



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Talking about practice: Embedding sustainable practices



Conversations with Melindi Robertson, Margaret Sear and Catherine Lee

This video is part of ECA's *Talking about practice* series (TAPS), designed to support discussion and reflection on the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) and its links with the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF). The series is intended to support lively discussion among educators as they reflect on their practice and identify 'what next?' actions as a result of their discussions.

This video is made up of three sections, each shot at a different early childhood service. In Part 1 we visit Mt Gravatt Kindergarten, a Gowrie Queensland affiliated service in Brisbane; in Part 2 C&K Redlands Community Kindergarten, also in Brisbane; and in Part 3 The Point Preschool, a community-based preschool in Sydney.

All three services have outstanding reputations for, amongst other things, sustainability. Both Mt Gravatt Kindergarten and C&K Redlands have been assessed under the NQS and received exceeding ratings. The Point Preschool is awaiting assessment but has a national reputation for its commitment to sustainability.

Each part of the video includes an interview with a senior educator from the relevant service and a discussion about what sustainability means for early childhood settings. While the three sections are interconnected they each provide a slightly different perspective on the many ways in which services can go about incorporating sustainability into their everyday practice.

What is sustainability?

Sustainability is often thought about in terms of environmental sustainability—reducing waste, minimising consumption and protecting and conserving wildlife and natural habitats. These are all important aspects of being sustainable but, as Melindi Robertson points out in Part 1 of the video, sustainability can also be considered more broadly as:

'being able to meet our current needs without infringing on the ability of future generations to meet their needs'.

From this perspective, sustainability is not just about conservation but also about related issues of fairness and equity and the importance of thinking about our impact on the lives of future generations.

Today's young children represent the first of those future generations and this makes it important for us, as educators, to help them realise the significance of caring for and protecting their environment.

This responsibility is reflected in the NQS, which asks that each service take 'an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future' (NQS Standard 3.3). More specifically, settings are asked to embed sustainable practices into their operations (Element 3.3.1) and to support children to 'become environmentally responsible and show respect for the environment' (Element 3.3.2).

What does sustainability mean for your service? Reflect on your own context—where are you located? who are your children and families? what is going on in your local community?—and think about how you can introduce children to the local environment in meaningful and relevant ways.

Taking small steps

One of the key ideas from each of the educators featured in the video is that developing sustainable practice is about taking small steps. There is no single thing that will make your service 'sustainable' overnight. While each of the three services offers an inspiring view of sustainability in practice, the practices you can see and the commitment that is evident have been built up over time. Rather than being about instant results true sustainability is, as Margaret Sear points out in Part 2, about developing an ethos or mindset that looks to incorporate sustainable practices wherever possible throughout a settings operation. It might be through big picture items such as water tanks and solar panels, but it can also be about developing smaller, day-to-day habits such as remembering to turn off the lights, composting scraps or stopping to think before you turn on the air conditioning.

'My advice is to take small steps ... and if it all seems overwhelming, ignore most of it and look for the simplest thing to do and just work on that until you build your courage up and then go to the next step' Margaret Sear, C&K Redlands Community Kindergarten.

Make a list of all the things that you already do that can be considered sustainable—you will probably be surprised at what you find. Think about what else you could do—what is the next 'simple thing'? How could you bring together what you already do so that it forms a coherent plan or strategy?

Getting started

- **Get help:** If you feel overwhelmed by the responsibility, or just by the sheer amount of available information, find someone to talk to. In some states there are established sustainability networks that you may be able to join (see the links and resources section of this newsletter for some suggestions); in other cases you might be able to speak to your local council or find other early childhood services that are already incorporating sustainability and are happy to share their ideas and expertise.

If funding is an issue, find out what grants are available that you may be able to apply for. The existing sustainability network groups will be able to help you identify those that are most suitable for early childhood services.

