



# Outdoor learning environments: best practice principles

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Play based learning is most effective when children are able to pursue their interests across an array of environments including outdoor learning spaces. Learning is maximized when educators plan outdoor spaces thoughtfully to be reflective of children's current interests and empower children to approach their learning with a sense of agency. (DEEWR, 2009)

This fact sheet provides information on best practice principles to consider when developing an outdoor learning environment for education and care services to support requirements of the National Quality Framework and to provide an optimum learning environment for children.

## Natural environments under the National Quality Framework

Regulation 113 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations states that approved providers must ensure outdoor spaces allow children to explore and experience the natural environment.

Quality Area 3 of the National Quality Standard relating to the Physical Environment includes a requirement for the:

- appropriate design and flexible use of the physical environment, including interaction between indoor and outdoor space
- inclusion of natural elements and materials which allow for multiple uses
- active participation of children through self-initiated play and independent exploration
- active involvement of sustainable practices.

Outdoor natural play environments should provide a blend of natural areas, environmental features and plants to interest children in learning about nature and its elements. Important features include unstructured spaces and activities for creative learning and spontaneous play. Natural environments provide

opportunities for children to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between plants, people, animals and the land.

It is important to consider unintended consequences that may impact on the safety of children and staff when designing the outdoor learning environment. Undertaking risk assessments throughout the design process or when introducing something new to the environment will support services to manage safety considerations. It is recommended that services also consult with recognised authorities where appropriate.

## Designing an outdoor environment

Educators need to consider various aspects of design when developing an outdoor space to ensure it is accessible for all children. A good design will offer children choice and promote enough challenge for children to engage in considered risk taking while balancing the need for safety. Natural play spaces offer a unique opportunity for considered risk taking and challenge during physical activity that children are unable to access in other ways. Experimenting with perspective by climbing a tree or theorizing about the properties of mud fosters a sense of connection to nature. It is this connection to nature that creates opportunity for sustainability education with our very youngest of children and should be woven into the way of 'being' at the service. (DEEWR, 2009)

Permanent outdoor spaces should be flexible to enable educators to be responsive to children's interests and development. The use of repurposed loose parts and open ended resources allows children to enter and participate in play at their own level and to be guided by their own ideas. The educator role is to then interact with children in these spaces to scaffold play in support of exploring children's ideas, providing provocations for learning and testing theories. (Rinaldi, 2013)

The reflective questions below are designed to support approved providers and educators to consider how the design of the outdoor learning spaces in their service supports a natural outdoor learning environment:

- Are spaces open ended and flexible enabling educators to be responsive to children's interests?
- Is there an opportunity to invite children to share their ideas for the design of the outdoor space?
- Are open ended loose parts available for children and educators to use to resource play ideas?
- Are there spaces in the outdoors for children to retreat for quiet or relaxation time?
- Have you consulted with the education and care service community and independent third party organisations on the design of your outdoor space?
- Have you made choices for drought hardy plants, indigenous to the local area and low allergenic plants that minimise the risk to children?
- Are there adequate trees for providing shade?
- How are opportunities for physical activity encouraged with children in the outdoor space?
- How are children able to actively engage with natural elements of the outdoor environment?
- Are spaces stimulating and do they enable children to experiment with their ideas and theories?
- What resources do you need to enable children's exploration in the outdoor environment?
- Do children have access to natural play spaces including trees, plants, mud, sand and water?
- Have you considered access to the outdoor space for children experiencing mobility challenges?
- How does the outdoor environment support children to engage in considered risk and challenge?
- Is there enough space and variety of types of spaces for children to be able to engage as individuals, in small groups and large groups?
- How could the outdoor space support sustainability education with children?
- Are there rainwater tanks and other water sustainability measures available for use in play?
- What opportunities are there for children to take care of the outdoor space?
- Are some resources created from reused/repurposed materials?
- Do children have free flow access between the indoor and outdoor environment for most of the day?
- Are pathways, entrances and exits for play spaces clear so that children's play is not disrupted by general foot traffic?

## Getting started

- Research and read information about natural play environments.
- Consider forming a stakeholders committee and invite parents, children and teachers to join.
- Ask children what they like to do when they play rather than what features they would like in a playground.
- Visit your local nursery or have them come to visit

your education and care service.

- Consider starting with some simple elements and then add more as the budget allows.
- Focus on one area of the natural play environment at a time.
- Hold regular working bees.
- Invite community involvement and participation.

## References

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian

Governments 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia.

Rinaldi, C 2013, *Re-Imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia*, Government of South Australia.

Education and Care Services National Regulations

National Quality Standard 3: Physical environment

## Useful links

[Early Education for Sustainability SA](#)  
[Natural Resource Management](#)  
[Nature Play SA: Natural Play Principles](#)  
[Challenging Play - Risky!](#)  
[Kidsafe Fact Sheet: Tree Climbing](#)  
[Sustainable Landscapes: Choosing Sustainable Products and Materials](#)  
[Department of Education Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments](#)

## Contact details

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