

Going 'green' in child care services

by Georgia McKay

Awareness about the cause and effects of climate change, along with the need to adopt environmentally sustainable practices, has grown dramatically in recent years. The growing trend towards adopting 'green principles' in child care services is part of a broader sustainability movement, which seeks to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, in Kinsella, 1987). Developing children's understanding of their impact on the environment is the first step towards providing them with the necessary skills to be part of the climate change solution.

While it is understandable that families and child care professionals may be concerned about overwhelming children with negative impressions of the future, educating children about climate change does not need to be all 'doom and gloom'. Teaching children about caring for the natural environment provides them with a range of opportunities for rich, hands-on learning experiences about nature and the environment, and provokes curiosity, creativity and critical thinking skills.

Similarly, while it is important for child care professionals to respect the differing values and cultures of children and families attending their service, it should be recognised that sustainability is not so much a 'lifestyle choice' as it is a way

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.6, 3.7, 4.1, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.5

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.3, 5.4, 8.2, 8.3 and 8.5

QIAS Principles: 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 4.3 - 4.5, 7.1, 7.2 and 7.4

of living. The intention of adopting sustainable practices should be to encourage a questioning and investigative approach amongst children regarding their surroundings and environment, rather than to dictate a particular set of values.

Incorporating 'green principles'

It is important that environmental education is incorporated into the service's program and becomes part of its daily practice, rather than being treated as a separate 'add on' subject or theme. It is equally important that sustainability is embraced as a 'whole service' approach, in which all stakeholders have a sense of ownership over the process. Talking with management, staff, carers and families about the rationale behind environmentally responsible practices is one strategy for securing their support.

Services should be aware that there may be some barriers to implementation, such as differing levels of knowledge and experience amongst child care professionals. Providing child care professionals with the necessary resources, education and support can overcome some of these barriers and enable them to confidently and effectively implement sustainable practices. One strategy for renewing interest and maintaining enthusiasm is to provide ongoing professional development opportunities. Services could also consider developing a resource folder for child care professionals with media articles, research items, books, journals and gardening tips, and incorporating sustainability as a regular agenda item for staff and carer meetings.

Sustainability management plans

The first step in developing a sustainability management plan is to review the service's philosophy using an environmental focus. It is important to consult all stakeholders from the outset to ensure their ongoing commitment to



Developing a sustainability management plan

The following tasks may be undertaken when developing a sustainability management plan:

- develop a policy
- establish targets for a reduction in energy and water consumption
- re-examine purchasing practices
- implement a recycling program
- re-examine waste management
- implement behavioural change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- review cleaning practices. For example, minimise the use of toxic chemicals
- develop a garden or vegetable patch
- communicate achievements with the local community and seeking their input
- participate in conservation activities conducted by the local community.

achieving the service's goals. This may include:

- discussing children's understanding of environmental issues
- surveying families about their interest in, and experience of, environmentally sustainable practice
- brainstorming ideas at staff and carer meetings
- setting up an idea log for child care professionals to contribute to as ideas arise.

Conducting an 'environmental audit' of sustainable practices that are already occurring at the service is a useful tool for developing a sustainability management plan. Services can also consider conducting an audit of their energy use, waste management, water consumption and chemical use.

The purpose of the plan is to guide staff through the process of initiating change by formalising targets, goals and practices. They can be useful for ensuring the service's commitment towards meeting goals, as strategies are clearly defined and broken down into more manageable components.

Consideration should also be given to the overall aesthetic of the service. Does it reflect the natural environment, local community and Indigenous culture? What types of plants are used - are they native or drought resistant? Services must also consider the design and dimensions of their

indoor and outdoor physical environment as not all services will have sufficient space to introduce natural elements such as a worm farm, vegetable patch or rain water tank. Services without natural outdoor play areas may be able to incorporate other environmental aspects into their educational program by using natural materials.

Monitoring and measuring progress is an important step towards ensuring that tasks are being undertaken in a meaningful and accountable way. Services may find it useful to appoint a sustainability officer or an 'environment committee' to steer and motivate the service. Offering child care professionals positions of responsibility may have additional benefits in terms of fostering leadership capabilities.

It is important to develop short term, achievable goals and to celebrate achievements, which will help to build confidence about the process. The service's achievements can be communicated via newsletters (electronic where possible) or a notice board. Small changes can be used as a stepping stone for further change across the service as environmental awareness grows.

Involving children in implementing sustainable practices

There are a number of ways children's involvement can be sought when developing and implementing sustainable practices. Discussion can be stimulated by even the simplest observations, such as prompting children to question where uneaten food scraps go. Child care professionals can discuss more complex environmental issues with older children, such as the concept of drought, by examining photographs and reading stories. Children can also be involved in water conservation projects by making signs, drawing pictures and writing messages about what is needed to conserve water, which can be placed near taps and bathroom areas.

Child care professionals can involve younger children in environmentally friendly activities such as putting food scraps in the compost bin, ensuring that taps are turned off properly and flattening cardboard boxes for recycling. It is also important that child care professionals talk with younger children about what they are doing in simple ways, and as children develop they can also begin to discuss the reasons behind these practices, which helps to foster critical thinking skills.

