



# Utilising physical and social environments to maximise learning

*An environment is a living, changing system. More than a physical space, it includes the way time is structured and the role we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives. The environment either works for us or against us as we conduct our lives. Greenman 1988, p.5*

## Why it matters

Learning spaces are a powerful learning mechanism in the delivery of two years of funded kindergarten. When educators take time to work with their colleagues to create dynamic and holistic learning spaces, both inside and outside, they invite children to explore and discover, interact and engage, and support their growth and development in the five learning outcomes.

With the implementation of two years of funded kindergarten, educators can consider the way that the learning environment will support and challenge children's learning needs. This might mean that spaces will need to be used differently, catering for children's learning over a two-year period. Planning for spaces will need to become more intentional with clear expectations for children and adults.

Creating effective environments that maximise learning over a two-year period starts with having high expectations of children and a belief that, with strong and supportive teaching strategies, children will be able to learn in their environments in purposeful and respectful ways. Utilising a collaborative approach, where each educator is part of the teaching and learning decisions, environments become mechanisms to support the varying interests of the group and an effective way to create diverse learning experiences for each child.



Effective implementation of two years of funded kindergarten is enhanced when educators engage with the Practice Principles of the **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework**

- Reflective practice
- Partnerships with families
- High expectations for every child
- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Equity and diversity
- Assessment for learning and development
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Partnerships with professionals.

It is recommended that educators refer to the **VEYLDF** and the Practice Guides for further suggestions and ideas about continuous improvement.



### Practical tips to support integrated teaching and learning:

- **Use small group opportunities with children to talk through how the environments are working.** Children will have clear opinions about how spaces are working, what they will need, as well as ideas about how to look after the resources. If a particular area is not working in the way you planned, include children in determining the solutions.
- **Work as a team to undertake an audit or review that considers the way that the environment meets the needs of children over two years of kindergarten.** After you have set up the environment (both inside and outside), step back and examine closely the learning spaces that you have created. Use reflective practice to identify the ways these spaces make it easier or more challenging for children to settle into and learn within the environment. Remember spaces send powerful messages to children about how to behave – ensure these messages are about their productive participation in the program and maximise children’s agency.
- **Another way to analyse the environment is to use the vision for children in the Early Years Learning Framework.** Make a list of the spaces that connect with the concepts of belonging, being and becoming. Discuss the result with your team. Make plans to address any imbalances – for example, are there enough places to just ‘be’? Are there spaces that support children’s diverse learning needs?
- **An audit might also need to examine the number of resources available to children.** Diverse groups will need a range of the basic equipment and resources utilised in early childhood programs such as scissors, crayons and markers, as well as more sophisticated materials. Consider providing ‘banks’ of these basic resources that children can access readily throughout the program. Support these approaches with intentional teaching strategies that help children learn about how to access, use, maintain and store the equipment.
- **Use the regular staff meeting times as an opportunity to reflect on the learning environment.** Considering the environment is supporting learning, this requires ongoing reflection, as well as decisions about changing or modifying approaches. Make this a standard agenda item in these meetings to ensure it is included. Use the reflective questions below to help guide the conversation or develop your own.
- **Use an indoor/outdoor program as much as possible.** Utilising two spaces for diverse groups of children will promote a more settled atmosphere and enriched participation. Implementing two years of funded kindergarten will require educators to plan together for both spaces and consider ways to provide learning in the five outcomes, both indoors and outdoors.

## Questions for reflective discussion:

The VEYLDF Practice Principle **Reflective Practice** invites educators to think about and challenge the practices they take for granted.

Use the following questions to support discussion with your colleagues.

- What is your understanding of the way environments support children's learning across two years of kindergarten?
- If environments send 'powerful messages' to children, what messages do you want children to receive from the spaces that are created? How will this differ across the two years?
- What challenges to children's daily transitions, learning and participation does your environment present?
- What could you do to address these challenges? What strategies might you develop?
- How will diverse learning styles be catered for?
- What challenges might children have as they participate in the program – how will these be catered for?
- Where will smaller groups meet? What resources do these spaces need?
- What assets do your environments have?
- How can you maximise these benefits?

## References and further reading

Greenman, J. (1988). *Caring spaces, learning places: Children's environments that work*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2016). *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. DET and VCAA, Melbourne.  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veylfdframework.pdf>

Department of Education and Training (2019). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Australian Government, Canberra.  
<https://docs.education.gov.au/node/2632>

Resources on the Practice Principles  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/Pages/veylfdfproflearn.aspx>

Reflective Practice Education Resource  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/profdev/Pages/reflectivepractice.aspx>

NQS Professional Learning Program e-Newsletter, no.: 11, 12, 13, 30  
Search for archived issues via your web browser.

DET webpage supporting educators to plan for and run Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Programs  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/Pages/running-three-year-old-kinder.aspx>



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