

Information Paper



Using Built and Natural Environments

Under the National Quality Standards there is a strong focus on the use of both built and Natural Environments. Quality Area 3 deals with Physical Environment and Element 3.2.1 states: Outdoor and indoor spaces are designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.

Firstly, we need to look at the definitions of built and natural environments as defined by the NQS.

Built environments include manufactured, synthetic and commercially produced surfaces, materials, toys and equipment.

Natural environments include natural materials and surfaces which have undergone very little modification, for example, grass, trees, rocks, plants, materials, soil, sand, water, clay, timber, bark, seeds, shells and stones.

CONNECTING CHILDREN WITH NATURE

The emphasis on connecting children with nature is consistent with the commitment worldwide to bring children back to nature. It is based on very convincing research of the benefits of this connection to children.

Outcome 2 of My Time, Our Place, Framework for School Age Care in Australia is: 'Children are connected with and contribute to the world'.

The NQS and My Time, Our Place describe the environment needed for children as well as the role educators will play.

- Provide children with access to indoor and outdoor spaces with natural features such as plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water (NQS 3.1.3, NQS 3.2.1, MTOP-O2)
- Discuss with children the ways that the life and health of living things are interconnected (NQS 3.1.3, MTOP-O2)
- Help children to explore relationships with living and non-living things and to observe, experiment, notice and respond to change (NQS 3.2.1)
- Provide opportunities for children to connect with nature, discuss with them this connectedness and protocols (NQS 3.1.3, MTOP-O2)

Three ways services can develop children's appreciation, and respect for nature, are:

Beautiful moments are just that – nature putting on a show. If, say, rainbow lorikeets are feeding noisily on the blossoms of a gum tree, draw it to the children's attention in more than a superficial way. If the clouds are an unusual shape or are moving quickly across the sky, or the sky is piercingly blue with no clouds, share your observations and delight with the children.

Take advantage of moments such as these to develop children's 'spirituality' – that sense of awe and wonder, that connection with nature.

Gardening Most children love being outdoors digging in the soil, getting dirty, creating and watching plants grow. In addition, gardening is educational and develops personal attributes such as cooperation, understanding, responsibility and creativity.

However, every OSHC is different and some may not have a suitable or large enough space for gardens.

- Consider using garden structures that are easy to assemble, movable, adaptable, and perhaps require little digging
- Purchase gardening tools that are light, easy to handle and the correct size for children
- Select plants that are easy to grow and/or interesting such as spinach, cherry tomatoes, parsley, chives, sunflowers, corn and strawberries. Involve older children in researching suitable plants, planning and design, and setting up the garden, and younger children in planting and watering
- Plant flowers that attract butterflies, ladybirds and other interesting insects or birds
- Make a scarecrow
- Install a small rain water tank, birdbath or sundial

Nest boxes are another way to connect children with nature – this time with living creatures. Local councils give advice and designs for nest boxes for any number of birds and animals – so do many of the hardware stores.

SUSTAINABILITY

It is a natural progression from children appreciating and enjoying nature to understanding that nature is fragile and its resources are finite. Indeed sustainability is a topic which My Time, Our Place and the NQS have a lot to say about the educators' role. They are required to:

- Collaborate with children to develop daily routines and practices that embrace and embed sustainability (MTOP-O2)

- Enable children to care for and learn from the land (MTOP-O2)
- Assist children to respect, care for and appreciate the natural and constructed environments (MTOP-O2, NQS 3.2.1)

Simply put, educators are to be 'Earth Smart' and to ensure that their every action accords with this. They also need to talk about their commitment with the children and listen to any ideas that children may have.

Two of the ways that services can use to teach children about sustainability are:

Composting

Some services have the familiar rubbish bin style while others have a range from the sophisticated to very simple worm farms.



Although only 30cm wide, 20 cm high and 10 cm deep (about the size of a small fish tank), this is interesting because it is see-through. Children can observe the decomposition, composting and life cycles.

Recycling

Everyone is familiar with recycling, particularly when in art and craft activities.



This igloo made out of plastic milk containers. The educator and the children started with a circle of milk bottles, ran a cord through the handles and continued from there. As you can see, the end result is very effective.

ARRANGING THE INDOOR PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The NQS 3.1.4 requires educators to involve children in making and maintaining an aesthetically pleasing environment. Given the focus of the NQF on all things nature and natural, what about bringing the outside in?

Bringing the outside in

Natural environments do not have to stay outside. The natural environment can be used to enhance the children's indoor program.

Ways to bring the outside in include:

- Display outside items of all types – bits of branches, bark, feathers, shells, driftwood, fronds – in open shelving or a bookcase.

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- Gather pine cones, seed pods, leaves, gumnuts, and small stones. Children can use them to explore simple science and maths concepts such as classifying, counting and weighing – or simply to enjoy or use in their art and craft.
- Add pot plants. They not only bring the outside in, but meet the requirement of an aesthetic environment.
- Provide sand and water trays for younger children.
- Make nature walls. Use a large piece of hessian and have the children attach any interesting natural items they find.
- Construct collages made of rocks or shells and hang them.



SUMMARY

My Time, Our Place and the NQS contain some requirements that are different to those that services and educators have had to meet in the past. Many of these differences relate to: connecting children with nature; sustainability, such as composting and recycling; and, ensuring an aesthetic environment – outdoors and in – with many natural elements. We can move closer to meeting these requirements with a few simple changes to the environment and our practices.

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