

Empowering Tamariki with Parklands School

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by Lucy Carver

This year, Whenua Iti Outdoors (WIO) partnered with Parklands School to deliver a nine-week social skills programme designed to address the unique challenges facing their junior tamariki. The collaboration was born from Parklands' recognition of a growing need to support students' social, emotional, and motor skills through hands-on, values-driven learning in the outdoors.

Andrea Smith, Principal of Parklands School, highlighted the importance of the programme, explaining that “our students face challenges in attendance and achievement. Over one quarter of our students have multiple out-of-school agencies involved with them and/or their whānau—to support learning, behaviour, and pastoral care. Whilst student engagement is high, we are finding many students transitioning into our kura, throughout the year levels, are coming in lacking many skills. At the younger levels, basic motor and social skills are lacking. With the older students, we are finding a lack of resilience, confidence, and self-esteem. A lot of our students find it difficult to deal with negative emotions and struggle to do the right thing when faced with a challenge when in a bad space.”



Guided by WIO's experienced instructors and supported by familiar staff from Parklands, tamariki practiced skills essential for building resilience, teamwork, and problem-solving at the Whenua Iti site in Lower Moutere. Throughout the programme, over 40 tamariki in Years 2–4 worked through nature-based activities that required them to navigate challenges and work together, all while having the freedom to explore and learn in a safe, outdoor setting.

Leah works in the Nesting Class with 5-year-olds who are transitioning to Parklands School and accompanied one of the groups on site. “For many of these tamariki this will be a completely new experience for them,” she says. Tamariki face a host of barriers to getting out and experiencing outdoor activities. “For many different reasons, their weekends may not be filled with any kind of outdoor activity. Most of the tamariki don't get these opportunities,” reflects Leah. “I've seen a growth in the cohesion and unity amongst the group. I can see lots of the quiet shy students starting to come out of their shell and express themselves more confidently in the group.”



The programme was designed to align with Parklands School's core values—KAHA: Kotahitanga (unity), Ako (learning), Haepapa (responsibility), and Aroha (compassion)—helping to link the learning back to their experiences in the classroom. With Parklands' Lunch in Schools programme, students were fully equipped to make the most of each day's activities.

Reed, Teacher Aide, reflects on how outdoor learning influenced his childhood. "As a kid, I remember being down the river and building stuff, playing together, and that was where all the learning happened. I think the tamariki learn so much from outdoor experiences like this." He notices changes in the dynamics between tamariki since the programme started, "I've seen a lot of introverted kids speak up more, and a lot of the extroverted kids having to share and work together, rather than by themselves."



Mark Bruce-Miller, CEO of Whenua Iti Outdoors, acknowledges the significance of the investment made for the group of tamariki. "The outcomes and feedback speak volumes. It's clear that there is both a need for and value in supporting similar programmes throughout our community. The real challenge is securing support beyond the 'pilot programme'. If we can integrate these opportunities into future years across more schools, it will be a major step towards fostering supportive learning environments for our youngest students."

The hope is that this programme has set a foundation for lasting positive change for these tamariki. By prioritising resilience, curiosity, and problem-solving, Whenua Iti Outdoors and Parklands School are seeking to model a partnership-driven, outdoor learning approach that can empower children to meet challenges confidently in order to flourish.

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<https://www.whenuaiti.org.nz/news/empowering-tamariki-with-parklands-school/>