



How to Create Outdoor Learning Environments That Engage & Empower Children

THE SIMPLE 3 STEP STRATEGY THAT SHOWS EDUCATORS HOW TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT & EXTEND LEARNING.

the
**empowered
educator**

Why learn from me?

I'm a 40 *something* Mum of twin 9 year old girls and a 23 year old.

We live in Northern NSW Australia but I grew up in QLD and a fun fact for you... my first ever role in a childcare centre was a high school work experience placement in Rockhampton!

I was pretty focused, even back then, to study then work with young children.



- ★ Presenter
- ★ Educator
- ★ Blogger
- ★ Project Manager
- ★ Writer
- ★ Coordinator
- ★ Director
- ★ Family Services
- ★ Mum!

**What will you discover
during this workshop?**



How to Embed Sustainability & Eco-Friendly Fun into Early Learning Environments



A 3 step process to review, assess and reflect on your outdoor planning and program.



Why how you set up your outdoor space builds capacity for learning consistently.



How to include children's voices & preferences in the outdoor learning environment.

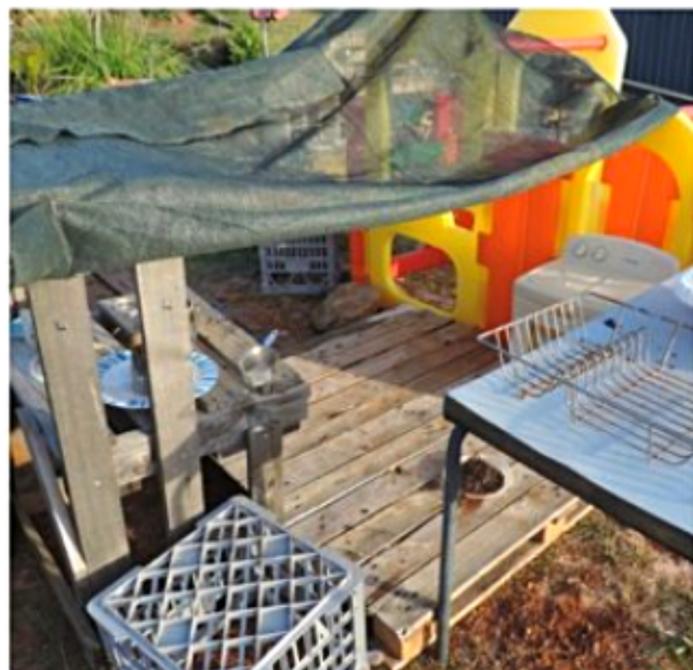


How to use information gathered from reflections to increase engagement & remove barriers.

The Outdoor Play Environment



How can we ensure outdoor play areas are also an opportunity for learning?



Creating a Space For Learning...



By recognising it as an extension of the indoor program - not just time to 'run off steam' or give educators a quick break to chat.



By setting up our spaces in ways that consistently encourage and extend curiosity, investigation, imagination, exploration, independence, risk, challenge, spontaneity and social connections.



Creating a Space For Learning...



By providing a balance of planned, spontaneous, open ended and child led activities and interactions.



By capturing the children's voices and preferences to inform outdoor planning and setup.



By putting thought into how we can use the space available (big or small) to build capacity for learning in partnership with a program, observations and reflections.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



1

Plan for outdoor play and learning as you would for indoor experiences (no separate program needed!)



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



2

Identify a child's interests, developmental milestones, strengths, family culture and learning style to inform and enhance environment design & setup.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



3

Provide opportunities for children to take risks, overcome obstacles and challenge their emerging skills.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



4

Incorporate natural elements to the space so children can engage with a natural environment and add materials to their play.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



5

Ensure areas are available to children that offer a place to be quiet, relax, be alone, explore feelings and self regulate as needed.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



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6

Consider whether the design and materials used provides children with opportunities to invent games, make their own rules, show leadership, express themselves, direct their own play and also work together.

10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



7

Ask if the current outdoor space supports the development of coordination and balance through play.



10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



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8

Have a process in place to regularly observe, reflect and evaluate how children are using the environment and what needs it is meeting.

Use this assessment to identify gaps.

10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



9

Assess impacts on children's wellbeing - do they have a place that is special to them?

Are routines made visual & simple?

