



PROVIDING APPROPRIATE OUTDOOR SPACE

Outdoor experiences are an important part of children's healthy growth, learning, wellbeing and development.

Outdoor experiences provide an opportunity for children to explore, discover, be curious and appreciate the natural world, as well as be active, strengthen fine and gross motor movement skills and participate in risky and creative play.



Indoor and outdoor learning spaces in children's education and care settings should be designed to align with the objectives and guiding principles of the National Quality Framework (NQF) including:

- ensuring the safety, health and wellbeing of children
- improving children's educational and developmental outcomes
- the rights and best interests of the child are paramount
- best practice is expected in the provision of education and care.

Outdoor play enables children to explore, experience, value and connect with the natural environment. Experiences in an outdoor environment support children to gain knowledge about the natural world and develop environmental awareness. It is a child's right to have an opportunity to explore, experience and develop respect for the natural environment (Articles 29 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

LINKS TO THE EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES NATIONAL LAW

Part 3 - Division 1 – Application for service approval, including section 47(1)(b): Determination of application for service approval: In determining an application for service approval, the

Regulatory Authority must have regard to the suitability of the education and care service premises and the site and location of those premises for the operation of an education and care service (except in the case of a family day care (FDC) residence).

Part 3 - Division 5 – Application for service waiver

Part 3 - Division 6 – Application for temporary waiver

Section 167 – Offence relating to protection of children from harm and hazard

Section 168 – Offence relating to required programs

Section 323 – Approved learning framework.

LINKS TO THE EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES NATIONAL REGULATIONS

Part 2.2 - Division 1 – Applications for service approvals, including regulation 25: Additional information about proposed education and care service premises

Part 2.2 - Division 5 – Service waiver

Part 2.2 - Division 6 – Temporary waiver

Regulation 103: Premises, furniture and equipment to be safe, clean and in good repair.

Regulation 104: Fencing (exceptions apply in relation to children over preschool age)

Regulation 105: Furniture, materials and equipment

Regulation 107: Space requirements - indoor space (does not apply in respect of a FDC residence)

Regulation 108: Space requirements – outdoor space (does not apply in respect of a FDC residence)

Regulation 110: Ventilation and natural light

Regulation 113: Outdoor space – natural environment (additional requirement for centre-based services only)

Regulation 114: Outdoor space – shade (additional requirement for centre-based services only)

Regulation 115: Premises designed to facilitate supervision

Regulation 254: Declared approved learning frameworks

LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

The importance of providing safe, suitable indoor and outdoor learning spaces is reflected in the National Quality Standard (NQS), in particular:

Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice

Element 1.2.3 – Child directed learning

Quality Area 2: Children’s Health and Safety

Element 2.1.2 – Health practices and procedures

Element 2.1.3 – Healthy Lifestyle (healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child)

Element 2.2.1 – Supervision

Quality Area 3: Physical environment

Standard 3.1: Design (the design of the facilities is appropriate for the operation of a service)

Element 3.1.1 – fit for purpose (outdoor and indoor spaces, buildings, fixtures and fittings are suitable for their purpose, including supporting the access of every child)

Standard 3.2: Use (the service environment is inclusive, promotes competence and supports exploration and play-based learning)

Element 3.2.1 – inclusive environment (outdoor and indoor spaces are organised and adapted to support every child’s participation and to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments)

Element 3.2.3 – Environmentally responsible (the service cares for the environment and supports children to become environmentally responsible)



Under the National Regulations, approved providers of centre-based education and care services and family day care venues are required to provide access to unencumbered outdoor space of at least seven square metres for each child*. This space requirement, which is more than double the minimum space requirement for indoor space, enables children to participate in more active physical play and provides access to nature, sunlight, fresh air and experiences unable to be achieved indoors.

UNENCUMBERED SPACE

Space requirements are based on total useable, unencumbered space available at the premises.

Unencumbered space is considered as the useable play and leisure space available for children. For example, unencumbered space does not include areas where children have access to potentially hazardous items, areas of play space or school facilities that cannot be adequately supervised or accessed freely.

To be considered unencumbered space, the space available must be used exclusively by the education and care service at the time it is operating.

Approved providers must ensure that outdoor spaces provided at the premises allow children to explore and experience the natural environment, and that there is adequate shade.



Family Day Care residences do not have the same minimum requirements for outdoor spaces and should ensure strategies are in place to enable children in residences without direct access to outdoor environments to have opportunities to access outdoor spaces.

* Outdoor space requirements do not apply to a child or children being educated and cared for by the service in the case of an emergency or exceptional circumstances.

OUTDOOR SPACES

Outdoor spaces for children should enable them to participate in experiences that connect them to the natural world. It should also enable them to engage in ‘risky play’ and physical activity, and provide access to different sensory experiences. Outdoor spaces should be of a shape that ensures that children are able to engage in purposeful outdoor experiences (that is, long narrow spaces may restrict outdoor play options available to and experienced by children).

