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15 Environments in Family Day Care

In Family Day Care, our environment is our home

A Family Day Care setting is a unique environment for education and care because the education and care is taking place in an educator's own house, not a setting designed by an architect specifically for teaching and caring for young children.

Family Day Care is home-based care. So, our environments are our houses and our backyards.

Some Family Day Care educators use dedicated parts of their home and garden for Family Day Care, (such as a specific lounge area, garage or a fenced off area of the backyard), whereas others use their entire home.

It is important that Family Day Care environments remain homelike – that we don't try and recreate centre-based care environments in our homes. It is also important that we organise our environments to allow children to play and learn.

Environments are the areas where children play and learn, and where we provide care for children.

The more time we spend thinking about how we set up our environments, the higher quality care we can provide for children and the safer they will be. We also need to organise our environments so they do not impact too much on our family's or own personal spaces.

We must never forget that both children and us, as educators, deserve to live and play in beautiful, aesthetically inviting and functional spaces.

In Family Day Care, children's environments are our homes. They must always fill this dual purpose.





What is the difference between environments, learning provocations and set ups?

These words are often used interchangeably in education and care – sometimes, people talk about learning environments as the ‘provocations’ they set up for children to learn from.

For this topic – *Environments in Family Day Care* – we will define environments as:

- ▶ your location and the home from which you operate
- ▶ all fixed structures
- ▶ furniture and furnishings, as well as equipment, materials and resources provided by you
- ▶ all indoor and outdoor spaces at your home that are used by children.

The Oxford Dictionary defines environments as: “the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates.”

Your environments are the spaces in your home and outdoor areas in which you care and educate children, as well as the resources and furniture and equipment in those spaces.

What do children need from their environment?

Children need an environment that is established to help them learn and play. Children need their environments to be safe. They need to feel like they are at a place where they belong.

The *Guide to the NQF* puts it this way:

“The physical environment is critical to:

- ▶ *contributing to children’s wellbeing, creativity and developing independence*
- ▶ *providing a diverse range of experiences that promote children’s learning and development*
- ▶ *keeping children safe*
- ▶ *creating/organising spaces to reduce the risk of injury.”*

*Create the Perfect Play Space*¹ puts it this way:

“The physical indoor and outdoor space for children should provide;

- ▶ a sense of belonging
- ▶ emotional security
- ▶ space
- ▶ safe risk-taking opportunities
- ▶ challenge
- ▶ stimulating resources and materials (inclusive of all children’s needs)
- ▶ experiences based on children’s interests and abilities, and
- ▶ displays (that are meaningful to the children).

