



Government  
of South Australia

SafeWork SA

# Nature Play and Playground Proactive Compliance Project 2021 Project Closure Report

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## Executive Summary

Nature play areas provide children with play activities in outdoor settings where natural elements feature.

As awareness increases on the benefits of children's contact with nature, many schools, childcare centres, and Persons Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) are embracing the idea of developing a nature play space and playground.

Most child injuries in playgrounds are the result of falls. Most playground injuries are minor, such as scratches or bruises. However, sometimes, playground injuries result in serious fractures, lacerations and head injuries.

Between November 2021 and July 2022, SafeWork SA undertook a compliance campaign titled "Nature Play and Playground Proactive Compliance Campaign" (the campaign).

An interrogation of SafeWork SA's record database found during the financial years 2019-2021, SafeWork SA received 166 notifications relating to nature play or playground incidents consisting of 105 notifications within the metropolitan area, and 61 notifications in the regional area.

The most serious injury notifications to SafeWork SA in relation to nature play or playgrounds occur at schools, included:

- amputation of a student's finger
- partial amputation of a student's finger
- serious spinal injury

SafeWork SA Inspectors audited nature play areas within community playgrounds, play areas owned by PCBU's, Child Care Centres and Schools and conducted 116 site visits and 49 compliance audits during the campaign.

Nature play areas occur within community playgrounds, play areas owned by PCBU's, Child Care Centres and Schools.

Audits of the playgrounds resulted in 65 statutory notices being issued in response to non-compliance, including 2 prohibition notices and 63 improvement notices, with 1 improvement notice being withdrawn following an internal review.

The most common areas of non-compliance identified that resulted in an Improvement notice was:

- inadequate maintenance of installed play equipment – 37 notices
- lack of hazard identification – 9 notices
- inadequate loose fill – 8 notices
- lack of annual inspections – 7 notices
- nil evidence of structural integrity – 3 notices.

It is recommended that SafeWork SA:

- communicates the outcome of the campaign to internal and external stakeholders.
- considers a follow up audit of public and private school playgrounds in the SA metropolitan area utilising the same audit tool used for this campaign.
- conducts an audit of the playground area in any childcare facility which SafeWork SA receives a complaint about in 2023, utilising the same audit tool used for this campaign.
- provides a presentation regarding this report to the following industry groups and collaborate to advise them of the key trends identified:
  - Local Government Association
  - Department for Education and Child Development
  - Catholic Education SA
  - Association of Independent Schools
  - Early Childhood Organisation Inc SA
  - Australian Childcare Alliance South Australia
  - Early Childhood Australia SA Branch
  - Department of Environment & Water
  - Kidsafe SA
  - Nature Play SA
  - South Australian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education
  - Business SA
- publishes this report, including the audit tool on the SafeWork SA website. This will allow self-audits to be conducted for any playground

## Introduction

SafeWork SA's primary function is to regulate the work health and safety (WHS) laws in South Australia through a combination of education and compliance activities.

SafeWork SA regulates compliance with the *Work Health and Safety Act (2012)* (SA) (the Act) and the *Work Health and Safety Regulations (2012)* (SA) (the Regulations) and can require Persons Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBUs) to rectify safety breaches through the issuing of statutory notices, expiations, or prosecution.

Nature play areas and playgrounds are springing up everywhere, and kids just love them. As awareness increases of the benefits of children's contact with nature, many schools, childcare centres, and PCBUs are embracing the idea of developing a nature play space.

Schools and Child Care Centres are run by both government and private PCBUs, and these are places in which the public should feel are a safe places, without un-reasonable risk to children's health and safety. Dealing with these types of injuries and complaints can be sensitive.

PCBUs have a duty to ensure the hazards and risks associated with the use of playground equipment are identified and that adequate safety measures are in place to eliminate the risk. Where a PCBU cannot eliminate the risk, the risk must be minimised so far as reasonably practicable by applying the hierarchy of controls.

## Background

SafeWork SA received multiple serious student injury notifications in relation to playground or nature play incidents occurring at schools during the financial years 2019 to 2021. One involved an amputation of a student's finger, one involved a partial amputation of a student's finger, and another involved a serious spinal injury.

