Introduction

This document aims to demonstrate how a focus on one area of learning—Quality Area 3 in the National Quality Standard (NQS)—the physical environment—has connections and implications for practice across the whole of the seven Quality Areas. It also demonstrates how the physical environment can support children’s learning across the five Learning Outcomes as stated in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

The document has been designed to support educators to see the connections between the EYLF and the NQS and to see the elements, not as individual items to be ‘ticked off’ but rather part of a larger holistic approach to quality programs for children.

In essence, a well organised learning environment has the potential to underpin good practice across all Quality Areas in the NQS and the five Learning Outcomes specified in the EYLF.

Learning environments are one of the key practices from the EYLF

A well organised environment is:

- welcoming
- vibrant and flexible
- responsive to children and their changing needs, interests and abilities
- one that invites experiences, interactions, risk-taking, discovery, connections to nature, conversations, play and collaboration
- one that has a sense of place and purpose for resources, materials and experiences
- consistent and predictable
- well resourced and well maintained
- interesting and engaging (absorbs children in complex, deep learning experiences rather than shallow or superficial experiences)
- contains open-ended, complex materials that can be used in many ways and can be used again and again without becoming boring
- balance of experiences/types of experiences.

We value space because of its power to organise, to promote pleasant relationships between people, to create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning—Louis Malaguzzi.
EYLF—the physical environment—connections to the ‘big ideas’ of Belonging, Being and Becoming

Belonging

- Environment supports belonging by being welcoming to children and families, warm and inviting, consistent and predictable and gives a sense of ownership and involvement.
- Environment that allows children to participate in decisions about how it is arranged, choice of available materials, provides sense of belonging.
- Children and families can find their culture, background, identity reflected in a way that makes them feel good about themselves.
- Environment that also includes parents—makes them feel part of what goes on too.
- Environment promotes/allows time for genuine relationships to occur—children and children, educators and children, educators and parents, parents and parents.

Being

- Environments that allow time and space for children to lose themselves in what they are doing—open ended resources are more likely to encourage this.
- Space and time to be alone, to be together, to finish something, to continue something, to be with an adult, to be away from adults.
- Mixture of spaces—small, large, medium, private, open, secret and public.

Becoming

- Environments that provide time/space/resources to extend on children’s learning and interests.
- Environment that allows educators the time and freedom to connect deeply with children and their learning in order to guide/support where it goes to next.
- Environment where children have the chance to develop skills, recognise talents and potential for the future (how do we know what children will be good at if they have no time to get good at anything—blocks of time, repetition and time to practice).
- Materials that allow development of skills over time (not novelty art and craft).
- Environments that show educators understanding of how literacy and math develop and support children’s learning in these areas (not tokenistic reading/writing materials).
- Environments that encourage increasing independence.
EYLF Outcomes—Connections to the physical environment

Outcome 1—Children have a strong sense of identity

- Welcoming environment that provides sense of belonging helps children to feel safe and secure.
- Environment that provides challenge and risk encourages agency and helps children to feel sense of achievement, (self esteem/identity/feeling good about yourself), ‘What is my influence?’.
- Environment supports children’s relationships with each other and collaborate constructive relationships rather than conflict filled/disruptive relationships.
- Environment supports adult-child relationships that help children to feel secure/belonging.

Outcome 2—Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Environment that encourages positive relationships, active decision making and collaborative play helps to create sense of community.
- Environment that has sense of order, encourages children to also care for/look after it.
- Environment that engages with the outside world rather than being isolated from it (outward rather than inward looking).
- Sustainable/natural environment helps children to develop awareness of and respect for the environment (How is sustainability embedded into daily routines and environments?).
- Environment that reflects/acknowledges the history of place and contribution of Aboriginal people and culture to Australian society.

Outcome 3—Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- The environment supports wellbeing through promoting healthy diet and physical activity.
- Supports emotional wellbeing through providing range of different spaces—opportunities for challenge, opportunities for collaboration, opportunities for solitude—that respond to children’s mood.
- Environment that is inclusive/reflective of children and families background/culture/identity.
- Environment encourages persistence, curiosity, genuine achievement—contributes to feeling good about yourself.
- Environment that promotes autonomy/independence as children develop and become more competent at looking after themselves.
- Environment that allows educators to respond to individual children’s needs rather than always treating them as a group.

Outcome 4—Children are confident and involved learners

- Environment set up to encourage exploration, choice, curiosity, creativity.
- Materials that encourage problem solving; that lend themselves to skill development (i.e. children can get better at using them with practice, time and support).
- Environment allows children choices and ability to use resource and materials for their own ends (ask why not? Rather than why?).
- Materials and experiences that encourage perseverance, persistence, curiosity, problem-solving.
- Environment provides open-ended materials—not single use or predetermined and complex holistic experiences (rather than learning skills in isolation).
- Environment that encourages collaborative play and thinking (children to work together).

Outcome 5—Children are effective communicators

- Environment that encourages and supports communication (not too noisy, encourages/provides space for small groups or children to work together).
- Environment that allows educators time to engage with children to talk, discuss, listen, have real conversations).
- Examples of communication (pictures, symbols, words/text) are evident in the environment and are used by educators to draw children’s attention to aspects of communication.
- Environment that provides space for children to display their work so that their ‘communication’ is visible to others.
- Orderly environment introduces children to ideas of classification, sorting etc.
- Environment provides access to technology for children to explore and use (cameras, computers etc.).
National Quality Standards—Connecting all quality areas to all of the standards.