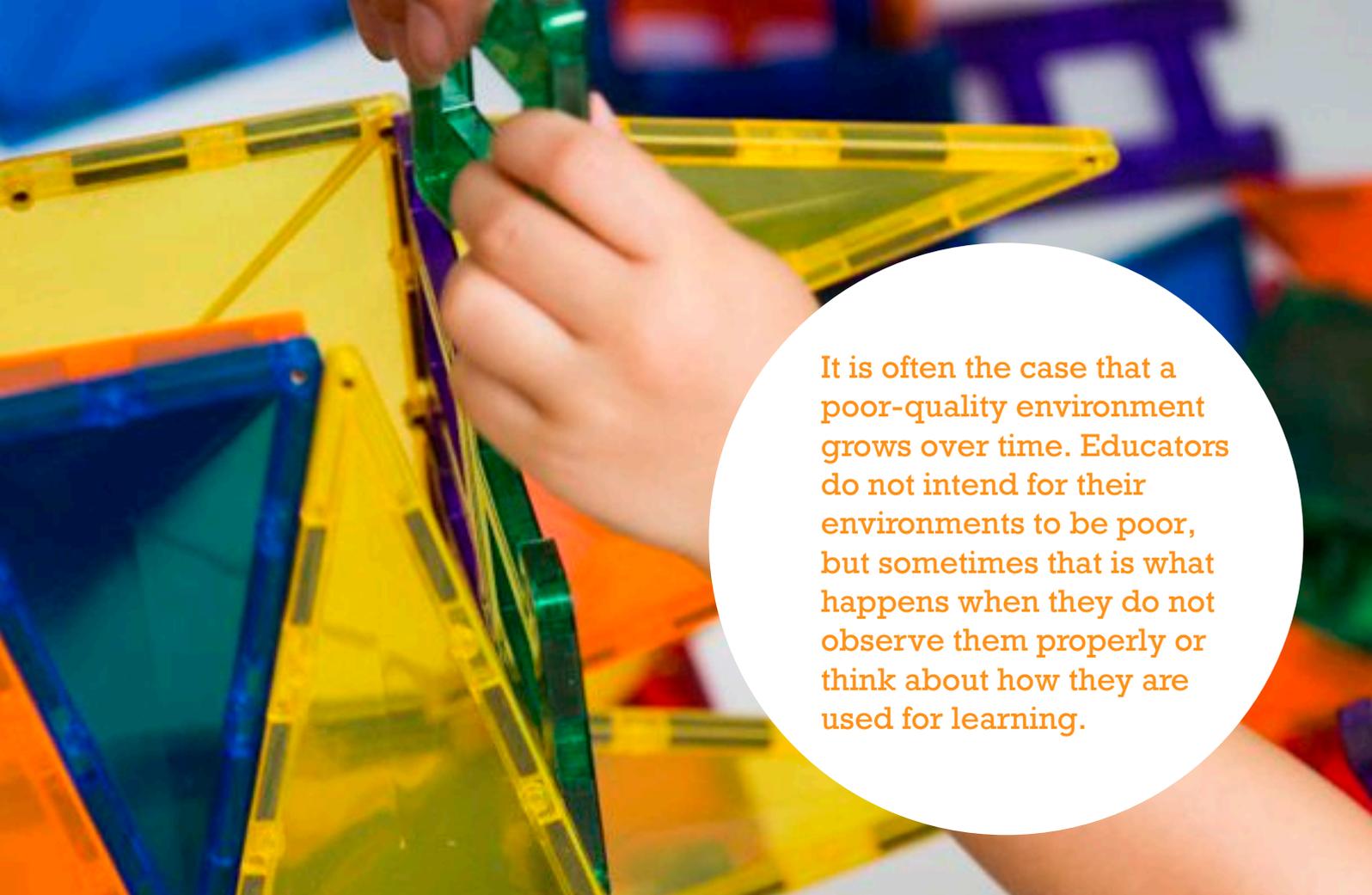
...all of which are designed to promote children’s holistic development.

A truly empowering environment for children should support their learning and development across each of the five learning outcomes in the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *My Time, Our Place*.”

1. [Create the Perfect Play Space: Learning Environments for Young Children. How To Series, PSC National Alliance.](#)



Think about your environments. Do they provide these things to the children you care for and educate?



It is often the case that a poor-quality environment grows over time. Educators do not intend for their environments to be poor, but sometimes that is what happens when they do not observe them properly or think about how they are used for learning.

What would 'poor quality' environments look like in Family Day Care?

There are many factors that can create poor quality environments in Family Day Care. The layout of the home can have a big impact, but there are many other factors in our control to consider. These include:

- ▶ overly cluttered
- ▶ have no defined spaces for different activities.
- ▶ have a lot of plastic – toys, furniture, storage
- ▶ don't have good storage
- ▶ do not reflect the Family Day Care educator's or the children's life
- ▶ have little natural light
- ▶ do not allow children to easily access resources
- ▶ have few spots for children to withdraw to for quieter time
- ▶ have few natural elements
- ▶ are unchanging
- ▶ are unsafe
- ▶ provide no challenge to children
- ▶ have overly bright colours and harsh lighting
- ▶ have few educational resources – and a lot of single use toys
- ▶ are unclean
- ▶ have no soft surfaces
- ▶ have nowhere comfortable for adults and children to sit
- ▶ have walls cluttered with notices and posters
- ▶ tell you nothing about the Family Day Care educator, their family or the children who play there.

What would 'high quality' environments look like in Family Day Care?

High quality environments come in many different forms. They may be high quality because they are spacious and new, or they may be high quality because they have been used by the one educator for 30 years who has managed to gradually refine her space each year!

