



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority

QUALITY AREA 1

THE HOW AND WHY OF IN-NATURE PROGRAMS



In-nature programs can take place in a variety of natural environments, such as at your local park/reserve, at the beach, a lake, or in the bush.

Each place will offer unique learning experiences for children and can also pose its own planning challenges and considerations.

THE THEORY OF IN-NATURE PLAY

An in-nature pedagogy can be provided within any education and care service type, including long day care, preschool/kindergarten, out of school hours care and family day care. Your in-nature pedagogy will reflect the unique environmental context of your service, the children, families and your community.

In-nature programs have the great potential to introduce the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of engaging with Country, knowing and being for children, families and educators. Authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, history and culture in an in-nature program can take many forms. Read [this article](#) from ACECQA's *We Hear You* blog to find out about one service's approach.

As well as being an overarching term for any program in a natural space, in-nature also refers to a program that involves time spent in a natural setting on a regular basis. Most services choose a space in their local community and within walking distance, or a short trip from the service.

Some services are able to access bush areas or riverbanks as part of their in-nature program. Local councils are creating more natural spaces and rejuvenating existing natural spaces to invite their community back to explore and relax in. The beach is also a likely consideration for a destination for services to incorporate in-nature pedagogy into a program. These environments can change rapidly, with shifting tides and seasonal changes to flora and fauna, and therefore need close supervision and regular risk assessments.

All of these natural spaces provide opportunities for children to learn about and benefit from nature.

ACECQA's *We Hear You* blog has a number of articles which explore an in-nature pedagogy. You can read more about different approaches to in-nature play, in the bush at the beach and in the local park.

Visit <https://wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au> to access this great resource.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR EACH CHILD IN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Research shows that spending time in natural environments has a range of benefits for children. Dr Sue Elliott has identified the following positive outcomes for children participating in a bush kinder program.

- Physical activity – children take part in more physical activity outdoors during in-nature programs and in all weather. This is an important outcome for children as more and more children and families have limited access to natural environments at home.
- Nature dispositions – many parents reported that their child had a greater interest in nature and positive attitudes to natural elements.
- Social skills – educators and teachers observed more collaborative play and children relating to others with understanding, respect and supportiveness.
- Respect and equity – educators and teachers observed less gender stereotyped play at bush kinder than at the service premises, and when siblings visited bush kinder they integrated easily into the play scenarios; all children were welcomed to play.
- Curiosity – Bush kinder aligns with the approved learning frameworks outcome that ‘children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflectivity’.
- Reflection skills – Children changed the way they interacted with the environment and spent periods of time sitting, reflecting and participating in philosophical discussions with peers, educators and teachers.
- Creativity – Parents described that at home, children became less dependent on manufactured toys, and instead collected rocks, twigs and other natural materials for innovative and creative play.

(Chancellor, B, and Elliott, S. (2014) From Forest Preschool to Bush Kinder, in Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, Volume 39, No. 4 December 2014.)

LEADING PRACTICE WITH YOUR SERVICE PHILOSOPHY

When high quality practice is embedded, it is reflected across the service’s operations and systems. Your in-nature practices should align with your service’s philosophy and pedagogy, the principles and practices of the approved learning framework/s, and the policies and procedures that relate to the National Quality Standard (NQS).

A statement of philosophy serves three purposes. It:

- underpins the decisions, policies and daily practices of the service
- reflects a shared understanding of the role of the service among staff, children, families and the community
- guides educators’ pedagogy, planning and practice when delivering the educational program within all spaces.

Some services will incorporate an in-nature pedagogy perspective into their philosophy, and others may choose to develop a separate philosophy statement for their in-nature pedagogy.

In terms of your in-nature pedagogy journey, consider your service context when developing your philosophy.

- How will you begin the process to develop and implement an in-nature pedagogy at your service?
- Who will be involved, and how will you capture the voices of children, families and your community?
- What is your measure of success and what planning processes will you use to inform your program?

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

In-nature programs typically take place in locations that are also available to the general public. Services will need to consider this, and how this impacts the children’s program, time and routine. You will also need to consider what impacts this may have on children, families, the staff and the community itself.

Children benefit from services engaging with local communities and within community spaces, because these partnerships strengthen children’s interest and skills in being active contributors to their own community. Collaborative partnerships are achieved when the service’s philosophy has a strong commitment to valuing diversity, inclusive practice and connecting to the community.

Consider and connect with these community organisations in your local area:

- **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders and communities:** there are many benefits to creating meaningful two-way connections with the Traditional Custodians of the land on which an in-nature program occurs.
- **Local Council staff:** council staff can provide support and advice to educators and teachers on a range of matters such as safe spaces to play and rest and bathroom facilities. Councils may even welcome your service to engage in projects with the council to build or improve local natural spaces.
- **Bush kinder networks:** there are a range of networks available across Australia. One such organisation is [Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network](#) (ECOLN), based in Victoria. They welcome participation from teachers and educators from across Australia.
- **Local environmental groups:** groups such as Bushcare or [Landcare](#), can provide perspectives and information about local flora and fauna which will support the development of environmental responsibility and awareness in your program. They often welcome children and adult volunteers as part of their regeneration programs.
- **Park rangers:** if your in-nature program is taking place in a national park, rangers can provide advice, assistance and information to not only ensure the safety and well-being of those involved, but also enhance the children’s learning and development with their expert knowledge of the area.



