



## The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



# Spaces for children



## Setting the scene

The EYLF has 'Learning environments' as one of the eight pedagogical practices that promote children's learning and recognises (pp. 15–16) the responsibility to educate for sustainability:

Outdoor play spaces 'foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education.'

Outcome 2, Key component 4, reinforces these views:

Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment.

The National Quality Standard (NQS) to be introduced from January 2012 has a specific Quality Area 3 dedicated to the physical environment and requires that:

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

And, of course, the other quality areas, including health and safety, educational programs, relationships with children and families and staffing arrangements all relate to the 'environment' provided.

The e-Newsletters during the year have talked about 'environments for learning' and encompassed both outdoor and indoor spaces in which young children play and learn.

A new video in the *Talking About Practice series* (TAPS)—[www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp/environments\\_for\\_learning\\_and\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework.php](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp/environments_for_learning_and_the_early_years_learning_framework.php) examines issues about environments in early learning settings in great detail.

The theme has attracted a lot of discussion on Facebook, with contributors asking questions about:

- how to introduce more natural materials into the program
- whether and how to include animals in the setting and learning program
- what is the value of a veggie and/or herb patch
- how to gradually renovate a tired playground and replace plastic with natural materials.

## Values and beliefs

As speakers on the TAPS videos note, how educators set up environments for children's learning largely reflects their values and beliefs; although regulations may also affect how things are done.

For example, if educators believe that first-hand, sensory experience of nature is important for children's growth as caring, responsible citizens of this planet, they go out of their way to engage children with nature—taking children out and bringing nature in.

If they believe that children need a strong sense of belonging and agency at the learning setting, they:

- keep some familiar aspects of the spaces and equipment, making changes only gradually, in collaboration with children
- add furniture and fittings that bridge between home and setting, using little sofas in home corner, lamps for reading and 'real' table cloths and crockery at meal times
- create intimate spaces where children can be private and play 'secret' imaginative games
- have individual and family photographs on aesthetic display
- enable children to choose when they need snacks and what among some choices, they'd like to eat.

At Halifax Street in South Australia, for example, babies, from the time when they are beginning to feed themselves, choose when to sit down to eat. They may wander off to play and come back, but meal times are about relaxed, pleasurable dining, not rush or conformity.

At Gowrie Victoria's Docklands centre, the building design incorporates a dining room near a kitchen and servery. Because children don't all finish eating at the same time, educators set up tables with boxes of small construction materials, so that children who finish can wash their hands and continue to engage with the group while they play.

In all of the settings that respect children and value the social aspects of meal times, educators are calm and model ways to interact socially and enjoy the occasion. It is notable that even very young children follow these models of courtesy.

When children experience troubled lives, 'a safe harbour' is even more important. Settings that support children and families who know trauma, are very aware that 'novelty' is not beneficial. Instead, security and familiarity are vital, such as familiarity in the people you meet at the setting and their consistent responses to you; and comfort in familiar surroundings and respect for your right to access what you need, when you need it—like a bed, a blanket, some food, a comforting toy, and a cuddle.

## Connecting with nature

Some settings are fortunate enough to have natural bush and parklands around them; others live with a brick, tile and steel environment in the CBD, or operate in a church hall. There is general agreement that natural materials add aesthetic value to any early learning setting—they are more attractive to live and work with—and children gain cognitively and affectively from interacting with and taking responsibility for plants and animals.



Contributors to Facebook offer suggestions about how to 'add nature' to the indoor and outdoor environment.

**Jessie:** Add natural elements to all experiences; leaves, bark, twigs ...

**Wendy:** Create a herb garden, add logs to the garden, bring branches of smelly plants in, do leaf rubbings, charcoal drawings, make clay pots ...

**Angela:** I have introduced a nature shelf with leaves, bark, gum nuts, woven baskets, rocks and shells, so children feel the outdoors in. We made mobiles out of sticks, shells etc and used them inside and outside. We kept some natural grass and the children love rolling down the slope.

**Melissa:** We have put together a science table and children collect different leaves, seeds etc. and look at them through a magnifying glass. We do natural collages and bring natural materials into the sand pit.