Are there objects and real materials that link to familiar people and places

10 Pillars to Engaging Outdoor Learning



10

Allow outdoor spaces to evolve and change with the child's emerging skills and interests -

...encourage self selection of resources and the freedom to move them from one area to another.

“You should be creating little pockets of experiences everywhere to enhance any ‘moments’ that arise”

“Skill development opportunities should appear in as many different guises as possible to give a higher chance of engagement”

Alistair Bryce-Clegg 2012 – From Vacant To Engaged

Barriers To Engaged Outdoor Play



Engagement Barriers...



- ❌ Educators reluctance to go outside due to weather.
- ❌ Educators not confident with elements of risk management and risk v risk benefit policies.
- ❌ Concerns about health and safety – especially during covid restrictions.
- ❌ Parents/Carers lack of tolerance for messy play and dirty clothes.

Engagement Barriers...



- ❌ Children say it's boring/too hot/too cold/nothing to do when outside play is mentioned.
- ❌ No budget to upgrade or replace outdoor equipment and materials.
- ❌ Lack of suitable space/small or shared environments.
- ❌ Environment doesn't support open ended, fluid play or give children enough freedom and choice.

Engagement Barriers...



- ❌ Space to open and not broken up into smaller defined pockets of play.
- ❌ Setting up for different stages of development and age groups.
- ❌ The quantity, quality and variety of materials available for children.
- ❌ Large groups of children with inadequate child to educator ratios and poor active supervision skills.

Engagement Barriers...



- ❌ Poor shade or lighting.
- ❌ Children's behaviour and ongoing social conflicts.
- ❌ Lack of professional development and planning support in how to use the outdoor areas as a learning environment.
- ❌ The perception of outdoor play as a risk to children's safety and use of limiting language – “be careful”, “don't hurt yourself”.

Engagement Barriers...



- ❌ Children don't know where they can engage in rough, loud play and active movement or where to retreat to find spaces for quieter, less active play.
- ❌ Lack of understanding around sensory processing challenges and self regulation needs.

How do we measure & build engagement?





**Use a step by step plan
that routinely captures
and incorporates
information from 5 core
areas...**

Measure & Build Engagement



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Observations

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Reflections

Measure & Build Engagement



3

Assessments

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Measure & Build Engagement



Program

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Measure & Build Engagement



5

Changes

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Record this information using the 'Engaging Environment Planner'.

Why use an environment planner?



To guide you toward increased engagement and extensions of learning in the outdoor environment.



To show evidence of change and ongoing improvements in response to children's needs.



To become more aware of children's preferences and their voice.



Why use an environment planner?



To provide a clear link between the planning cycle, documentation and environments.



To gain a better understanding of WHY your space looks the way it does.



To help you address and remove barriers to engaged play.



Why use an environment planner?

Ultimately....

It provides a routine of small steps to follow that ensures educators will be able to regularly evaluate their spaces and understand how children have been using them.



Simplify the HOW...



Simplify The HOW...



Identify core learning outcomes and key developmental areas you want to focus on.



Clarify priorities and goals for individual and group learning.



Simplify The HOW...



