



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Rethinking outdoor learning environments

Part A: Provocations

Introduction

This e-Newsletter and the following one focus on learning that can occur in outdoor environments and some considerations about how best to support that learning. The aim is to assist educators to make the most of these environments with children. The e-Newsletters build on several previous ones (Numbers 11, 25 and 52) that also focus on outdoor spaces.

This e-Newsletter (Part A) contains *provocations*—that is, questions and challenges related to outdoor learning environments. Part B will suggest *provisions*—practical ideas for learning experiences. Connecting with nature and engaging with sustainability are underpinning themes in both newsletters.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) acknowledge the importance of outdoor learning environments:

Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Play spaces in natural environments include plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16).

NQS Quality Area 3: Physical environments refer to both sustainability and the physical aspects of outdoor environments that facilitate children's learning:

Standard 3.2: The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

Standard 3.3: The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future.

Sustainability: An underpinning theme for rethinking outdoor learning environments

Educators cannot ignore global environmental issues. Contemporary educators recognise the critical importance of addressing sustainability with children and families. Important questions include:

- How can services operate sustainably?
- How can children, educators and families engage with education for sustainability?

Addressing these questions may require different ways of thinking and acting that embed sustainability as integral to all aspects of service operation. Engaging with sustainability is more than simply providing rocks and logs in the outdoor environment or a compost bin in the corner. Offering direct experiences with natural elements can contribute to positive sustainability values, but critical reflection by educators about how they engage with children in outdoor environments is likely to result in more meaningful learning opportunities about sustainability. Educators can ensure that children have opportunities to:

- collaborate and respond to environmental challenges, such as water usage during drought
- strengthen their sense of agency through 'real work'
- enact their rights to make decisions about daily environmental issues.

Both children and educators can learn to notice and respond to changes in natural settings and collaborate to create sustainable outdoor learning environments.



Connecting with nature: The natural outdoor learning environment

There are increasing concerns about the disconnection between children and nature. There are also concerns about risk-averse approaches to play, sedentary technology experiences and lack of time for unstructured outdoor play and their likely negative consequences for children's long-term health and wellbeing (Moore & Cooper-Marcus, 2008).

Educators can ensure children have daily access to natural outdoor learning environments. Outdoor play in nature offers a number of benefits, including opportunities to learn:

- physical skills and build stamina
- social skills
- how to manage risks
- respect for nature.



How do educators create natural outdoor learning environments that benefit children?

Services might begin with small steps such as planting a vegetable garden or creating a digging patch. Various publications, including Elliott (2008) and Gamson Danks (2010), suggest many practical ideas. However, an evolving outdoor playspace needs to be based on guiding principles and requires ongoing maintenance. Good-quality outdoor learning environments are dynamic and responsive. They reflect the local landscape and weather, support children's interests and prompt many play possibilities. For example a slope may suggest a rolling mound, a trickle stream or embedded tyre steps. A windy place might become the site for small trees that offer protective shelter and/or sound experiences. Seasonal plant changes provide a variety of leaves and flowers and visiting wildlife invite investigation.

Spatial arrangements are important too, as spaces designed for different types of play add interest and promote sustained engagement. For example, smaller spaces may encourage play with others and communication through symbolic or sensory play; open areas are likely to encourage multiple uses including construction, low obstacle courses and ball games; areas with soft-fall support physical activity such as swinging and climbing. Using plants, rocks, logs or hay bales to create borders and pathways that define different play areas promotes a more harmonious playspace for all.

An outdoor learning environment is never finished. Educators continually collaborate with children, families and colleagues to create and change it. Educators reflect on their pedagogical approaches outdoors, examining the ways that they recognise children as active participants and change agents for sustainability. Natural elements in outdoor environments may challenge educators' understandings about how children engage with natural materials. For example, what might a child learn from spontaneously making 'wombat stew' with soil, sticks and leaves outdoors instead of having more predictable and possibly closed experiences such as riding a trike?

Do we provide for and value these opportunities for imaginative, open-ended creative play?

Are the major concerns in outdoor play about minimising risks, such as prohibiting children's use of sticks, and not getting dirty—or alternatively, rediscovering the sense of wonder and play potential of natural outdoor learning environments?



