

More than just a vegie patch: sustainability and sustainable practices in early childhood education – the way forward

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Sustainability is a key component of Quality Area 3 of Australia’s National Quality Standards for early childhood education and care. Yet many services are struggling with meaningful ways of incorporating sustainability into their programs and practices. The inclusion of ‘nature’ both indoors and outdoors is one aspect of sustainability. However, it should be included as part of a larger picture including

economic and social sustainability where educators collaborate with children and families to make positive change for their futures.

Why should early childhood services focus on sustainability?

Our legislations and guiding documents have included sustainability as one of their major platforms as shown below.

Legislation and guidelines informing our approaches to sustainability	
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	Article 29 (Goals of education): A child’s education should develop each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage a child to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help a child to learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.
National Quality Standard (NQS)	Element 3.3.1 Sustainable practices are embedded in service operations: educators and children work together to learn about and promote the sustainable use of resources and to develop and implement sustainable practices. Element 3.3.2 Children are supported to become environmentally responsible and show respect for the environment: children develop an understanding and respect for the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land.
Early Years Learning Framework- Outcome 2	Children are connected with and contribute to their world – Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment – Educators promote this when they embed sustainability in daily routines and practices and when they find ways of enabling children to care for and learn about the land.

The concept of sustainability is broader than we may think

Sustainability is a broad concept encompassing the child, their family and extended family, their early childhood service, local community, Australian society and then global society!

Children are and should be seen as competent beings who are able to be leaders, active citizens in their own learning and agents of change. Children are naturally attuned to the environment – as adults, some of us have lost this trait. Sustainability is an issue of social justice and equity.

What can we do to include sustainability in our service?

Communicate

- Install a bulletin board in the foyer of the building to inform parents and visitors of the current work being undertaken and where they can go for more information if they are interested in taking action at work or at home.
- Include hints and tips related to the current project in the newsletter that goes home to each family.

Use energy wisely

- Develop an action plan for energy use and minimisation.
- Investigate alternative energy sources, e.g. solar PVC's or solar hot water.
- Review heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) efficiency.
- Collaborate with alternative energy suppliers/green electrician.

Get into the garden

- Encourage a worm farm.
- Build a compost area.
- Make a vegetable garden or use hanging baskets.
- Collaborate with local nurseries, supermarkets, local food groups and involvement with the parents and grandparents with the garden and the children.

Commonly accepted definitions in sustainable practice in early childhood education and care

Sustainability - living within our limits and understanding the interconnections among economies, society, politics and the environment and providing equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. A commonly-accepted definition is 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. (Brundtland Report: Our Common Future, 1997)

Environmental sustainability - the long-term maintenance of ecosystem components and functions for future generations.

Education for Sustainability - **working with** peers, adults and educators to observe, decide on and partake in responsible actions for the future.

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability refers to children aged 0 – 5 years undertaking Education for Sustainability (as above).

Embrace biodiversity

- Plant bird-attracting plants and install a birdbath.
- Create a lizard lounge.
- Increase the number of native plants.
- Collaborate with Catchment Management Authorities (CMA) and wildlife educators.

Re-use

- Re-use resources and equipment: boxes, containers, tins and bottles can be re-used for collections, storage and sand/water play.
- Use fabric and other materials in pretend play.
- Collect plastic shopping bags for children's soiled, wet clothes.
- Reuse face washers and hand towels.
- Collect rain water and use in the garden, for water/sand play and to clean.



Re-use resources

Reduce

- Role model behavior you want to teach to children
- Use simple language to discuss with children:
 - Why you turn the lights off
 - Why the scraps are collected after meals
 - Why we don't let the taps run
 - Why rubbish goes in the bin.
- Discuss rubbish trucks, rubbish and land fill.
- Implement a sustainable purchasing policy.

Recycle

- Make recycled paper with the children.
- Explore with children the items in your environment that are recyclable or non-recyclable.
- Purchase toys made from recycled plastic.
- Recycle paper, glass, tins and other materials either into recycle bins or use within the program and classroom.
- Look at containers – can you source baskets instead?

