How do you design your indoor & outdoor space to engage children in quality natural environments?

A natural environment at your OOSH service is an environment which includes natural elements.

**Natural environments may include:**
- Gardens where children can grow their own plants
- Washed sand in trays for sensory, symbolic and physical play e.g. Setting up a dinosaur scene or writing messages in the sand like Aboriginal people did
- Digging patches where children can use garden equipment
- A range of planting to encourage a variety of modes of play such as playing with gum nuts, small branches, flowers, stones and bark
- Small pits of pebbles, gravel, coarse and smooth river rocks for imaginative play
- Plants for picking and eating
- Plants that encourage birds, butterflies and other insects
- Trees that provide shade
- Worm farms and compost areas for environmental education
- Water play areas for sensory play.

**Natural environments both indoors and outdoors provide:**
- Interest and stimulation
- Additional variety
- Places to explore
- Open ended interactions
- Spontaneity
- Risk taking
- Exploration
- Discovery
- An appreciation of the natural environment, developing environmental awareness and a platform for ongoing environmental education.

**Why do we need to bring natural items into our OOSH Centres?**
Natural materials challenge and inspire children’s thinking, with no set outcomes.

**INDOOR**
- Logs and branches from trees, e.g. sawn off logs for seats
- Small logs used as blocks – non-traditional blocks encourage pretend play
- Indoor plants can be grown in pots and used with toy animals
- Wooden toys provide sensory and tactile experiences not provided by plastic toys.
- Baskets can be used to store material and equipment to play with.
- Small sand boxes inside can be filled with small pebbles, sawdust or sand for play.
- A bowl of corks floating in water so children can learn about flotation.
- Add rocks and sticks to the building area.
- Make a nature grid where children can display natural items they have collected. They can touch and examine them e.g. bird’s nest, large leaves, pine cones

**Replace plastic with natural containers**
- Baskets
- Wooden Crayon Holders (children can help to make them)
What is the role of the Educator?

• Provide access to natural materials
• Find ways that children can care and learn from the land
• Model respect, care and appreciation for the natural environment
• Sharing information and providing access to resources about the environment and the impact of human activities on environments
• Embedding sustainability in daily routines and practices
• Looking for examples of interdependence in the environment and discussing the ways the life and health of living things are interconnected.

Remember - we don’t always need to set up natural activities... they are sometimes all around us. We just need to explore them!

OUTDOOR

• Natural materials can divide areas – plants in large pots, large logs and sawn logs for seats.
• Wooden recycled pallets to create “Pallet Lounges” for the children to relax in
• Tyres to grow plants in, filled with sensory materials, dividing areas and storing toys and materials.
• Twigs and branches can be placed in a digging patch for interest and variety. Large stones can surround digging patches for sitting on or using in play.
• Get children to create creek beds using stones and plants and add water for sensory play.
• Wooden outdoor furniture can add variety to play spaces.
• Bird baths, cubbies and materials that allow children to construct small spaces in which to play.

What evidence is there that children are aware of their natural environment?

• Showing a growing concern and appreciation for natural environments
• Observing, noticing and responding to changes in the environment
• Developing an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments and the interdependence of living things.