Sustainability

Deepening a focus on sustainability supports many aspects of the National Quality Standard – from curriculum and learning activities, to enhancing the physical environment of the service, professional learning and community partnerships. This newsletter explores activities in one service over a decade, provides tools to enable staff discussion and auditing, and offers links to key research in NSW settings and practical resources.

What a decade of work can look like

Kaarin Wilkinson is the Director of Waite Campus Childrens Centre (WCCC) in Adelaide. She describes the ways in which her service has built a focus on sustainability over a decade.

The focus on sustainability at WCCC began in 2007 when the centre was looking at how to improve its outdoor play space. A parent from the Parent Advisory Group suggested that sustainability should be a key part of any renovation. In consultation with the group, the parent wrote a strategic plan to guide the service. This big picture vision for change has assisted the service to make significant changes over time. A sustainability committee, consisting of parents and staff, provided ongoing guidance for implementing, reviewing and revising the plan in the following years.

Our questions to Kaarin were influenced by a 2016 report Sustainability as a different way of thinking everyday: Examining environmental education in NSW early childhood education services. The report, prepared by Dr Sue Elliot and Professor Nadine McCrae from the University of New England, is organised around three project frames:

- children’s knowledge and learning about sustainability
- exemplary sustainable early childhood service role models
- early childhood services as community hubs for sustainability.

The 2016 report into NSW services noted: ‘Sustainability: It is as much about how children learn, as what they learn’. How do children learn about sustainability at WCCC?

Embedding sustainability in the curriculum is a particular focus of WCCC. A particular priority is ensuring that learning activities are provided for younger children. Examples of this approach are: Intentional teaching and education for sustainability with under 2s, Using teachable moments for education for sustainability with 2–3 year olds and Exploring interconnectedness with 3–5 year olds.
Connections to place are fostered, particularly through Pilyabilyangga, which is the name of the service’s outdoor classroom and biodiversity butterfly garden. The link to the Kaurna people is emphasised with acknowledgement of Country. Children are encouraged to sit and listen, imagining what the Pilyabilyangga would have felt and sounded like 40,000 years ago for the Kaurna children.

Once a week, children aged 3–5 begin their day outside. Younger children can sleep on the verandah. The service regularly schedules days on which the whole centre is engaged together in nature play outdoors.

The 2016 report about sustainability in early years contexts noted ‘Children’s expression of negative feelings and fears about the world may be alleviated if they have “more opportunities to engage and participate in environmental stewardship and civic responsibility”’. One outcome of the sustainability focus for children at WCCC is a perceived increase in agency and control. They are involved in decisions about water use. They learn to see recycling as a way of taking care of the world. Kaarin says:

‘There are ways to talk to children about climate change. Children see the impact of rubbish on the environment, they can see what happens when there is not enough water. We work with children to develop understandings of interconnectedness and the impact on the future of what we do now.’

Another frame for strong sustainability programs was ‘Exemplary sustainable early childhood service role models – whole centre approaches, professional learning and mentoring, leadership, general service provision’. What are the strengths of the WCCC program?

The service has invested in staff training; four staff have completed a Diploma in Sustainability over the past decade. This has really made a difference, especially in terms of embedding and deepening practices over time.

Kaarin completed a Carbon Accounting Course and subsequently completed assessments of the service and its practices. In the past decade, the service has obtained grants to support the installation of water tanks and solar panels. The focus on sustainability has had positive impacts on the budget over time, with an 80 per cent reduction in electricity bills. Minimal money is spent on new equipment as the focus is on repurposing and recycling. Between July 2014 and July 2016 the service reduced its waste to landfill by 43 per cent. WCCC received an award at the 2016 KESAB Expo as the early years site with the greatest reduction of materials to landfill.

While parents initiated the sustainability program, the service’s families come from diverse backgrounds, with varying knowledge of sustainability. The service newsletter regularly features information about topics like recycling, water saving, growing food at home and local events that build sustainable practices. Food scraps are sent home to families who have chooks, and tips and ideas from families are shared, creating a positive two-way focus.
How does the WCCC sustainability program interact with the wider community?

The service is part of a university campus and has at various stages led the way with activities such as recycling.

Over time, the service has connected with external organisations, hosting TAFE students interested in sustainability and providing a venue for the Early Education for Sustainability network and for individual child care services. The service has raised money to support the Waite Community Garden, which opened in 2015.

A case study, *Learning through play in Pilyabilyangga*, was produced by the South Australian Department of Natural Resources.

What has enabled this focus to become embedded over time and what new directions are possible?

As with most stories of successful organisational change, the impact of teamwork has been significant. Kaarin emphasises the need to respect the views of parents: ‘We started on this journey because of parents and this input continues to be vital’. She also noted that some strategies cost money and that the service had been fortunate to obtain grants for some of the changes in infrastructure.

One element that she would like to progress is in documenting what is happening: ‘I’d like us to document teaching practices and to fully articulate what is happening at each age group within the service’.

The service has received several awards for recycling, for reduction of waste, for water saving and for sustainability education over the last decade. Find more information about WCCC.

Take action

Consider how the staff at your service might take action around one or more of the following topics: nature, water, waste, energy, toxins, educational activities, management and policy. You can consider these topics using the checklists in the *Little Green Steps: Sustainability education for childcare centres* booklet.

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<tr>
<th>Check Box</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Savings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using washing line rather than clothes dryer in all but wet weather. Use small, fold-up laundry racks so children can hang out smaller items while staff hang out bigger items.</td>
<td>18,000 KWh saved per year</td>
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<td>Consolidated laundry loads to two less loads of laundry per day.</td>
<td>106 KWh saved per year</td>
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<td>Bed sheets have been labeled so they can be reused for the same child on consecutive days. Sheets in batches twice a week instead of every day. Other loads consolidation also</td>
<td>53.4 KWh saved per year (assuming laundry already being hung on line)</td>
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<td>One less load in dryer per day.</td>
<td>1057.7 KWh saved per year</td>
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<td>New efforts to turn off lights and air-conditioning when not in use, and use natural light and ventilation when adequate (both are used less and the centre is less stuffy now).</td>
<td>512 KWh saved per year</td>
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<td>Separate the lighting circuit for the nursery, change room and main children’s room, so each needs only be on when necessary.</td>
<td>135 KWh saved per year</td>
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<td>Ensure all computers, printers, photocopier, air cons, and lights are off at the end of every day.</td>
<td>Big savings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Switch to compact, efficient light globes.</td>
<td>131.25 KWh saved per year</td>
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Talking about practice: Embedding sustainable practices


Professional support

Most states and territories have professional groups that support sustainability practices in early years settings. This newsletter provides a sample of content from the Victorian-based Environmental Education in Early Childhood.

Resources

20 case studies

The Education for Sustainability webpage hosts over 20 case studies from early years settings – you can filter by theme (biodiversity, food garden, waste, water, general, outdoor learning/play), by aspect (community, curriculum and learning, governance, inquiry, vision and values, whole site approach, youth voice) and by stage (starting, challenging, committing, transforming).

Talking about practice: Embedding sustainable practices