

Environmental Experiences in Child Care

By Lauren Boyle

As community awareness of environmental issues increases, so does the value of environmental programs for children. The main aim of an environmental program for children is to provide them with knowledge, skills and attitudes to assist them to become environmentally responsible. Participating in environmentally sustainable activities can encourage the development of children's sense of responsibility and empowerment. Staff and carers in children's services can provide opportunities for children to connect with and to embrace the natural world.

How can children experience the natural environment?

Raising children's awareness of the environment in a general and natural way can be a good place to start when introducing an environmental program. There are many approaches that services can employ to encourage children to observe and experience nature, including:

- where possible, providing a setting that includes a variety of flora and fauna both indoors and outdoors. This might include introducing pets to the environment and involving children in their care, planting and caring for indoor and outdoor plants or observing plants and animals that occur naturally in the service's environment
- using natural materials to set up play areas. For example, using items such as pebbles, logs and large rocks rather than manufactured barriers to delineate play spaces or using bark, twigs or sticks to display children's creative work
- using recycled and home made equipment as well as manufactured resources. For example, using recycled plastic bottles for sand scoops, using old pots and pans in dramatic play areas. Using everyday equipment in innovative ways can assist children to develop their resourcefulness and creativity in play.
- introducing activities such as natural 'treasure hunts' or 'nature walks' to stimulate children's curiosity and encourage them to interact with the natural world.
- using natural materials within other aspects of the program. For example using natural

This article relates to:

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

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

QIAS Principles: 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 7.1, 7.2, 7.4

items such as seed pods, pebbles, leaves and sticks for collage or for sorting, matching and counting games, painting with natural implements such as sticks, leaves, pebbles or adding bark and twigs to sand play areas

These types of activities provide children with opportunities to explore elements of the environment and can foster the development of positive feelings and attitudes towards nature.

As children explore the environment and natural materials, it is important to help broaden their understanding of how nature and people interrelate. It is also important to remember that worthwhile experiences for younger children focus on play, discovery and exploration rather than formal instruction. Older children, however, may enjoy a focus on more formal and complex experiences such as nature and science experiments or activities.

How can services develop and implement an environmental policy?

Conducting an 'environmental audit' of the service to determine what environmentally sustaining practices are already occurring is a good way to commence the development of an environmental policy. This may also help staff and carers to consider practical ways to incorporate environmental education into children's experiences.

As with all policy development, the development of an environmental policy should involve consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders, including children, families, staff, carers, the local community and, where appropriate, government and environmental advocacy organisations such as Planet Ark.

The following aspects of the service environment or wider community may be considered by services when undertaking the development of

an environmental policy:

- water conservation
- energy conservation
- air quality
- waste reduction
- chemicals reduction
- animals and plants, especially those that are rare or endangered
- the local environment
- noise pollution

When developing an environmental policy, services may find it beneficial to prioritise the policy either according to what stakeholders perceive to be the greatest area(s) of need or by building upon sustainable practices already occurring in the service. For example, a service which already participates in a local council recycling program may extend this by introducing a phone book or greeting card recycling program which can involve staff, carers, management, children and families.

When considering how an environmental policy may best be incorporated into the existing program, services may find it useful to consider issues such as:

- the design of the service or care setting. For example, does it allow for the implementation of a worm farm, vegetable patch, compost bin or rain water tank?
- local resources and organisations. For example, councils or environmental organisations that may be able to inform or assist in the development of appropriate policies and practices



- practices that the service currently implements to promote environmental sustainability. For example, recycling programs, energy conservation, waste minimisation, minimising the use of toxic products
- the service's philosophy and any principles or mission statements to which it currently adheres
- how the program currently operates. For example, children's opportunities for learning experiences, the balance between indoor and outdoor and planned and spontaneous activities, how staff reflect upon and develop programs to enhance children's development

Undertaking an audit of this kind will assist services to review their existing practices and take steps towards prioritising and planning for improvement.

Where possible and appropriate it is valuable to involve children in the development of an environmental policy as this can assist them to feel ownership over the policy and can encourage their sense of responsibility in following the policy.

How can staff and carers introduce environmentally sustainable practices to children's services?