Generally, they would have many of the following features:

- ▶ spaces that are beautiful or well designed
- ▶ separate spaces for exploring, playing, investigating, relaxing, creating, for children to be by themselves or with others, for the Family Day Care educator to work with children
- ▶ lots of outdoor elements inside (plants, natural colours)
- ▶ enough resources and equipment
- ▶ spaces for children to run and climb
- ▶ spaces for children to take risks
- ▶ elements that give joy or surprise and wonder to children
- ▶ elements that show something about the children and the educator that shares this space
- ▶ home-like touches
- ▶ spaces that reflect the service's philosophy
- ▶ calmness
- ▶ uncluttered walls
- ▶ equipment and resources that children could access independently
- ▶ outdoor areas where children could make discoveries and have an impact on the environment
- ▶ safety being prioritised
- ▶ great storage
- ▶ spaces that promote children's learning and development
- ▶ spaces that reflect and extend on children's learning.



High quality environments are often beautiful and calm. They are places where children and adults want to be and want to explore.



The environment is the third teacher

Have you ever heard the phrase ‘the environment is the third teacher’? What does this mean and where does it come from?

The phrase comes from the early childhood teaching approach developed in the towns and villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy. This approach was developed by teacher Louis Malaguzzi and the parents of children after World War II. Malaguzzi believed the physical environment to be of fundamental importance to the early childhood program; he referred to it as the “third teacher, alongside adults and other children”.

Children’s engagement and interaction with their environment helps them to construct their own learning. As a Family Day Care educator, you are often the sole ‘architect’ of the spaces you dedicate to Family Day Care. You decide what goes in there, which areas will be used and what they will look like. You need to devote time to ensure that your environments are the best ‘third teacher’ possible.

You could set up environments that are perfectly safe for children but do not encourage or help them to learn. You could set up environments that look beautiful but do not reflect your life or the life of the children that learn in them. The best environments are set up consciously by educators who are aware of the importance of the environments to children’s learning.

“A typical Reggio Emilia environment for children will include lots of light, mirrors, plants and other natural materials and photos (that are meaningful to the children). The environment is designed to engage children with displays and photos of their work, with captions of discussions between adults and children. There is a real community feel to the environment with shared spaces and materials.”²

2. [Create the Perfect Play Space: Learning Environments for Young Children. How To Series, PSC National Alliance.](#)

A dedicated space or shared space?

Are your environments dedicated to the purpose of Family Day Care, or are they shared with your family?

Sometimes, educators will choose to buy, build or rent a house that has space they can use solely for Family Day Care. This can make it easier to follow all the safety regulations, separate work from your family life and ensure your Family Day Care resources are not forever under your family's feet. Some educators have always worked this way and cannot imagine combining their Family Day Care and their home in the one space.

Other educators use their entire house for Family Day Care, with bedrooms for sleeping, loungerooms and rumpus rooms for playing and the family bathroom as everyone's bathroom.

There are advantages and disadvantages in each method. Some educators do a bit of both – some areas are just for Family Day Care, some areas are just for families. Most educators do not have a choice. They use their space in a way that works for them and their families.

What is important to remember though is that your environments must be safe for children. They need to always assist you in following the Regulations. Can you maintain this if your family members are using the space too?

A point to remember is that, Family Day Care was never intended to be a small childcare centre. Families choose Family Day Care because it is home-based care. Even if you are using dedicated spaces, those spaces should still look like what they are – a part of someone's home, a part of your home.

What do your environments communicate?

Do they communicate:

- ▶ who you are as an educator, your cultural background, your family life?
- ▶ welcoming messages to families and children?

Do you feel a sense of calm and order, or anxiety and chaos when walking into your space?

Does your environment feel like a storage area or a space children can learn?

Can you find what you need when you need it?

Do your environments communicate:

- ▶ that this is a shared space for children and adults?
- ▶ that it is your home?
- ▶ that learning happens here?

- ▶ who you are as a person and as an educator?
- ▶ who the children are that you currently care for?
- ▶ that you love what you do and put much thought into creating great environments?

Get down at child level and look at your environment from this level. What does your garden or yard and your house communicate to children from this level?





