

## **Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods**

Season 2 Episode 3 with Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear

### **Belynda Smith**

Welcome, welcome everyone. Firstly, I'd like to say that this podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people. I'd like to respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community, honouring elders past and present, and First Nations people everywhere in the spirit of reconciliation, particularly parents. I'd also like to thank the Department of Education and Lotterywest for funding this series of podcasts, which is produced as part of Children Week celebrations in WA

Next, I'd like to say thank you so much to those educators, parents and others listening in today. We really appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast, finding time in your busy day to learn more about how we can support the needs of children

I'm Belynda Smith. I'm a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga Parenting Service, and I'm passionate about meeting the needs of parents so that we can help families and children to thrive. Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity. We promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, working with children and their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in WA.

The 2022 Children's Week theme is: "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports the well-being and healthy development." So that's our focus for the series of podcasts.

I'm really thrilled to introduce you to Kelsie Prabawa-Sear. She's from Nature Play WA and is the CEO there and has taken on that role recently. So, I'm thrilled to introduce you to her. Kelsie, can you tell us a little bit about you?

### **Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Hi, thank you so much for having me, Belynda, and before I launch into talking about myself, I'd like to also acknowledge that we're Noongar Whadjuk land and acknowledge the work that our Noongar Whadjuk people have done in taking care of this land for so many thousands of years.

So, a bit about me. I grew up in Perth; one of three kids in a really non-eventful middle class suburban white family. Three kids and a dog up. My early years were full of sport, playing, playing sports with my brother mostly, playing at the park, mucking around, a lot of books, a lot of reading and generally a lot of fun. Quite an uneventful childhood.

**Belynda Smith**

Sounds quite idyllic.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

It was, it was lovely. I had a lovely school experience and then ended up at uni doing science and Indonesian language, which took me on a bit of an adventure to Indonesia as part of an exchange program through UWA. I spent a year when I was twenty going to university in Indonesia. From there my path became a bit more flavoursome I would say.

When I was a kid, when I was at primary school, one of my teachers, the art teacher, really invested time in nature with us and I was part of the environmental group and a big animal lover. And then when I spent time in Indonesia, I decided that I was going to kind of combine those things, my language skills and, I was studying anthropology at the time, anthropological skills, and my love for conservation in nature. And that was the path I was going to take.

I didn't know how to do that; I just knew I loved it.

**Belynda Smith**

Quite some convergence, isn't it?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, and now I say to, well, I want to say young people, but anyone that I'm talking to, if you know you love something that you'll find a way. And that's what I did.

I've worked in state government, I've done consulting work, more recently worked for Perth Zoo and then came to Nature Play, but in between I've done a Masters by Research and a PhD. I've just combined that focus; everything I have done, looking back, has had to do with either children, nature, or communities, it's one or all three of those combined. That's kind of what's led me to here to Nature Play, which is a combination of those things too.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, and what a fantastic organisation to work with. Do you want to tell us a little bit about Nature Play WA?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, so, I'm very pleased to be here at Nature Play and like you said new to the role. So, Nature Play is a not-for-profit organisation, and it really works – our sole focus is to create great childhoods for WA children. That's through getting them to have opportunity for play, time in nature, and then just acknowledging that that really gives so many benefits of physical well-being, mental well-being, developmental well-being. So yeah, it's quite an easy mission to get kids to play and have time in nature. It sounds simple but we work really hard to get that to happen.

### **Belynda Smith**

It's for me as a parent, I remember getting the passport, the Nature Play passport when my little boy was maybe two or three and it was a really fun thing to do together to kind of tick through the list. It was great.

So, I'm really interested. You've got such a strong research background. What does the research tell us about children and unstructured outdoor play time? What does the science got to say about what children need?

### **Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

It's really interesting because my impression is that the research is catching up with what I would say our old people have always known. An example of this is my mother-in-law was visiting from Indonesia a few years back and she said to me, this is where my kids were still little babies, she said in the morning we take them out in the early morning sun and peel off their PJs so they get a bit of sun on their skin.

