

Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities – Design Standards

# Part 1: Strategic Design



Government of South Australia  
Department for Education

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## Part 1: Strategic Design

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# Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities – vision and governance

In South Australia there is a history of investment and innovation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Across the State the development of ECEC facilities has seen parents, children and a range of professionals in child development come together in the interest of growing healthy children, families and communities.

Most children attending ECEC facilities will be within the age range of birth to 6 years. These settings can bring together care and education, health, community development activities and family services and may include:

- preschool
- long day care
- occasional care
- inclusive preschool programs
- targeted parent and community programs
- health services
- community support services and programs.

This early learning model enhances the holistic education and care benefits and seamlessly link to early years of formal schooling. An environment where community, educators, specialists and families collaborate in the provision of family and child services supports highly effective development and learning.

Services are provided in direct response to the needs of the individual communities and incorporate local cultural and community members' agency into decision making.

The early years learning environment and planned curriculum are guided by the [National Quality Framework \(NQF\)](#) and [Early Years Learning Framework](#) which provides a national approach to [regulation](#), assessment and quality improvement for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services across Australia.

The NQF includes National Law and National Regulations, [National Quality Standard \(NQS\)](#), assessment and quality rating process and national learning frameworks. The NQF is administered by the [Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority \(ACECQA\)](#), an independent national authority.

The [Education Standards Board \(ESB\)](#) is the state regulatory authority that administers the NQF in South Australia. They are responsible for granting approvals (including provider approvals and service approvals) and assessing and rating services against each of the quality areas of the NQS and providing an overall rating based on these results, with the department's building design standards aiming to support an [exceeding rating](#).

# Early childhood pedagogy principles

From birth, children are connected to family, communities, culture and place and a child’s early learning, development and wellbeing influences their life chances. Children’s learning is dynamic, complex and holistic, meaning the physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning and culture are all intricately interwoven and interrelated.

The [Early Years Learning Framework – Belonging, Being & Becoming](#) (EYLF) has a specific emphasis on play-based learning which provides both a context (a place or space where children play) and a process (a way of learning and teaching) where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play-based learning environments (both indoor and outdoor) should promote and support different types of play for children’s active engagement, agency, problem solving, curiosity, creativity and exploration.

Centered around children’s learning, development, and wellbeing are the principles, practices and learning outcomes needed to support *belonging, being and becoming* – Figure 1.

VISION		
BELONGING, BEING AND BECOMING		
PRINCIPLES	PRACTICES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships</li> <li>Partnerships</li> <li>Respect for diversity</li> <li>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives</li> <li>Equity, inclusion and high expectations</li> <li>Sustainability</li> <li>Critical reflection and ongoing professional learning</li> <li>Collaborative leadership and teamwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holistic, integrated and interconnected approaches</li> <li>Responsiveness to children</li> <li>Play-based learning and intentionality</li> <li>Learning environments</li> <li>Cultural responsiveness</li> <li>Continuity of learning and transitions</li> <li>Assessment and evaluation for learning, development and wellbeing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children have a strong sense of identity</li> <li>Children are connected with and contribute to their world</li> <li>Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</li> <li>Children are confident and involved learners</li> <li>Children are effective communicators</li> </ul>

**Figure 1:** Early Years Learning Framework – This diagram illustrates the principles, practices and learning outcomes required to achieve the vision of the Framework and support all children’s belonging, being and becoming.

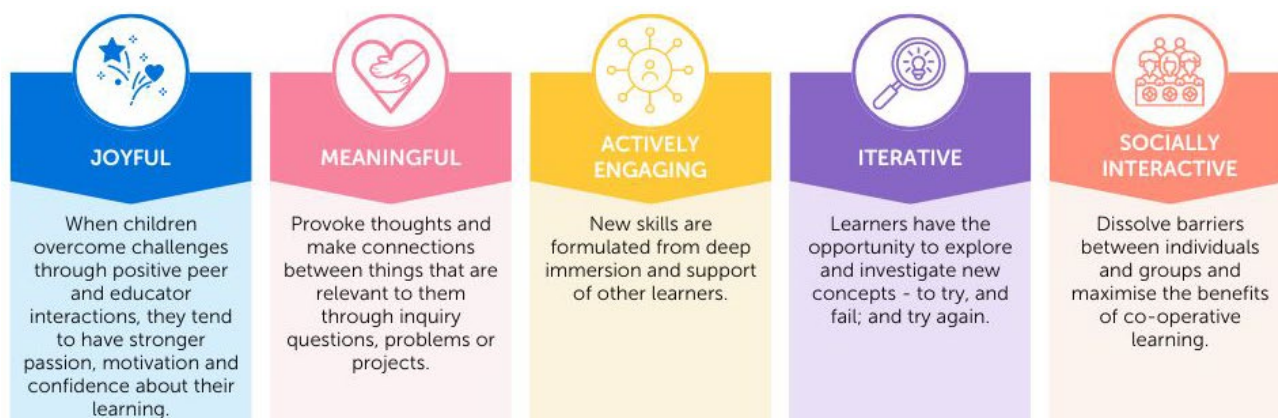
# Early childhood learning environments

To meet the requirements of NQS Quality Area 3 – Physical Environment, which aims to ensure the physical environment is safe, suitable and provides a rich and diverse range of experience that promote children’s learning and development, ECEC facilities must ensure the concepts outlined in Figure 2 are met.

