



The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



Creating 'enabling' environments

Setting the scene

The EYLF (p. 14) emphasises the importance of:

... creating physical and social learning environments that have a positive impact on children's learning.

As Catharine commented on the EYLF Forum:

I think the EYLF is challenging us to look seriously at the environment we create for children and ensure that the spaces 'spark conversation and interaction and exploration and belonging, being and becoming'.

The physical environment is one of the seven quality areas of the forthcoming National Quality Standard (NQS) which services will be required to meet to obtain approval to operate from January, 2012. The NQS (Draft NQS, 2009, p. 16) requires that:

The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

E-Newsletter No. 11 focused on the 'great Australian outdoors' where children can be free to connect with nature, build relationships and challenge themselves to do today what they couldn't do yesterday.

As Jodie beautifully expressed on the EYLF Forum:

Outside, where we can feel the wind in our faces, feel the ground crunch under our feet, see the colours of the earth, see the lizards play, smell the grass mowed and watch the plane leave trails, or clouds move across the sky.

E-Newsletter No. 12 discussed the 'language' of indoor environments where visible boundaries create a sense of 'rooms' within a room and materials and equipment are organised so that children can make choices and show a sense of care.

This e-Newsletter aims to bring some of those principles together and to talk about how learning is best fostered by the spaces we create for and with children.

A safe harbour

The spaces we create communicate emotional as well as physical messages to children, families and staff.

All children need a 'safe harbour' where they feel secure, nurtured, believed in and supported to 'be brave' and try new things. Children benefit from having familiar spaces and equipment, from being allowed to use their comforters as they need them and from being given time to return to unfinished work until they are satisfied.

As the manager of a setting in Victoria said:

If a child needs the soothing effect of pouring water, we let them pour from one container to another for ages—don't interrupt; allow the child to be in that moment. If they need to lie down in the home corner covered with a blanket, we let them. If the clay table still works after two weeks, we leave it for children to squeeze, massage and roll; we might add wet clay or new moulds or pictures of things children might make, but novelty isn't the key—pleasure, satisfaction and interaction are.

This service, as many others do, uses gardening and pets to promote children's wellbeing and learning.

With the EYLF focus on 'belonging' in mind, many settings go out of their way to make people—children and adults—feel welcome when they arrive. They purchase comfy sofas and cane furniture and place them in waiting areas and at the entry to the rooms.

Initially, putting the sofa in the entry where adults bring children in the mornings was an accident, but parents sit on it and watch their children settle; we can sit and talk briefly with them; they can read a story to their child if they've got time, or talk with other parents. It's turned out to be a lucky accident.



These settings have framed or digital photos of children, with their friends at the setting, with their families and with educators. They choose materials, furniture and fittings that reflect family and community contexts; familiar things to see, hear, touch and smell. In some cases, families lend or donate artefacts from their cultural background or family interests for display or for children to investigate and discuss. This builds a strong sense that 'we all belong here, wherever we have come from to this place'.

A place to 'be' and to 'become'

Settings on the South Coast of NSW and in the suburbs of Sydney demonstrate the principles of order and beauty in action while dealing with the practicalities of running an early childhood service.

Walloo Children's Centre for example, in the Illawarra district, explains:

We work with the children to create an orderly environment where everything has its place. It's not that everything has to stay in its box, just that children know which equipment is best used where, and where to put it away when they've finished. It builds a sense of care and ownership and it's fair to the next users.

Educators in field visits offer some tips regarding furniture and fittings:

- Look for ways to bridge between home and centre, bringing in touches of home with lamps, cushions, flowers in vases ...
- Choose uncluttered, simple furniture in natural materials—wood, cane, with washable or waterproofed cotton covers.
- Where possible, provide 'real' furniture in home corner.
- Make access easy—a 'lazy Susan' with paints to enable a group to share, plastic smocks clean and near the paint table/ easels, water nearby to wash brushes.