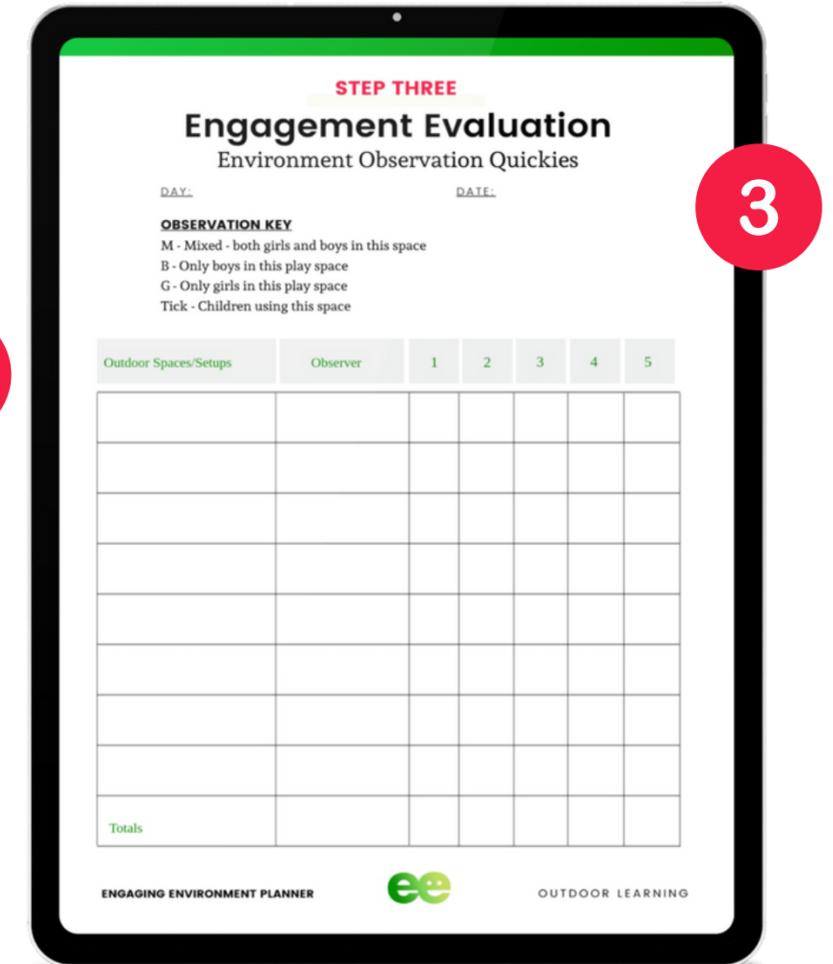
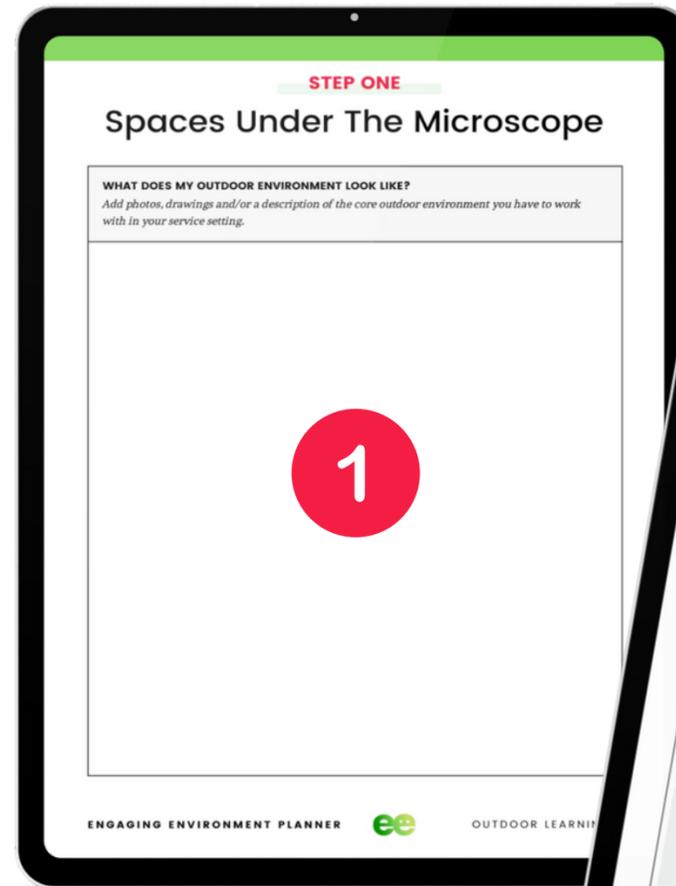
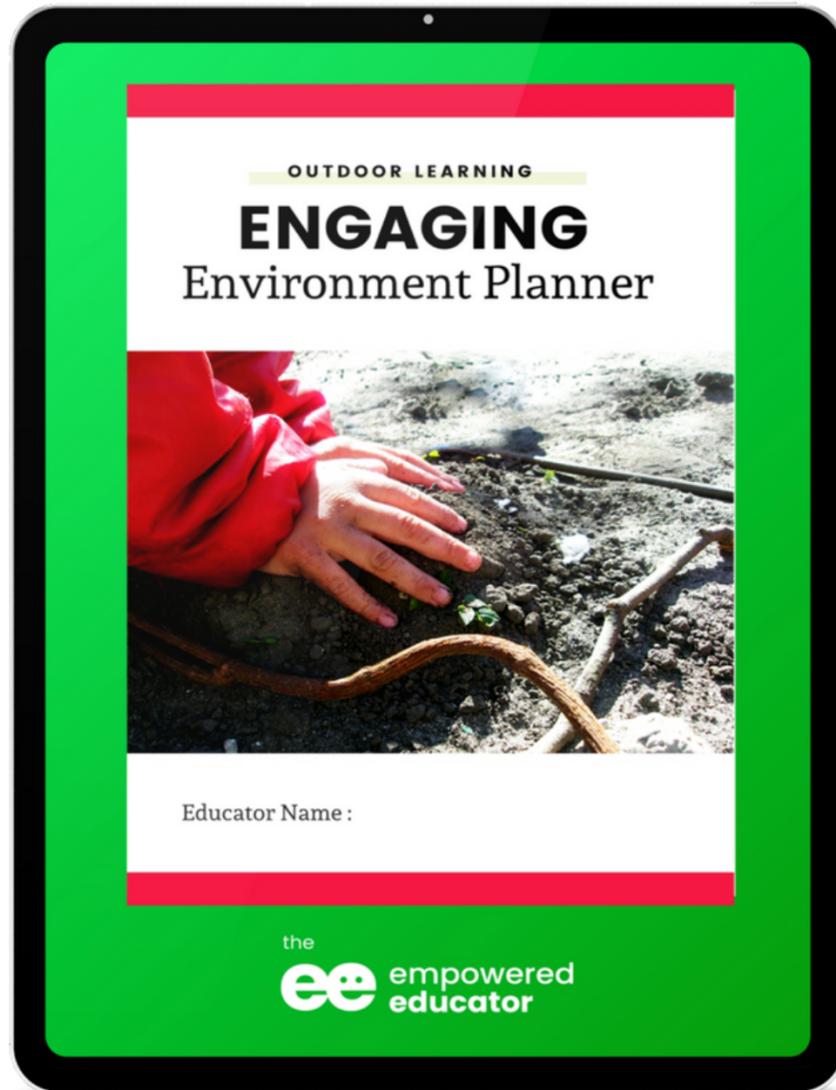
Review how the space looks at the moment and why you set it up that way, what has been working, what hasn't, how children have been interacting with the space and if their needs have been met.





