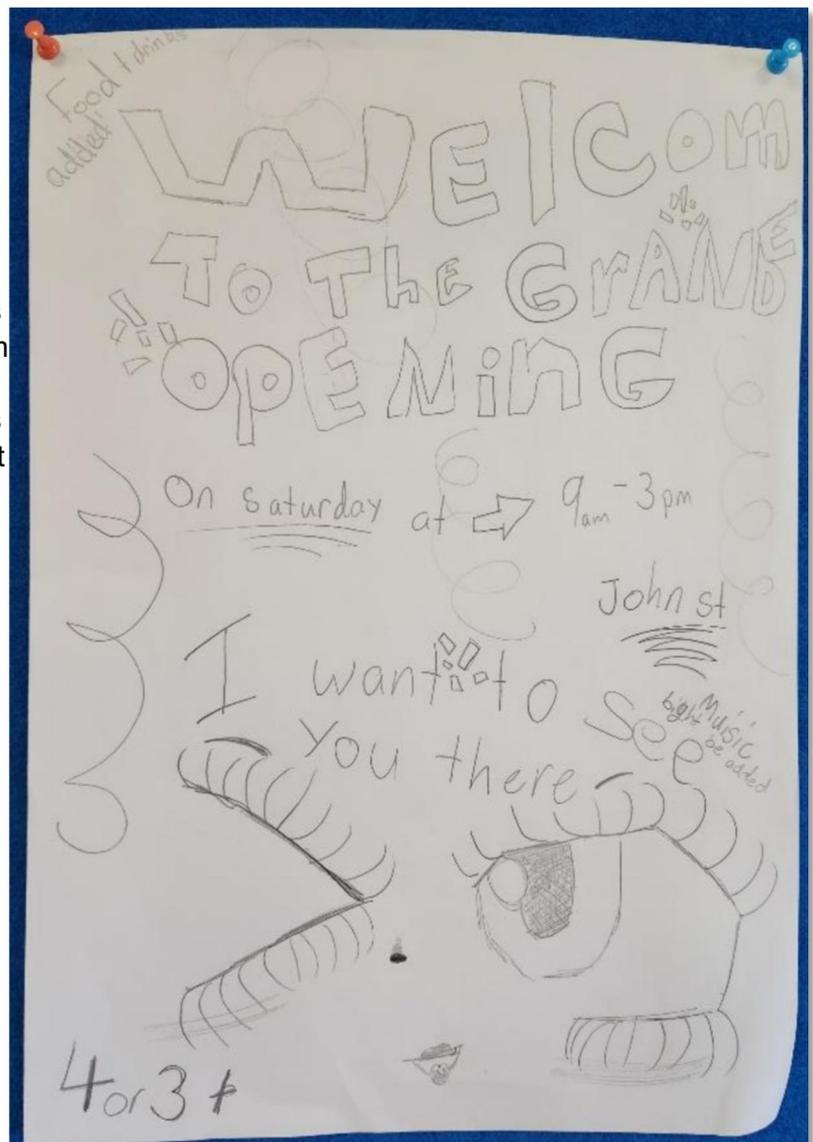


As for who children seek out as playmates, they will play with anyone who is willing! As expected, friends are the top of this list. Children enjoy play with children closer to their age ranges, who have similar experiences and interests. If friends are not available, extended family, siblings and pets will be engaged. Finally, some children identified playing by themselves and neighbours as other alternatives. Not all children have access to pets, siblings and extended family. This is often reflected in cultural experiences though, with Pasifika families often having greater access to cousins and other family members.

Interestingly, children shared that the families at WWSS are often blended. This means there is either many children at home, or there are no children at all. This can depend on family circumstances of which parent is taking care of their children on any given day. Some children reported that their family consisted of up to 11 children. These large families can make great play opportunities for children, but the lack of routine can disrupt this.

WWSS Play Space Planning & Design - Child Voice

Students at Waterford West State School are seeking ways to be heard and engage in active citizenship at their school. This process aimed at supporting the local children to grow a sense of control and agency over the space through enabling children to add in planning and design elements. This included establishing a design team supporting them to run a democratic process with their peers to name the space, generating a list of design elements, creating marketing materials including signage as well as planning the launch event.