**Sarah:** Bring in some low lying moss rocks or source some reasonable sized logs from your local council as seats or balance obstacles. Half wine barrels go a long way for veggies, small trees, flowers etc. Different textured walking paths incorporating pebbles, shells; use diosma branches, for example, (soft, aromatic and pliable) to weave in a metal fence, or purchase bamboo screens for fence lines.

Janine demonstrates how exciting 'nature' can be:

*We have an indoor garden in our room that children help to look after. We have also planted beans and peas along the outside fence and already we are eating our own greens! We have strawberries in pots. We germinate our own mung beans, sprouts on a weekly basis and eat them up! If you live in Brisbane, there's a community garden at Northey St City Farm with FREE access to roosters, chickens, raised vegetable beds, native honey bees, musical instruments among the trees and much more ... !*



## Using community assets

While 'taking children out' has staffing implications, many settings find it very worthwhile to invest in visiting local parks, gardens and community events, expanding the adult-child ratio with assistance from parents and/or casual staff.

Gowrie Victoria at the Carlton North centre, for example, at the suggestion of a Parent Committee member, developed a fabulous 'Winter Solstice' event—when the sun is lowest in the sky in mid-winter—which involved:

- parents making pumpkin soup and scones and lanterns with children
- buying battery-run tea light candles to place in the lanterns
- convening at a local public park, returning to Gowrie premises after 15 minutes
- creating a 'campfire' and enjoying the 'early dark' together.

The event was memorable; strangers in the park sent mobile messages to friends about 'Wow, what a magical experience that was!'





On a more regular basis, Halifax Children's Centre visits the local library and parks and has a section in the Community Garden. Children, educators and families wheel buckets, spades, watering cans and trowels there come rain or shine. At the garden, children use magnifying glasses and cameras to observe and record what's happened since their last visit. Younger children learn concepts and behaviours such as 'you've got to use the paths', 'don't trample the plants' and 'plants need water'. Older children begin to learn about the life cycle of particular plants, responsibility, and how to document growth and change.

### The learning might appear spontaneous, but it's highly intentional.

Educators in Family Day Care are in a perfect position to use 'homely' natural environments and local facilities. June, in the Pine Rivers service in Brisbane, has a well-established home setting where she has terraced the steep banks outside the back door to create garden beds which the children tend. It was an 'interesting experience' to be in the vicinity of homemade, garlic-based pest control oil, as the children demonstrated and explained how effective it was against bugs! June regularly takes the children to local spaces, including the shopping centre, where a child became so interested in strawberries, the group bought and grew plants and enjoyed the fruits.

These children, like others in well-planned family settings, make the most of local beaches, animal sanctuaries, museums and libraries. It would be sad to think that Family Day Care environments might become more 'institutionalised' when they have so much to offer by being 'like home' and taking advantage of public spaces!



### Animal pets/pests

Many early childhood settings incorporate small animals so that children can learn about their life cycles, enjoy their 'company' and learn lessons of responsibility in caring for other creatures.

As Lisa said on Facebook:

*We have chickens, ducks, guinea pigs, rabbits, birds and a fish; they take a bit of caring for, but the children absolutely love them.*

Gowrie Victoria, Carlton North solves these problems through local neighbours looking after the animals on weekends, children and staff frequently taking them home and the animals going on 'R and R' to a farm owned by parents for more extended periods when the centre is closed ... Pets 'have rights too' and children learn important values by planning ahead to meet pets' needs.

Real mud, real plants, real animals and real materials to work with give children connection, confidence and challenge; they also demonstrate that 'learning can happen anywhere, anytime ... even at home!'

### Respecting where you are

It's important to recognise where the setting is located and not to 'fake' anything. If you're in the city or suburbs, make the most of local visiting places and bringing in visitors and maximise the natural elements in your spaces by clever use of bamboo, cane, ceramic and found materials. Make sure 'this space' is as inviting, uncluttered and child-and-family-oriented as possible, including comfy furniture that encourages families to linger as they bring and collect children.

If you're in the bush, respect its nature and avoid removing growing materials from their natural environment unless you and the children have a good purpose for them—I've seen a lot of leaves taken from plants with no particular purpose in mind.

