

No sticks higher than your hips

At school now, my son has less time for sticks.

He still uses them, but in ways curated by others: make a stick man, build a bug house. The whole class crafted a log pile, balancing branches atop the concrete playground.

But left alone among the trees and a sword, a gun, a spear - they all emerge, fallen branches taking on energetic new life.

Me and other mothers seek to contain the games – no sticks higher than your hips, no hitting, remember your strength, let everyone play. I try to show him these pieces of wood offer more than arms; we dug up some rotten roots and saw the worms feasting.

The boys drag an abandoned Christmas tree across the park, determined and charging. They push and shout, no care for noise or danger. Last week they grouped together for a 'wild wee'; five-year-olds carousing among the rowan.

I shelter under the cedar, a *monoecious* tree – it has both male (pistils) and female (stamens) parts. On the news today they said boys are twice as likely to play outside as girls, that green space design is gendered, with girls made less welcome as a rule.

Soon I will face a battle to go home and my son will insist on adding to his stick pile – a growing construction beside our front door. Taking home a piece of the park, a slice of the space he owns.