

# Unearthing the possibilities

**“We want an environment that creates potent memories of the indoor and outdoor environments.”**



**St Mark's Preschool Director Tinna Loker has been on a 10-year journey working out how to put her passion for the environment and sustainability into practice in a practical, cost effective and smart way.**

During her workshop she showed how the Early Years Framework and National Quality Framework are incorporated into the Preschool's philosophy and program and explained how sustainability learning is made transparent to the families and wider community.

“The Quality Improvement Plan goal of respecting the land is something that is very important to me and every morning we pay respect to our land,” Tinna says.

“Using the Rainbow Serpent story ties in beautifully with sustainability principles and it's a lovely introduction to Aboriginal land knowledge for our children.”

At St Marks the outdoors is just as important as the indoors.

“Explaining to families that learning and play outdoors is just as important as indoors is a bit hard. They think outside is playtime and indoors is learning.”

Tinna documents everything that goes on outside in photos and on the floor book, and she has erected signs about the outside areas and activities that go on there to educate families and visitors.

The outside is planted and landscaped to create distinct areas that children can take ownership of on a particular day. Every Thursday the children spend the whole day outside.

“At first they were a little lost. They needed time to get used to it but now they are busy and look forward to it. We must give children the time to explore.

“The parents can see what we've done. A spider audit, a worm investigation or building the frog pond, we document it.

“We give children time to encourage ‘I wonder moments’.”

The outside area has a cubby house and trees, ponds and an inhabited possum box and the children are allowed to explore and climb.

Small solar panels from Bunnings have been installed. Some boys have created a secret tunnel in the bushes. They like to climb the outside of the cubby house and

peer from the tops of trees. The children also go on excursions to Centennial Park where they can climb and explore.

“It's written in our policy that we allow children to take controlled risk.”

St Mark's children have access to a rock garden and are allowed to use hammers and nails. Tinna is convinced learning about risk at an early age will make them better able to judge danger in the future.

The Preschool's garden was inexpensive. Tinna and her staff use rocks and sticks they find in parks or that families contribute. They collect old baskets and pots from the side of the road during council pick-up times. When they hear tree loppers in the area they go and ask for tree stumps.

Stone blocks being discarded during a church renovation were collected by the Preschool.

“The children are involved in everything and empowered by being able to take charge of an area.”

Tinna says her local council has been invaluable. As well as a source of grants, council staff have visited the centre to

plant plants and give sustainability talks.

The Preschool has reintroduced a nature table, which Tinna says dads in particular enjoy. It's full of animal skulls and other interesting objects.

Documentation is mostly visual and Tinna says each staff member does what he or she is most comfortable with. Teachers' musings are an important part of the records enjoyed by families.

Tinna cuts and pastes items from the daily diary to create folders for NQF.

Tinna brings her own pet dog into Preschool and the children have been encouraged to respect animals.

“There's been a lot less squishing of insects and more interest by the boys since we began our program.”

Tinna says to be successful preschool teachers should be activists themselves, believing in and acting on sustainability principles.

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