

Children's Services Regulations 2009

Regulation 97(1)(b) requires that the outdoor space that is provided at a children's service with a standard licence includes features that enable each child who is cared for or educated by the children's service to explore and experience the natural environment. Outdoor spaces should include a range of different natural features such as sand, soil, grass, a variety of different plantings and trees.

It is not enough for children to look at trees and plants in children's services, they must be able to actively explore, engage with, and experience different types of natural environments. This means allowing children to touch and interact with the natural environment in their everyday play.

Features that enable children to explore and experience the natural environment

A natural environment in a children's service is an environment which includes natural elements.

Natural environments may include:

- gardens where children can grow their own plants
- sandpits for sensory, symbolic and physical play
- digging patches where children can use garden equipment
- a range of planting to encourage a variety of modes of play such as playing with gum nuts, small branches, flowers, stones and bark
- small pits of pebbles, gravel, coarse sand and smooth river rocks for fine motor and imaginative play
- plants for smelling and picking
- plants that encourages birds, butterflies and other insects
- trees which provide shade
- worm farms and compost areas for environmental education
- water play areas for sensory play.

Why include natural environments in outdoor spaces

Current research clearly shows that natural environments and outdoor play are beneficial to children in many ways. Playing outdoors is important for developing capacities for creativity, symbolic play, problem solving and intellectual development. Outdoor play has clear physical benefits for developing children including helping children to acquire gross motor skills, eye-hand coordination and helping to prevent obesity.

Sensory stimulation derived from interacting with natural environments allows children to learn with all of their senses. These senses include seeing, hearing, touching and smelling. It is well known that physical activity is beneficial for children in many ways. In a recent review of literature concerning children outdoors, Munoz examines research linking time spent outdoors to increased physical activity, healthy development and overall wellbeing.

Research also shows that children who have trouble concentrating benefit from playing outdoors, as after playing outdoors these children are better able to concentrate on tasks.

Natural environments give staff members in children's services opportunities to teach children about caring for the world in which we live. Seeing plants grow and change throughout the year helps children to understand and learn more about nature.

Including natural environments in outdoor play spaces

Including natural elements into an outdoor play space does not have to look a particular way, there is no formula that has to be followed. The design will take into account the size and configuration of the space, the way in which the space is used at the children's service and the ages of the children who play in the space.

An outdoor play space with natural features designed for toddlers in long day care will look very different from an outdoor space with natural features designed for an outside school hours care service.

Considerations when designing or modifying outdoor play spaces with natural environments

Natural play spaces can provide rich opportunities for children to explore new ideas and to develop their interests and understanding.

When thinking about the design of an outdoor space for children the following opportunities for children should be provided:

- to explore and develop a relationship with the natural environment;
- to gain a sense of freedom; and
- to explore and to learn the skills required to manage self risk.

It is not necessary to redesign the whole outdoor space in order to include natural features. In addition to trees and other smaller plants and shrubs, pots, tyres and tubs may be used to contain natural materials for play such as stones, sand, soil etc. Flowers can be grown in small tubs and gardens for the children to grow their own plants can be created in raised beds which can be constructed or bought commercially.

Natural environments indoors

Natural environments do not have to be limited to outdoors. There are many ways in which the natural environment can enhance the children's indoor program. Pot plants and small tubs in which to grow plants are visually appealing in children's rooms. Parts of branches and small logs with the bark attached can be used in imaginative play in conjunction with other materials. Pine cones, seed pods, leaves, gumnuts and small stones can be used in different ways including opportunities for children to explore simple science and maths concepts such as classifying, counting and weighing. Sand and water trays inside provide additional interesting experiences for children's play.

Program planning and natural environments

The *Children's Services Act 1996* requires the proprietor of a children's service to ensure that there is an educational or recreational program available for all children being cared for or educated (section 26A).

This program must be based on the developmental needs, interests and experiences of each child, takes into account the individual differences of each child and enhances development. An interesting and dynamic outdoor play space which includes natural features adds interest and stimulation to the program provided and creates additional variety for children's learning.

Early Years Frameworks

Learning outcome two in the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* states that 'Children are connected to and contribute to their world'. This outcome requires educators to help children to develop an awareness of the impact of human activity on the environment and the interdependence of living things. Natural environments within children's services are the arena in which children learn these things.

Belonging, Being and Becoming, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia examines the practice of early childhood pedagogy and the role that good learning environments play in teaching. 'Play spaces in natural environments include plants, trees edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open ended interactions, spontaneity, risk taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education'.

Designing outdoor play spaces with natural features

There are many books on designing outdoor play spaces for children, these will be of help in sourcing ideas.

Local expert consultants may be contacted for help with designs for outdoor play spaces and advice about child friendly and hardy plants.

References

Belonging Being and Becoming, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia www.acecqa.gov.au

Department of Education and Training (DET) and Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), *Victorian Early Learning Development Framework for Children from Birth to Eight Years*.

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/edcare/Pages/veyladf.aspx

Written resources

Munoz, S. A. 2009. *Children in the outdoors*. Sustainable Development Research Centre. Horizon Scotland.

Outdoor Play Guide for Victorian Children's Services.

Department of Education and Training

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation

Elliot, S (editor) 2008 *The outdoor playspace naturally. For children birth to five years*. Pademelon Press, Melbourne.

Organisations

Playground and Recreational Association of Victoria (PRAV)

www.prav.asn.au

PRAV supports and work with many different people and agencies in the community, including local government, schools, early childhood centres, playground designers and landscapers and playground manufacturers who have an interest in children and outdoor play experiences.

Environmental Education in Early Childhood (Vic) Inc (EEEC)

www.eeec.org.au

EEEC aims to promote a holistic approach to environmental education and sustainable practices in early childhood and the early years of primary school. The approach involves policy development, house keeping practices, play and learning experiences and strategies for working with children, staff and parents.