This campaign was considered by SafeWork SA due to multiple serious student injury notifications in relation to nature play or playground incidents occurring at schools during 2019-2021 financial years.

SafeWork SA's records for the financial years 2019-2021, captured 166 notifications relating to nature play or playground incidents consisting of 105 notifications within the metropolitan area, and 61 notifications in the regional area.

Multiple serious injury notifications in relation to nature play or playgrounds occur at schools, such as:

- amputation of a student's finger
- partial amputation of a student's finger
- serious spinal injury

These incidents involving playgrounds were serious and the trends also indicated a lack of inspection and maintenance.

This campaign demonstrated SafeWork SA's commitment to the community to ensure compliance and enforcement of WHS legislation. The introduction of nature play areas is rapidly spreading throughout schools. The proactive auditing of these nature play areas demonstrated to the public that SafeWork SA cares about the youth of this state and ensures

that other government agencies receive the same regulatory oversight as any other business within the state.

The campaign audits were undertaken using a uniformed audit tool with the aim of ensuring PCBU's were better informed of obligations, responsibilities and how to manage risks. The audit tool also took into consideration Australian Standard (AS) 4685 - Playground Equipment and Surfacing.

Any non-compliances identified that couldn't be remedied while the Inspector was onsite were dealt with by statutory notices.

The campaign objective was to achieve long term and sustainable improvements to workplaces, workers, and students' safety across Government and private PCBU's in relation to nature play areas and play equipment.

## Scope

The following sectors were targeted as part of this campaign:

- Schools – government and non-government
- Childcare providers
- Community nature play areas
- Council owned nature play areas

SafeWork SA Inspectors intended to conduct 50 audits between November 2021 to January 2022 of nature play areas within the community, private PCBU's and Child Care Centres in the metro area. The campaign period was extended to 31 July 2022 due to Covid-19 restrictions limiting site audits and PCBU staffing difficulties at sites.

During the campaign, SafeWork SA visited a number of nature play areas within schools, childcare facilities, council owned, and privately owned, auditing the safety control measures in place to protect students, workers, and the public from injuries.

Inspectors assessed if:

- The PCBU had undertaken an adequate risk assessment for the nature play areas
- The PCBU had a daily playground inspection checklist that included nature play elements
- The PCBU had a quarterly playground inspection process that included nature play elements, evidence of completed inspections could be sighted, and any identified issues were rectified
- The PCBU had an annual playground inspection process, evidence of completed inspections could be sighted, and identified
- There was a process for donated materials, a designated drop off location, and a system for inspecting donated materials before use.

Inspectors completed audits to identify what controls the PCBU had in place to mitigate work health and safety (WHS) risks. If required, Inspectors issued improvement notices and/or prohibition notices to ensure any identified risks were controlled.

Educational information was provided to the PCBU consisting of –

- Code of Practice – How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks
- Playground Audit Tool
- Advising PCBU of Australian Standard 4685

