



# CAMPUS EXCURSIONS:

## Learning in the local environment

**Both the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Standard* (DEEWR, 2012) advise that supporting children to become actively engaged in their local community is a desirable thing.**

This is articulated in the *Early Years Learning Framework* as one of eight pedagogical practices to promote learning and in Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world. The *National Quality Standard* lists collaborative partnerships with families and communities as one of seven quality areas. Therefore, there is a strong push for moving beyond the boundaries of the early learning and care centre and into the community in which it is situated.

Our preschool childcare centre for two- to five-year-old children is located on a university campus and sits within one of the faculty buildings. We feel very much a part of the university community and we like to get 'out and about' on campus so other campus users know we share the grounds with them. We join in on campus

community events and are often invited to come and sing or contribute to community activities, such as the annual Smith Family Giving Tree, Harmony Day or Mental Health Day initiatives. As educators, we see these as significant opportunities for children to be involved and engaged in their local community.

We also use campus facilities, such as the gym, to extend our program experiences—this is especially important during our long winters when our own outdoor environment is sometimes too unpleasant for extended outdoor playtime. We always send a tray of treats, made by the children, over to the gym staff at Christmas time to acknowledge their generosity in making the gym spaces available to us whenever possible.

Sometimes we visit faculty buildings, such as the science building—these visits often fit well with other work we're doing in the centre. We're not always the quietest visitors so staff members notice our arrival and come out to say 'hello' when we visit and regularly stop and talk to us about the exhibits on display. Some children have family members working in the building and they are always happy to show us around and to explain their work to our curious cohort.

We invite campus users to our space as well. We have a Reconciliation Garden in

our playground and whenever we have a smoking ceremony with campus Elders, we send out an invitation to all campus users, via campus community email alerts, to come along and join in with us. For some university staff members and students this is their first opportunity to participate in a smoking ceremony and we feel privileged to share our experiences with others.

We think these efforts at community engagement are important on several levels. First, they provide opportunities for children to feel part of a community broader than the confines of our preschool. Equally, we think it important for other campus users to understand that children occupy and use campus facilities too and also contribute to campus life. This is a significant move towards making children both visible and acknowledged within the university community.

Significantly, we believe moving beyond the boundaries of our centre allows for engagement in real issues and this adds depth, value and relevance to our curriculum. Becoming actively involved in campus activities enables meaningful learning opportunities situated within real-world events. We think this is important and we also believe children have a lot to contribute to their community.



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A recent curriculum focus on spring flowering shrubs, for example, saw children venturing beyond the playground to identify wattle trees and other flowering native shrubs and trees. While investigating the natural environment, the children noticed rubbish littering the paths linking the university car parks to campus buildings. This experience stimulated a group effort, prompted by the children, to collect rubbish and to write signs to display around the campus inviting campus users to be more careful of the environment we all share. This relevant experience provided a real context for thinking about environmental issues, for engagement with the creation of written texts and for social activism. Our educators see real value in exposing children to meaningful opportunities, such as this. Educators believe that working with real concerns, such as the insidious problem of campus litter and the consequent environmental degradation it causes, supports deep learning by engaging young learners in issues of local concern that are directly related to issues of broader global significance.

Our undergraduate student educators, all drawn from the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) course, are committed to sustained engagement in local, place-based curriculum. They understand the

significance of working with real goals in mind and the satisfactions gained when real work is rewarded with acknowledgement and change. Socio-cultural approaches encourage interaction with relevant community learning opportunities. These can be centre-based issues that involve the early learning community immediately or broader issues that are directly related to our community but also linked to far more widespread social or environmental concerns.

For example, a recent project saw our educators and children contributing to a campus-wide effort to collect rubbish. We felt the project fits well with our environmental program in which we had made our own efforts to tidy up surrounding bushland. Along with teams of university staff and students, the children and their educators spent a morning collecting rubbish and depositing it in collection bags supplied by the university. The children worked hard and enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to a larger university project.

Afterwards, the children expressed their satisfaction in being able to help the university look tidier and spent some time discussing the broader implications of their cleaning efforts for the non-human animals who also share the space with us.

It was a potent opportunity for learning about interconnectedness and sustainability.

The children's efforts were recognised and applauded by event organisers who sent the following message to the centre, as well as acknowledging the children in a broader message sent out to the university community:

*You are all seriously amazing!*

*Every little bit helps and if the smallest hands on campus can contribute then I am sure that we can instigate changes with everyone in the university community.*

*We look forward to more events in the near future!*

Reaching out and into the local community has many positive outcomes for all stakeholders and is well worth the effort whenever a local excursion is possible.

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#### **References:**

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