My mother-in-law raised eight children, so I don't question her methods and I went along with it. It wasn't until years later when I was talking to my dermatologist and she said to me, "Do you realise your children, because they have brown skin, they need more time in the sun than you do to get the vitamin D that they need?" and I said to her, "No, I didn't really realise that."

She said best time is early morning, getting out in the early morning sun, T-shirts off, arms in the sun, sun on the torso. And she said to me, because vitamin D is really important and it's great for our bone health. That had been what my mother-in-law had said to me, "They'll get strong bones if they have time in the sun."

That's just one example where I think, yeah, often old people know what they're talking about, and we haven't translated that into, or I haven't translated that into the scientific data. Some of the exciting research I've seen just this last couple of weeks is helping us – we've always understood that time in nature is, well, not so recently we've understood that time in nature is really good for us. When we go outside, we feel that sense of calm and we can tell- we feel the stress leaving us. That's the cortisol dropping. We see particularly in our kids, but also adults, we see that kind of happiness and pleasure, and that's our endorphins rate rising and oxytocin rising, which helps alleviate stress and anxiety. That's something that we've kind of accepted and understood as part of the science for a while. But more recent research is showing us around how time in nature can set us up, time in nature as a little one can set us up to be more resilient as an adult. Some of the research I was reading last week, which is out of the University of Kent, was around the role that smells of nature play, and I found it really fascinating.

### **Belynda Smith**

That is fascinating.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

And because we've long associated smell with memories, and childhood memories in particular, and this research was looking at how time in nature as a little one if it's a positive experience, which it normally is, as an adult, when you return to nature, that positive association has even better our impact on your well-being and mental health. So, for those of us that had time in nature as little ones, when we return to nature, it makes us feel better.

But on the other hand, it's also telling us that it's really important to take our little ones into nature and give them that time in nature so that they can build those foundations to return to as adults. And I think for those of us that are thinking about the state of the world at the moment, we don't know what our kids are going to be facing. The more that we can do to kind of fill up their little resilience bucket, the better.

So that was one really interesting bit of research, I thought, and then another one is a research project that we're working with the Origins Team on, and Nature Play's role in that has been developing in eight-week series-

**Belynda Smith**

I know someone who has been doing that, they've been LOVING it!

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

GREAT! And we've been loving offering it. So, it's been fantastic to work with parents of three-year-olds and three-year-olds to have time in nature, but with a real focus on the developmental lens. And sometimes it's us parents need the encouragement to let our kids take risks and develop their sense of self and the sense of adventure and their understanding of risk and really encourage them to lean into their creativity and movement and all those things.

So that research project, as well as working with parents to see how the parents have developed and the kids have developed throughout that, the bigger project is also going to look at the physical and psycho physical and biological impact of having some time in nature on those kids, which we expect will be probably more than what we what we currently understand as far as benefits go.

**Belynda Smith**

And I don't know if I'm right in thinking this, but my understanding is that this is the generation that's spent more time indoors than ever before. So, you'd think that also by virtue of that juxtaposition that time in nature is just so powerful and important to them.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, absolutely, but I think one of the things for us to consider is if we as adults, haven't spent time in nature, for whatever reason, then we're less inclined to take our little ones into nature too. And it becomes even more restricted, and more restricted. I know having had conversations

recently with my nan, who just turned 92, and my mum, about our areas that we're allowed to roam these children and explore, and you can see how much it's shrinking, constantly shrinking, and then as an adult and a parent myself trying to provide opportunity for my kids...

**Belynda Smith**

It's terrifying, isn't it? Like you force yourself to do it, but.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

It's terrifying. And I have to remind myself that not only do we live in a really fabulous community, which we do, that not letting my kids have that time outside that time in nature and the independent time is actually a huge risk in itself. To try and balance out that risk, you know, not letting them, when they're old enough to ride their bikes by themselves, not letting them ride by themselves, not letting them play with their friends independently is also a risk.

