

Previously published in 2016 in *Belonging Early Years Journal*, Issue 2, p. 8-9.

Nature is just not enough by Dr Sue Elliott

The article title 'Nature is just not enough' is deliberately provocative here for all early childhood educators. We need to be provoked to create change in the current global climate change crisis which has long-term consequences for the children we work with today. It is now recognised that we are living in a new geological time, 'The Anthropocene', defined by the way humans have impacted on the Earth's ecosystems to the point that we have, possibly irreversibly, changed the climate. It is clear young children have the most to lose from the many social, physical and environmental impacts of climate change and emerging research does now indicate the potential for negative developmental outcomes (Danysh et al., 2014). But, what does this mean for how we work as educators with young children and their families? Before we discuss some practicalities, we need to review our shared early childhood education history and some current factors impacting on how we understand sustainability in early childhood education.

Early childhood education has historically built on the foundations of theorists such as Froebel and Rousseau who advocated children playing in nature as integral to children's learning and development. Over recent decades this has been eroded by increasing trends towards disposable and synthetically orientated consumerism. I question just how many more rubber and plastic outdoor playspaces can we install in the name of safety and how many more imported manufactured play materials can we accumulate in centre store rooms? We seemed to have lost sight of the many benefits of moveable wooden planks, tanbark soft-fall and locally found natural items with possibilities for open-ended play.

In more recent years nature in early childhood education has been reinvigorated and several factors have contributed to this. Firstly, across our current guiding policy documents *Being Belonging Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2013) natural play elements and naturalised playspaces are promoted. Secondly, we are in the midst of an international nature play movement fuelled by 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv, 2008). Harking back to our earlier theoretical links to the importance of nature in childhood, early childhood educators have readily grasped this opportunity to bring back nature into early childhood programs. In

Australia, there has been a rapid emergence of forest preschool or bush kinder programs and state government funded 'nature play' initiatives. So, we now have many rocks and logs in outdoor playspaces, baskets of natural materials (albeit often store bought and imported) and at best estimate over 150 bush kinder programs nationally. There are significant documented benefits for children from these changes, but is nature enough to address global climate change?

Into this mix we add the word 'sustainability', a somewhat new and perplexing term for many early childhood educators (Elliott & McCrea, 2015). But, sustainability is multi-dimensional, not just about nature and is described by UNESCO (2010) to include four dimensions: social, natural, economic and political. Sustainability is also about shifting worldviews and exploring ways of ethically being in the world collectively with others both human and non-human. While there are now many practitioner publications to promote exploration of what sustainability might mean in early childhood settings (refer to the list below), field experience suggests often practitioners default to nature as the most readily understandable way to implement sustainability or perhaps they may identify a few discrete sustainable outdoor practices such as worm farms and water tanks. The unique challenges of engaging with sustainability (Standard 3.3) in early childhood services are evident in the regular ACECQA assessment and ratings reports. Most recently, this Standard was explicitly identified as the third most frequently unmet Standard for early childhood services nationally (ACECQA, 2016).

With this history and discussion of the challenges in mind, we must now rethink the implementation of education for sustainability in early childhood settings. Some possible strategies for deeper shifting of worldviews and multi-dimensional approaches are outlined below.

- Draw UNESCO's four dimensions of sustainability as quadrants on a sheet of paper and as a team of educators create your own service map of the various program experiences and routines and/or operational practices that link to the different quadrants. Now question are there an abundance of ideas listed under natural and not much elsewhere in social, economic or political dimensions? What new ideas could be introduced into the program or service operation that would lead to a more balanced and holistic embedding of sustainability?

- Reflect on how any new sustainability experiences or practices are introduced. Are they introduced as this is what we are now going to do, or is a rationale offered and discussed incorporating all viewpoints? You might like to view Simon Sinek's Ted Talk online about leading change by beginning with 'why' not 'what'. You are most likely to embed change and bring others along with you by beginning with 'why' we might need to use sustainable cleaning practices, not 'what' you think are the ones to use.
- Engage in some pedagogical challenges by considering how the values, worldviews and the inevitable dilemmas of implementing sustainability experiences might be integrated into the program with children and families. There are many social learning possibilities such as how children might equitably share water from a limited source in a sandpit or digging patch, how to incorporate plants in play without denuding the garden or considering the sustainability ethics of food at lunch or snack time.

As indicated at the outset 'nature is not enough', there is much more to addressing sustainability in early childhood services, and we must in times of global climate uncertainty. I acknowledge experiences in nature are important, but only part of the story in promoting children's healthy and sustainable futures.

References and further reading

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