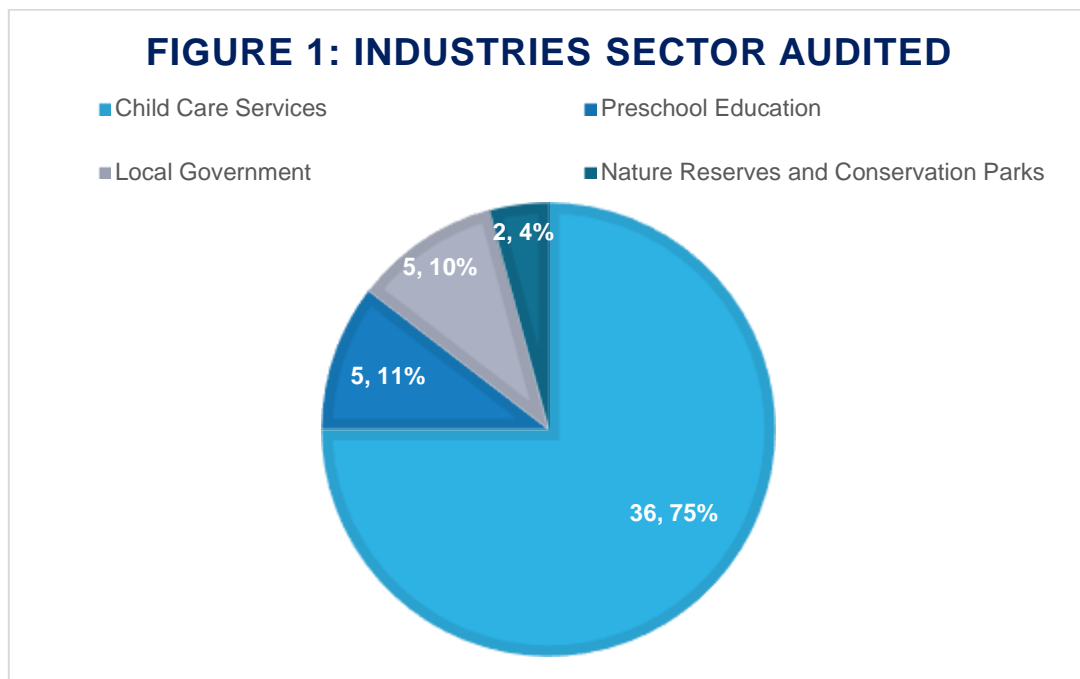
## Industry Audits

Inspectors used a checklist to ensure a consistent approach with each site. Inspectors were instructed to enforce requirements and to take immediate action to mitigate any safety risks identified while on site.

SafeWork SA completed 49 audits on various industry sectors, consisting of:

- Childcare Services, 36 audits (75%).
- Local Government, 5 audits (10%).
- Preschool Education, 5 audits (10%).
- Nature Reserves and Conservation Parks, 2 audits (4%)

The industry sector types that were audited are displayed below in Figure 1.