So yeah, it's something too, I think that we need to constantly manage that within our own minds, that fear and how much of the fear is real. As I like to say to our friends, we hear about a lot more, we see a lot more that happens in our communities, but I don't think it's any less safe for our kids and I think by not letting them experience these opportunities that's actually creating more issues. And we see that as our kids get older and their risk taking, they just don't have – they haven't developed their risk-taking abilities.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, in terms of mental health as well, they're saying there's all sorts of negative outcomes for teenagers and young adults. And you're saying this, the research is showing that this is a good building block for that longer term results.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah. And we can fill it ourselves as adults when we go well, I should speak for myself, when I go for a walk, I know it helps me calm down. I know it helps me process things. It gives me a bit of time away and I come back feeling calmer and more grounded and it's true for people of all ages.

I know my youngest often says that she feels free when she's outside, the wind in her hair and she feels free. We're trying to put that into practice in a really practical way. One of the projects that we're working on at Nature Play is a talk and walk program. That's focused on girls and people who identify as female from the age of around 11. And that's because research has shown us that at that point, that's where the physical activity drops off. That's where the social isolation can happen. That's where we see high school and difficult relationship times as well. Nature Play worked with some groups of girls from across, I was going to say Perth but actually beyond the metro area, to develop this program. So, with a real co-design approach.

**Belynda Smith**

That's really cool.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, and it's an app that the girls, actually any kids, can use that's not social media based and it's not connectable beyond the app. It's really around having a look, taking stock of how you're feeling, going for a walk with a friend ideally, or a family member, or if you want to, by yourself. And then there's a few questions to ask yourself or ask each other as you walk. These are questions that the girls helped us develop and some challenges to doing away and. Challenges like, trying to take a photo of something beautiful or saying hello to someone in your walk. Just with that focus of trying to get outside, not performative activities, not competitive sport, but just some physical activity in the outdoors.

**Belynda Smith**

Beautiful. It sounds like such a great sort of grassroots, organically grown initiative.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, and something that the kids told us would work for them. It's been a great process to work with the young people and see what it is that they want to do and what they think would work.

**Belynda Smith**

I had a little scart about on the website. All I knew about really was the passports, which are fabulous, but there's so many different campaigns and things. Do you want to tell us about a couple more, a couple of your favourites?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Well, I was going to say, because my 9-year-old picked up a passport when we're at the Joondalup library a few weeks ago and has been harassing me ever since to go to Neil Hawkins Park to use it with her. So I would say that the passports were great resource and a lot of local governments have them; that's lovely because it's in paper format. So, for anyone who's trying to avoid screen time it's a really good one. The Talk and Walk app is fantastic too, I think if you've got older kids.

Some of our more popular resources, everyone seems to love the Off the Beaten Track Camping Destinations. We get lots of hits for that.

Things to do in insert season, they are really popular. And we've got a great list of things to do from birth to two years. That seems to be really popular resource as well

I think once the kids kind of get a bit bigger and you're more inclined to just hit the parks or hit natural settings. But when they're little, I think people, our families, feel like they need a bit more direction on what would be useful.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, activities to do out the backyard or whatever.

It's so great that there's all of these resources available for free yet to families. I'm going to ask you another question. What are some of the great parks that you love to visit with your family?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, that's a really good question. It has changed over the years, depending on the age of the kids and for any families that have an age range of kids, you tend to want to go to something that the older kids will enjoy. Because the little ones will always, always find something to play with, always find somewhere to dig or something to play with. So, anything with a bit of a high climb, Kings Park have got some really good challenging kind of playgrounds.

**Belynda Smith**

Haven't they! They've got some amazing playgrounds

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

But for us as a family more recently, and certainly since COVID, I've really tried to focus on getting the kids to birdwatch, which particularly one of my kids is really into. I tend to prefer a bit of a walking trail where we can walk and talk, have a look, take photos of beautiful plants, see what we can spot as far as animals go. And we're really, really lucky that we live across the way from a park, so my kids are constantly being told to go to the park and if not that one, just one in our local area. Because I do find if you kind of packing up and driving that can be a bit much for a busy family and if you've got kids doing different activities. So for me, the local park is good enough, they always find some way to muck around and play and if we stick to local then they usually bump into friends as well, which is another benefit.

**Belynda Smith**

I'm not sure about where you live, but where I am, there's pretty much a park within a few blocks.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, it's great.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah. It's perfect.

