

# ewba in action...



**Morphett Vale and Murray  
Bridge communities share  
how they've put *eat well be active*  
into action**

## **Name of site and author of this story:**

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## **What has your site been doing in relation to ewba's key message/s and strategy/ies for action? Who has been involved?**

A key strategy at our centre has been the large redevelopment of our outdoor play environment - our "Outdoor Learning Environment project". This is now almost complete. The vision for this project started three years ago, through wanting to develop a magical learning environment to enable children to discover, create and explore the outdoors in a diverse range of ways, and to enrich their senses.

A main feature of this project has been to provide an unique outdoor environment that offers rich learning experiences for children. We wanted to create something different to standard playgrounds, something that families can recreate in their homes and a place where positive role modelling can occur.

Our new outdoor play/learning area includes:

- A stage and sandpit which is divided by a platform to create two areas.
- Wide, paved paths (that are pram and wheelchair accessible) that lead to a vegetable garden with raised beds and a large rain water tank.
- Several garden beds throughout the yard.
- A large area made up of a combination of play-safe and artificial grass to give space to move.
- Our pergola, which we have enclosed and laid Marine carpet underneath to add texture to the surface and an area safe for babies to explore.

The new area purposely only contains a few fixed items, so as to keep the environment open to inquisitive minds and allow for a variety of learning experiences and opportunities. For example, our fixed stage can become a pirate ship or a dancing stage, keeping children's imaginations alive by being able to turn it into something different!!

Although our new outdoor learning environment has largely been designed for use by children and families using our crèche program (funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations), our centre is encompassing involvement from the whole centre, as well as the broader community. Our 'Girls Girtz' program has planted vegetables in tubs and we aim to extend the vegetable garden so the centre's Every Day Cafe can use the freshly grown vegetables. Our centre also hopes to invite young people in our 'Youth Connections' program to design and create a mural on the exterior wall of the pergola.

## **Has this been a new event/project/activity/practice/environmental changes/policy for your site, or does it build on existing elements?**

This has been a new initiative for our centre. A 'Reinvigorating Outdoor Environments' training session organised by *eat well be active* Morphett Vale and run by Gowrie Training Centre in 2007 provided our team with guidance to create a plan for an outdoor environment supportive of rich learning, play and movement experiences. The City of Onkaparinga and a Community Benefit SA grant funded the project.

### **What has been the best part of your site's action/s?**

It was a project that gave the families and people in the community a voice in how they would like to see this area developed. It is also a space that can be used by all the programs in the centre and promotes a team focus.

The reaction of the children when the area was first opened to them was wonderful - full of excitement, discovery and fun! It has become an extension of our inside room and allowed us to offer so many different learning opportunities for the children

### **What has been the biggest challenge (if any) that has had to be overcome?**

It was initially hard to explain why we didn't want to have any fixed play equipment and why we wanted a sandpit and garden space. I don't think it was until the project was completed that it was fully understood as to all the benefits of our choices.

We initially planted fruit trees. They were very difficult to maintain and required more water and care than we thought. Unfortunately most didn't make it through the summer. We have had to review this and consider more drought-tolerant options.

### **What have been some of the outcomes so far, what changes have you noticed, or what are you hoping for as a result of your new activity/project/policy?**

The biggest change is the atmosphere in the crèche. The children now have a space to move and play in. It has a calming and relaxing feel about it that immediately positively impacts upon the children and families that use it

We are able to change the environment to suit the individual children we have each session and to adapt to their changing needs and likes. For instance, in one week our stage became a dinosaur cave and then the next day it was a shop. Children's sense of adventure has returned with this ability to make their own decisions about their space and how they would like it to be.

Opportunity for children's learning has increased, and it has enhanced all aspects of their learning – imagination, problem solving, language, social and physical (gross motor skills have also improved).

Our outdoor learning environment is used every day. Having the protected, undercover space means we can use this area in all weather which has opened up our space and given children room to move.

We have been able to meet the individual needs of children. For example – space for playing by themselves, space for playing with only one or two other people, being able to adapt it to all ages.

Strong community engagement and ownership has been another positive outcome. Parents have been involved in ways they never have been before e.g helping with the veggie garden.

## **What do children and parents say about this?**

The feedback from families and children has been very positive. They have all enjoyed seeing this space transformed into an environment that offers so much more to their children. Parents of children with additional needs have particularly commented on how this space can be adapted more to meet their child's specific needs.

## **Where to for the future?**

We are now about to start working on our garden areas. We have watched the children play and experimented with different designs over the past few months. We have decided to plant a drought tolerant garden (instead of fruit trees), with lots of sensory plants for more sensory play and plants that will attract native wildlife.

We plan to create more "nooks and crannies" throughout the garden area, creating spaces for children to hide and explore.

We plan to secure our pergola area for wet weather play and install sails for shade over the grassed area.

We still aim to work with other programs so our Outdoor Learning Environment can be used holistically throughout the centre.

## **What advice would you give to others who would like to start a similar project?**

The most important piece of advice would be not to rush. Look around at other outside yards, research safety regulations and what will work well in your area, and consult your community as to what they want.

Take lots of photos of what you would like to be done as this is the best way to ensure that the builders have the same vision as you. Read through the plans thoroughly and ask questions if unsure.

The play-safe surface and artificial grass can get very hot, so shade is an important issue to discuss, especially if trees are being removed, as this will impact on the shade.

Install any rainwater tanks off the ground.

**If you would like to ask any questions or follow up further about this story, please contact Karen Charles at Hackham West Community Centre: 8384 1065 or email [karcharl@bigpond.net.au](mailto:karcharl@bigpond.net.au)**