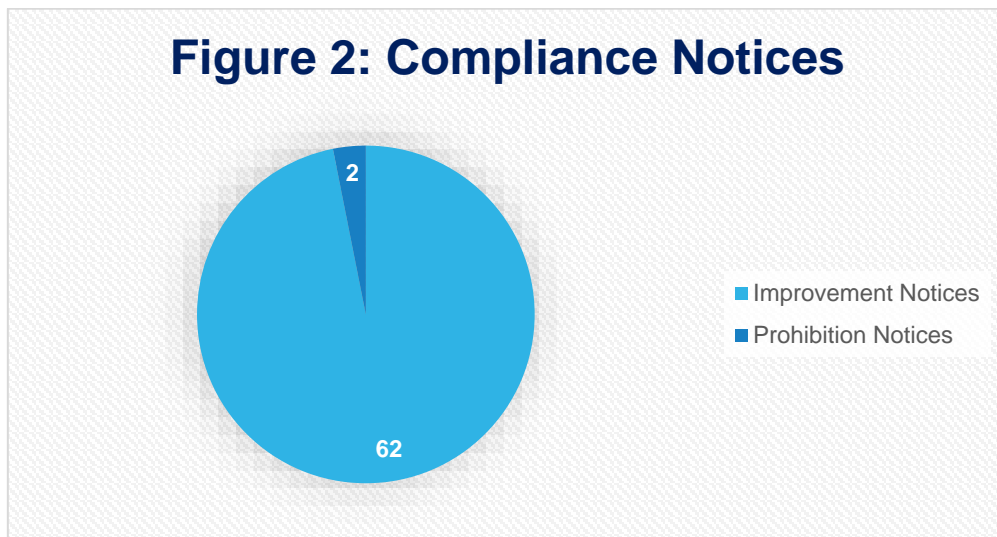


## Statutory Notices

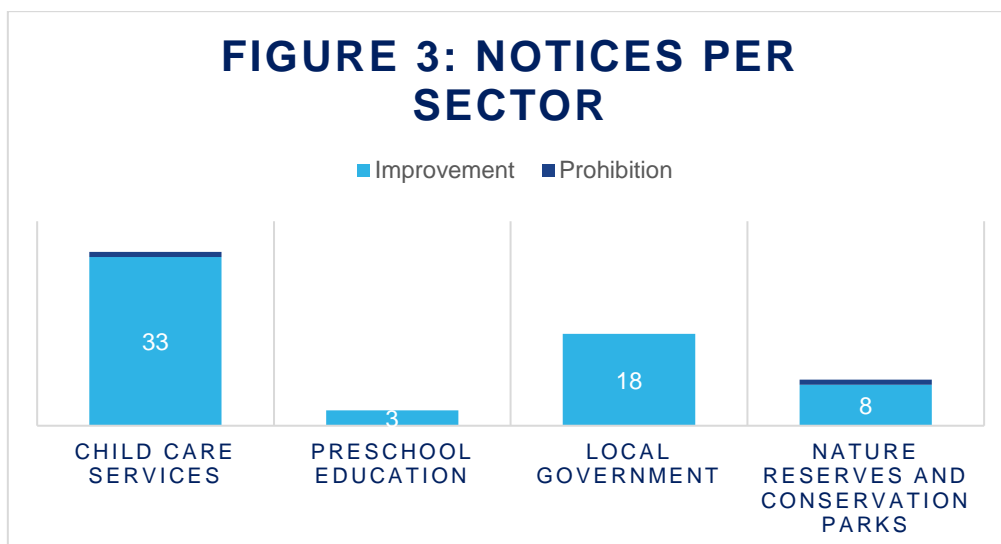
49 audits were conducted during the campaign, resulting in 65 statutory notices being issued in response to non-compliance, consisting of:

- 2 prohibition notices
- 62 improvement notices
- 1 improvement notice being withdrawn following an internal review.

All notice types are displayed below in Figure 2.



The number and type of notices issued per industry sector are displayed below in Figure 3.



## Statutory Notice Analysis

### Prohibition Notices by Type

The 2 prohibition notices issued related to:

- Maintenance and inspection of plant – condition of a mud kitchen presenting a structural risk.
- Provide and maintain safe plant/structures – connection points on a bent swing and having sharp edges presenting a laceration risk.

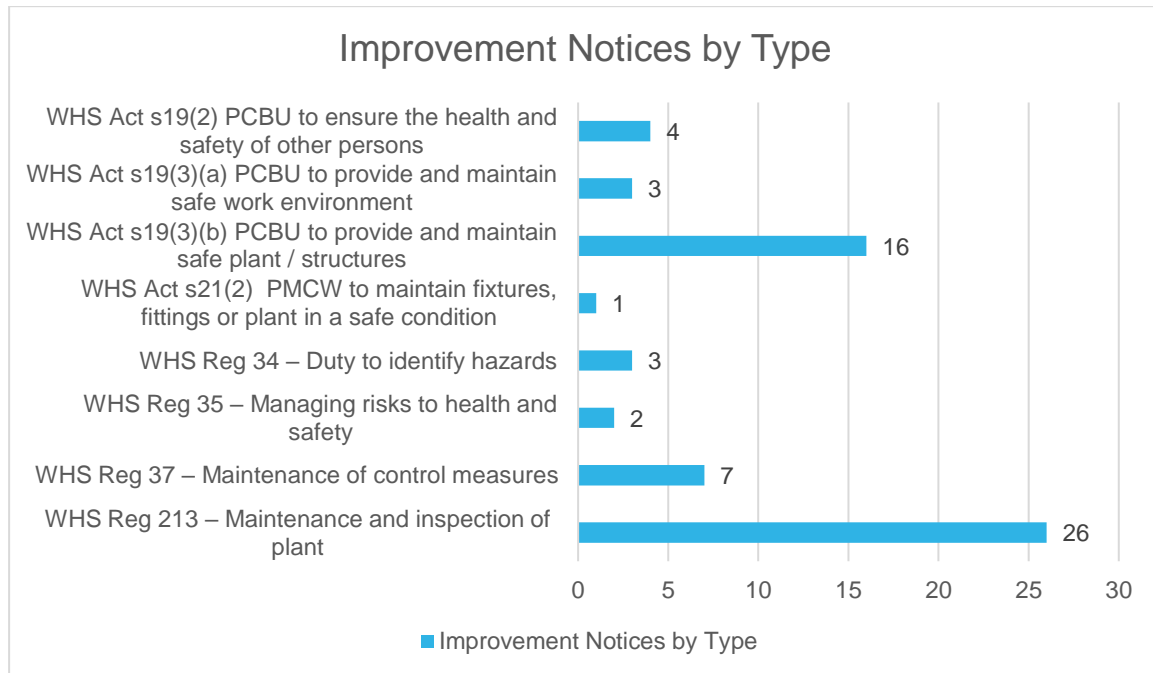
The following photo demonstrates the toddler swing that related to the prohibition notice.



