Introduction

Part A of this e-Newsletter contained questions to provoke critical reflection about outdoor learning environments and the ways educators engage with children in these environments. A rationale for natural play settings was based on children’s health and wellbeing and the urgent need to address sustainability. The next step is to consider provisions in all types of early childhood care and education settings—the practical ways that educators create engaging outdoor learning environments that stimulate the senses, invite exploration and discovery and challenge children as active learners.

The natural outdoor learning environment

Children’s increasing disconnection with nature was mentioned in Part A. Evidence for this disconnection is diverse—for example, a toddler who finds it challenging to place their bare feet on grass or a four-year-old who suggests that apples are manufactured in supermarkets. Louv (2005) uses the term ‘nature deficit disorder’ to describe the characteristics of children who seem anxious and show physical discomfort in natural settings.

Educators play a significant role in offering children direct experiences with nature and being positive role models. They demonstrate not only awe and wonder, but also respect and care for and interest in the natural world. This fundamental learning with significant adults is essential if children are to begin to understand the complexities of sustainability, the systems that support life and why caring for the land, plants, animals and ourselves matters.

The provisions suggested in this newsletter focus not only on natural elements, but also on how educators can re-imagine, re-think and re-use in the outdoors to promote sustainability.
Some specific provisions: Natural elements

Natural elements can include specific designed features such as sandpits, gravel pits, trickle streams and digging patches, backdrops of established trees, shrubs and garden beds and moveable objects such as rocks, logs, flower pots and hay bales. These provisions offer opportunities for open-ended imaginative play and a variety of sensory experiences. These opportunities allow children to strengthen their sense of agency and gain understandings about the natural world.

Suggestions for educators’ practices:

- Engage children in real work outdoors—for example gardening, monitoring water conservation and building bird boxes or feeders.
- Contribute to local biodiversity by planting Indigenous plants that will attract local birds and insects. Encourage children to observe what happens and discuss these observations.
- Consider ways of incorporating animals in the program. They can play a key role in learning in the outside environment by creating links between ecology (the study of living things), the natural world and sustainability. Most children are intensely interested in having relationships with and learning about animals. Many outside spaces are teeming with opportunities to learn about invertebrates such as worms and millipedes, birds and native fauna.
- Offer natural materials such as seed pods, sticks, feathers, shells, stones and bark for sorting and patterning, arranging on flat rocks or tree trunk rounds or as props for dramatic play. Educators need to consider how removing these materials from nature might affect other species, even when the materials are plentiful. For example, hollow logs may be homes for birds and animals. In other words, educators communicate messages to children through the materials they offer and the suggestions they make about how to use them.
- Take advantage of natural aspects outdoors such as shade, wind, sunny corners, slopes and natural puddles. What play experiences best suit these settings? What spontaneous learning opportunities might arise?
- Establish systems for maintaining and learning about worm farms, compost bins, vegetable and herb gardens and water tanks. Use these provisions to intentionally teach sustainable practices and promote children’s agency.
- Consider ways to offer children opportunities to practise tree-climbing skills. Is there a suitable tree with low level branching and soft-fall underneath?
- Ensure that there are props available to promote investigation of nature outdoors—for example binoculars, magnifiers and books or posters to help identify animals and plants.
- Consider both the safety issues involved in using natural materials with infants and toddlers as well as the enormous benefits and learning opportunities that these materials offer with their different textures, smells, sounds and colours. Place small objects in an orange bag secured with a knot.
The following story illustrates a teaching approach in which the team paid close attention to what children were saying and doing, so they could then question what was happening and better facilitate learning. Recent provocations in this setting have focused on risk-taking and how children engage with and learn in a natural ‘bush kinder’ outdoor environment.

Sticks are very much a part of our place. They are woven into many elements relating to who we are, our space, learning environment, our culture … but they weren’t always.

As a new Director of a centre on a beautiful 42-hectare expanse of land, I remember being curious and challenged by the unwritten but very well understood ‘rule’ that children were not allowed to play with sticks (despite being surrounded by them). We discussed the ‘why’. The answer, as I predicted, was that sticks were considered to be dangerous by most team members. The rule made me wonder how often we take the time to think about and analyse why children are drawn to something. Is it simply easier to ban it on the premise that it is risky and by banning it make the environment safe?