THE BENEFIT OF RISKY PLAY DURING AN IN-NATURE PROGRAM

Risk taking is an important element of children's play and in-nature programs provide many learning opportunities. These include:

- providing children with a chance to learn how to manage risk and as a result develop an understanding of safety
- allowing children to explore their desire for risk in a controlled and carefully supervised situation, reducing the likelihood that they will seek out greater unmanaged risks for themselves
- the opportunity to take part in experiences that build on the child's capabilities, such as climbing trees, jumping from a height, balancing and sliding. This allows children to accept challenge and experience feelings of success and pride
- providing the unique opportunity to experience thrill and exhilaration
- providing children with the opportunity to practice and improve their movement skills and spatial awareness.

PRACTICAL THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING AN IN-NATURE PROGRAM

This list of things to consider is not exhaustive. Keep in mind your unique service context, your children, families and community and your service philosophy when planning an in-nature program.

Orientation visits

Children, families and staff will come to the in-nature experience with different levels of familiarity and comfort with natural environments and spaces. Consideration needs to be given to orienting children, families and staff to an in-nature program. How will this orientation look for your community? Consider when the orientation visits may be held, who will attend and what the aim of the orientation program will be.

Meal times

In-nature programs allow for and value uninterrupted time for play, curiosity and exploration. This will impact on routine activities such as meal times. In-nature meal times will probably be individualised to suit children's needs, and the unhurried learning environment. You should also consider hygiene routines such as handwashing and toileting when planning your programs and locations.

Toilet and facilities

Adequate toilet, washing and drying facilities must be provided for safe use by children as per regulation 109 including additional water for hand washing. Consider if your site has bathroom facilities and if a portable toilet is required. Or is something like a bush toilet needed at your site? All facilities should ensure that the dignity of children is respected, and their right to privacy. A daily check of these facilities should be built into any safety checks completed before children arrive at the location as well as your risk assessment of the site.

Child safe principles

Services need to consider how they are meeting the requirements of the [Child Safe Principles](#) within their in-nature program. For example, where programs are operated in public areas or where children are required to access public toilet facilities, have you considered the risk and minimised the opportunity for children to be harmed.

NOTE: The Child Safe Principles are based on the Child Safe Standards. [Some regulatory authorities](#) have developed resources to further support your understanding.

The service philosophy

Regularly critically reflect and review the in-nature program to ensure it remains consistent with the service philosophy and pedagogy. If inconsistencies are identified, review your practices to match the service philosophy or review the philosophy to align with your evolving in-nature pedagogy.

The impact on the local community

An in-nature program will have some level of impact on the environment or community it takes place in. This impact may be more pronounced in a shared community space such as a park or beach. You will need to critically reflect, analyse and respond to the impact the program is having on the site. Consider how the children are interacting with the space and community. How do the community respond to the children and staff and does children's play have any impact on the natural environment? Connecting with your local council, community groups and families can help your reflections.

The quality assessment and rating process

If an in-nature program is part of your regular program and the location is considered an extension venue of your service premises, you need to think about how this will be taken into account as part of the quality assessment and rating of your service. As part of the site assessment of a service (r.61(1)(b)) for quality rating purposes an authorised officer may include an assessment of an in-nature site, as part of the service premises visit. It is important that you discuss this with the authorised officer before the visit date and inform the authorised officer about your program for the day, so that he or she may build that into their visit and dress appropriately for the location.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR IN-NATURE PEDAGOGY

- How does your service's philosophy guide your in-nature pedagogy and teaching decisions?
- How do your practices, including consideration of the Child Safe Standards, consistently align with the service's in-nature philosophy?
- In what ways does the in-nature approach support and promote children's safety and consistently align with the design and delivery of the educational program and service philosophy.
- How does your in-nature pedagogy demonstrate a strong commitment to the principles, practices and learning outcomes of the approved learning framework/s?

Regular and open communication between the approved provider, service leaders, coordinators, educators, teachers and families about the in-nature pedagogy and the service philosophy will build a shared understanding of children's learning, participation and progress. Regular communication about the program and benefits of play will demonstrate to your community how children's outcomes are improving over time by playing in nature.

For more information about the legislative requirements of an in-nature program download the ACECQA Information Sheet: [The regulatory requirements of an in-nature program](#).

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

For additional information download the [Guide to the National Quality Framework](#).

Visit the ACECQA website at www.cecqa.gov.au to download:

[National Law and National Regulations](#)

[National Quality Framework Supporting materials](#) – including Information sheets, posters and other resources which are all freely accessible.

ACECQA Information Sheet: [The how and why of in-nature play](#)

[ACECQA We hear you Blog – Bush Kinder](#)

[ACECQA Risk Assessment and Management Tool](#)

Find other useful resources:

[Parks Victoria – Bush Kinder Handbook](#)

[Nature Play Queensland](#)

[Department of Education and Training, Victoria – Bush Kinders](#)

[CELA Blog – A bush yarn](#)

[Nature Play Australia](#)