The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQs) emphasise the importance of the physical environment as both a key practice and now a Quality Area to be assessed in services. And yet what does a high quality physical environment look like? Luke Touhill looks at spaces that support children’s learning.

The physical environment is a central component of the programs that we offer children. It is not necessarily the most important element in creating a high quality service—ultimately it will be the quality of the relationships and interactions within a centre which determines the quality of care. However the environment plays a major role in either supporting or hindering the development of such relationships.

A rich and inviting environment provides opportunities for children to explore and investigate their world at their own pace, to develop an interest in learning and to share that with others. Importantly it also provides a reflection of our views about children and families—it is a concrete measure of our beliefs and one that on first impressions can create either a sense of welcome or a sense of unease.

In the last 15 years there has been a renewed interest in the role the physical environment can play in supporting children’s learning. Much of this interest has been sparked by ideas from Reggio Emilia. To the educators of Reggio a carefully planned environment is the equivalent of an extra teacher and this idea—of the environment as a “third teacher”—has quickly become a key element in discussions about the design of children’s services. The striking differences between the preschools of Reggio and those of Australia (or, for that matter, the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom) has prompted considerable debate about the adequacy of existing approaches to service design and organisation, the result of which has been a major reappraisal within the early childhood field of how environments for children should look.

The significance of this debate, and of the influence of Reggio Emilia, can be gauged from the fact that it is difficult now to imagine any serious discussion of physical environments without some reference to Reggio. And yet there is also a downside to this interest in Reggio. For some, the sheer beauty and elegance of the Reggio preschools has overshadowed the more important lessons as to how an environment can be designed and organised to promote children’s learning. We have therefore seen a movement to more careful presentation of play materials and greater consideration of the “aesthetics” of children’s environment. Welcome as this is, on its own it does relatively little to change children’s experience of early childhood settings and support their learning. Beautifying a dysfunctional environment will do little to address underlying issues caused by lack of space or poor organisation. Wicker baskets may be a step up from ice cream containers and shoe boxes but without deeper thinking as to how the environment as a whole can support or hinder children’s learning they remain window dressing.

Deeper thinking required

In this article I would like to explore how we can move our thinking about the physical environment beyond just aesthetics to also include ideas about how we organise space and how our spaces help to structure children’s play and learning.

One of the first things to understand about our environments is that they affect our behaviour, often in ways that we are not consciously aware of. For both adults and children the environment gives us cues as to what is expected. How the environment is arranged can also make behaving in certain ways easier or harder. In the late 1960s American researchers Sybil Kritchevsky
and Elisabeth Prescott investigated just this—how does the way that the environment is organised affect behaviour? 40 years later their findings are still relevant:

'What is in a space, a room or a yard, and how it is arranged can affect the behaviour of people; it can make it easier to act in certain kinds of ways, harder to act in others...

One of the most effective predictors of program quality [is] physical space...

The higher the quality of space in a centre, the more likely were teachers to be sensitive and friendly in their manner toward children, to encourage children in their self-chosen activities, and to teach consideration for the rights and feelings of self and others. Where spatial quality was low, children were less likely to be involved and interested, and teachers more likely to be neutral or insensitive in their manner, to use larger amounts of guidance and restriction, and to teach arbitrary rules of social living.'

Space therefore not only affects children's learning but also influences how we as adults behave and even how we interact with children.

The implications of this for how we think about and use our environments are far reaching and yet sadly, are too often ignored. As Deb Curtis and Margie Carter note:

'Early childhood program spaces are seldom put together with conscious sustained attention to the values they communicate or the effect they have on the children and adults who spend their days in them.'

We tend instead to take our surroundings for granted and, without the conscious attention that Curtis and Carter urge, it is easy for children's services to become institutions in the worst sense of the word. For the educators of Reggio Emilia this is the worst possible outcome:

'The idea is that we should avoid any choice or solution that would make a school building a sterile rather than a living space.'

