

Natural environments photographs

Practice Note 5(a) | July 2010



Every
child,
every
opportunity



Introduction

The *Children's Services Regulations 2009* require 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 (regulation 97(1)(b)). 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.

This publication provides some ideas for setting up and using natural environments in a licensed children's service.

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 picking and eating
- 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.



Children and adults in natural environments

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 and allows children to explore and experience the natural environment. 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.

The role of adults

It is important to think about how the environment is used in early childhood services and the interactions between children, staff members and carers. All educators play an important role in teaching and guiding the children within natural environments. Educators do this by:

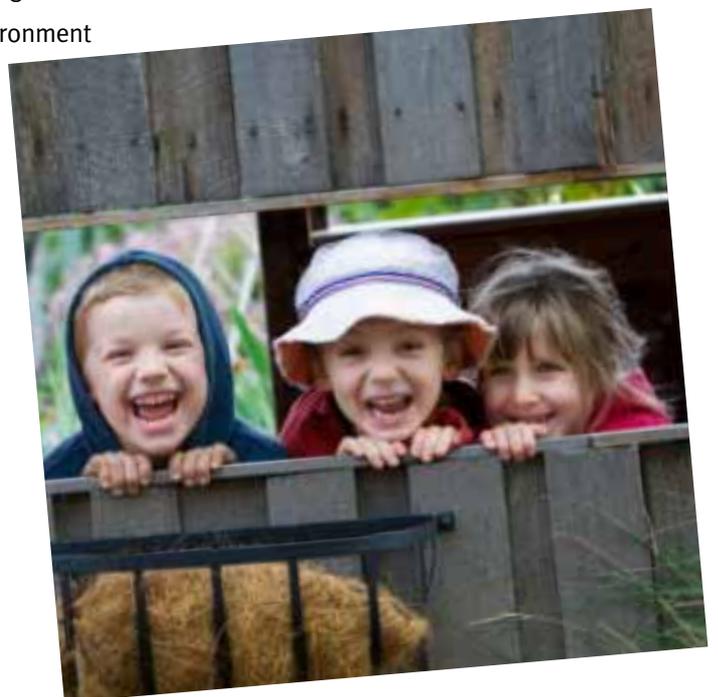
- providing access to a range of natural materials
- finding ways that children can care for and learn from the land
- modelling respect, care and appreciation for the natural environment
- sharing information and providing access to resources about the environment and the impact of human activities on environments
- embedding sustainability in daily routines and practices
- looking for examples of interdependence in the environment and discussing the ways the life and health of living things are interconnected.



Children's learning and development in natural environments

When children are using the natural environment to develop knowledge in this area this is evidenced by children:

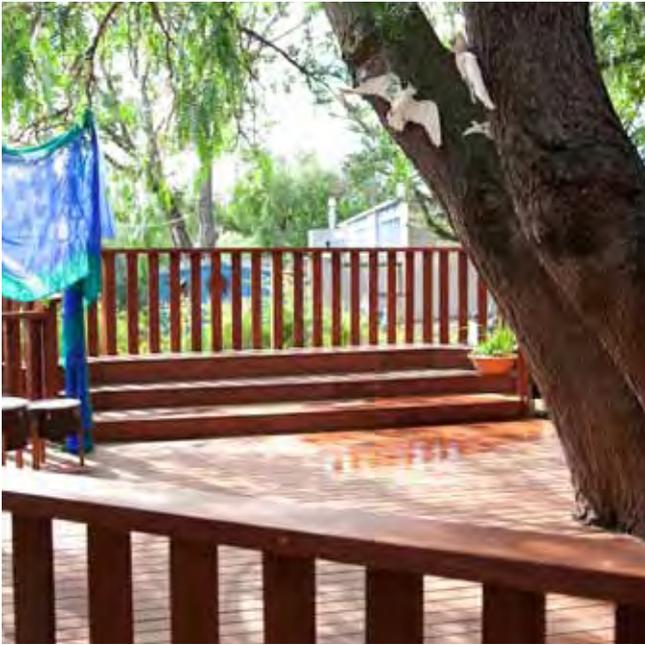
- showing a growing concern and appreciation for natural environments
- exploring relationships with other living and non living things
- observing, noticing and responding to changes in the environment
- developing an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments and the interdependence of living things.



Dividing areas

Areas can be divided both inside and outside by using sawn off logs, plants in large pots and wooden fences. Planter boxes and bamboo poles can be used to divide outside play areas.







Providing shade

Shade cloth is most commonly used for providing shady play areas, however creeping plants and vines and trees can also provide shade.