## Toddler Swing – Sharp Edges

This photo show the connection points on the swing are bent with sharp edges presenting a laceration risk.

## Improvement Notices by Type



## Improvement Notices issued under WHS Act Section 19(2)

The 4 improvement notices issued under WHS Act 19(2) related to ensuring the health and safety of other persons. These related to tripping hazards, impalement hazards, laceration risks, and inadequate loose fill.

The following photo relates to one of the improvement notices.



## Rebar Hazard

The rebar was exposed above the log level causing trips/falls, and impalement risk for patrons.

### Improvement Notices issued under WHS Act Section 19(3)(a)

The 3 improvement notices issued under WHS Act section 19(3)(a) related to providing and maintaining a safe environment. These notices included a lack of annual inspection, loose items, and areas on play equipment where spider webs were observed.

### Improvement Notices issued under WHS Act Section 19(3)(b)

The 16 improvement notices issued under WHS Act 19(3)(b) related to providing and maintaining safe plant. These notices related to a lack of maintenance and a variety of wear and tear issues observed in a range of playgrounds.

### Improvement Notices issued under WHS Act Section 21(2)

The 1 improvement notice issued under WHS Act section 21(2) related to a lack of annual inspections being conducted to maintain plant.

### Improvement Notices issued under WHS Regulation 34

The 3 improvement notices issued under WHS Regulation 34 relate to a lack of hazard identification regarding 2 x water features, and a rope swing.

The following photo relates to one of the improvement notices.



## Rope Swing

This photo shows the hazards inherent with this style of rope swing where the rope adjustment was doubled over within a child's reach, presenting a risk of finger or limb entrapment.

The carabiners securing each rope in place were non locking and could easily be opened without a tool or key.

## Improvement Notices issued under WHS Regulation 35

The 2 notices issued under WHS Regulation 35 related to loose logs and a trip hazard.  
The following photos demonstrate some of these risks.



### Loose Logs

This photo shows a section of a playground with loose logs. This causes a risk of children running across them believing them to be stable and then falling and causing injury.



### Tripping hazard

This photo shows lifted artificial grass which is causing a tripping hazard.

## Improvement Notices issued under WHS Regulation 37

The 7 notices issued under WHS Regulation 37 – Maintenance of control measures all related to an inadequate depth of loose fill, which was being used as a control measure.

The following photos demonstrate some of these risks.



### Lack of fill

This photo shows missing loose fill in the playground area exposing the playground edge.



### Compacted fill

This photo shows how fill has become compacted over time such that it is no longer loose fill.

The following 2 photos show the fill at the time of the notice being issued and then after compliance was achieved.



## Improvement Notices issued under WHS Regulation 213

The 26 improvement notices issued under WHS regulation 213 related to a lack of annual inspections and lack of maintenance of installed play equipment.

The following photos demonstrate some of these maintenance issues.



### Stepping Log

These tree stumps were installed in a singular line with graduating heights for climbing/walking on in the nature play environment.

Initially the log was installed using cement, as per design. The log was found to have significant movement when stepped on, and not secured in place.



## Rope Bridge

The rope bridge located in the playground had a missing support rope and was noticeably frayed.