**Belynda Smith**

So, you've recently taken the helm at Nature Play WA. What's your vision? What are you hoping to achieve there?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah, well, I've come in at a time when the team and the Board there had really worked hard on a new strategic plan and it was one I was really, just really honestly excited to see. Two of the areas that they had highlighted that just pleased me so much was one combining the research and really working to communicate the research and then partnering with other organisations to be a part of research. So that all fits me to a tee, I love that.

And we're at the moment we're working with some partners on a more inclusive approach to programs and we have a great partnership with Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions and that's for our Every Kid in a Park program. We're working with families and kids of all abilities to help them find out about what they can do in parks, what parks offer them, what's accessible and then also more broadly around our stories of country and interviews with local experts in the area to open up that kind of time outdoors to a more diverse audience. I think I would like to take that, and Nature Play would like to take that and broaden it even further. So, who are the families in our community that don't get the access to parks, who are the families that need support to have time and playtime outside and working with those communities.

**Belynda Smith**

Sounds amazing.

So, to finish our podcast, we like to ask five quick questions. What's the book you love most as a child?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

I find this question a bit of a tricky one because I was a bookworm as a kid, so there are LOTS. But there was one book that I remember in Year 5 being given by my teacher as a reward, and that was called *The Taste of Blackberries* by Doris Buchanan Smith. And I remember I didn't know how to say Buchanan. And the reason that it's stuck in my mind is that it was a story about friendship, and this is a spoiler, but one of the kids gets stung by a lot of bees and ends up dying, and that book made me cry.

**Belynda Smith**

Oh, my goodness.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

It made me feel. It really was a huge book for me. It was the first book that really had that sort of emotional effect on me. And so, I think that's probably the book.

**Belynda Smith**

Oh, amazing. I'm going to have to look that one. I don't know that one.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

I don't know how it – I mean it's a 70s book. I read in the 80s, so I'm not sure how it would stand up today, but it was a good book.

**Belynda Smith**

What helps you to have a sense of well-being?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

It's going to sound like I'm saying it because this is my job, but for me, absolutely time outside.

**Belynda Smith**

I'm pretty sure that's why it's your job!

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Yeah! Time in my garden, I've been working on making a native garden out the back for a long time now. Watching the plants pulling out the weeds. Time in the garden and time with my kids, you know, as a working parent time with my kids is really, really good, and important for me.

**Belynda Smith**

What's your happiest childhood memory?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Summertime, summer holidays. My family were a family that holidayed at Wadjemup, at Rottnest, and so beach, family, summer, that's the happy place of my childhood.

**Belynda Smith**

What's your favourite outdoor space? I'm sure there's lots, but could you pick one?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Uhm, my favourite outdoor space. This is a bit of a tricky one. I've always loved Kings Park because it's got- there's so much there. There's something for everybody, for every occasion, there's a spot. And also, because it's right in the middle of our city, so I'd probably say anywhere at Kings Park on any given day.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, it is quite something, isn't it? And complete this sentence: To help them thrive, children need.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Unconditional love and support. I think everything else can come. Bit of boundaries and some rules but love and support number one.

**Belynda Smith**

So finally, how can our listeners learn more about your work or get in touch with your organisation?

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Probably the easiest thing is to have a look at our website [www.natureplaywa.org.au](http://www.natureplaywa.org.au). We also have a great Facebook page with lots of posts, lots of interesting information and we're also on Instagram: Nature Play WA. But yeah, I would say their website is probably the best spot to start.

**Belynda Smith**

Alright, thank you so much for joining us. It's been really lovely having you here and learning a little bit more about Nature Play WA and all the exciting things that are in the future for you and your organisation.

**Dr Kelsie Prabawa-Sear**

Thank you so much. It's been my pleasure.

**Belynda Smith**

Thank you and thank you so much to everyone listening. If you'd like any more information about Meerilinga, just contact us via e-mail [mycf@meerilinga.org.au](mailto:mycf@meerilinga.org.au) or visit us at [www.meerilinga.org.au](http://www.meerilinga.org.au)

Thank you.