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## ENCOURAGING MEANINGFUL AND EFFECTIVE USE OF INDOOR AND OUTDOOR SPACES

### Background

At Mayfield OSHC we had begun to observe the OSHC educators being required to intervene in indoor play experiences due to children engaging in loud and boisterous activities, that were not considered safe for inside play. Some of these activities included running, throwing toys, yelling, and misusing resources. These activities were discouraging those children who were wanting to use the dedicated Zen Zone space for relaxation or calm down, particularly when they needed the space to assist with self-regulation of their emotions. This over stimulating environment was therefore not allowing children to concentrate on homework and quiet reading experiences. Educators were required to intervene in otherwise beneficial play due to it not being appropriate or safe for indoors.

Initially we interviewed the children to find out why they preferred to play in either the indoor and outdoor spaces to help us understand why the children were making certain play type choices for specific environments.

Children were struggling to use the indoor area in particular the Zen Zone space appropriately. We discussed with the educators and other stakeholders possible changes to our afternoon routine to leave the room as a quiet space for the first half hour of the session. During this period, we observed that the children still struggled with the concept of relaxation and rest. This then prompted us to reflect on how we can further assist children in utilising the spaces appropriately and teaching them the skills required to regulate their emotions, but also on how we can critically reflect on the strategies we use to achieve this.

### Research Question

“How can we structure our environment to encourage children to meaningfully and effectively utilise their indoor and outdoor spaces?”



### Research Method and Data Collection

In consultation with our educators, we researched the challenges, and perspectives of why they felt that they were intervening in either indoor or outdoor play.

We then observed how the environments in particular Zen Zone and afternoon rest period were being utilised. We found the children didn't know how to rest and had a limited understanding as to why certain activities were not safe or appropriate for the indoor space. We then reflected and engaged in critical conversation with educators about why we were intervening in play experiences. Through these discussions it became apparent that educators were intervening in outdoor play experiences in the majority of incidences for behaviour purposes where as in the indoor environment educator intervention was occurring for beneficial play that would be appropriate for outside such as running, throwing/bouncing balls, play wrestling etc. This then raised the question of how we could support the children in making the choice to take these experiences outside and deciding for themselves what would be appropriate.

Using the Leuven Scale (Laevers, 1994) we were able to assess the level of engagement children had with experiences in both the indoor and outdoor spaces. Children measured at a high level on the Leuven Scale in our outdoor experiences as there was limited intervention in their play. This allowed them to continue their play experiences for longer, with more freedom and creativity in their play. Children in the indoor space were measuring on the low end of the Leuven scale due to intervention by the educators to redirect their play or by other children who were looking for the room to be a quiet space. Children trying to use Zen Zone, use the room for homework, or participate in restful activities, were disrupted and unable to focus or engage. The children participating in the boisterous activities initially measured high on the Leuven scale however due to educator intervention their level of engagement decreased due to the disruption in their play and limiting the freedom of choice in their activity.

We then began to have conversations with our stakeholders in regards to the rest spaces/ Zen Zone. We discussed with children why they were not wanting to use the space and they told us that it's too messy, too noisy, children were 'being silly', and the resources had been broken. These discussions then led to what would encourage them to use the space and what tools would assist them in using the space to regulate their emotions. The children discussed the need for behaviour and volume level expectations for the space as well as ideas for physical resources including stress balls, reading books, pictures to help meditate, comfy seating, soft toys and breathing exercises.

We decided to ask all of our stakeholders in addition to the children, the broad question about indoor and outdoor play preferences. Outdoor play was overwhelmingly the preference of play spaces as children responded to their experience of freedom, opportunity for exploration and adventure, greater choice of play experiences, promotion of self-identity, less stress, less tense and sport options. Indoor related responses were mostly in reference to technology use and weather. This survey also supported our previous data which highlighted how educator intervention in indoor play was limiting children's freedom and choice in their play experience.

In response to our research and data collection we have assessed and discussed strategies about how to support children in developing skills, and ideas in regards to utilising their environments meaningfully. We have done this through using children's ideas and play forms as a basis for decision making in the service. Encouraging them to challenge their thinking and guiding their actions.

### Theoretical Framework

We explored different pedagogical approaches and perspectives in regards to children's social and emotional wellbeing. The CASEL approach (CASEL, 2018) outlines social and emotional learning competencies including self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management and relationship skills. By building strategies to guide our programming we would be able to encourage children to develop their autonomy in making responsible choices in regards to their own social and emotional wellbeing. We used My Time Our Place, taking a holistic approach. Educators recognised the connectedness of mind, body and spirit and the importance of life long learning (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2011) Our research project focussed particularly on the personal, social, emotional and spiritual well being of the children and how rest and relaxation and being in control of their mind and body can benefit them.

### Findings

#### Rest Program

We created our Zen Zone space to provide relaxation and calm down opportunities, whilst also providing a space for children to encourage self-regulation of behaviour.

We organised a structured, educator led rest period at the end of each before school care session to holistically prepare children for the classroom. We regularly discuss with children the benefits of rest and relaxation and the benefit on our overall health and wellbeing. These discussions including the importance of controlling their mind and body whilst practising stillness. Educators work collaboratively and endeavour to use the same language to provide consistency such as “I can see that ..... is strong in their mind, because they are controlling their body and practicing stillness.” Therefore positively reinforcing the value of rest.

During the rest period we explore different forms of rest and relaxation in order to support and include children with different needs. We quietly do visualisation activities reminding children to think positively in regards to their own personal wellbeing and using positive self talk including “what do you like most about yourself, tell yourself over and over I am proud of my self because, I love myself because, I can cope/manage my emotions by doing this,” etc. Other tools we have incorporated into our program include child and educator led yoga, mindfulness and breathing exercises.

#### Noise Monitors

As result of the children's feedback in terms of the volume level of the room during rest time noise monitors were created for individual spaces in the indoor environment. These noise monitors allow for change in volume, from silence, whispers, partner talk and group discussion. Allowing children to monitor their own volume levels. Some of the Year 6 students developed an instructional video to help encourage and educate other children to use these noise monitors.



### Silent Clean Up/ Change in Routines

As a result of the change to our morning routine we decided to reflect on and evaluate some other aspects of our session routine and in particular, clean up time. We observed during clean up time children were loud, fought over items to clean up, were running in the room and some children choosing not to participate at all. A child suggested that we do a silent competition one day and see who could be the quietest for the longest. We observed the children focussed on the task and being more gentle and deliberate with respecting and putting the resources away. As a result we have continued with our silent clean-up process and have observed a more positive attitude from the children in respecting the resources.

### Basketball Court/ Weather Conditions

In response to our stakeholder survey and educator observations we discussed possible strategies with stakeholders to maximise the effectiveness of our outdoor space during weather conditions. The children identified that when the weather permits their preference is to be playing outside however when it is raining and too hot their outdoor experiences can be limited. Discussions began with the Approved Provider about a permanent cover for our basketball court. We are currently working collaboratively towards a common goal by sharing information with stakeholders, future joint planning and objectives for the project. This has been a valuable process though justifying why this project would be beneficial, as it has required us to critically reflect on the value of our environments and how we can utilise them most effectively.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout our action research journey we have developed a greater understanding of how we can structure our environment to encourage children to meaningfully and effectively utilise their indoor and outdoor spaces. Whilst also supporting children in developing an awareness of why we rest and the importance of allowing the time and space for this. The strategies we have used to encourage children to develop their autonomy in making responsible choices in regards to their own social and emotional wellbeing have been positive, however we will continue to work on embedding this into the culture of our service.

### References

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