Using logs and branches

Logs and branches from trees can be used in creative ways in both the inside and outside play spaces. Sawn off logs can be used for seating and for dividing areas of the playground. Twigs and branches can be placed in the digging patch and sandpit for adding interest and variety. Small logs can be used to add interest to indoor block play with small figures or animals. Non-traditional block sets will also encourage pretend play.





Growing plants

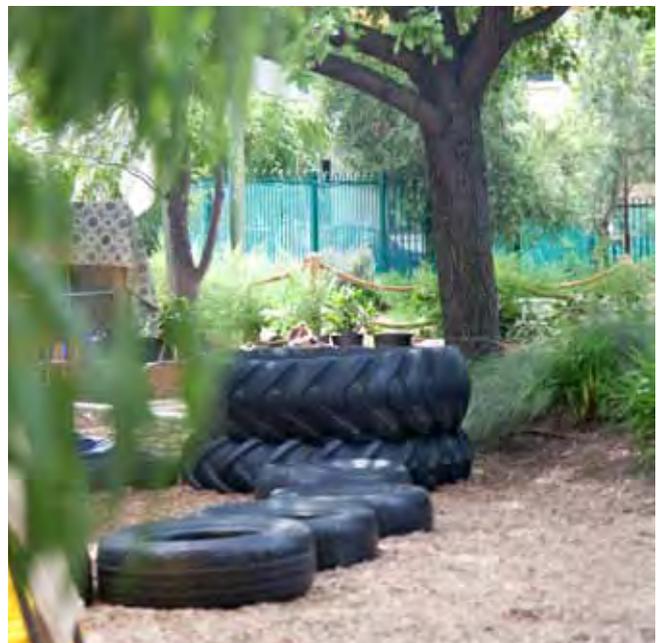
Plants can be grown for smelling, picking and eating. Herbs and flowering plants attract different insects, birds and butterflies. Using waist-high corrugated iron and wooden containers allow children and adults to access the plants more easily. Plants can be grown in small pots for use in play or on fences in baskets.





Use of tyres

Car or truck tyres can be used in many ways. Tyres can be filled with different sensory materials and they can be used for planting or holding pot plants. Tyres can be used for dividing areas and storing toys and materials.



Stones and rocks

Large stones can surround sand pits and digging patches for sitting on or using in play.

Creek beds may be constructed for children to play in or for water play. Stones around a tree add interest. Wet stones provide another avenue for sensory play.





Small stones used for ground cover

Small pebbles and stones can be used in parts of the playground to add interest and provide more sensory experiences for children.



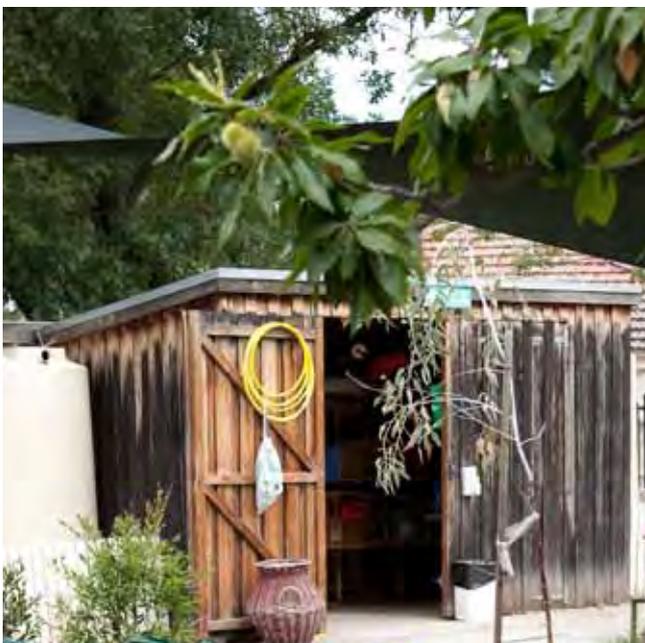
Wooden furniture

Wooden furniture can add variety to play spaces. This furniture may be built in or may be moved about.



Wooden structures

Wooden edging next to sandpits can be used for seating or for play. Platforms allow for special spaces for small group play. Decking can be used to define areas and allow for different tactile experiences. Bird baths, cubbies and sheds made of wood make for a more attractive environment and give children small spaces in which to play.







Wooden toys and natural play materials – inside and out

There are many toys available to purchase. Small figures and objects can add interest to pretend play and well constructed traditional toys made from wood are useful additions to the materials presented to children. These provide tactile and sensory experiences not provided by plastic toys. Baskets can be used to store material and equipment for the children to play with. Small sand boxes inside can be filled with small pebbles, sawdust or sand for indoor or outside play.