- Have sets of textas labelled for each child's use in the literacy corner to encourage children to focus on the task rather than fussing over pens.
- Use open shelving and see-through screens at children's heights so they can access equipment and see alternative, inviting spaces.
- Use rugs and mats to identify the 'territory' for an activity such as block building; it also helps to limit the number of children working in a confined space.



- Place beautiful things at children's eye level—a pottery bowl, a woven cane sculpture, and lovely shells in the bathrooms.



In a setting with a number of Aboriginal children, educators take care to promote the use of materials from the environment and those likely to be found at home. They believe this gives the message that 'learning happens everywhere' and you don't need expensive plastic materials to have fun and learn with family and friends.

Quality and challenge matter

One of the most noticeable elements in an effective early learning environment is the emphasis on 'quality' rather than quantity:

- When there is quality paper, children use it judiciously.
- When there are quality crayons, textas, pencils and paints, children plan what they will do with them and use them thoughtfully.
- When the easels are height-adjustable, all children feel they can paint like an artist and their 'work' is valued.
- When the wooden blocks and toys are lovely to hold, children construct with them more creatively.

At KU West Pymble Preschool, for example:

- Textas for each child are named and placed with a collection of papers of high-quality and varied textures, colours and shapes at the literacy table.



- Letters of the alphabet are laminated and displayed in a transparent cookbook holder. Educators help children to refer to them and remind children about the sound-symbol relationships they know.
- An Aboriginal-countries map is displayed and discussed and children are familiar with the language groups of their area.
- Puzzles are chosen with increasing challenge as children progress over the year.



- Computer games and software are selected for their potential to foster creativity, constructive interactions, thinking and problem solving.

At the computer, two children interact and chat while using drawing software. The children are encouraged to think about what they might draw—'They are playful'. They write their name on a list and cross it out when their turn ends—'One activity serves several learning purposes'. They only print their drawing when they are satisfied—'Wasting paper is bad for the environment'. Children are in complete control, being reminded that they can ask for help at any time—'It's supported independence.'



Conclusion

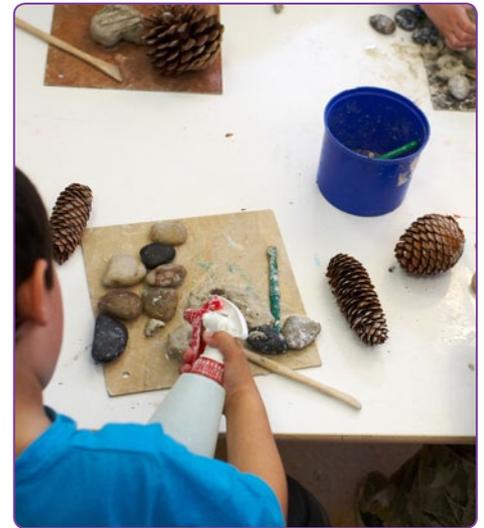
Perhaps the message in relation to the physical environment is: Keep it simple!

As Catharine has said on the Forum:

Spaces educate. And crowded, over-busy environments don't help families or children 'know where to go'; they don't draw them into a room or give them anything to 'mull over'; they don't spark conversations.

Educators at Alunga Children's Centre on the NSW South Coast suggest that creating orderly and inspiring learning environments can be as simple as:

- planting a tree or a hedge
- removing clutter and throwing out damaged equipment
- incorporating natural materials such as hanging baskets and bamboo screens on a wire fence
- fundraising or asking for donations or the gift of a solar-powered water feature and inviting children to help create a pebble garden around it
- having a 'Look what we found in the garden today' chart with words and pictures, the day and the date
- bringing in leaves and cones found in the Botanical Gardens at the weekend
- providing magnifying glasses and relevant pictures and books for identification.



As Claire Warden, one of the keynote speakers at the ECA Conference in 2010 explained:

Enabling environments are provocative, natural, open-ended and rich in possibilities for collaboration and reciprocity.

So, have a spring clean and de-clutter!

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Resource

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2009). *National quality standard for early childhood education and care and school aged care*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_agenda/quality/documents/nqstandardchildedu.pdf



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A voice for young children

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