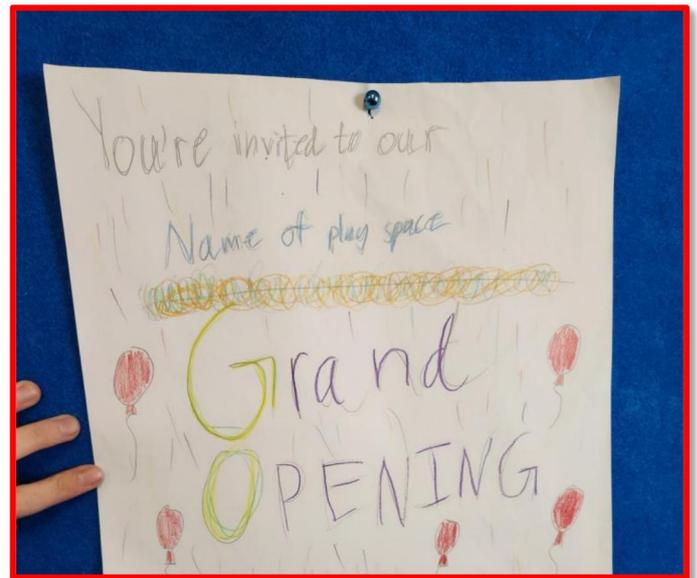
Naming the space:

Students who took up the invitation to be part of the planning and design team, made a flier to invite others to help name the space.

A list of names was generated and then the student leaders circulated these names through the school for voting.

The final decision '**Kids Tree House**', receiving the most votes.

The planning and design team then used Canva to create this sign and tag line.



Planning & Design of Kids Big Tree House - Child Voice

The planning a design team developed a list of key aspects of the space they think will support the play to be high-quality and child-led. Below are some examples of illustrations from the child voice collection process as well as a final list of all the items they would like to see in the space.

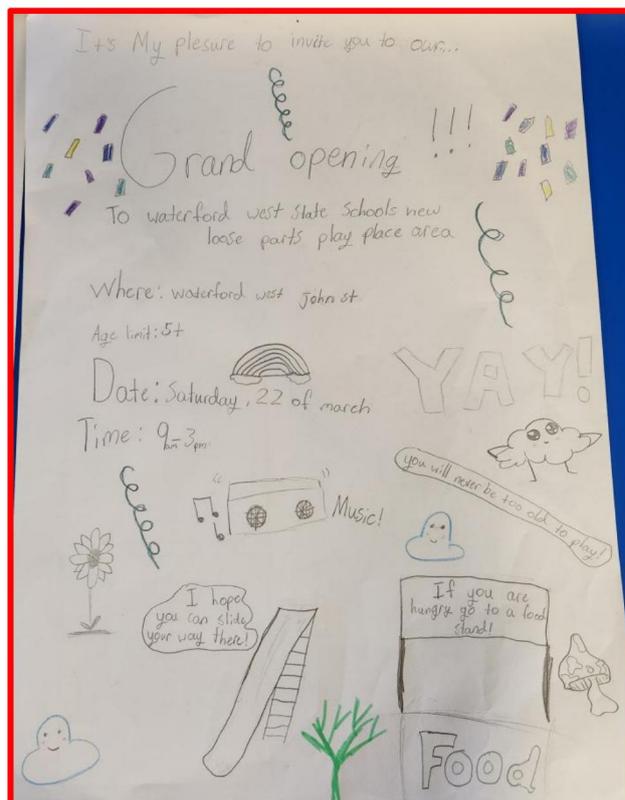
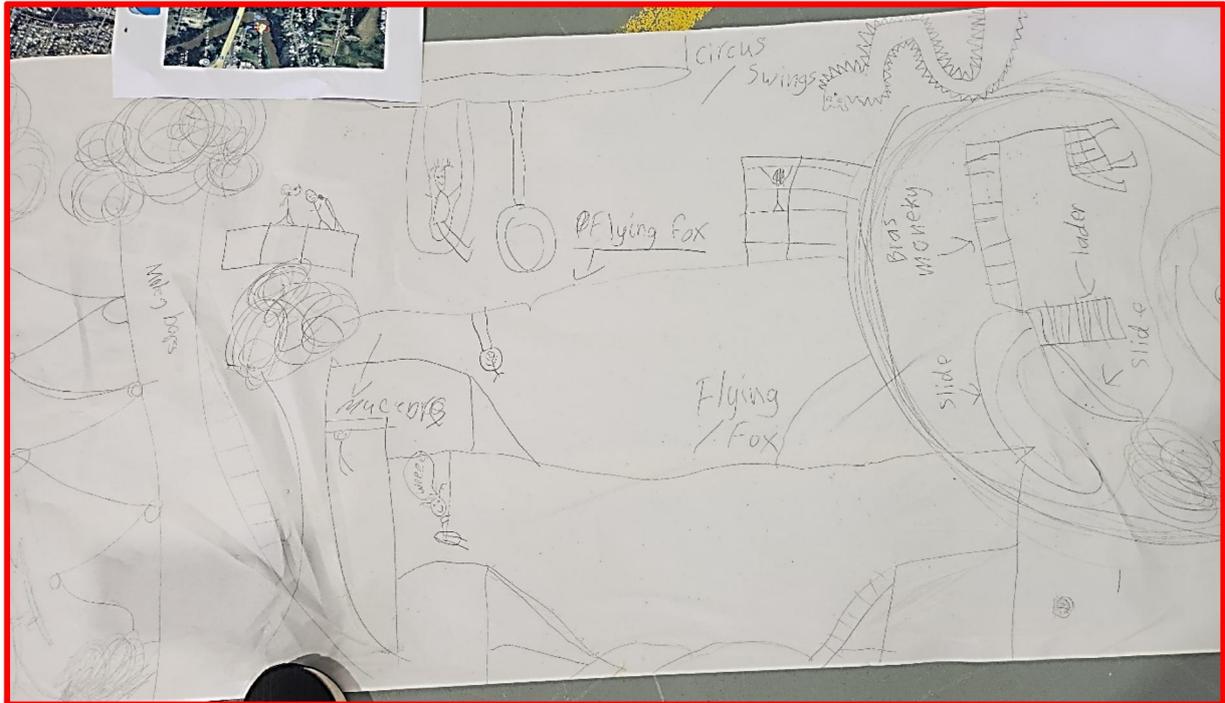