We pondered several questions:

- What is it about sticks that engages children—why are children interested and drawn so consistently to them?
- If we consider something to be dangerous or risky, how do we include the children and parents in the conversations about it?
- What is our responsibility in relation to ensuring that children have an understanding of the properties of sticks, thereby empowering them to make informed choices in their play?
- Do we truly value children as capable and competent learners if we try to take risks out of the environment and shield them from possibly dangerous situations?
- What are the benefits of stick play?

We documented and made visible to the community what sticks meant for children. I believe it is crucial that when we see a pattern of play, we ask ourselves why it is occurring. We asked:

- What possibilities do children see?
- How do sticks allow children to express themselves?
- How can we support and scaffold this learning?
- What does a stick mean for a child?

Looking through this lens of children’s perspectives with an image of the child as a capable and competent learner is quite liberating. Yes, we have a duty of care to the children, but we believe strongly that they are capable of keeping sticks low, away from faces or whatever boundaries we decide on together. We learnt a lot through this process—yes, about sticks, but more importantly about children and learning.

It is truly inspiring to observe how children approach and use sticks in different ways. They collect, draw, build, imagine, construct, treasure, create fires, make patterns, write, measure, whittle, cuddle, investigate, wonder about, sculpt … and so much more.

What is dangerous? Perhaps what is dangerous is to not really listen to what matters to children.

Kirsty Liljegren
Director
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Some specific provisions: Re-imagining, re-thinking and re-using

It is easy to open a catalogue of educational resources and select a range of play materials and equipment. When doing so, consider the cost to the environment and the ethical issues involved in sourcing such materials. Consider whether or not they will make a valuable contribution to the program. There are enormous benefits in buying less ‘stuff’—benefits for the budget, the environment and children. Recycled, reclaimed and improvised materials offer wonderful creative learning opportunities. Educators have often had to ‘make do’ with whatever is available and now we know that there are significant benefits in ‘making do’!

Practices to consider:

- Use improvised materials and encourage children to transform them imaginatively and creatively. For example, an old scarf becomes a superhero cape, a ship’s flag, a picnic table cloth or an opportunity for peek-a-boo. Children can change, move and reconfigure improvised materials or ‘loose parts’ as play interests evolve and change outdoors.

- Have discussions with children about how materials are reused or recycled and why it matters. For example, invite children to explore what materials objects are made from, what is recyclable and how recycling happens.

- Reusable and second-hand materials abound in our throwaway society. Use reclaimed and reusable objects and materials in the program in multiple ways to promote sustainability. For example, charity shop furniture can be used instead of buying book shelves, paint racks and provisions such as dividers, tables and dramatic play areas.

- Plan opportunities for children to contribute to repairing and maintaining as a sustainable practice. For example, sanding, polishing, painting, tying, nailing and gluing are useful real-life repair skills to practise outdoors.

- Instigate a strategy within the service that guides sustainable and ethically informed purchasing. Firstly, ask if the object or material is really needed. If it is, then ask what else could possibly be used instead. What is it made of and where has it come from?

Some specific provisions: Being organised but responsive

Organised outdoor learning environments require planning and consideration of the setup and storage, as well as a flexible and responsive approach each day and a willingness to be spontaneous. Striking a balance between planning and moving away from the plan is essential if everyone is to make the most of learning possibilities outdoors.

Suggestions to consider:

- Plan intentionally for both indoor and outdoor learning.

- Consider the potential of spontaneous unplanned events such as rain showers, windy days or visiting birds.

- Set up natural outdoor learning environments before children arrive. While dynamic environments offer much potential and often require less added play equipment, educators do need to create provocations for play—for example an arrangement of logs, fabric draped in a tree or spades, seedlings and pots ready for gardening.

- Have organised storage outside, as this enables both children and educators to find and use provisions easily. Storage that is accessible to children promotes their sense of agency.

- Aim to have storage located close to specific play areas.
Conclusion

The benefits of a flourishing outside environment are likely to be evident to all who enter. Children and adults alike enjoy spending time in the space, which creates endless opportunities for discovery and learning. Thinking about the provocations or challenges associated with outside spaces enables us to see them anew and contemplate what a rich environment means. The provisions educators choose for the outside environments tell a story about values. What values are being expressed in your outside space? Does the space make everyone want to spend time in it and, if not, how could this change?

*To live in an environment that has to be endured or ignored rather than enjoyed is to be diminished as a human being.* (Gauldie, 1969, p. 182)

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References


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