Some specific provocations: Critically reflective thinking

The outdoor learning environment can extend experiences with nature. Children, families and educators are likely to react in a variety of ways to these experiences. Most children enjoy being outside—in part because of the freedom, fresh air and change of pace that the outdoors offers. What happens however when educators do not feel the same way? Perhaps they feel the cold or heat, they know that parents don't like their children getting dirty, they are frightened of spiders or they worry that children will have accidents if they take their shoes off.

Educators can learn from critically reflecting on their attitudes and responses to the outside space. This is an important part of the planning process. Through critical reflection and engaging with multiple perspectives about these ideas and questions, educators can create meaningful and engaging outdoor learning environments.

Questions to consider:

- Does your service statement of philosophy identify the values and benefits of outdoor environments, the importance of planning for the outdoors and linking indoor and outdoor learning?
- How are the perspectives of children, educators and families considered when making decisions about the outside space, materials and how children use the environment?
- What are the *real* safety issues and risks in your outdoor environment and what are the *perceived* ones? Who sees these risks? What is risky for one child, in a particular setting on a particular day, may not be for another child. Risk is relative.
- Do you focus on both risk assessment and benefit assessment? For example, it may be risky to climb a tree, but the sense of achievement and physical skills that children gain from climbing are very beneficial. Suitable soft-fall materials and clear height limits can minimise the risk.
- NQS Standard 3.3 asks educators to consider caring for the environment and sustainable futures. Have you thought about the impact of using synthetic plastic surfaces such as artificial grass? These ground covers are perceived as safe and easy to care for, but are they? All surfaces need maintenance and artificial grass can become dirty, very hot and falls can result in grazing. The environmental impact of these oil-based plastic materials is significant. Consider the source of the materials. Are they renewable (for example grass or rubber) or non-renewable (for example plastic, which is oil based)? How long will they last and what will happen to them when they are discarded? How do these artificial environments make us feel? Do they offer relaxing respite or do they jar the senses? For example, are they sometimes too hot to walk on or rough to fall on? Do they provide the temperature relief from the heat that living plants can?
- If rocks and logs are removed because children may fall or trip, how do they learn to navigate a world that is filled with tripping hazards and uneven surfaces? Including uneven surfaces provides opportunities for learning balance and coordination, particularly for infants and toddlers who are developing these physical skills.
- The phrase 'there is no such thing as bad weather—only inappropriate clothing' reminds us that children throughout the world play and learn outside in extreme temperatures. Consider the role that clothing and footwear play in children enjoying experiencing the outdoors. Can the service provide wet-weather clothing and gumboots?

A story from the field—bare feet is best

The following incident occurred when one of the authors was a teacher.

The team and I worked hard to develop a philosophy that reflected our beliefs and values. Within our organisation there was a strong emphasis on valuing and integrating nature and children's right to play outside. These values were implemented in the environments we set up. We offered an indoor/outdoor program where children could choose where they wanted to be. There were many opportunities for sensory play and exploration with sand, mud, rocks, plants, water and natural materials.

Children were also able to make decisions about clothing and footwear and they often chose to spend time without any shoes or socks. Educators actively encouraged this. We had conversations with families and promoted the benefits of bare feet in newsletter articles that highlighted how bare feet help to develop fine motor skills.

One parent, Viti, seemed frustrated over many months when she arrived at the end of the day. Her daughter often had bare and sandy feet. Her mother showed mild disapproval and hurriedly put on Grace's shoes and socks as they got ready to leave. My response to this was to 'ramp up' the information about the importance of bare feet. I created a large poster that I displayed in the foyer, proclaiming that 'bare feet is best'!

One day I took the time to have a conversation with Viti. I reiterated how her daughter really enjoyed playing with bare feet. I had a good relationship with Viti, but her reply reminded me of the importance of listening to others and being aware of cultural considerations and what this means for identity. She said 'I know it's good for Grace to have bare feet, but when I see her with them, all I can think about is those children in my country who are poor and barefooted on the streets of Calcutta'.

We took account of different perspectives and talked it through with Viti. The outcome was that Grace could still play with bare feet and the educators made sure that she had clean feet and shoes and socks on when Viti arrived.

Conclusion

Outdoor learning environments that promote children's connections with nature and sustainability are engaging spaces for children and educators. The challenging questions and prompts for critical reflection in this e-Newsletter will hopefully provoke rethinking the outdoor learning environment in your service and how you engage with children outdoors.

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