Setting the scene

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) identifies ‘Learning environments’ as one of the eight key practices required to promote children’s learning:

... creating physical and social learning environments that have a positive impact on children’s learning (p. 14).

The EYLF (p. 15) describes environments that support learning as:

… vibrant and flexible spaces that are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child. They cater for different capacities and learning styles and invite children and families to contribute ideas, interests and questions.

Early childhood education has long recognised the natural and constructed environments inside and outdoors as vehicles for learning and opportunities for teaching. As the EYLF (pp. 15–16) notes, Australian play spaces “… invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature.”

We also need to think about whether the environments we provide:

- offer opportunities to build relationships between adults and children; children and children; and adults and adults
- invite conversations
- promote sustained shared thinking and collaborative learning
- introduce novelty to provoke interest and more complex and increasingly abstract thinking.

The EYLF uses the term ‘learning environments’ to encompass both indoor and outdoor spaces. This e-Newsletter focuses on outdoor spaces and subsequent e-Newsletters will deal with setting up indoor spaces for learning.
Voices from the field

1. I asked a colleague who is director of a long day care service about ‘outdoor spaces’ and this is his reply:

   There are different spaces for children and adults; some are small; some are big; and some are in-between. We try to create ‘rooms’—forests, cubbies, open spaces … spaces to hide in …

   We try to create a connection with the real world … mud, dirt, bugs—a real world in ‘their own backyard’ that links to the broader community.

Neville’s comments are echoed as I talk with educators in SA and Qld. Many people mention ‘natural materials’ and ‘letting the children get dirty’ and ‘creating inviting environments with light and shade and angle and texture’ in the most ordinary of circumstances.
3. At Halifax St, an inner city setting in Adelaide, Kate explains that:

Staff became aware through a seminar, that the neurological development of babies is enhanced when they can experience different levels, surfaces and textures as they start to crawl, walk and toddle around their spaces. The presenter explained that neuroscience indicates that walking on different surfaces and slopes stimulates synapses that build rich schema. Staff therefore provide sand in a plastic ‘pit’ and spend some time each day exploring the sensory experience with educators reflecting back babies’ language use. They provide ramps, mats and bridges of various textures for babies to feel on their hands and feet as they move up and down and from space to space.

2. Lynne, in Adelaide, for example, talks about how important it is for gardens, however small, to ‘... feature native plants and grasses that are adapted to a drought environment, but which provide “edges and lines” that break up the landscape’ and gentle colour ranges from yellow through pink to pale green. Staff at Gowrie SA, see ‘the environment as a third teacher’ and ‘indoor and outdoor exploration is available to children all day’.

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Inviting the real world in

A number of settings have live animals that children help to care for, observe, talk about and record.

1. Coooloon Children’s Centre in Tweed Heads, NSW, for example, has bantam chickens, which children hold, feed, collect eggs from, observe and talk about.

The centre Director, Judy says:

*We have families that choose our centre because of the opportunities we give children to engage with living creatures in the natural world. Our bantams provide so many opportunities for learning across all areas of the EYLF curriculum. This includes learning about and meeting the needs of living things; empathy and caring; turn-taking in the egg-collection roster; life cycles as we wonder why our eggs won’t turn into chickens and life and death as things naturally occur. We learn about recycling as we save kitchen scraps and much, much more.*

2. Annie Dennis Centre in Northcote in Victoria has guinea pigs, which are a similar source of conversation and thoughtful care. Children in each room take turns in caring for the animals, including over holiday breaks.

3. A centre that works with vulnerable children and families found that watching, observing and recording changes in silkworms through their cocoon stage to moths, fascinated and calmed children over several weeks and led to significant learning.

4. When renovating a difficult space, with a wall alongside the street, an inner city setting created alcoves and windows in the wall of the babies’ room. Adults, many of whom are elderly, can’t resist ‘chatting’ to the babies as they walk past and babies are extremely curious about what’s happening in the street—milk and paper deliveries, ambulances and fire trucks whizzing by, parents coming and going … Adults and children exchange facial expressions, gestures, babbling, chatting and cries of mutual delight.

As Kate says:

*In designing the wall/fence in the baby room, we were influenced by our desire to increase opportunities for infants and staff to engage with the community.*
Conclusion

In this e-Newsletter, we have been talking about outside spaces and the many roles we want them to fulfil in early childhood education.

Neville, for example, makes the important point that:

As backyards become smaller and parents are more nervous about children being out in the community, we need to fill children’s need to challenge themselves and to manage risks—to climb and explore different surfaces and levels; to go into places where there might be ‘secret things’ and living creatures. We need to realise that some children may be in an early learning environment for four to five years and children of different ages need different challenges in the outdoor space—spaces can’t be ‘one size fits all’.

Sometimes, in early childhood, we have utilised the learning potential of indoor spaces, but tended to see ‘the outdoors’ as ‘just a place to let off steam’. Certainly, children need space to run fast, to shout without disturbing others, to invent imaginary games and to play sport without objects getting in their way. Settings that have limited space often fulfil these needs by taking children out to community parks.

However, the focus on ‘spaces as learning environments’ reminds us that both indoor and outdoor spaces should be regarded, planned and constructed with their learning potential in mind. This means that when educators are with children outside, they are focused on the learning that’s happening, ready to seize opportunities to foster and extend learning and to capitalise on the potential of the ‘great Australian outdoors’ to stimulate rich, thoughtful, reflective conversations.

In future e-Newsletters, we will also explore the idea of sustained shared thinking and conversations’ between children and adults and children and children. This concept, drawn from international research into ‘quality early childhood provision’, is a core part of how the EYLF envisages ‘learning environments’.

Questions to stimulate thinking and conversation:

- Are our indoor and outdoor environments equally focused on children’s learning? How do educators approach children’s learning indoors and outdoors?
- Are our environments flexible so that they will challenge and support children’s learning, potentially for five years?
- Are there elements in our environments that connect with children’s learning in their home, culture and community? What do these look like?
- How could we help all children to understand and respect the history and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first custodians of this land?
- What would an environmental audit of our setting show about energy usage or wastage? How might we, as educators, with children and families, act for sustainability of resources?

And Judy asks:

Do our spaces invite both children and adults to feel a sense of ‘belonging’?

Are there spaces where parents can sit comfortably and observe as their children begin to feel comfortable and become explorers?

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