Look around, be inspired!

In encouraging us to be reflective, the EYLF encourages us to look closely at our environments not just in terms of how they meet a set of building standards, or in terms of their functionality, but also in terms of how they can support our program. So, while the National Quality Standard assesses the physical environment directly under Quality Area 3 the environment will also be an important contributor to what is happening in Quality Area 1 – Program and Planning and Quality Area 5 – Relationships with Children. Beyond simply thinking about what materials and equipment we set out we need to consider deeper questions about how our environments support our implementation of all of the principles and practices contained in the EYLF.

If, for example, we recognise the importance of sustained shared thinking for learning then we need to consider how our environment supports it actually happening. How does the environment promote children and adults engaging deeply with each other without interruption or distraction from others? If an environment is hard to supervise because of its layout, size and shape then this becomes far more difficult. An educator who is constantly having to look over their shoulder to see what is happening elsewhere is far less likely to be able to engage in a meaningful interaction with a child or small group of children at the same time.

Similarly, if we value holistic learning then we need to think about how our environment supports it—do we provide materials that are open-ended and flexible and allow children to engage in the kind of complex learning that we know is so valuable? And does the environment allow children to combine and use different materials in new ways that will enhance their learning and understandings?

Or, if we want to provide for continuity of learning, how does our space allow this to happen? Are children able to leave what they are working on and return to it later? Lack of space within many (if not most) children's services buildings typically means that playrooms are often places where children eat and sleep as well as play. Such arrangements mean regular interruptions to pack away and reorganise the room. If materials are packed away every one to two hours, there may be little incentive for children to engage in complex play or construction—knowing they have only a limited amount of time and that what they do will then be packed away. Where spaces are shared there is often little chance for children to develop longer-term projects which continue from morning to afternoon, let alone those that may continue for days or weeks at a time. If we value the depth of learning that such projects provide then we need to think of ways to create spaces that can stay undisturbed for periods of time.

Equally important is how much actual physical space we are able to provide for different experiences. As Kritchevsky and
Prescott found, where space is limited educators often find themselves exercising more control over groups of children to ensure harmony and prevent conflict. At the same time there is often no ability for children to spread out or to find their own space. Interruptions and distractions caused by closely adjoining play areas mean that children’s play may not develop as it could in a larger space. If, for example, the block area is too small then how much opportunity is there for children to build complex and interesting constructions? Or for groups of children to work together, or for different groups of children to work on their own projects side by side?

If we value autonomy, independence and agency then how does our environment allow children to have a degree of control over their surroundings—where in the environment do they get to make choices about what they play with and how they play?

And what about the importance of natural materials and the chance to engage with natural surroundings? The EYLF and NQS make clear how important such experiences are and yet many services have been designed with little or no natural space. How can we bring nature into such environments in a way that is meaningful and not tokenistic? None of these things are necessarily easy to do—especially in services that have been designed to comply only with minimum standards and space requirements. However if we recognise the importance of the physical environment to what happens in a space then the time and effort needed to create rich, engaging and beautiful environments becomes worthwhile. Equally, when we recognise the vital role that the environment plays in either supporting or hindering our work with children, we can start to consider our environment in a broader way—not just in terms of what goes where, or how it looks, but in terms of how it can promote and guide children’s learning and relationships.

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**References**


EYLF Professional Learning Workshops

REGISTRATIONS NOW OPEN

65 EYLF Professional Learning Workshops are about to take place across urban and regional Australia, to assist early childhood education and care professionals to better understand and implement the EYLF.

Workshop benefits include:

- a practical, hands-on experience that will help you to implement the EYLF in your service
- facilitators who are knowledgeable and experienced early childhood experts
- opportunities to develop support networks with other EC professionals in your region
- free resource materials
- travel subsidy* (conditions apply)
- lunch and refreshments
- a certificate of attendance.

ECA has been funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to implement the EYLFPLP.