Bring the outside in
Dr Brenda Abbey

Children need frequent and prolonged contact with nature for their immediate and long-term health and wellbeing. This need is acknowledged by the requirements of the National Quality Standard, the Early Years Learning Framework and My Time, Our Place. However, services can find it a challenge to provide sufficient natural elements and activities to meet these requirements.

One way to meet this challenge is to bring the outside in. Natural elements indoors nourish children’s senses and foster their respect for the natural world. They also evoke a sense of well-being, beauty and warmth in children, educators, parents and visitors alike. Importantly, bringing the outside in provides educators with increased opportunities to develop children’s knowledge and understanding of the physical environment, the interdependence of living and non-living things, and the important role the children play in caring for it.

Some of the suggestions listed below may seem obvious yet, surprisingly, services often overlook them when assessing their practices against the requirements of the National Quality Standard, and when writing their Quality Improvement Plan. Others may not be practical in every service but may prompt educators to think of similar ways to bring the outside in as well as inspire their creativity.

The suggestions have been separated into the categories:

1. Creating a natural feel
2. Intensifying the feeling embedding the feeling
3. Embedding the feeling
4. Keeping the feeling going

Children enjoy using natural items for specific art projects or to create their own masterpieces. Items could be pine cones, feathers, leaves, shells, sand and rocks, or a palette of many browns of mud paint. One of the most beautiful creations I have seen was a mobile made from treasured items from the sea. Clay is a must have.

1. Creating a natural feel

- **Let in the natural light and fresh air** – The human body, mind and spirit need natural light and fresh air. Open up as many windows as you can, pull back the curtains, remove decorations from the windows, and let the sunlight and fresh air stream in.
- **Enrich the view of nature from your windows** – The next best thing to bring outdoors is to see it. Check the scenery from your windows. Perhaps place a large, leafy potplant where it can be readily seen. You may wish to be creative and frame your view with an interesting window shape.
- **Reflect nature in your décor** – Colours, patterns and textures can be used to create a natural look and feel indoors. For example, green evokes grass, plants and earth, yellow and orange the sun.
- **Use nature-related furniture** – Elements such as tree stumps can be used as seats or even stools and chairs in the dramatic play areas. A glass-lidded table can be filled with natural items such as delicate sea shells, beautiful rocks, and small pieces of driftwood sanded to bring out the natural wood grain. Even tables covered with brown paper protected by clear, heavy-duty plastic with a centrepiece of natural bushes can be used effectively. Floor coverings such as cork and bamboo or their look-a-likes can add to the natural look. Cane storage baskets are already being widely used with great success.
- **Be eco-friendly** – Every nature lover knows how important it is to keep the environment clean. When you choose materials and resources consistent with sustainability, you not only bring nature indoors but contribute to a sustainable future.
- **Keep the room clean, clear, uncluttered** – Make sure the room looks spacious by minimising clutter and storing and displaying resources in an organised way.