Seeking family involvement

Seeking family involvement in pursuing the service's environmental goals is important for providing a consistent message for children across the home and care environment. The first step in seeking participation from families involves openly communicating about the service's program. Families should be consulted in the process of developing/reviewing the service's philosophy to include their feedback for an environmental focus.

The service could also consider developing a code of practice in consultation with families that reinforces environmentally responsible practices. Newsletters are another tool for conveying information about the service's conservation activities. These can also be used to request donations of materials that can be recycled in the service. Services may seek ideas from families for the design of outdoor settings, such as the types of plants to be planted in the garden, and can request their participation in working bees. Families that are new to the service often bring new ideas and enthusiasm about environmental programs. Services may find it useful to enquire about families' interest in, and experience with, environmental conservation at orientation or enrolment.

Conclusion

Adopting environmentally responsible practices in services can provide children with a range of valuable learning experiences. It also conveys important information to them about the natural world, and the key role that they can play in sustaining it ■

References and further reading

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Service profile: the 'Sustainable Planet Project'

Georgia McKay spoke with Campus Kindergarten's Director, Greg Lang, about the challenges and achievements they have experienced in adopting environmentally sustainable practices as a core part of their service program and operations.

Campus Kindergarten is located on the University of Queensland campus in Brisbane. The long day care service caters for children from the ages of two-and-a-half to six years. In 1997, the centre embarked on a 'Sustainable Planet Project' which sought to educate children about the environment through a variety of activities and learning experiences. This project achieved a remarkable degree of success in terms of reducing waste and water consumption, enhancing play spaces and creating a genuine culture of sustainability at the centre.

Campus Kindergarten's Director, Greg Lang, says that one of the major challenges in maintaining the momentum of the project has been the departure of its former project coordinator, Robert. Greg suggests that the danger of sustainability initiatives being isolated to key individuals is that, once they leave, the program can lose focus and direction. Campus Kindergarten is embracing this challenge by incorporating environmental education as a key component of professional development for all staff, to ensure that interest is maintained and knowledge shared across the entire centre.

Another key challenge is relaying information about conservation to families to ensure consistency between the home and care settings. It is important for child care professionals to emphasise to families the educational value in adopting sustainable practices because, as Greg notes, 'that is the validity of why we exist'. Child care professionals need to frame education about environmental sustainability in the context of creating greater understanding of the social and scientific reasons for adopting socially and environmentally responsible behaviours.

Campus Kindergarten has incorporated environmental education into all aspects of their curriculum and everyday practice.

'Sustainable Planet Project' at Campus Kindergarten

Physical items, such as the service's worm farm and vegetable garden, provide a talking point for daily discussions with children about sustainability. Waste management and recycling is one area in which younger children can become educated and involved through repetition and rhymes, while older children can be engaged in more complex environmental issues. For example, children at Campus Kindergarten recently wrote a letter to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd outlining their concerns about global warming after reading a newspaper article. Marie White, the project's coordinator, says that the children displayed extensive knowledge about global warming and its impact on the environment, and that receiving a response to their letter was a highly rewarding experience for them.

Sustainability has also been a key consideration when developing the centre's physical spaces. The centre's recent re-vegetation program incorporated a range of native plants, which were selected for their low impact on the soil and minimal water requirements. Environmental concerns were also at the forefront of the architect's brief for renovating the centre. Key features of 2009 will be the conducting of both centre and family environmental audits and the development of a multi-level hydroponic garden irrigated by wind and solar power and featuring liquid fertiliser, produced in the worm farm, for the garden.

Several years ago the centre introduced a 'litter-less lunch' program to reduce the amount of packaging used in children's lunches. Part of this program involves educating families about the impact of plastic and other types of packaging on the environment, and provided strategies to reduce consumption of pre-packaged lunch items, such as introducing lunch boxes with sectioned-off compartments. The centre also proposes to conduct an environmental audit this year, which will include a component for families and children to complete at home. This data will be re-examined periodically to determine whether there has been an identifiable change in practices.

When considering ways to introduce environmentally friendly practices in child care settings, 'think big and start small'

A key consideration in implementing all of these initiatives has been cost. Greg recommends contacting businesses within the local community to discuss a centre's proposals, as there is a great deal of information available and a general willingness to support environmental initiatives. It may be useful to brainstorm a list of 'parties of interest' who may be able to provide advice or assistance, such as local newspapers, museums and environmental specialists.

Greg says that while the prospect of implementing a sustainability program can initially appear overwhelming, it is important for child care services to 'think big and start small', and remember that adopting environmentally responsible practices will ultimately open up a range of learning experiences for children. Greg

suggests that in order to change attitudes and behaviours in a lasting and meaningful way, environmental education must capture the 'hearts and minds' of children. In essence, this means prompting children to question why things are done in certain ways, and encouraging them to develop their own innovative solutions to problems ■



Campus Kindergarten's vegetable garden, which is fertilised by the service's compost station and worm farm. The staff and children built the protective structure to keep out the possums.