Quality Area 1—Educational program and practice

Standard 1.1—An improved learning environment informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child’s learning and development

Elements

- Curriculum decision making will include decisions about the environment—what is available, how it is arranged and set up—Link to EYLF (learning environments).
- Current knowledge, ideas, interests etc. should be reflected in the environment and also how the environment is used.
- A well organised environment supports routines such as calm, unhurried learning opportunities, (e.g. materials to hand out where routines take place and where space is available).
- Displays/notice boards can be an effective way to share documentation with families.
- Physical environment helps determine how accessible a service is.
- An inviting environment encourages participation.
- How the environment is setup (e.g. availability of resources, access to inside/outside—ability to move around centre) either encourages or discourages children to make decisions for themselves.

Standard 1.2—Educators and coordinators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child

- Examples of children’s work/learning is documented, displayed, and available to families.
- Engaging environment encourages ideas, questions and creativity for educators to build.
- A flexible, well resourced environment allows educators to respond to interests as they arise.
- Space for staff to meet/work/discuss will help this to happen (space that is conducive to discussion/reflection).
Quality Area 2—Children’s health and safety

Standard 2.1—Each child’s health is promoted

Elements
- Physical environment supports children to become more independent/responsible for their own wellbeing (e.g. access to toilets, drinking water that allows children to independently meet their own needs).
- Environment provides space for rest, quiet time, children to be alone or in small groups (not just at ‘rest time’ but throughout the day).
- Well organised environment supports educators and children to be hygienic and minimises time and effort needed to keep things clean and hygienic.
- Environment is organised to make this easier to do—fresh air, ventilation, spaces that are easy to maintain and keep clean.
- Grouping—how does environment encourage/allow for small groups rather than being a large group all the time?
- Notices/prompts/guidelines are clearly visible (not overwhelmed by other clutter).

Standard 2.2—Healthy eating and physical activity are embedded in the program for children

Elements
- Environments for mealtimes encourage relaxed, enjoyable experiences.
- Environment encourages adult participation in routines and small groups where possible.
- Vegetable patch to encourage children’s involvement—more likely to try/eat something if they’ve produced it.
- Environment encourages/engages children in physical activity.
- Environment is flexible so it can change over time as children’s needs, skills and abilities change.
- There are enough challenges for children as skills develop.
- Space for physical activity (where can children run, jump and climb).

Standard 2.3—Each child is protected

Elements
- Environment is set up to enable adequate supervision (without being intrusive or limiting).
- Environment safe, yet still challenging/interesting.
- Environment with ‘high expectations’.
- Environment planned to provide degree of risk and challenge suitable to the group/s of children who will use it.
- Environment shaded (natural shade where possible).
Quality Area 4—Staffing arrangements

Standard 4.1—Staffing arrangements enhance children's learning and development and ensure their safety and wellbeing

Elements
- Environment is set up to enable different ways of grouping and working with children while still maintaining adequate staff numbers.
- Access to toilets etc. so that staffing numbers do not compromise.

Standard 4.2—Educators, coordinators and staff members are respectful and ethical

Elements
- Well set up environment removes frustrations making it easier to interact with care, empathy and respect.
- Well organised storage reduces staff tension and makes it easier to share resources.
- Well resourced environment reduces need to share resources and eases pressure on staff (OH&S, stress, tension).
- Comfortable, relaxing spaced for breaks etc.

Quality Area 5—Relationships with children

Standard 5.1—Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child

Elements
- Environment is key to enabling these to occur—well organised, engaging environments help children to become engaged and free staff to work with/engage with individuals or small groups for extended periods (staff do not need to always act as police and/or entertainers to the whole group).
- Supervision arrangements enable staff to engage rather than feeling they always have to be ‘supervising’—staff are not spread too thinly.
- Predictable environment helps children to feel secure, confident and have a sense of ownership.
- Environment where children can make choices increases confidence, encourages curiosity, interest and creativity.

Standard 5.2—Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults

Elements
- Well organised environment allows children to play in small groups which encourages friendships and meaningful relationships.
- Well organised environment helps to reduce disruptive behavior.
- By engaging children it reduces aimless wandering, running, boredom.
- Can provide messages to children about expected behaviours—promote constructive behaviour.
- Environment minimises times that children are stressed or frustrated.
- Environment allows privacy, respect, dignity where appropriate (e.g. toileting).
Quality Area 6—Collaborative partnerships

Standard 6.1—Respectful supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained

Elements
- Environment is welcoming to parents/adults as well as children.
- There is space/time for uninterrupted discussion/meetings.
- How information for families is displayed—easy to read, uncluttered, inviting.

Standard 6.2—Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected

Element
- Environment and routines are structured to allow conversations with families each day.

Standard 6.3—The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children’s learning and wellbeing

Element
- Inclusion of children with high support needs is enabled.
- Relationships and partnerships are built and maintained with the community through negotiation and supply of materials.

Quality Area 7—Leadership and service management

Standard 7.1—Effective leadership promotes a positive organizational culture and builds a professional learning community

Element
- Effective governance/management systems in place to ensure maintenance/upkeep/development of physical environment.
- Induction of staff includes commitment to caring for and seeing the physical environment as a significant teaching tool.
- Physical environment—how children are grouped can help to promote continuity

Standard 7.2—There is a commitment to continuous improvement

Element
- Importance of environment underpinning philosophy.
- Adequate adult space for staff discussion will support this.

Standard 7.3—Administrative systems enable the effective management of a quality service

Element
- Adequate space for admin/records storage will make this easier to achieve.