Decide on how to arrange your spaces and what materials to keep, take away or introduce by reflecting on the information collected

Keep It Simple With A 3 Step Strategy



Measure & Build Engagement



1

Spaces Under The Microscope

What does your outdoor environment look like?

What is the canvas your starting with?



Add photos, drawings and/or a description of the core outdoor environment you have to work with in your service setting.



See Step 1 of Environment Planner



Measure & Build Engagement



2

Savvy Setups

How will you setup your spaces this month?

What resources & areas will be in use?

Why will you set them up in this way?

Where are the connections to assessment & voices?



Fixed Equipment & Areas

 Keep a core list of experiences to refer back to/extend on/change as needed each month.

Assess The HOW...

How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?

Reflect On The WHY...

Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?



See Step 2 - Setup A Environment Planner

STEP TWO
Savvy Setup A

FIXED EQUIPMENT & AREAS How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?	REASONING Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER  OUTDOOR LEARNING

Examples

- ✓ I'm adding sheets, rope and pegs to the preschool fort area to invite opportunities for teamwork and problem solving.
- ✓ Introducing lavender and rosemary to plant in the garden to extend on sensory exploration from last month.



See Step 2 – Setup A Environment Planner

STEP TWO
Savvy Setup A

FIXED EQUIPMENT & AREAS How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?	REASONING Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER **ee** OUTDOOR LEARNING

Non Fixed Equipment/Resources

 Keep a core list of experiences to refer back to/extend on/change as needed each month.

Assess The HOW...

How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?

Reflect On The WHY...

Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?



See Step 2 – Setup B Environment Planner

STEP TWO
Savvy Setup B

NON FIXED EQUIPMENT/RESOURCES How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?	REASONING Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER  OUTDOOR LEARNING

Examples

- ✓ Adding a bucket of tubing, pipes, rope, cardboard rolls and wood offcuts to sandpit area to invite more opportunities for creativity, manipulation and open ended learning.
- ✓ Setting up musical instruments, dress ups & stage area to extend on drama/performance interest recorded in assessment dated

➔ See Step 2 - Setup B Environment Planner

STEP TWO
Savvy Setup B

NON FIXED EQUIPMENT/RESOURCES How is this equipment or resource being utilised/setup or modified for this months planning?	REASONING Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER OUTDOOR LEARNING

Intentional/Planned Experiences

 Keep a core list of experiences to refer back to/extend on/change as needed each month.

