

## Being, belonging and becoming in the physical environment

Campbell St Children’s Centre Inc. in Queanbeyan, NSW, is working with Early Childhood Australia to focus their Quality Improvement Plan on Quality Area 3: Physical environment, examining the playground, rooms and spaces where the children and educators work and play.



The project is based on the premise that a well-organised learning environment has the potential to underpin good practice across all Quality Areas in the *National Quality Standard* and the five Learning Outcomes of the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

A well-organised environment is welcoming, consistent and predictable, and reflects the community in which it sits, thus providing a sense of place and purpose. It needs to be vibrant and flexible so it can respond to the children and their changing needs, interests and abilities. It needs to invite experiences, interactions, risk-taking, discovery, connections to nature, conversations, play and collaboration.

To do this, the setting environment must contain open-ended, complex materials that can be used in many ways to engage and hold children’s interest, and allow learning experiences to become more complex over time. A well-resourced and well-maintained environment should provide a balance of experiences and materials which children can access at any time, or which are provided by educators to enhance children’s learning and understanding.

A focus on the physical environment naturally incorporates the ‘big ideas’ of *Being, belonging and becoming*, as outlined in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009).

The environment supports *belonging* when families and children are welcomed consistently in warm and inviting ways, which can give them a sense of ownership and involvement. When the environment reflects and is rich in the culture and identity of the enrolled families and the wider community, it helps families to feel valued and good about themselves.

The physical environment can support children in building a sense of security and strong relationships, by providing areas where they can choose to play independently or with others. A well-designed environment also facilitates genuine relationships developing, not only between children and children, but also between educators and children, educators and parents, and among parents.

Environments that allow time and space for children to lose themselves in what they are doing contribute to children’s sense of *being*, as they become completely absorbed in the ‘here and now’ experience. Providing mostly open-ended resources is more likely to encourage this.

To support this idea of *being*, the physical environment needs to provide children with space and time to be alone or with one another, time to finish activities or ways to continue later on, and the choice to be with, near or away from educators. To facilitate this, the physical environment should include a mixture of spaces—small, large, medium, private, open, secret and/or public. Thoughtful arrangement of rooms indoors and plantings outdoors can achieve this without compromising educator supervision and children’s safety.

The environment also contributes to each child’s sense of *becoming* when it provides time, space and resources to expand on their learning and interests. In addition, the well-designed environment allows educators the time and freedom to connect deeply with children and their learning in order to guide, support and further this learning.

The environment has the potential to support children’s skill development when it allows blocks of time for experimentation, repetition and time to practise, with open-ended



materials that can be adapted and changed by children over time as their interests, skills and confidence develop and change. This also supports their increasing independence.

Well-designed environments with engaged educators promote children’s literacy and numeracy, through careful and thoughtful experiences and materials that further children’s learning without being tokenistic.

We know the physical environment has a strong impact on both young children’s learning and development. Environments that are well-designed allow children to explore, give them a sense of control and allow the children to engage in focused, self-directed play.

The environment can make a significant difference in the experience of the child, the parent and the educator. It is therefore significant that the environment we provide supports the growing child’s physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

How does your environment do this? At the same time, the environment needs to provide for children’s safety, their overall health, their comfort, their need for appropriate child-sized resources and equipment, their need for flexibility and choice as they grow and change, and their need for space to move and be physically active. That has been our challenge at Campbell St Children’s Centre Inc.

**Judy Radich**

Director


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