## Swing

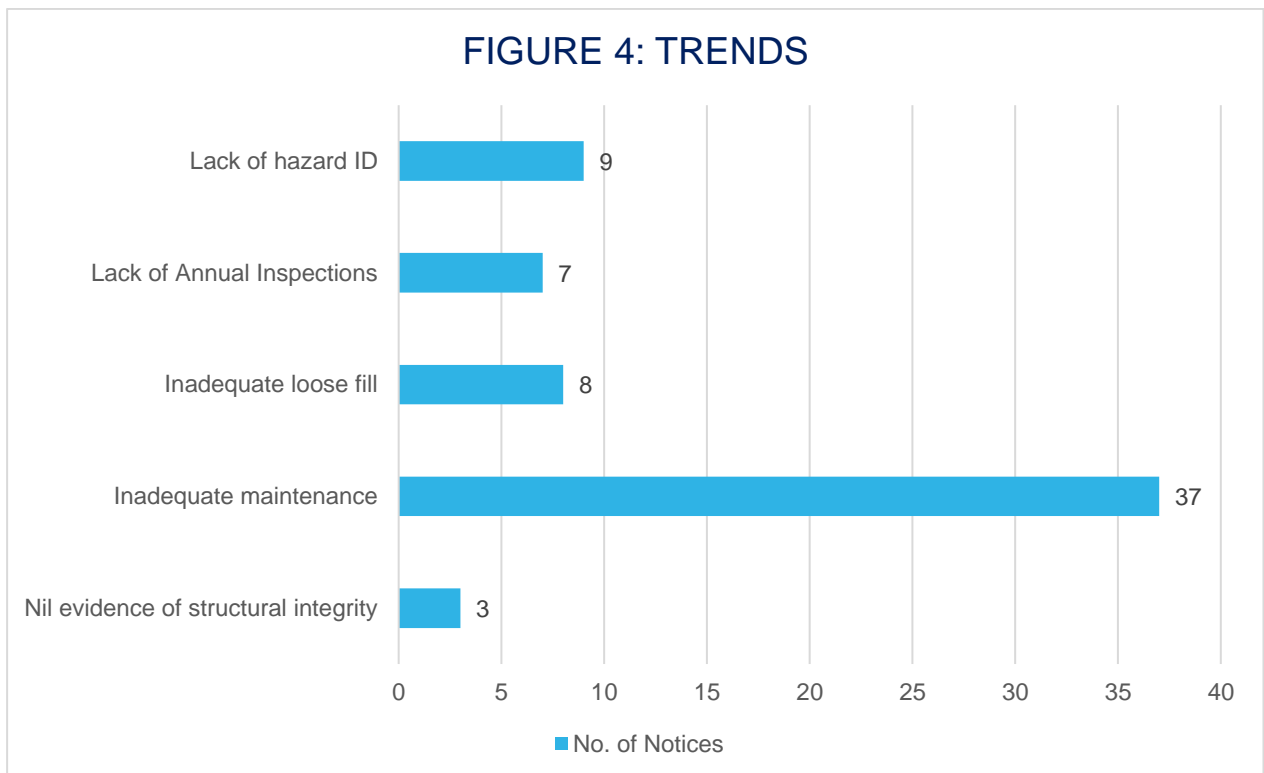
The swing located in the playground had a black rope connecting the seat to the frame with metal carabineers. The rope was doubled over (using black plastic loops) and presented a risk of finger entrapment for the user.

## Trends

A summary of broad trends which led to compliance notices (prohibition and improvement notices) being issued are:

- Lack of hazard identification – 9 notices
- Lack of Annual Inspections – 7 notices
- Inadequate loose fill – 8 notices
- Inadequate maintenance of installed play equipment – 37 notices
- Nil evidence of structural integrity – 3 notices.

Trend types are displayed below in Figure 4.



## Recommendations

It is recommended that SafeWork SA:

- communicates the outcome of the campaign to internal and external stakeholders.
- considers a follow up audit of public and private school playgrounds in the SA metropolitan area utilising the same audit tool used for this campaign.
- conducts an audit of the playground area in any childcare facility which SafeWork SA receives a complaint about in 2023, utilising the same audit tool used for this campaign.
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  - Nature Play SA
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  - Business SA
- publishes this report, including the audit tool on the SafeWork SA website. This will allow self-audits to be conducted for any playground.