Adopting an environmental perspective in planning for children involves translating the knowledge staff and carers possess of children's development and environmental education into challenging and appropriate learning opportunities. Some ways that children may be introduced to environmentally sustainable practice include:

- engaging them in one to one and small group discussions about sustainable practices. The discussions may be prompted by things as simple as children observing the local council recycling truck on collection day, noting how full a garbage bin is or noticing the food and scraps that are left over after mealtimes.
- encouraging them to participate in any established recycling program at the service, or involving them in developing and implementing new strategies for recycling materials.

For example, using materials donated from families for art and craft or donating items to a local council kerb side collection scheme. These activities can not only help children to learn about waste reduction within the

service and community, they can also foster a sense of contributing and connecting to the wider community.

Older children's interests may be stimulated about current environmental issues that are reported in the media, for example, issues such as the drought that has recently affected much of Australia or daily weather reports which often include updates on air quality and pollution levels. Depending on individual children's skills, staff and carers may be able to extend upon children's interests in these areas through activities such as:

- discussing the issues with children and seeking their ideas and opinions
- involving children in research about environmental issues through the radio, television and newspaper reports, as well as through the internet and other media
- engaging children in developing strategies to address particular environmental issues identified in the service. For example, reducing water consumption, recycling food waste

How can families become involved?

The key to encouraging environmental awareness and sustainable practice in children's services is



consistent environmental programs that promote positive learning experiences for children and enables them to observe adults engaging in environmentally sustainable practice. It is also important that services communicate with families about the environmental program at the service and the importance of sustainable practice. Open communication in which families' views are sought and families are informed about the program and how it is implemented daily in the service can encourage families to adopt sustainable practices at home. Meaningful communication between services and families not only supports family involvement; it can also help to provide greater consistency between children's experiences at home and in the child care setting.

Families can be informed about and involved in the development of an environmental policy and in the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices in many ways. For example:

- involving families in the development or review of the service philosophy which includes a focus on environmental sustainability
- displaying information that outlines service policies, practices and its philosophy with regard to environmental sustainability
- using service newsletters to inform families of current environmental issues and related activities at the service
- requesting and recognising families' donations of recycled materials and other items for use in the service
- developing a Code of Practice in consultation with families that reinforces environmentally responsible practices and displaying this in the service
- inviting families to participate in tree planting projects at the service or in 'nature walks' in the local area or neighbourhood

Supporting staff and carers to promote environmental education

It is important that staff and carers are able to access the necessary resources, education and support to enable them to effectively and confidently implement an environmentally focused education program. Staff and carers' daily interactions with children and parents are an integral aspect of a successful environmental program and it is important that staff and carers are able to support these interactions with current information and knowledge about environmental issues.

When developing an environmental program, consideration should be given to the interests and needs of staff and carers. Ways to initiate and support staff and carers' interest may include:

- developing a staff and carer resource library which includes current information about environmental education and environmental issues in general
- seeking or conducting staff and carer professional development opportunities to enhance their understanding of environmental education in child care
- providing resources that staff and carers can use to enhance children's learning and experiences. For example, books, DVDs/ videos, posters, puzzles, games

It is essential to engage staff and carers in the development of environmentally sustainable practices in the service. Consultation with staff and carers can occur through: meetings, discussion groups, questionnaires or surveys, staff/carer appraisal programs and participation in the development and review of the service's philosophy and policies.

Children's services intending to introduce or extend the environmental program and/or environmental sustainable practice will benefit significantly from genuine consultation with all stakeholders. Adopting a collaborative approach to environmental programs in children's services



can help to create a climate of joint responsibility and environmental improvement which may benefit children now and in the future. ■

Further reading

- **Commonwealth of Australia Department of Environment and Heritage. (2000).** *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan*. Canberra, ACT: Author
- **Davis, J. and Elliott, S. (2003).** *Early Childhood Environmental Education: Making It Mainstream*. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia
- **Gordon Community Children's Centre. (1993).** *Playing For Keeps*. Geelong, Vic: Gordon Technical College
- **NSW Environment Protection Authority. (2003).** *Patches of Green: A Review of Early Childhood Environmental Education*. Sydney, NSW: Author

Useful websites

- **Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage** – www.deh.gov.au
- **Australian Association for Environmental Education with the formation of a National Early Childhood Special Interest Group (AAEE EC SIG)** - www.aeee.org.au
- **Environmental Education in Early Childhood Vic Inc. (EEEC)** - www.vicnet.net.au/~eeec/
- **New South Wales Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (NSW ECEEN)** - www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nsw_branch/eceen.html