Key considerations in creating environments

“There are a number of key considerations for creating and maintaining a positive environment for children and some are listed below:

- ▶ **Providing an environment that supports** children’s health and safety is paramount.
- ▶ **The thinking behind your environment** – how is it reflective of your philosophy (values and beliefs). Consider the key messages you want to convey through your environment.
- ▶ **The layout of your environment** will affect how children play and learn. Small spaces allow for quiet, small group play and individual play. Large, open spaces encourage large muscle, loud play.
- ▶ **How you choose and display resources** will define how the children play with and use them. Choose resources that are flexible and allow open-ended experiences for children.
- ▶ **Use what you have.** Think about your current resources, materials and equipment and try to use them in new and different ways.
- ▶ **Be realistic.** Your built environment (the size and shape of your rooms and outdoor play areas), location and climate will set some boundaries on what you can achieve. A good environment makes the best use of your available space and resources.
- ▶ **Engage your families.** Think about resources or materials that may be available from your families. Their active participation in providing natural or recycled materials will increase their involvement in your service.
- ▶ **Demonstrate cultural diversity and respect for other cultures** in your environment by using and displaying resources and materials from local communities and other countries.”³

3. [Create the Perfect Play Space: Learning Environments for Young Children, How To Series, PSC National Alliance.](#)

Who lives here? Who learns here?

Can you tell who lives in your home? Can you tell who learns here? Generally (but not always), homes in Australia have photographs on the wall of the family whose home it is. Can children see their photographs on the walls of your home? What about photographs of you and your family?

Can you see your culture reflected in your home's fabrics, plants, and artefacts? What about the music you play?

Can you see the culture of the original inhabitants of Australia in your environments?

Can children learn about your family from your home? Can they see their family and its culture in your home?

Do children have any ownership over the space? Do they have a place to put their bag? Do they feel like they can enter it freely?

Can children see representations of what they have learnt in your home?

Does your environment feel home-like? Are there soft

furnishings like cushions, lounges and mats? Are there mirrors? Think about what is in your home, what is in other's homes. Is this what your environment is like?

What are the aromas in your home like? Do these aromas smell in a way that is familiar to children?

Can you see yourself and the children you are caring for (as well as children you used to care for) in your home?



Beauty and joy

Are your environments beautiful? Are they well designed? Increasingly, the early childhood sector in NSW is realising that children have the right to learn in places that are beautiful. (And educators have the right to teach in such places!)

What is a 'beautiful place' is different to all of us. But beauty is hard to find in a place that is cluttered, that has notices and certificates on every wall, that is crammed with child-sized furniture.

Are you happy to invite friends into your home and backyard? Or are you constantly apologising that it is also your workspace?

Can the children you care for come into your house and find beautiful objects? Or do you keep such things away in rooms that are only available for the family?

Does your home create joy in children?

Joy researcher Ingrid Fetell Lee discovered that certain

elements of design universally activate joy in human beings. Things that are universally joyful are like:

- ▶ bright colours
- ▶ abundance
- ▶ round shapes.

(Think about coloured balloons, fairy bread with hundredsand thousands, bubbles, confetti, or a bunch of flowers.) Ingrid says designing more joyful spaces can actually change how we feel and act.

She says that “one of the reasons that round things are so joyful is because round things are the safest shapes. Bubbles, balloons and balls, and hula hoops and carousels. And in childhood, we're reaching out to touch things, and those shapes are the safest shapes.”

She also says that an abundance of those shapes is necessary because we evolved in a world where scarcity was dangerous, so abundance makes us joyful.



Can you include
joy in your
Family Day Care
spaces?

Wonder and magic?

Are there things in your environment that are unexpected?
Special things? Do you hide things for children to discover?
Are there magical things? Things that inspire awe in children?

Are children given things to explore that spark their wonder?
Are they given opportunities to interact with wondrous
objects, such as a large unbreakable floor mirror with fairy
lights?

What about overhead projectors that can show them big
shadows? Or mirrors that reflect other mirrors? Think about
how you feel when you see something like the VIVID Festival
in Sydney. Can you spark this awe and wonder and magic in
children within your environments?



Mirrors and windows

Some say that early education environments should act like mirrors and windows to children's lives. They should see their own lives and realities reflected in an early education setting and they should see windows into other realities, things they don't yet know about.