## Further information

- For further information and advice on complying with legislative requirements, visit the SafeWork SA website at [safework.sa.gov.au](https://safework.sa.gov.au) or call SafeWork SA on 1300 365 255.
- You can also request a visit from our advisory service, who can provide practical advice based on your workplace's industry, size, risk, and complexity. Our advisors can visit your workplace to help you understand your work health and safety responsibilities, as well as provide practical support to improve your systems, practices, and general approach to safety.

## Appendix A – Audit Tool

**Nature Play and Playgrounds  
SAFETY COMPLIANCE INSPECTION - 2021  
Site Inspection Report**



**Government of South Australia**  
SafeWork SA

**INTERNAL USE FORM ONLY**

Date  /  /  Time  :  AM / PM

**PCBU DETAILS**

Trading as  ABN   
Entity Name   
Business Type  Industry Sector   
Address   
Suburb  State  Postcode   
Phone  Email

**EVIDENCE SIGHTED**

☐ Nature Play Area ☐ Risk Assessment(s) ☐ Playground Inspection Training Record  
☐ Playground Area ☐ Maintenance records ☐ Supervision Requirements  
☐ Completed Daily/ Quarterly/ Annual Playground Inspection Checklists ☐ Other:

**NOTICES ISSUED**

☐ Prohibition Qty:  ☐ Improvement Qty:  ☐ Other:

**SIGN OFF**

PCBU Rep. Name   
PCBU HSR Name   
Inspector/s Name

**OFFICE USE ONLY**

Date Entered  /  /  Client ICN  InfoNET File No.

	Assessment topic	Compliant Y or N	WHSIN or WHSPN	Comments
<b>Nature Play and Playground Risks</b>				
1	<u>Sharps</u> : Metals/plastics/fibre glass items are smooth with nil damage or sharp edges, no exposed screws/nails, sandpits have no visible sharps and are raked daily, and metals are non-rusted.			
	<u>Falls</u> : Equipment has adequate fall protection (handrails, platform walls, etc) and/or impact protection (loose fill under any item with a fall height greater than 600mm from the ground).			
	<u>Unintended Movement</u> : Logs, stumps, boulder, large rocks, and non-moving play structure parts are adequately secured (no movement).			
	<u>Biological</u> : Equipment is clean of any biological waste (including animal), and sandpits have no visible waste and are raked daily.			
	<u>Flora/Fauna</u> : Play areas are free of any dangerous animals, plants/trees/gardens are maintained, and climbing trees have been assessed by an arborist confirming suitability.			
	<u>Impalement</u> : Play items are stored adequately/clearly visible, tree/plant roots are horizontally cut/do not raise to a vertical point, and any vertical poles cannot be landed on/fallen onto.			
	<u>Drowning</u> : Creek beds have water levels below 300mm, larger bodies of water have adequate fencing or access restrictions, any water areas have adequate access/egress, and any water access is adequately supervised.			
	<u>Entrapment</u> : Equipment is free from tight spaces, any holes are large enough to prevent entrapment of fingers/head/etc, and moveable items are easy to move and are light weight.			
	<u>Slips/Trips</u> : Playground equipment has adequate grip surfaces (including in wet weather), and walkways/trails are clearly visible and surfaces are even.			
<b>Systems &amp; Training</b>				
2	The PCBU has an adequate risk assessment for the play area(s)			
	The PCBU has a daily and annual inspection process for play area(s)			
	There is sufficient supervision of the play area(s) while in use			
	The PCBU has a maintenance schedule for play area(s) and any equipment/items used in play area(s)			
	Workers have adequate training for supervision, maintenance and/or inspection requirements			
	The PCBU has a reporting process for play area(s) incidents and hazards (including maintenance issues)			
	If applicable, there is a process for the receiving of donated materials and inspecting donated materials to determine suitability			
<b>General -</b>				
3				

DISCLAIMER: This report only deals with matters the subject of the specific inspection. It does not purport to indicate overall compliance status of the relevant duty holder(s) with work health and safety laws.