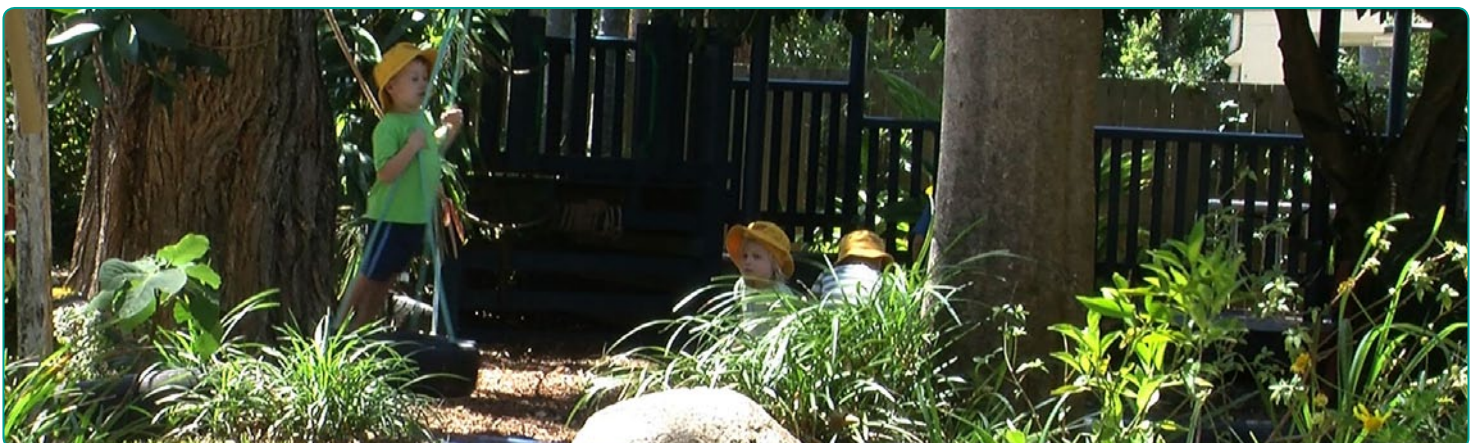


- **Establish a starting point:** A self-assessment or an audit conducted by someone else will help to identify what you already do. It will also help to establish a baseline for your use of resources. How much electricity, water and gas do you use? How many paper towels and tissues? And what cleaning chemicals? How much garbage do you throw away? How much recycling?

On the basis of what you find out there may be some easy and obvious steps to take to reduce your consumption—turning off lights and taps, opening windows to let in the breeze, recycling and composting waste. Thinking longer term you may wish to consider more involved solutions such as installing water tanks or solar panels.

- **Talk to children, families and colleagues:** Develop a shared understanding of what sustainability might look like in your service. Find out what skills, knowledge and experience others might have to contribute.
- **Be realistic:** Start small and remember to set manageable and achievable goals. No one can do everything all at once. Develop a plan so that you have an idea of what you are trying to achieve over time. A vegetable garden and a worm farm are a good start but what will you do next?
- **Make it meaningful:** Work on ways to incorporate sustainability into your program in meaningful ways. Sustainability doesn't work as an 'add-on' or occasional experience—to be successful it needs to be embedded into what you do on a day-to-day basis.

How are children involved in sustainable practices every day? Make a list of all the little things that you already do and of what else you could do.





Questions for reflection

- At Mt Gravatt Kindergarten they have recently decided to re-introduce reusable hand towels rather than paper towels in the children's bathroom. What do you think about this? How might it contribute to sustainability? What are the practical challenges such a move might present? How would you weigh up the pros and cons?
- At C&K Redlands Community Kindergarten their power usage is less than that of the average family home in the area. How much power do you use? How does it compare? What could you do to reduce your power usage?
- Each of the featured services has a strong commitment to using natural and/or recycled materials for children's play and for art and craft. What do you think about this? How might the use of such materials change children's play? Where could you introduce more natural and recycled materials into your own program?
- Each service also has a very natural playground—with as few artificial or synthetic materials as possible. How important is it for children to experience play in natural environments? What do you think about the deliberate emphasis on bare feet in Part 1 of the video? What about the insects, birds and animals that share the playground spaces? How do you welcome such wildlife into your service? What might be the benefits for children of doing so?
- One of the most important influences on children's behaviour and attitudes is how the significant adults in their lives act. How do you role model sustainable practices in your day-to-day work with children?
- The Point Preschool runs a successful bush care program in conjunction with the local council. Once a month children from the preschool, with a bush care officer, work to regenerate a patch of land adjacent to the preschool. What opportunities are there for your children to be involved in caring for the local environment?

Links and contacts for further information:

National:

Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE)
www.aeee.org.au

NSW:

Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (ECEEN)
www.eceen.org.au

Qld:

Queensland Early Childhood Sustainability Network (QECSN)
www.qecsn.org.au

Vic:

Environmental Education in Early Childhood (EEEC)
www.eeec.org.au

The Point Preschool:

www.thepointpreschool.com.au

Further reading:

Davis, J. M. (Ed.). (2010). *Young children and the environment: Early education for sustainability*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

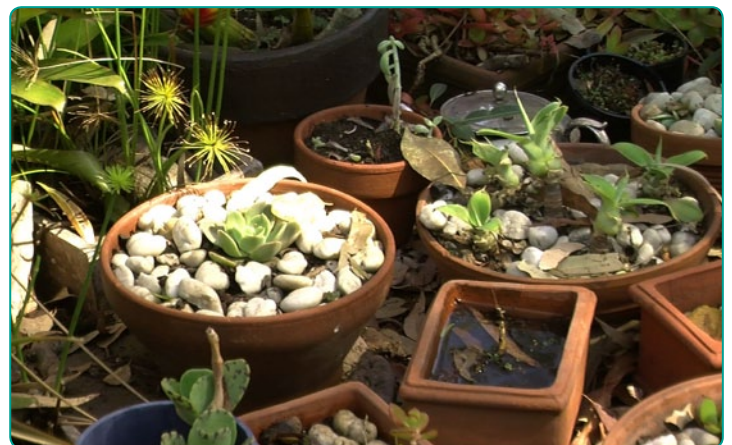
Lee, C. (2012). *'Stories from the heart': Connecting children and families with our earth*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

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