Can children have the comfort of seeing familiar objects and photographs of themselves with their families, as well as objects that are new to them?

Do the books you have in your environments act as windows and mirrors? Can children learn about other worlds from them? Windows help us develop an understanding about the wider world. Children need to learn how other people conduct themselves in the world to understand how they might fit in. Can they see people of the same culture and different cultures in your environments? People with disability and able-bodied people? Older people and younger children? People with similar lifestyles and culture as theirs and people with different ones?



Do your environments act like mirrors and windows?

Cosy spaces

Do both your indoor and outdoor environments have cosy spaces? Are there places where children can connect with each other and with their environment? Can two children sit together in different places (this helps sharing, collaboration and co-operation.)

Are there cosy spaces outdoors as well as indoors? Do you put a soft mat down for children to sit on when they have had enough running or climbing? Are there spaces a child can be by themselves? Are there spaces where you can just sit with one child? Are there tables meant for all your children and others intended for just one or two? Is there subtle lighting that promotes cosiness?

Have you heard the Danish word ‘Hygge’? (pronounced *hoo-guh*) It’s defined as “a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being”. It’s about making your home cosy with soft lights and cuddly textiles – it’s about creating a space that makes us feel content.



Functionality

Your environment must be safe for children and for you as an educator. They can't have trip hazards or be dirty, for example. Many services will ask you to do a safety audit or checklist on a regular basis to ensure your environment is safe.

But beyond being safe, it also needs to be functional.

What does functionality mean in the context of environments?

- ▶ Things need to be where children and you can easily access them.
- ▶ Things need to be stored near where they are required. For example, paper towels need to be stored near where you eat; glue needs to be stored near scissors; hats need to be stored near the door. Arts and crafts activities need to be near a tap and in an area that is easy to clean. Blocks are best in an out-of-the-way corner, so children don't knock over each other's creations.

- ▶ Children need to be able to access resources independent of educators.
- ▶ There needs to be enough resources for children to play and learn from.
- ▶ There needs to be spaces where adults and children can sit, inside and outside.
- ▶ There needs to be space to run and climb.

Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.

Steve Jobs

What do the Learning Frameworks and the National Quality Standard and the Regulations say?

The *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and *My Time, Our Place (MTOPI)*, the Regulations and the National Quality Standard lay the foundations and expectations for us about Family Day Care environments.

The Early Years Learning Framework

The EYLF says that:

“Learning environments are welcoming spaces when they reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families participating in the setting and respond to their interests and needs.

Environments that support learning are vibrant and flexible spaces that are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child. They cater for different learning capacities and learning styles and invite children and families to contribute ideas, interests and questions.

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.”

What does this actually mean?

1. Children and families should see themselves reflected and be able to learn about others from the environment

2. Children can learn different things in outdoor learning environments

Quality Area 3 of the NQS

The entire Quality Area 3 of the National Quality Standard requires that our physical environments be “safe, suitable and provide a rich and diverse range of experiences that promote children’s learning and development.”

The *Guide to the NQF* puts it this way:

“The physical environment is critical to:

- ▶ *contributing to children’s wellbeing, creativity and developing independence*
- ▶ *providing a diverse range of experiences that promote children’s learning and development*
- ▶ *keeping children safe*
- ▶ *creating/organising spaces to reduce the risk of injury.”*

This quality area tells us that the physical environments of our services are important because:

- ▶ *“inclusive built and natural environments in indoor and outdoor spaces, when appropriately resourced, promote play-based learning*

- ▶ *well maintained, fit-for-purpose facilities keep children safe and support each child’s access to facilities and participation in activities/experiences”*

What does this actually mean?

1. The physical environment is important to help children learn

2. Great environments help children play and keep them safe

Elements 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 of the National Quality Standard

Element 3.1.1 demands that our environments are fit for purpose and Element 3.1.2 demands that they be well kept.

- ▶ *“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.*
- ▶ *Element 3.1.2 Upkeep Premises, furniture and equipment are safe, clean and well maintained.”*

Elements 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 and 3.2.3 of the National Quality Standard

Element 3.2.1 demands that our environments be inclusive, Element 3.2.2 demands that our resources support play-based learning and Element 3.2.3 demands that we be environmentally responsible.