Table 5: WWSS planning and design team child data collection

What is cool and interesting that is already in the space	What activities would be fun	No of responses	What activities would be fun - continued	No of responses	Do you know anywhere to get these items
The shipping container	Swing	11	Big container to make a pool	1	Parent's work
Curved rubber	Rope	8	Big shelf	1	Junk yard
Boat	Ladder	7	Blanket	1	From home
Car	Slide	7	Box	1	Ask Facebook
Hose	Zip line	7	Chains	1	Recycling places
Pallets	Tyres	6	Climbing things	1	Construction sites
Slide	Sand pit	5	Container	1	Reverse Garbage
Ladder	Water play	5	Crates	1	Kmart
Spools	Fort	4	Drill	1	Big W
Everything	Hoola hoops	4	Duct tape	1	Target
Pool ladder	Pool	4	Fake glass	1	Bunnings
Wheelbarrow	Tree house	4	Foam balls	1	Tool shop
Pull thing	Boat	3	Foam pit	1	Coles
Boat	Hammer	3	Food	1	Scrap yards
Fence	Monkey bars	3	Handles	1	Cheap shops
Slide car	Rope swing	3	Hill - to roll barrels	1	Bunnings
Boat and slide	Shovels to dig a pool	3	Iron	1	Construction areas
A rocking boat	Tarp	3	Long and short poles	1	Curbside collection
Screws	Wood	3	Long pieces of wood	1	
Rope	Car down the hill	2	Mats	1	
Shadesail for cover	Climbing bits (rock climbing)	2	Metal bar	1	
Boat	Fabric swing	2	Mini digger	1	
Cable reels	Glue	2	Mini shed	1	
Pallets	Go kart	2	More building stuff	1	
Fake grass	Grass	2	More of everything	1	
Slide	Mud	2	More pallets to build	1	
Ladder	Screws	2	Mud pit	1	
Shipping container	See saw	2	Nails	1	

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Go kart	Timber	2	Pallets	1	
Climbing Trees	Trampoline	2	Parkour	1	
Shipping container	Water	2	Pile of dirt	1	
	A giant roof to stop rain	1	Pillows	1	
	Add a dog	1	Planks	1	
	Balance	1	Plastic binoculars	1	
	Ball pit	1	Playhouse/treehouse	1	
	Barrel	1	Pond to splash in	1	
	Bath	1	Race track	1	
	Big boat	1	Ramp	1	

These results were utilised by AIP staff to focus resource collection efforts.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate a strong need for WWSS children to have access to high-quality child-led play. To support children's all-round development. 12% of the school participated in the child voice process, demonstrating significant interest and engagement.

Children spend most of their time in adult-directed activities, this even includes most of their play provisions. Loose parts play is a powerful way to grow agency, resilience, friendships, love of the school, connection to place and community, as well as support children to achieve developmental milestone as well as be active physically and socially.

Play Actions Plans are tried and proven process increasing/augmenting children's time, space and permission to play within school settings. Targeting physical wellbeing, social and emotional competence and a positive sense of community.

The students at Waterford West are experiencing low wellbeing and decreased opportunities to engage in high-quality child-led play. They are seeking support from adults, to provide improved places and spaces for them to flourish in.

Key considerations

WWSS has suspended this process. It is uncertain if anyone has explained this to the children of this school, especially those who participated in this child voice consultation?

WWSS is only part way through the Play Action Plan process. If WWSS decide to continue, effort will need to be made to re-establish the value of the child's input and trust in the process. This will take careful consideration and dedicated planning.

To benefit fully from this play action plan and see results for children will depend if 'Big Tree House' project is permitted to continue, and open during and after school.