CASE STUDY

Growing, caring for and cooking plants

The use of a service garden to teach sustainability, life skills and caring for Country

SERVICE	Margaret Ives Community Children's Centre
SERVICE TYPE	Long day care
MEAL PROVISION MODEL	All meals provided on-site
BUSINESS MODEL	Private, not-for-profit, community managed
AGE RANGE	Birth to 5 years
NUMBER OF APPROVED PLACES	82
REMOTENESS AREA CLASSIFICATION	Major cities

LOCATION

Norwood, SA



Background

Margaret Ives Community Children's Centre has incorporated their gardens into the everyday programming and experiences of children at the service.

The gardens run through a combination of staff, child and community cooperation, fostering the building of community, a sense of ownership and pride, and the distribution of maintenance workload.

The gardens provide learning opportunities that help children learn valuable life skills, along with an understanding of sustainability and caring for Country.

What did you want to do?

To give children the opportunity to:

- Build connection to Country, and care of Country by learning:
  - How important nature is.
  - How to take care of nature.
  - About the lifecycles of plants.
  - About sustainability.
- Build on the children's interests relating to gardening.
- Practice cooking skills.
- Practice turn-taking, teamwork, and numeracy and literacy in a fun and play-based way.
- Provide opportunities for children to do something while at the service that they may not have the chance to do at home.

What did you do?

Setting up the gardens

- The gardens started with staff and family consultation.
  - This was achieved through their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
  - PLCs are groups at the service that have representation from each of the service's rooms, as well as from families.
  - Within these groups, members discuss projects to implement at the service.
- The service applied for grants to help set it up.
  - Donations were also invited and accepted.
- Staff planned for a native garden and a kitchen garden.
  - A lot of work went into what, where and when to plant.
  - Much of this was done with the children as an educational experience that focused on:
    - > Seasonality of produce grown.
    - > How to look after the plants.
  - Educators also use books and tablet devices at the service to assist with this research.
    - > Children asked questions and educators looked them up with the children.
    - > They then looked at the answers together, with the educator facilitating the translation of the information for the children.
    - > They then made decisions together about the next steps for the garden.

Embedding in programs

- All staff program together every three weeks to talk about what they will be doing.
- The garden has become an embedded part of each day at the service and is automatically included in programs.
- Special programs:
  - The service runs a one term program called 'Eat a Rainbow'.
- Some of the food used is from the garden and some is purchased.
- The program aims to support children to:
  - Try different fruits and vegetables of all the different colours.
  - Increase acceptance of new foods.
  - Encourage the acceptance of more fruits and vegetables into their meals.

Who looks after the gardens?

- Educators, children, family volunteers, community.
- The educators are responsible for the daily maintenance of the gardens, along with the children.
  - This allows the distribution of workload, and teaches children about responsibility and caring for nature.
- One of the mothers of the service also volunteers in the garden.
  - She works with the local primary school as well, and includes children from the school to help with the service's garden.
  - This extra support also reduces workload for staff.
- The community are invited into the service twice a year to help prepare the garden beds for re-planting.

How do the children engage with the gardens?

- Staff take children out either individually or in groups, depending on how many children are interested in gardening that day.
- Children assist staff with checking the plants and watering.
- When the produce is ready to harvest, children are able to harvest with the staff and bring it into the centre to cook with if they wish.

The difference it has made

Growing, harvesting, cooking and tasting the produce and herbs from the gardens has made a big difference at Margaret Ives. Examples include:

- More cooking experiences
  - Cooking experiences with the children have increased since the garden started as children like to cook with what they pick.
  - Some of these experiences are planned and some are ad hoc.
- A sense of pride.
- The children are proud of what they have been able to achieve by growing, harvesting and cooking the plants themselves.
- Food exploration
- Children are tasting food they may not usually try as they have grown it themselves.
- Rich, embedded, everyday learning.
- The gardens have provided opportunities to learn about:
  - Different plants and a how they grow.
  - The importance of growing foods in the right seasons.
  - Lifecycles in nature.
  - Care and respect for the environment.
  - Environmental sustainability and responsibility.
  - Patience while observing the growth of the plants.
  - Food literacy.
  - Civics.
  - Literacy and numeracy.
  - Community and working together.
  - How to search for, interpret and use information.

Top tips

- Think about the space you have at your service before you start your garden.
- Knowing which spaces get sunlight throughout the day and the year will impact what you can grow and when.
- Include children in the process, this helps them:
  - Build ownership of the garden.
  - Increase their interest in caring for it and maintaining it. This can include:
    - > Consultation and research on what to plant according to children's interests and what they would like to try.
    - > Surveys on what the children would like to cook with the food they grow.
- Have passionate people driving the project.
- This has led to greater success in the garden at the service.
- Plan enough time to look after the garden, as it will thrive with proper maintenance.
- Engage with the community to help set up and maintain the garden.

When implementing these strategies services should ensure they continue to meet the relevant food safety, food allergy and regulatory requirements.

See Section 5, page 74