- ▶ *“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 3.2.2 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.*
- ▶ *Element 3.2.3 Environmentally responsible – The service cares for the environment and supports children to become environmentally responsible.”*

What does this actually mean?

1. Your environment indoor and out needs to be safe and clean and suitable to care and educate children in

2. You need enough equipment, you need to be environmentally responsible and your environment needs to be organised well.

Education and Care Regulations

The most important parts of the law and regulations in regards to physical environments require your Family Day Care provider to:

- ▶ make sure that every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children from harm or hazards that could cause an injury while they are with you (Section 167)
- ▶ make sure that the part of your home which you use for Family Day Care and all equipment and furniture in it are safe, clean and in good repair (Regulation 103)

- ▶ make sure you have enough furniture, materials and toys and equipment for the children you are caring for, including cots or other beds and change tables or change mats (Regulation 105)
- ▶ make sure you have a fence around any outdoor areas that children under school age can't go over, through or under (Regulation 104)
- ▶ make sure that the indoor spaces where you are caring for children have enough natural light (sunlight), fresh air and that the home is not too cold or not too hot (Regulation 110)
- ▶ make sure that if you have glass (windows) in your home, it is safety glazed or treated with safety film to prevent it from shattering, if broken. If this isn't possible, it must be blocked off so a child can't hit or fall against the glass (Regulation 117)
- ▶ make sure you have adequate toilets and places for children to wash their hands – children must be able to get to a toilet from both inside and outside your home fairly quickly (Regulation 109)
- ▶ make sure you have a laundry to wash dirty clothes, nappies and sheets, and make sure the laundry is safe (by

making sure children can't get access to chemicals such as detergents or nappy buckets), and is shut off from children (Regulation 106)

- ▶ check your home at least once a year to ensure that the health, safety and wellbeing of children who you care for are protected (Regulation 116)

Under the law and regulations, as a Family Day Care educator, you have to tell your Family Day Care provider if you:

- ▶ intend to renovate your home
- ▶ make any changes to your home
- ▶ get a pet, build a pool or a pond, or install any new windows or glass doors in your home
- ▶ make any other changes to your house that might affect any of the things listed on this page (Regulation 116).



The regulations, law, EYLF and MTOP and NQS demand one thing in common – that your environments help children play and learn and be safe while doing so.

Key messages you may want to consider

You work in home-based care – don't try and make your space look like an education and care centre.

Your environment needs to reflect children's lives and experiences and offer them windows to new things.

Your environment is important. It is where you work and it helps or hinders children to learn.

The more functional your environments are the better.

Your Family Day Care environment needs to reflect you as an educator and your family.

Your children need to feel at home in your home.

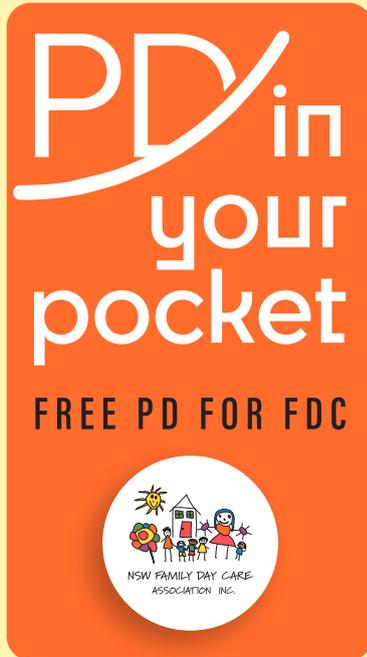
Beauty and joy are important in environments.

Wonder and magic are too.

All environments need cosy spaces.

A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore and learn in a secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor space. (Hodman, 2011)

This booklet is part of the PD In Your Pocket professional development program.



This topic – **Environments in Family Day Care** – has an accompanying webinar and video, both of which can be viewed as videos or listened to as podcasts.

There is also a Facebook Group where you can discuss the topic with other Family Day Care educators in NSW.

For more information about PD In Your Pocket, go to:

www.nswfdc.org.au/pdinyourpocket



NSW FAMILY DAY CARE
ASSOCIATION INC.

“There are three
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adults, other children,
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