



Australian Children's  
Education & Care  
Quality Authority

## QUALITY AREA 3

# INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS



An inclusive service environment is one where both indoor and outdoor spaces – natural and built – are organised and adapted to support every child's participation and to engage every child in quality experiences (Element 3.2.1).

In such an environment, all children's backgrounds, abilities and preferences are valued, and all children have equitable access to the resources and experiences they wish to engage with. Inclusion supports children's participation in learning and enhances opportunities to both demonstrate learning and value difference.

Inclusive environments recognise the diverse ages, interests, preferences, abilities and learning styles of all children and can help:

- promote children's learning, development, and engagement
- ensure a sense of belonging
- foster positive social relationships.

To ensure spaces are truly inclusive, this should ideally be considered and addressed in the design stage. Recognising that this is not always possible, it is important to note that, once environments have been created, educators can consider how reasonable adjustments could be made, including the placement, choice and organisation of equipment and resources to promote access and participation for all children. The environment and resources can also be adjusted throughout the day in response to children's play.

While the focus of this information sheet is the physical environment, consideration should be given to how the service embeds inclusion holistically by fostering an inclusive social and emotional environment. The service philosophy, programs, policies and procedures should also reflect the commitment to inclusion by recognising and valuing diversity.

## LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK (NQF)

Inclusion is a key aspect of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics, and many other charters and documents relating to education and care.

Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the National Quality Framework (NQF) and are embedded throughout the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the approved learning frameworks.

The NQF:

- uses the terms *each child*, *every child* and *all children* to promote inclusion
- recognises all children as confident and capable learners with the capacity and right to succeed regardless of diverse circumstances, including strengths, cultural background and abilities
- requires educators to hold high expectations for the learning and development of all children, recognising that every child treads an individual learning path and will progress in different and equally meaningful ways.

The right of every child to be included, to participate and have equitable access is demonstrated through all seven NQS Quality Areas.

Quality Area 3 of the NQS promotes the creation of inclusive service environments:

**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.

## UNDERSTANDING NEEDS AND ACCESSING SUPPORT

All children’s needs should be considered when designing an inclusive environment, including those of differing ages, interests, backgrounds, cultures and abilities. It may be beneficial to work with third party organisations that specialise in supporting services to be inclusive. They can help identify barriers, offer strategies to address these, provide tailored equipment and resources, and deliver training.

When designing or adapting an environment for inclusion, it is essential that all regulatory requirements are met, such as making ‘reasonable adjustments’ in line with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. Consideration should be given to the requirements of all children and their families. This should involve observing, listening and engaging with children, and consulting with families.

**Reasonable adjustments are changes to a policy, practice, procedure, program or environment that enables a person with disability to access and participate in the service on the same basis as others. An adjustment will be ‘reasonable’ unless the provider can show that making the adjustment would impose an unjustifiable hardship on them.**

Children, families and other service stakeholders should also be consulted in the design and set up of the physical environment. Their requirements are dynamic and as the design process continues, more information or suggestions to promote inclusion may be presented.

Children’s education and care services receiving Child Care Subsidy from the Australian Government may access support through the Inclusion Support Program (ISP). Check with your relevant state department for any specific state support.

If your service is connected to a school, taking opportunities to discuss with them the shared facilities and any adjustments that may need to be made, can also aid smooth transitions between environments.

Developing a Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP) supports services to implement or enhance inclusive practices that are responsive and relevant to each child. In collaboration with children, families, educators, service leaders, inclusion support professionals, and other members of the community, the SIP can be used to proactively identify potential barriers to inclusion and support the service team to remove or address these in an ongoing and meaningful way.

## EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT

While it is critical to consider opportunities for inclusion in the design of the service environment at the outset, there are many adjustments that educators can make to promote inclusion once the environment is in place. These adjustments can substantially enhance children’s experience and can often be made as part of daily routines, changing in response to children’s movements throughout the day.

Some examples can include:

- adjusting the height of equipment
- allocating a space for children to relax and have down time
- moving items to provide for accessibility
- providing a balance of structured and unstructured experiences.

## UNIVERSAL DESIGN

An educational framework that has relevance to inclusive environments is ‘universal design for learning’ (UDL). When applied to physical environments, it suggests they should (ideally) be universally designed at the outset. This helps to ensure that access, participation and support for all children is prioritised.

There are seven principles of UDL. These principles, alongside the National Quality Framework, can provide a basis for discussion around the design of new spaces and/or adjusting pre-existing spaces.

1. Equitable – The design enables equal access by all children.
2. Flexibility in use – The design accommodates a wide range of children’s preferences and abilities.
3. Simple and intuitive – The design is easy to understand.
4. Perceptible information – The design communicates necessary information effectively to children through different means (pictorial, verbal, tactile), regardless of children’s sensory abilities.
5. Low tolerance for error – The design minimises hazards.
6. Low physical effort – The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.
7. Size and space for approach and use – Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use, regardless of children’s size, posture, or mobility.

To ensure that inclusion is factored into decision-making at the outset and these principles are considered, services can incorporate inclusion into their Statement of Philosophy and in their policies and procedures that inform daily practice. As mentioned, ‘reasonable adjustments’ should be made to support the access and participation of children with disability in line with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.



## SERVICE DESIGN

All aspects of the service environment should be assessed so that every child's access and participation is enabled. Some considerations include:

### Accessibility

The premises should be wheelchair accessible and there should be sufficient free space to allow access around the service by children who are less mobile. Consideration should also be given to the ability of children to access equipment (e.g. height).

### Adequate space

Space should be sufficient to accommodate both large and small groups and a balance of quiet and active zones. The environment should allow for individual play and the sleep and rest needs of the children.

### Play

Play facilities should offer opportunities for all abilities and consideration should be given to accommodating shared, multigenerational and complementary play experiences. Equipment, resources and materials should allow for multiple uses, promoting flexible thinking and investigation (Element 3.2.2).

### Outdoors

Environments should include both built and natural features that meet the range of ages, interests and abilities of all children (Element 3.2.1).

Some questions to guide reflection on service design are:

- What are your processes and who is included in the decisions on resources, equipment and material purchasing and sourcing?
- What opportunities do you provide for all children to be involved in planning, setting up and modifying the environment?
- How is the environment equipped and organised to cater for all ages and levels of capabilities?
- How are the backgrounds and cultures of families and the broader community reflected in the environment?
- How can you make the environment welcoming and inviting for all children and families?
- What systems are in place to allow for the physical environment to be adapted to include all children and provide for their requirements and interests as they evolve over time?



## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

[Guide to the National Quality Framework](#)

[Inclusion Support Program](#)

[Early Childhood Australia inclusion resources](#)

[Working Together Agreement](#)

[The Universal Design of Early Education](#)

[Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

[Disability Discrimination Act](#)