

Managing shared environments

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Many outside school hours care services share their venue with other organisations such as schools, churches and community groups. This creates many challenges for services, particularly in relation to the availability of space for storage and setting up and packing away the program. Staff working in shared environments need to develop strategies to manage these challenges and to promote quality outcomes for children.

What shared spaces may services use?

There are many settings in which outside school hours care services may operate and these can have significant implications for the daily operations of the service. Some services may be in a situation where they share their entire environment with others, for example when they operate out of a school classroom or a community or church hall. Other services may be in a position where they are required to share certain facilities or aspects of their environments, for example toilet or kitchen facilities, resources and outdoor spaces.

Some services may be required to entirely set up and pack away their program for each care session, often within challenging timeframes. Other services may have limited or no storage space at the venue, and they may not have a dedicated space for children and staff to store their belongings during the care session. Services that share facilities and/or outdoor areas which are difficult to access from the main service venue may have issues with matters such as supervision, safety and children's opportunities to make choices.

What challenges can shared environments create for child care professionals?

One of the key difficulties experienced by services that share their setting is that they are unable to have total ownership over the environment, meaning that things they may like to change or improve cannot be easily altered. There can also be constraints imposed by either the property owner or other tenants that affect activities such as being able to display children's work or setting the environment up in aesthetically pleasing ways.

Other significant challenges that can affect services in shared spaces include:

- the space not being purpose built for child care which may potentially impact upon the adequacy of supervision and access to facilities such as food preparation and bathroom areas
- lack of storage space for equipment and records
- lack of space/opportunities for children to return to projects or works in progress over time
- safety or health issues arising when other tenants do not leave the space in a hygienic, tidy and/or safe condition

- having limited access to the venue, meaning that the program must be set up/packed away during the session, when children are present.

All of these issues can potentially impact upon the quality of care and experiences provided for children. However, there are many strategies that services can implement to address the challenges presented by shared settings.

Promoting quality outcomes for children

Effective communication with the property owner and/or other tenants of the shared environment is essential to managing the space successfully. Child care professionals need to be proactive in their approach to communicating what they require in the shared setting in order to promote the best possible outcomes for children. A key aspect of this involves child care professionals advocating for the value of quality outside school hours care to children's wellbeing and development, and to encourage recognition that children learn through their play and quality experiences.

Where a service uses school facilities, such as a room, school hall or outdoor areas, it is helpful for the service to promote a positive, two way relationship between themselves and the school. Strategies for this include inviting the school principal and/or other members of staff to outside school hours care events such as fundraising activities or morning or afternoon teas, and providing the service's newsletter to the school. Staff and children may also be able attend school activities such as school fetes and concerts.

The strategies below may further assist services to support quality outcomes in shared settings.

To provide a variety of interesting resources and experiences for children:

- use children's interests to plan activities and experience to minimise wasted time providing activities that are not relevant to the children in the service
- provide each child with a calico 'work bag' to store works in progress. This may be taken home by the child, or kept in a storage tub at the service if space allows.

- involve children in planning for and setting up experiences. Older children can also be involved in deciding how to make the best use of the limited space and time that may be available.

To communicate with families:

- display information for families in an easel style flip display book, or in a traditional display book
- use a sandwich board for important notices or information about daily activities
- pin notices, children's artwork and photographs on pieces of fabric that can be hung on the wall. These can also be used to improve the appearance of the environment, and are easy to move around and store.
- if they are available, use the backs of mobile cupboards or room dividers to place notices or displays which can be moved out of sight when the session finishes
- create photo albums or use a digital photo display frame.

To make the space attractive and child friendly:

- use table cloths and table decorations to brighten up eating areas
- use easily portable materials such as rugs, fabrics and light cushions to create soft spaces and to break up spaces if the setting is one large room or area
- provide a mix of new and regular or predictable experiences. For example, children often like to be able to revisit permanent play areas such as drawing and writing areas, art/craft areas, story areas and construction play areas.

To promote children's health and safety:

- carry out thorough safety checks at the beginning of every care session. Services cannot assume that the shared space will be in the same condition as in which they last left it

- encourage children to advise staff immediately, without touching the object, if they find any unusual or dangerous items in the space
- where bathroom facilities are shared, keep a storage tub or storage area (if available) of a small supply of emergency hygiene stock such as toilet paper, soap and paper towels in case the bathroom facilities have not been replenished
- always ensure that any shared food preparation areas are cleaned meticulously before preparing food for the children.

To store important written records:

- have portable folders or expanding files for storing documents such as children's records and enrolment forms and policy and procedure documents. Services need to also consider ways to ensure that these records are kept confidential.
- lockable storage boxes can also be used to store records, and the boxes may be covered in fabric and double as useful display tables for children's work and items of interest.

Services that are preparing for their Validation Visit also need to consider strategies to ensure they can easily access any records needed for the Visit that are normally acceptable to be kept off site, for example records of staff development.

To work effectively in shared environments, child care professionals need to be both innovative and proactive and to build partnerships with children, families, colleagues, and, most importantly, with those who own or share the space ■

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 2.2, 3.2, 4.1 - 4.3, 5.1 - 5.4 and 7.2 - 7.3

References and further reading

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- Victorian Government Department of Human Services. (2004). *Shared visions – Resources kit for outside school hours care*. Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Human Services.



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