Consider aesthetics and design

- Does the service reflect the natural environment, local community and Indigenous culture?
- What types of plants are used - are they native or drought resistant?

- Have you considered the design and dimensions of the indoor and outdoor physical environment?

What sustainability practices are you already engaged in?

Are you keeping scraps for chooks, using both sides of paper, using only one sheet of paper to dry hands? You are probably doing more than you think.

It is widely recognised that 'embedding' is the key to success in the Assessment and Rating process. Sustainable practices must be authentically entrenched in all aspects of the services. Assessors will expect children to know what these practices are, as well why the practices are implemented. Conduct an environmental audit in your service to determine what you are doing and where there are gaps.



Use natural materials in pretend play

Embedding sustainable practices and pedagogy in all aspects of the service:

- **Staff practices** within staff areas of the centre e.g. office practices, food disposal, use of white goods.
- **Pedagogy** – what we as educators do and say, projects and spontaneous learning, intentional teaching.
- **Physical environment** – the third teacher - turn off lights, open windows, plant grass, care for animals, consider textures, surfaces, senses.
- **Children’s learning and engagement**– thoughts, processes and projects that come from their interests that are empowering – remember not to underestimate the capabilities of children.
- **Whole-service approach including all stakeholders** – educators, management, maintenance crew, kitchen staff, administration, families, extended families, sister centres, local community including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and cultural groups, Australian community or even worldwide global community.

Conclusion

Sustainability is an ongoing and evolving process. We can never say, ‘That’s it, we’ve nailed it!’ We must keep learning, changing, improving and evolving.

Sustainability needs to be individual and tailor-made just for each individual service!

It involves all of us and impacts on all parts of our lives. Sustainability is a broad issue of social justice which allows us to use the principles and practices of our curriculum documents to work collaboratively with children, parents, other educators and the community to achieve positive learning outcomes for young children.

References and further reading and resources

The Early Childhood Educators Place - <https://www.facebook.com/TheEarlyChildhoodEducatorsPlace>

Little Green Steps Sustainability Education for Childcare Centres - <http://www.canterbury.nsw.gov.au/resources/documents/little-green-steps-report.pdf>

Little Green Steps, tips on how to be green - <http://www.littlegreenstep.com/Home/>

Clean up Australia Day - <http://www.cleanupaustraliaday.org.au/>

Keep Australia Beautiful - <http://kab.org.au/>

Rubbish free lunchbox - <http://sustainability.ceres.org.au/node/409>

Queensland Early Childhood Sustainable Network - <http://www.qecsn.org.au/>

NSW Early Childhood Environmental Education Network - <http://www.eceen.org.au/>

Planet Ark - <http://planetark.org/>

Green Home - <http://www2.acfonline.org.au/>

Environmental Education in Early Childhood (Victoria) - <http://www.eeec.org.au/>

ECTA Article (09-09 EYC, Sustainability) “Beyond Recycling and the Veggie Garden” - http://www.ecta.org.au/_dbase_upl/09_09_EYC_Sustainability.pdf

Australian Association for Environmental Education - <http://www.aaee.org.au/members/special-interest-group-1/>

Birds in Backyards - <http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/>

CSIRO - <http://www.csiro.au/>

The Edible School yard - <http://edibleschoolyard.org/>

Australian Museum - <http://www.australianmuseum.net.au/>

The Kitchen Garden Foundation - <http://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/>

National Chemical Information Gateway - http://apps5a.ris.environment.gov.au/pubgate/cig_public/!CIGPPUBLIC.pStart

Kidsafe - <http://www.kidsafe.com.au/>

Reverse garbage - <http://www.reversegarbage.com.au/>

Living Sustainably - <http://www.livingthing.net.au/go/news/living-sustainably/issue-25-november-2012/issue-25-contents.aspx>

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities - <http://www.environment.gov.au/>

My Green Life - <http://www.mygreenlife.com.au/>

NSW Aboriginal Land Council - <http://www.alc.org.au/>

Australian Aboriginal Land Council - <http://australia.gov.au/people/indigenous-peoples/land-councils>