



Australian Children's  
Education & Care  
Quality Authority

## QUALITY AREA 3

# THE ENVIRONMENT AS THE 'THIRD TEACHER'

Contemporary theories and research informed by the Reggio Emilia approach recognise and value the environment as a 'third teacher'.

Behind educators and families, physical spaces hold the potential to influence what and how children learn.

### Things to consider:

- How does the physical space of the service encourage children's agency?
- How is learning built into the environment?
- What learning opportunities are created by changing the space, for example by adding or taking away resources or equipment?
- How can collaboration with children, families and service staff help create sustainable environments?
- How do the different spaces of the service foster a sense of belonging and community?
- How does the environment reflect and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture?

## LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

The importance of providing inclusive and sustainable learning environments that maximise and promote children's learning is reflected under Quality Area 3 of the National Quality Standard (NQS) in particular:

**Standard 3.2:** The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

**Element 3.2.1:** Outdoor and indoor spaces are designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.

**Element 3.2.2:** Resources, material and equipment are sufficient in number, organised in ways that ensure appropriate and effective implementation of the program and allow for multiples uses.

**Standard 3.3:** The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future.

**Element 3.3.2:** Children are supported to become environmentally responsible and show respect for the environment.

## INTENT AND PURPOSE

Considering the environment in ways that are intentional and purposeful helps to:

- foster encounters, encourage communication and relationships
- create environments filled with natural light, order and wonder
- invite children to delve deeper, investigate and represent their learning through a range of mediums.

### Creating a shared responsibility

Sustainable environments promote the idea of children as partners and collaborators in their learning. These spaces have the potential to support children's understanding of the environment, sustainable practices and their inherent responsibilities as global citizens.

### Children's agency

Whatever the skills and abilities of the child and the type of education and care service, the environment should promote each child's sense of agency. Physical spaces should allow children to be active contributors and have an influence in their world. This involves children contributing to make the environment safe, for example, using equipment and resources in an appropriate way.

# THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IS NEVER SIMPLY A BACKDROP TO THE CURRICULUM; IT IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CURRICULUM OR LEISURE BASED PROGRAM. (Educators: My Time, Our Place)

## ENGAGING

Learning environments engage and foster a sense of ownership and respect when they are aesthetically pleasing, reflect the identity and culture of children and families, and encourage a connection to place. As such, the physical environment is never simply a backdrop to the curriculum; it is an integral part of the curriculum or leisure based program. An environment with rich and built-in learning opportunities also frees educators to interact with children.

Some characteristics of engaging environments include:

### Interesting things

Natural materials and things of interest for children to see, touch and smell have an inherently higher degree of complexity in terms of patterning and versatility.

### Open-ended materials

Areas dedicated to different experiences such as art and craft, books and literacy, blocks and building materials, can help children's engagement and learning. For example, a pine cone can be used as a prop for dramatic play or an item for construction. This is especially important when supporting a wide range of ages, abilities and learning styles.

### A balance of experiences

A balance of experiences facilitates shared thinking, including exploration, experimentation and hypothesising. Areas dedicated to experiences – for example, art and craft, books and literacy, blocks and building materials – can help children's engagement and learning. The key here is for educators to be flexible about what experiences happen and where.

### Flexible access

Just as educators should embrace a flexible approach to experiences, they should also provide and encourage the flexible use and access to resources and equipment. This responds to children's agency and interest in both indoor and outdoor spaces.

### Recycling and repurposing

Reusing, recycling, rethinking and repurposing of resources, furniture and equipment promotes an awareness of sustainable practices. This provides opportunities for children to problem solve and be creative in ways that develop their respect for the environment and thoughtful use of limited natural resources.

## The familiar and the novel

Balancing sameness and change, the familiar and the novel, responds to children's need for both. Often small changes in the environment can be enough to ensure the environment is interesting and engaging, especially for very young children. Talking with children about possible changes and involving them in decision making supports their agency, influence and learning and can reduce stress resulting from too much change.

## EMPOWERING AND RESPECTFUL

Respect for children as collaborators and partners with educators in their learning is central to the approved learning frameworks. Environments that are respectful of children's emerging skills and competencies provide opportunities for them to make their own decisions and to act independently.

These environments:

- **Encourage children to make choices**, including whether to be with others or to be on their own. Arranging furniture to create areas can encourage children to disperse and be together by choice. Big open spaces that force children into large or small groups may interfere with these positive interactions.
- **Support children to feel secure**, and the equipment and furniture allows children to do things for themselves. Chairs that allow feet to touch the floor, sinks that are child height (or stable stools that allow children to safely reach the sink or get on the toilet themselves), tables and chairs that support backs while sitting, and lockers with hooks that are accessible all encourage children to exercise agency.
- **Include displays of children's work** that are uncluttered and involve children in making decisions about whose work is displayed and how these are changed. It is important to acknowledge and honour the efforts of all children in meaningful and respectful ways. For example, working with children to identify work to be displayed may be more empowering than "wallpapering" with stencils or templated art work.
- **Create a vibrant and responsive space**. Think about how much fixed equipment is necessary both indoors and outdoors, make changes as children's needs and interests evolve and create a sense of discovery.
- **Allow for children's works in progress to be preserved** over days or even weeks.

## INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

In the approved learning frameworks, the concept of belonging is linked to a strong sense of identity. Physical environments play a major role in contributing to both identity and belonging by:

- Reflecting the lives of children through materials, equipment, decorations and pictures to respectfully give a sense of the communities and culture in your service.
- Creating a comfortable 'lived-in' feeling. This often means having a mix of found objects, purchased equipment and materials, including appropriate seating for adult educators and family members that also encourage quality interactions with children.
- Ensuring access for children with additional needs and for children under three in ways that reflect inclusive practice and facilitate their agency and learning.

## NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Engaging with nature also supports children to develop stewardship in order to become environmentally responsible and to respect the environment. Using flowers, shells, stones, fabric, baskets, art prints and other materials in the curriculum helps children to learn to appreciate natural beauty.

Services that have limited access to outdoor spaces may need to critically reflect and plan ways to support children's connection with nature, for example planning excursions and visits to local parks.

## ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION AND INVESTIGATION

Active involvement builds children's understandings of concepts and the creative thinking and inquiry processes that are necessary for lifelong learning. Children can challenge and extend their own thinking, and that of others, and create new knowledge through collaborative interactions and negotiations.

Environments that encourage collaboration and investigation:

- invite conversations with an array of materials that children can use to investigate, hypothesise and explore
- create possibilities for collaboration through the ways materials and equipment are displayed and offer resources to record and represent ideas
- use children's interest as a platform for developing project investigation that are responsive to the hypothesis children are forming through their play.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Visit the ACECQA website at [www.acecqa.gov.au](http://www.acecqa.gov.au) to download:

[Guide to the National Quality Standard](#)

[Belonging, Being & Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework](#)

[My Time, Our Place – Framework for School Age Care](#)

Find other useful resources:

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning – Transforming early childhood environments*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Greenman, J. (2005). *Caring spaces, learning places – Children's environments that work*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press Inc.

Kennedy, A., & Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Shared visions for Outside School Hours Care*. Melbourne: Department of Human Services.

Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Dimensions – Excellence in many ways*. Gosford, NSW: National Family Day Care Council of Australia

More information is available on the ACECQA website [acecqa.gov.au](http://acecqa.gov.au)

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