

# 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 keeping the feeling going
- 4 reminders; and
- 5 over to you.

Of course, you may well categorise them quite differently.



### 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 being outdoors is to see it. Check the scenery from your windows. Perhaps place a large, leafy potted plant 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 reminds us of 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-topped 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 native bushes can be used effectively. Floor coverings such as cork and bamboo or their look-alikes can add to the natural look. Card 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, check on the toxicity of 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.



### 3 Embedding the feeling

- **Position natural elements into all activity areas** –
- **Art and craft** – 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.
- **Dramatic play** – Safety considered, natural items can be used to enrich children's dramatic play. For example, a camping scene with a tent, complete with real twigs, pine cones and bark around contribute to the scene and feed the child's imagination. Stones can be used to stir into play soup or used as money.
- **Reading area** – Reading areas can be set up with cushions and a sheepskin under a tree branch with created leaves. Ensure books include non-fiction and fiction with a nature theme.
- **Construction** – 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.

- **Manipulative play** – Small items from nature collections are perfect for manipulative play. Once again, include puzzles and games with a nature theme.

### 4 Keeping the feeling going

- **Create nature and science boxes** – Gather and store interesting natural items such as stones, shells, bark, small pieces of driftwood, sand, pine cones, shark teeth, bones, nuts, cones, shells, seed pods, dried flowers, and bring them out when needed. Items for a science box could be bird nests, bee hives; cast-off snakeskin, feathers and the like. Invite children and parents to contribute. Over time, the boxes will hold interesting and unusual items, and make setting up areas that include nature an easy task.
- **Gather and display collections** – Children love collections. They are particularly drawn to the natural beauty and feel of rocks, pebbles and shells. In addition, they enjoy rearranging and sorting, categorising, ordering and comparing them.

- **Purchase commercial resources or create your own** – 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.

### 5 Reminders

- **Cater to every sense** – Sensory and science tables provide children with hands on and other sensory experiences. Children can see, feel and sometimes smell a, for example. However, children's sense of hearing is often not considered. Outdoor sounds such as rain, a waterfall, the surf, the wind and creatures can all be recorded and played back at quiet times or for intentional teaching activities. Herbs, such as potted rosemary, add refreshing fragrance to the room. Their leaves can also be used to explore the sense of taste.
- **Evoke memories** – Displays of objects which children have brought in or have gathered on an excursion, accompanied by simple text, can be used to evoke children's memories of what they have done or where they have been. A peacock feather can remind a child of a family outing to an animal park while a handful of cool, smooth stones can remind children of a picnic by a waterfall, and shells and a shark tooth could remind them of walks by the sea.



- **Display photographs** – Children love photographs, and this interest can be used to extend their knowledge about nature and their connection with it (eg a display of photographs taken on International Mud Day). Accompany them with captions and comments which can be used to introduce topics into the conversation.
- **Revisit documentation** – Learning Stories and made- books about nature and children's experiences with nature should not be overlooked as effective ways to bring nature indoors. When writing these, use as many sensory words as possible to prompt children's vivid recall of the experience. It will also help children who were not there to place themselves in the moment.
- **Over to you**
- **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; provoking children's

curiosity by rearranging the room or rotating natural elements in various activity areas; choosing a thought-provoking book, CD, DVD, YouTube video; and asking open-ended questions.

- **Find ways to increase your knowledge** – The movement to connect young children with nature is worldwide, and the result is the ever-increasing number of websites and articles devoted to the topic. More sector journals and magazines also include articles, such as this one.

Bringing the outside in is easy and meets the requirements of the NOS, EYLF and MTOP. Also, age is no barrier to the benefits to health and wellbeing it brings and the connection to nature that results.

NQS 3.1.1, 3.2.1, 3.2.2, 3.3.2 EYLF and MTOP 2, 3, 4, 5

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# The West Coast Way

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.



**WEST COAST**  
INSTITUTE

## STUDENT

Twenty-five-year-old Leanne Crawford from Carramar fell into a child care 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 services 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 knows our business and encourages best practice by keeping us up to date with the latest trends in training. Our trainees 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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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 by 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.
  - We are **Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Registered Assessors** for the **National RPL Scheme** so that our industry partners can gain financial support, which has just been increased by the Federal Government, when embarking on RPL. The increase in funding for this scheme allows those of you in regional and remote areas extra money for us to travel to you and see you in action at your workplace. As a public Registered Training Organisation (RTO), we are also currently able to offer the Diploma and Advanced Diploma **Tuition Fee Exempt** in all delivery methods, resulting in a minimal fee charged to the student for resources.
  - We are equipped to provide tailored Professional Development to individual services on a consultative basis or to large groups of staff of a number of services. Our areas of speciality are: **sustainability and nature, Behaviour Development incorporating the National Quality Framework, mentoring/coaching.**
- Our students and employers are great ambassadors for WCI and the training we provide.

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