Creating welcoming and inclusive spaces for all children

The value of the environment in promoting inclusion, children’s learning and enhancing well-being is well recognised in the education and care sector. It is also highlighted in Australia’s learning frameworks used by the sector, which describe learning environments as ‘welcoming spaces’ when they ‘reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families, […] are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child […] and cater for different learning capacities and learning styles (DEEWR, 2009 & 2011 p. 15). This fact sheet will highlight key considerations in providing inclusive and responsive learning environments for all children. Reflective questions are included to promote reflection and discussion.
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Getting started

Shepherd and Robertson (2012) believe that ‘messages are conveyed through the organisation of the environment, structures and fittings’ (p. 225). In thinking about this statement, take a walk through your setting in the shoes of the children who spend time there. Start in the entrance area, and make your way through the playrooms, the bathrooms, the outdoor area, and so on. Ask yourself, what messages are conveyed in this environment? How does it reflect your centre philosophy? What does it say about your image of the child and how children learn? How is diversity and difference respected and celebrated? How is full and active participation and inclusion promoted for all children? How does it demonstrate genuine respect, interest and a sense of belonging for everyone?

Promoting children’s well-being

The importance of the inclusive environment is afforded not only in enhancing children’s learning and development, but also in promoting their well-being. Research undertaken by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2007) identified three key themes in relation what well-being means to children. This included:

- Having agency or power to have some control and act independently;
- Feeling safe and secure; and
- Having a positive sense of self, and being valued by others.

In thinking about ‘what children tell us’ and recognising how important this is for their well-being, we might consider the questions below against these key themes. In thinking about your response, reflect on what inclusion might mean for all children, regardless of their culture, background, abilities, and life circumstances. In addition, consider not only the built or physical environment, but also the provisions you make available to children including, the way you organise the day, and how relationships and interactions are supported and nurtured with and between children and adults.

1. How do the environments, in our settings, provide opportunities for all children to make choices and take control?
2. How do the environments, in our settings, support all children to feel safe and secure?
3. How do the environments, in our settings, ensure all children feel recognised, included and valued, and contribute to a positive self of self?

Planning a way forward

In most instances the resources you require to create inclusive, welcoming spaces for all children are at your fingertips. To get started, use your observations and reflections as a springboard for a conversation about what is working well and identifying any areas for improvement. This conversation might be part of your self-assessment and quality improvement process for the National Quality Standard (NQS) and contribute to the development of your Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Alternatively, the conversation may inform the development of a Service Support Plan (SSP), with the assistance of your Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF). A SSP is a capacity building tool, designed to help you to clarify and articulate your goals for inclusion and the action steps you will take to achieve them.

Regardless of which plan you are working from, keep your action steps small, specific and achievable to ensure early success and build confidence towards more challenging goals. In many instances, the resources and support required to enact your plan and achieve your goals will be available within your service and local community. Creating more inclusive and welcoming spaces for children does not require a building renovation or major playground upgrade. It can be as small and significant as warmly greeting each and every child every day, by name, in such a way as to say, ‘I am so pleased to see you and am excited about what possibilities our day together might bring’.

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Questions for reflection

As a team, discuss your responses to the following questions:

- What is your vision for creating a welcoming, inclusive environment for all children?
- What are you already doing well that you will continue to do?
- What is one small action you can start doing immediately?
- What is one bigger action that you need more time to reflect on and discuss?
- What and/or who can assist you in this process of reflection and discussion?
- How will you measure your progress and celebrate your achievements along the way?

Further reading

This fact sheet is the first step in an ongoing conversation about children’s inclusion, learning and well-being, the environment as ‘a welcoming space’, and your role as educator in realising its impact and potential. There are a number of fact sheets to assist you to continue the conversation and take your next step forward. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- To rethink your environment from an equity perspective, read Exploring diversity and equity in education and care services.
- To learn about Flow theory, the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and the conditions required to increase children’s engagement and enhance well-being, read Promoting children’s involvement & engagement.
- To reflect on your role of the educator in developing nurturing relationships with all children, read Building respectful relationships with children.
- To find out more about the potential of SSPs to help you realise your goal of providing welcoming and inclusive environments for children, read Inclusion is making positive change.

To access these and other fact sheets, contact your local Inclusion Support Agency (ISA). To locate an ISA in your region, contact the PSC in your state or territory. Contact details for all PSCs are available on the website of the National PSC Alliance at www.pscalliance.org.au.

References


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