Sustainable practices and environmental responsibility

The Regulations
- Regulation 113  Outdoor space – the natural environment

National Quality Standard
- QA3 Physical Environment (3.3)

What are sustainable practices?

Sustainable practices are the processes services employ to maintain the qualities that are valued in the physical environment. Living sustainably is about living within the means of natural systems (environment) and ensuring that our lifestyle doesn’t harm other people (society and culture). In this respect, sustainable practices relate not only to the natural world but also to other important issues, such as poverty, consumption, community and health.

Sustainable practices empower children to gain knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the environment as it relates to our society. It is through positive childhood experiences that the foundations are laid for the development of environmentally responsible adults.

What is environmental responsibility?

Environmental responsibility is one aspect of sustainability. It is about instilling in children ways to be creative, empowered and positive about the future they are creating through connections and understanding of the environment. A service that aims to teach environmental responsibility will provide children with the opportunity to learn from the environment. Through hands on experience, children will explore the environment and develop skills and knowledge and will develop the critical thinking skills to make informed decisions that affect not only the quality of life in the present but for future generations as well.

What might environmentally responsible learning opportunities look like?

Children develop understandings of themselves and their world through active, hands-on investigation. A supportive active learning environment encourages children’s engagement with the environment.
Active involvement in learning builds children’s understandings of concepts and the creative thinking and inquiry processes that are necessary for lifelong learning. They can challenge and extend their own thinking, and that of others, and create new knowledge in collaborative interactions and negotiations.

Assessors are encouraged to gather information / evidence from a variety of sources including:

- discussion with educators to understand the basis of learning
- observing interactions between educators and children that reinforce practice
- children’s discussion that demonstrates their learning.

As an assessor, you may sight a range of learning opportunities to support children develop:

- an appreciation of nature
- a respect for the natural environment
- an understanding of the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land
- an understanding of Aboriginal sense of place.

Some examples of sustainable activities are listed below:

- observing and caring for birds / animals / reptiles / insects
- water conservation with timers or stickers visible on taps, rainwater tanks or children putting out buckets to collect rainwater
- children being responsible for turning lights and fans off before going outdoors
- children recycling paper and packaging for re-use in art and craft activities
- children participating in sorting and recycling waste after meals
- encouraging children to bring food in reusable containers for their lunch
- children fertilising the garden using “worm tea”
- drawing babies and toddlers attention to natural objects and smells
- children having the opportunity to explore and investigate their natural environment through play.

What might the service look like when sustainable practices are embedded and consistently promoted?

Sustainability should underpin what happens day-to-day in the education and care service. In other words, it should be embedded in the educational program, and in the routines and practices of educators and children. Isolated activities, such as setting up a nature table or a recycling system, are a start, but they need to be built on, coordinated and consistently undertaken to become embedded.

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- Policy documents, which are regularly reviewed to ensure the service’s commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainability is maintained.
• Environmental responsibility and sustainability education included in the service’s statement of philosophy and induction manual for staff. For example, sustainable development objectives may be included in job descriptions and selection criteria for staff.
• Environmental checklists / audits to help guide educators about:
  o water use
  o energy use
  o ventilation
  o waste reduction
  o chemicals
  o animals, plants and the local environment.
• Some form of Environment Management Plan developed by the service.
• An educator or family day care coordinator appointed to champion and motivate all staff, children and their parents to “go green”.
• Recycling bins for paper, plastic and other products.
• Water saving devices, such as rainwater tanks.
• Environmentally friendly pest management and cleaning products used at the service.
• Children have regular opportunities to play in the natural environment and make use of loose parts (eg rocks, twigs, leaves) as part of their play.

**How might educators assist children’s learning about environmental responsibility and sustainability?**

Educators can foster children's capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the knowledge of “why” and “how” to be sustainable. Educators may use a range of strategies to assist children to develop critical thinking and new environmental behaviours.

As an assessor, you may see, or see evidence of, educators:
• Involving children in decisions about the way the service can reduce, recycle and reuse resources in both the indoor and outdoor environment.
• Providing sensory and exploratory experiences with natural materials.
• Sharing with children their positive interactions with the environment.
• Integrating sustainability education with the creative and expressive arts such as music, poetry and visual arts.
• Modelling environmentally friendly and sustainable practices, such as repairing toys rather than discarding them and using second hand toys.
• Actively involving children in sustainable practices at the service.
• Discussing with children the ways different cultures relate to the environment.
• Supporting children to plant a garden.
• Supporting children to pick flowers, vegetables and herbs.
What might a natural outdoor learning environment look like?

The design of outdoor learning environments provide evidence of a service’s sustainable practices and demonstrate methods in which a service help children engage with the natural environment. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, 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.

A sustainably designed outdoor learning environment may include:

- outside pathways to assist children to explore, for example, pathways may be defined by timber slats, stepping stones or plants used creatively
- toys made of natural materials, like wood and stone, and recycled items used for craft
- natural materials accessible for free play, including imaginative play
- a range of plants, such as local indigenous plants, water efficient plants, plants that encourage birds, butterflies and other insects, and scented and flowering plants
- edible herb and vegetable gardens (pots) planted and maintained by the children
- areas of dirt / sand provided for digging with props supplied for imaginative play
- an organic waste area with a worm farm / compost bin / recycling station
- an area suitable for babies with various sensory experiences
- a short nature walk suitable for babies / toddlers.

How can environmental responsibility and sustainability be demonstrated with parents / caregivers?

As an assessor, you may sight the service actively involving parents, caregivers, families and the wider community in some of the following types of initiatives:

- the celebration of national and local environmental initiatives, such as Clean up Australia Day, World Environment Day, National Tree Day, and Earth Hour
- service involvement with local bush and land care groups
- the service sponsoring an endangered animal in a zoo or wildlife park
- children’s excursions to local permaculture gardens, nature walks, wildlife parks and pet farms
- the service raising funds for other children in areas affected by natural disasters
- water saving devices, such as shower heads and hose nozzles, being used as prizes for raffles or lucky door prizes
- parents / visitors who have expertise in environmental education working with the children
- visual displays of families saving energy around their home
- energy-saving tips being made available to parents / caregivers.
How can environmental responsibility and sustainability be demonstrated with parents / caregivers?

Family day care services can demonstrate their commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainability in very practical ways, although it may be on an adapted scale. Similarly, OSHC services can also impart environmental responsibility through sustainable practices utilised by all service types.

Just as with centre-based services, the key is that environmental initiatives are embedded into the program and involve not only the children but also the educators, parents, caregivers, families and the wider community.

As an assessor, you may sight:

- support from the family day care coordinator or OSHC nominated supervisor in providing advice
- collective access to recycled materials
- evidence of organised group excursions to parks, bushland and national parks.

Some FDC or OSHC services may have limited access to outdoor areas or restricted control over an area e.g OSHC service in a school and unable to make changes to outdoor area. The assessor will need to discuss the approach the service has taken to ensure that environmental responsibility and sustainability can still be embedded into service practices despite the limitations, remembering that environmental responsibility and sustainability is more than the physical environment.

References and further reading


NSW Early Childhood Environmental Education Network. www.eceen.org.au