Outdoor spaces for children cannot include:

- areas such as pathways, thoroughfares, car parks, storage areas and any other space that is not suitable for children
- an area of a verandah used in calculating the area of indoor space
- spaces that children cannot access, including steep slopes and areas of dense planting.

Access to outdoor learning environments provide opportunities for children to:

- engage in movement and physical activity such as walking, running, skipping
- connect with nature through observation and interactions such as gardening
- participate in experiences that are messy and noisy such as water play
- develop gross motor and stability skills such as balancing, twisting and swinging
- engage in risky play through climbing, bike riding and jumping
- lead free play individually and in group scenarios
- release energy and self-regulate.

Adequate shading can be provided by natural vegetation such as trees, shade sails and umbrellas. Natural surfaces that reflect less ultraviolet radiation such as grass, soil and bark, can be used to reduce UV exposure and radiant heat.

IMPORTANCE OF OUTDOOR SPACE

There are some characteristics of the outdoor environment that offer specific health and developmental benefits to children, which are unable to be replicated in an indoor environment. For example, safe exposure to ultraviolet light in outdoor environments is vital for healthy eye development. Studies have indicated that, without sufficient exposure to natural sunlight in childhood, the risk of myopia increases.

While there are health risks associated with over exposure to the ultraviolet radiation (UV), some sunlight exposure is important for healthy bone and muscle development. Children's main source of Vitamin D is through sunlight, and; it is very difficult to obtain an adequate amount of Vitamin D from food alone. How much sunlight is recommended will depend on UV levels which vary according to the geographic location, the time of year and the time of day. The Cancer Council recommends sun protection whenever ultraviolet radiation levels are 3 and above.

Access to sunlight, with appropriate UV protection, is important for children's development and may be considered when assessing whether a service is providing adequate access to outdoor space where children can engage in outside play. Approved providers must also ensure that indoor spaces of services' premises have adequate natural light (regulation 110).

In some circumstances, a council may restrict the service's operating hours during their approval process. For example, if the service is in a residential area, the council may impose restrictions on the use of the playground early in the morning and/or evening. If a service's use of the outdoor space is restricted due to council approval, the regulatory authority should be consulted, and a waiver may be required.



Further considerations for approved providers of FDC services in assessing and reassessing the suitability of, and risks associated with a FDC

service operating from a residence or venue can be found in [ACECQA's policy and procedure guidelines](#) for assessment and reassessment of residences and venues.

VERANDAHS

Verandahs may be calculated as part of the outdoor space available.

A verandah used as outdoor space must be:

- covered either by a separate solid roof or by the roof of the main structure
- largely open to the air, well-ventilated, have adequate natural light, and allow children to access and experience the outdoors
- open-sided, sharing its long wall with the adjoining building's indoor space, and no more than two other walls/barriers/fences that together do not enclose the structure.

A verandah used as outdoor space must not be:

- covered by a level of the building (for example, an undercroft)
- a covered walkway between two indoor spaces or a balcony that transitions from an indoor space to a drop.

Enclosed, covered outdoor spaces that are not open to the air will not be considered part of the outdoor space without approval by the regulatory authority. The regulatory authority may assess verandahs used as outdoor space on a case-by-case basis.

APPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE APPROVALS

Approved providers must provide the required amount of outdoor space in all property acquisitions or developments. They also need to consider the suitability of sites and premises before buying or leasing, as well as at the planning, designing and building stages to ensure compliance with physical requirements under the Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations).

In determining an application for service approval, regulatory authorities must consider the suitability of the service premises and its site and location.

When submitting an application for service approval, the following information is required:

- ✔ Plans prepared by a building practitioner of the proposed premises showing:
 - the location of all buildings, structures, outdoor play areas and shaded areas
 - a floor plan indicating indoor and outdoor spaces suitable for children.
- ✔ Calculations carried out by a building practitioner of the unencumbered indoor and outdoor spaces (regulations 107 and 108).
- ✔ The landscape of, or landscaping plans for, outdoor spaces that will be used by the education and care service, specifying the natural environments that are or will be provided.

Where the total amount of unencumbered indoor and outdoor space per child allows for different numbers of children, the lower number is the maximum number that a service may educate and care for.

Further information about what is required in an application for service approval is set out in [regulation 24-26](#).

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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

[Guide to the National Quality Framework](#)

[Belonging, Being & Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia \(EYLF\)](#)

[My Time, Our Place – Framework for School Age Care in Australia](#)

[The Risk Assessment and Management tool](#)

ACECQA Information Sheets:

- [Active supervision: ensuring safety and promoting learning](#)
- [Babies and outdoor play](#)
- [The environment as the third teacher](#)
- [Inclusive environments](#)

[United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

[ACECQA information sheet on evidence for waiver applications](#)

For Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) providers in [NSW – Out of School Hours Care \(OSHC\) Waiver Policy](#)

In New South Wales, design guidance for verandahs as outdoor space is provided in the [NSW Child care planning guideline](#).

In Queensland, guidance for unencumbered indoor and outdoor space is provided in the [Unencumbered indoor and outdoor space guidance](#).