Concept	Descriptor
<b>QA3</b>	<b>Physical environment</b>
3.1 Design	The design of the facilities is appropriate for the operation of a service.
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.
3.1.2 Upkeep	Premises, furniture and equipment are safe, clean and well maintained.
3.2 Use	The service environment is inclusive, promotes competence and supports exploration and play-based learning.
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.
3.2.2 Resources support play-based learning	Resources, materials and equipment allow for multiple uses, are sufficient in number, and enable every child to engage in play-based learning.
3.2.3 Environmentally responsible	The service cares for the environment and supports children to become environmentally responsible.

**Figure 2:** [ACECQA – Quality Area 3 Introduction](#) outlining the National Quality Standards' requirements for the physical environment.

Play-based learning environments (both indoor and outdoor) should promote and support different types of play for children’s active engagement, agency, problem solving, curiosity, creativity and exploration. Children learn through play when it is:



**Figure 3:** Adapted from [Learning through play: a review of the evidence](#) – learning through play happens when the activity (1) is experienced as joyful, (2) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, (3) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking, (4) as well as iterative thinking (experimentation, hypothesis testing, etc), and (5) social interaction.

Active learning environments ‘encourage children to explore and interact with the environment to construct meaning and knowledge through their experiences, social interactions and negotiations with others’<sup>1</sup>. They should:

- provide choice and different activities/experiences for children
- provide access to outdoor learning environments with opportunities for nature play
- use real life, relevant experiences for co-constructing understandings with children
- make accessible to children resources that can be used in multiple ways (information and manipulative, interactive and natural open ended materials)
- provide opportunities for shared activity
- create a collaborative social environment
- provide choice, accept and support children’s decisions
- provide opportunities for and supports authentic experimentation
- foster self-regulation and self-awareness
- respect the child’s ‘finished products’ and creative expressions
- encourage and accepts children’s autonomy, initiative and active participation
- respect a child’s choice to retreat/observe/play alone
- challenge socially diverse behaviours and attitudes respectfully
- encourage children’s creative expression and multiple representations.

<sup>1</sup> [Early Years Learning Framework – Belonging, Being & Becoming](#) (EYLF 2022 V2.0 pg 64)

# Strategic vision for ECEC facilities design

ECEC learning environments must align to the Strategy for Public Education (see Figure 4) and:

- be **welcoming, accessible, safe** and **inclusive**
- provide **culturally safe** and welcoming spaces that reflects local culture and needs
- cater for **diversity**, including different learning styles, language and capabilities
- be **responsive and enabling** to the needs of children as well as to the intention of the educators
- **support** children to explore using all their senses and **develop dispositions for learning** such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, **persistence** and imagination
- be **flexible and responsive** to the **interests and rights** of individual children including access to quiet spaces for thinking, wondering and **rest**, and more active spaces for sharing, laughing, building, climbing, digging, gardening, creating, dancing and being active
- provide opportunities for children to **make choices** and **develop autonomy** and **independence**, being encouraged and supported to make more complex decisions and follow through on their interests and ideas
- provide a range of spaces and opportunities for **active exploration** through play and the **investigation** of meaningful ideas including investigation with a range of technological resources and being able to problem solve, inquire, experiment, hypothesise and research
- provide a range of spaces to be able to **fully engage** in all forms of the Arts and STEM
- provide educators with **quiet and private** spaces to meet, discuss, **reflect and plan** for children’s learning
- provide **families and the community** with spaces to **actively engage** with their child’s development and learning and expand their own skills and knowledge
- **reflect and enhance** the lives of children and families attending the facility.

Each setting will reflect the personalities of the children, educators and families who are part of the learning community. The learning environment needs to support a sense of ownership and identity for all users.



Figure 4: Strategy for Public Education – outlines the areas of impact that we will prioritise and resource to successfully deliver on our purpose.

ECEC facility design must:

- support the education and care principles and contribute to targets outlined in various department, state and Australian government strategies
- enable the successful delivery of the Early Years Learning Framework and support the department's position on pedagogy
- incorporate [Universal Design Principles](#) to ensure products and environments are inclusive of all
- align with the principles outlined in the [South Australian Urban Design Charter](#)
- consider and respond to current and future climate change impacts to support the [SA Government's climate actions](#)
- align with the [principles of good design](#) provided by the Office for Design and Architecture SA (ODASA) in regard to context, inclusivity, durability, value, performance and sustainability
- meet the functional specifications and requirements of the department's 'Planning Standards'
- meet compliance approval and enable services to [exceed](#) during rating and assessment against the NQS by the Education Standards Board
- reflect our image of the child, the family and the community and make it a place of encounter with a strong sense of moral purpose within its community.

Detailed information supporting the design of ECEC facilities to align with pedagogy frameworks and department, State and Australian government strategies are available in [Appendix A](#).

A full [glossary of terms](#) is available in the ECEC Design Standards document.

## Revision record

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## Contact

Team: Asset Planning, Standards and Sustainability

Email: [Education.AssetStandards@sa.gov.au](mailto:Education.AssetStandards@sa.gov.au)

Phone: 8226 0717