2. Intensifying the feeling

- **Introduce living plants** – Plants help to clean the air and add green energy to the room, and they look great as well. Of course, children can benefit from any plant before placing it indoors. Select from potted plants, succulent gardens, terrariums or even hydroponics. Imagine the fun children would have with bonsai plants. Vertical gardens are also an option, and take less space.
- **Decorate with fresh flowers, fruit or vegetables** – Flowers are an instant reminder of the beauty of the natural world. Maybe you have a parent who grows flowers in the garden who could supply you with some fresh ones every week. Fruit and vegetables also make wonderful decorations as well as being healthy and tasty. Children can be intrigued by sprouting potatoes, chokos, carrot tops, seeds and the like.
- **Use seasonal reminders** – One way to remind children of the change of seasons is to display items indoors which reflect the environment at these times. Display blooming branches in the spring, flowers in the summer, nuts and colourful leaves in autumn, and pine cones and evergreens in winter – observe, notice and respond to change.
- **Introduce live creatures** – Introduce live creatures into the room. Worm farms or an ant nest behind glass; silk worms; a tank with fish, turtles, frogs or hermit crabs; or, a butterfly kit provides opportunities for children to connect with nature and to understand the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land.
- **Nature collections** – Small items from nature collections are fascinating to children. Posters, DVDs and CDs can also be used to bring nature indoors and add variety to activities. Posters which depict nature’s awesome patterns and colours or its creatures are always interesting to children.
- **Manipulative play** – Small items from nature collections are perfect for manipulative play. Once again, include puzzles and games with a nature theme.
- **Nature paper** – Children love collections. Plants help to clean the air and add green energy to the room, and they look great as well. Of course, children can benefit from any plant before placing it indoors. Select from potted plants, succulent gardens, terrariums or even hydroponics. Imagine the fun children would have with bonsai plants. Vertical gardens are also an option, and take less space.
- **Nature furniture** – Loose parts from nature (eg driftwood, timber off-cuts, pine cones, stones, bark) stored alongside the blocks add exciting new dimensions to children’s constructions.
- **Nature posters** – Nature posters can be used as seats or even stools and chairs in the dramatic play areas. A glass-lidded table can be filled with natural items such as delicate sea shells, beautiful rocks, and small pieces of driftwood sanded to bring out the natural wood grain. Even tables covered with brown paper protected by clear, heavy-duty plastic with a centrepiece of natural bushes can be used effectively. Floor coverings such as cork and bamboo or their look-a-likes can add to the natural look. Cane storage baskets are already being widely used with great success.
- **Nature tables** – Sensory and science tables provide a wonderful opportunity for children to connect with nature and to understand the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land.
- **Nature sensory small worlds** – Introduce live creatures into the room. Worm farms or an ant nest behind glass; silk worms; a tank with fish, turtles, frogs or hermit crabs; or, a butterfly kit provides opportunities for children to connect with nature and to understand the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land.
- **Nature displays** – Children love collections. Posters which depict nature’s awesome patterns and colours or its creatures are always interesting to children.
- **Nature manipulative play** – Small items from nature collections are perfect for manipulative play. Once again, include puzzles and games with a nature theme.
Bring the outside in

continued

- Display photographs – Children love photographs, and this interest can be used to extend their knowledge about nature and their connection with it. Displaying photos of nature can help children to engage with the outdoors as well as encourage them to learn more about the environment.
- Use intentional teaching – Bringing the outside in is only part of what is required to ignite children's interest in these elements. Your role is pivotal. Use intentional teaching strategies such as sharing your interest in and knowledge of nature, providing children with opportunities to explore nature, and connecting them with nature through stories, songs, and books.

6 Over to you

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West Coast Institute has an approach to doing business that we call the West Coast Way. This mantra provides staff with three guiding principles – to be resourceful, agile and partnered – to enable them to truly assess client needs and then develop a tailored workforce solution that is the perfect fit.

In the Children’s Services Department, we pride ourselves on fulfilling this mantra to an exceptional standard, and here’s how:

- We ensure our lecturers are up to date on all aspects of the Children’s Services sector, providing them with the latest training opportunities on offer, maintaining close industry networks with services, the Industry Skills Council and local and national associations for children.
- We actively participate on centre committees and association boards, as well as working alongside our students in our community Eco Playgroup. This contact with staff of various Children’s Services and families within the community allows us to relate to our students and provide the most up-to-date training that truly reflects the sector.
- With the growing needs presented to us by our students – those working in the services, those who have come straight from school or those embarking on a career change – we have listened and responded with resourcefulness and provided several methods of delivery for our training including: full-time, online (Flexible), part-time, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and traineeships.

Many of you may know our staff, both north and south of the river and regionally. They are supportive, knowledgeable lecturers who go the extra mile to ensure students understand what they are required to undertake. Sometimes, they even jump right in and work next to students to role model for them.

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STUDENT

“Twenty-five-year-old Leanne Crawford from Carramar fell into a childcare career whilst working at Jellybeans Day Care Centre. Her employer encouraged her to enrol in the Certificate III in Children’s Services as a traineeship so she could be trained on the job. "Studying children’s service has opened a lot of doors for me,” said Leanne. “It got me a job at the Autism Association of WA, which I love, it put me in the right direction to go to uni and it has motivated me to just keep doing what I can to help the children on a daily basis.”

Leanne is now a qualified educator at the Autism Association of WA, the first long day care centre for children with autism. Her role involves watching the children, providing them with daily care and contributing to their overall development. Leanne is now at ECU studying teaching part-time.

“I love everything about this industry. When the children learn to do new things, it puts such a smile on my face.”

EMPLOYER

“West Coast Institute’s knowledge of the industry and encourages best practice by keeping us up to date with the latest trends in training. Our trainers can work in confidence because they know they have the qualifications and skills to do the right thing by the children at the centre, every day of the week.” [Samantha Morrell, Manager, Mindarie Early Learning Centre]

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