Remember the Indigenous First Peoples of this nation and their traditional ways of caring for the earth. Find out about the traditional owners of the land your setting is on and how their culture worked in harmony with the local environment. In respectful ways, and in collaboration with local Indigenous organisations, investigate bush tucker and grow traditional plants. Learn about the highly significant rituals of Indigenous peoples and build children's knowledge of Australia's complex history.

At Wiradjuri Preschool and Child Care Centre, for example, educators realised that an ancient tree in the playground was becoming dangerous. Because they and the children were aware of the history and culture of the area, they recognised that 'the tree is linked to this land'. Instead of removing the tree, they decided to fence it, have it professionally monitored for safety and use the space for regular smoking ceremonies conducted by Indigenous Elders.

Sustainability is an issue for many settings, especially in arid areas of Australia, and educators are increasingly growing drought resistant plant species, discussing water as a scarce resource with children and using recycled water for gardens and water play in sandpits.



## Trusting children

It's interesting, in Australia, how we have become so preoccupied with 'safety and liability' in early childhood environments. Of course, we have to be sensible and protect children from obvious harm, but sometimes, concentrating overly on safety issues limits what we and children can do and we can 'lose trust' in children.

Many settings I have visited have begun restoring that trust. They incorporate rocks and logs in their sandpits, banks and seating areas—and, do you know what?—children are remarkably intelligent about risk!

At Wiradjiri, for example, they have uneven rock steps that children learn to manage from an early age; at Cooloon, they use rocks as part of the 'four-wheel-drive track'; at Gowrie Victoria and the Dorothy Waide Centre in Griffith, children are involved in digging, weeding and planting, with real spades, trowels and barrows; at Balaclava Road in Cairns, the sandpit has big rocks and a stone table; and, at Bayview Heights, also in Cairns, children help to trim the foliage and know that they can climb the giant Fig Tree—when they can use their own muscles and have the confidence to get up and down—no trikes, ladders or trucks allowed as climbing props!

Internationally, 'risk' is regarded somewhat differently. In Europe, for example, 'Forest Kindergartens' which began in Denmark, have spread all over Germany, New Zealand and the United States. Preschoolers attend these totally outdoor settings all year, in all weathers, learning not just about 'nature and science' but about personal resourcefulness, team work, problem solving and creative and critical thinking.

## Conclusion

It becomes clear that 'using the natural' enhances children's aesthetic, affective, cognitive and social growth. Nature provides a base that encourages curiosity and the drive to learn new things; it's a vital element in an inquiry-driven approach to learning in early childhood.

But, 'nature' shouldn't be just window dressing; it has to be brought in, or children taken out, with clear learning intentions in mind.

'Consider the walls', as Patricia Tarr (2004) says—minimise clutter, taking down tired teaching aids such as letters and numbers that become 'part of the furniture'; avoid stereotyped images of children or of cultures; use displays thoughtfully to make children's learning visible.

And, minimise clutter in arrival spaces. At Halifax Street, they found that parents seldom borrowed the displayed brochures on health and nutrition and it was much more valuable for the cook to come in early to greet families and to talk about such issues in a warm, personal, conversational manner.

April, on Facebook knows that redevelopment of garish, over-coloured and plastic environments can be expensive, so she has a long-term plan for improving her environment:

*I've recently replaced a plastic climbing frame with a purpose-built bamboo one; the roof of our fort is now bamboo as well. On the planning board, I will replace the plastic play house with a bamboo hut which will stand over a sandpit and 'beach'. The children and I have planted coconut coir hanging baskets with herbs and flowers at different levels, the lowest at shoulder height so toddlers can have a bird's eye view of what's happening in the basket gardens.*

This e-Newsletter has been compiled at this stage of the year to encourage educators to take a long, hard, critical look at their environments, preferably with children and families, and to consider how they can be gradually redeveloped to 'make spaces for children to be and to learn'.

For much, much deeper insights into 'Environments' go to TAPS: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfp/environments\\_for\\_learning\\_and\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework.php](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfp/environments_for_learning_and_the_early_years_learning_framework.php)

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## References

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Elizabeth Jarman newsletters: [www.elizabethjarmanltd.co.uk](http://www.elizabethjarmanltd.co.uk)

Forest Kindergartens: [www.telegraph.co.uk/Waldkindergarten-the-forest-nurseries](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/Waldkindergarten-the-forest-nurseries)



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