



Policy: Outdoor play areas in education and care services

Definitions, abbreviations and references

- National Quality Framework (NQF) includes the National Law and Regulations, the NQS assessment and quality rating process and national learning frameworks
- Education and Care Services National Law (National Law) and the Education and Care Services National Regulations. The National Law is adopted in SA through the Education and Early Childhood Services (Registration and Standards) Act 2011
- The National Quality Standard (NQS) is a key aspect of the National Quality Framework and includes 7 key quality areas that are important to outcomes for children
- Temporary waivers may be granted for up to 12 months
- Service waivers may be granted if a provider is unable to meet requirements for an ongoing period. State and Territory authorities may issue a waiver if an approved provider can show genuine difficulty meeting requirements under the NQS.

Purpose

The National Law and the NQF value outdoor play and access to natural materials for children. The National Regulations set out specific space requirements for the provision of indoor and outdoor space in centre-based education and care services. They stipulate that outdoor spaces provided at the education and care service premises must allow children to explore and experience the natural environment. In addition, the NQS, against which services are assessed and rated, contains a number of standards and elements under Quality Area 2 (children's health and safety) and Quality Area 3 (physical environment) which impact directly on the provision of outdoor spaces.

The Board is prepared in certain limited circumstances to issue temporary or service waivers with respect to requirements for outdoor space. These waivers may be used to allow indoor space to contribute to outdoor space to compensate for the reduced access to actual outdoor space.

This document sets out the Board's policy with respect to the granting of waivers for outdoor space requirements in parts of the Adelaide CBD, and provides guidance on the compensatory measures that would be expected to be put in place when a request for a waiver is made.

The importance of outdoor play

Research supports the overwhelming benefits for children when they are able to engage in free play in a natural environment. The importance of outdoor learning environments is acknowledged in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), 'Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Play spaces in natural environments include plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature. They foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education' (EYLF, 2009, p15-16).

Natural environments allow children to experience risk taking, problem solving and to face challenges and learn to cope with different situations. They also allow children to begin to understand the natural world around them. Importantly, outdoor play should allow children

opportunities to learn and gain competence across a varied range of motor skill activities.

It should provide occasions for children to refine skills in:

1. Motor skills: such as walking, running, jumping, climbing, hopping, skipping, sliding and tri-cycling;
2. Manipulative skills: such as throwing, catching, kicking, striking and bouncing; and
3. Stability skills: such as bending, stretching, swinging, twisting and balancing.

Exposure to outdoor levels of sunlight is being seen to be a positive factor in eye development. In addition, play on uneven and changing surfaces helps develop the internal sense of body awareness that is the basis for many physical abilities that are taken for granted. Outside play has also been linked to improved mental health and cognitive abilities.

A natural environment that provides challenge and exploration contributes to children's overall physical health, emotional and cultural wellbeing, and access to a natural environment accords with the broad objectives of the NQS, and the National Law and National Regulations to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children; to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children; and to promote continuous improvement in the provision of quality education and care services.

Policy statement

The importance of outdoor learning environments is embedded within the requirements of the NQF.

It is therefore the policy of the Board to only consider granting a waiver for outdoor space requirements of the National Regulations where genuine outdoor space cannot be achieved (either partially or completely) and where certain criteria are met. This policy statement outlines these criteria.

Genuine outdoor space is always preferable to simulated outdoor space.

An application for a Service Waiver may be considered for a service with reduced or no outdoor spaces only under the following circumstances:

- the proposed service is located within the Adelaide CBD
- the approved provider can provide an explanation for why the service needs to be located at that site rather than an alternative site that has outdoor space and may only be able to provide part of the required outdoor space
- the proposed service can demonstrate an unmet need for an education and care service; and
- the proposed service has access to suitable open space adjacent to the proposed service

If outdoor space to be used by the service is not part of the approved service site, the approved provider must provide evidence such as a letter of agreement that the service has the on-going right to access the space.

The outdoor space, if not on the approved service site, should be

- available during the service's hours of operation
- readily accessible for children
- of sufficient area for the number of children that will use the space and
- fit for the purpose of being used as an integrated part of the curriculum provided.

In addition to access to suitable open spaces, the service must be able to demonstrate the requisite amount of unencumbered outdoor space. Simulated outdoor space must be provided in addition to indoor space and cannot be counted twice when calculating areas.

Requirements for 'simulated' outdoor environments

Simulated outdoor environments are internal spaces that have all the features, experience and qualities of an outdoor space.

'Simulated' outdoor spaces should not be viewed as a replacement for outdoor play spaces but may be used in addition to access to outdoor play areas. If outdoor play areas do not provide for the full 7m² unencumbered space per child, the shortfall must be compensated for with 7m² unencumbered indoor space for each child in addition to the 3.25m² that is also required. That is, there must be a minimum of 10.25 m² unencumbered space per child.

The service must be able to demonstrate through their program how they will enable children to access natural materials such as trees and other plants, rocks and soil. Children should have nearly all day access to natural light and natural air movement, within the natural constraints of the weather. Simulated outdoor environments should promote the same learning outcomes that are developed during outdoor play.

The design of the allocated additional indoor space should allow the benefits of an outdoor learning environment, that is:

- the design provides access to natural experiences that mimic the outdoors, such as water play, sand play, bark play, accessible plantings, or other elements from nature
- the area is suitable and provides sufficient area for gross motor activities for different age groups and ample flexibility for continued challenge to meet children's needs and abilities and
- the service makes provision to allow adequate natural ventilation and access to natural light for example through large windows, glass doors and panels to enable views of trees, views of the sky and clouds and movement outside the facility.

Relevant regulations and standards and the availability of waivers

Regulation/ Standard Requirement Note: Regulations and Standards are being amended	Details	Waiver may be granted?
Regulation 108 National Regulations	Premises must have at least 7 square metres of unencumbered outdoor space for each child being educated and cared for by the service.	Yes
Regulation 113 National Regulations	Approved providers must ensure that outdoor spaces provided at the education and care service premises allow children to explore and experience the natural environment.	No
Standard 2.2 National Quality Standard	Physical activity is embedded in the program for children.	No
Standard 2.2 Element 2.2.2 National Quality Standard	Physical activity is promoted through planned and spontaneous experiences and is appropriate for each child.	No
Quality Area 3 National Quality Standard	The physical environment is safe, suitable and provides a rich and diverse range of experiences which promotes children's learning and development.	No
Standard 3.1 Element 3.1.1 National Quality Standard	Outdoor spaces are suitable for their purpose.	Yes
Standard 3.1 Element 3.1.3 National Quality Standard	Facilities are designed or adapted to allow interaction between indoor and outdoor space.	Yes

Approved Providers considering relying on a waiver to comply with the space requirements of the National Law as part of the application for a service approval are encouraged to consult with the Board during the concept and planning stages as there should be no assumption that a waiver will be granted.

In other exceptional circumstances, a waiver for outdoor space may be considered. The approved provider is encouraged to engage with the Board before the commencement of the project.

Temporary Waivers

A temporary waiver for outdoor space may be granted by the Board in the event that there is limited access to outdoors for example, where the outdoor play area is being renovated and cannot be accessed on a temporary basis, or where a service is temporarily relocated following significant damage to the usual service premises.

An application for a temporary waiver in circumstances such as these should be accompanied by a risk assessment detailing how risks to children will be mitigated or eliminated while the waiver is in effect.

This policy has been adapted from the New South Wales Department of Education and the Victorian Department of Education and Training policy statements regarding waivers of regulation 108 – outdoor space.