Assess The HOW...

What needs to be included in the environment to prep and setup for program intentional teaching experiences?

Reflect On The WHY...

Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?



See Step 2 - Setup C Environment Planner



STEP TWO
Savvy Setups C

INTENTIONAL PLANNED EXPERIENCES	REASONING
What needs to be included in the environment to prep and setup for program intentional teaching experiences?	Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER  OUTDOOR LEARNING

Examples

- ✓ I'll be setting up an obstacle course using materials that require lots of 'bend and go through' movements.

Why? Spatial awareness, coordination and balance was identified as a need for children in recent assessment dated

- ✓ Adding measuring cups, jugs, spoons, beakers, muffin trays to the water play area to extend on basic empty/full concepts.



See Step 2 - Setup C Environment Planner

STEP TWO
Savvy Setups C

INTENTIONAL PLANNED EXPERIENCES	REASONING
What needs to be included in the environment to prep and setup for program intentional teaching experiences?	Why? What knowledge has informed this decision?

CHANGES

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER **ee** OUTDOOR LEARNING

Measure & Build Engagement



3

Engagement Evaluation

Is your environment working?

How will you know?

Are you observing ALL areas?



What's Happening?

- ✓ Regularly observe areas at different times of the day/session.
- ✓ Use a key to ensure a quick process.
- ✓ List spaces ahead of time.



See Step 3 - Evaluation of Environment Planner

STEP THREE
Engagement Evaluation
Environment Observation Quickies

DAY: _____ DATE: _____

OBSERVATION KEY
M - Mixed - both girls and boys in this space
B - Only boys in this play space
G - Only girls in this play space
Tick - Children using this space

Outdoor Spaces/Setups	Observer	1	2	3	4	5
Sandpit	Jodie	M ✓	M ✓	M ✓	M ✓	—
Water Trough	Mick	—	G ✓	M ✓	—	—
Herb Garden	Mick	B ✓	—	—	M ✓	M ✓
Bike pathway	Jodie	—	—	M ✓	B ✓	B ✓
Quarry	Ciara	G ✓	M	G ✓	M	—
Fort/Slide	Mick	✓	—	—	—	—
Totals						

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER  OUTDOOR LEARNING

What is this information telling me/us?

- ✓ Review & Reflect on areas/experiences not accessed much during the day.
- ✓ Review & Reflect on areas that showed high levels of engagement.
- ✓ Evaluate whether one gender group was dominating a particular space.



See Step 3 - Summary of Environment Planner

STEP THREE
Quick Summary Of Today's Observations

What areas were not well populated?
[Large grey input area]

What areas showed a high level of engagement?
[Large grey input area]

Where there any spaces dominated by a particular gender? Which ones?
[Large grey input area]

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER  OUTDOOR LEARNING

The Action Step

Change & Connections

Document how you have made changes or will make changes and WHY.

Make connections between observations, assessment, environment and voices to show how your program meets the needs of children.



What Am I Going To Do With This Information?

- ✓ Decide on changes needed and document the why to refer back to.
- ✓ Use to inform future program and forward planning.
- ✓ Document children's voices & preferences to guide changes or different resources needed.



See Assess & Action Step in Environment Planner

ASSESS & ACTION STEP
Change & Connections

EVALUATING INFORMATION GATHERED

What did the children's voices and preferences tell me?

What changes can I make?

Why will I make these changes?

What will I need?

When will I action this by?

ASSESSMENT START: ASSESSMENT END:

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT PLANNER **ee** OUTDOOR LEARNING

Capture Children's Voices On Outdoor Learning



Contributing To Learning

Finding out what's important to them...



It is a necessary part of an educator's job to engage in self-reflection but it is just as important that we provide similar opportunities for children to also self reflect.



Educators need to find ways to reflect WITH children and invite their voices and unique perspective rather than just relying on our own reflections and analysis.



Capturing Voices & Building Connections...



Provide access to open-ended materials outdoors that allow children to create their own spaces.



Ask the children to help design or set up the outdoor space.



Invite children to help you solve a problem related to your outdoor environment or upcoming activities.



Capturing Voices & Building Connections...



Observe the social play and language occurring.



Encourage decision making, curiosity and autonomy within the outdoor space.



Introduce some playful self reflection activities and routines for children.

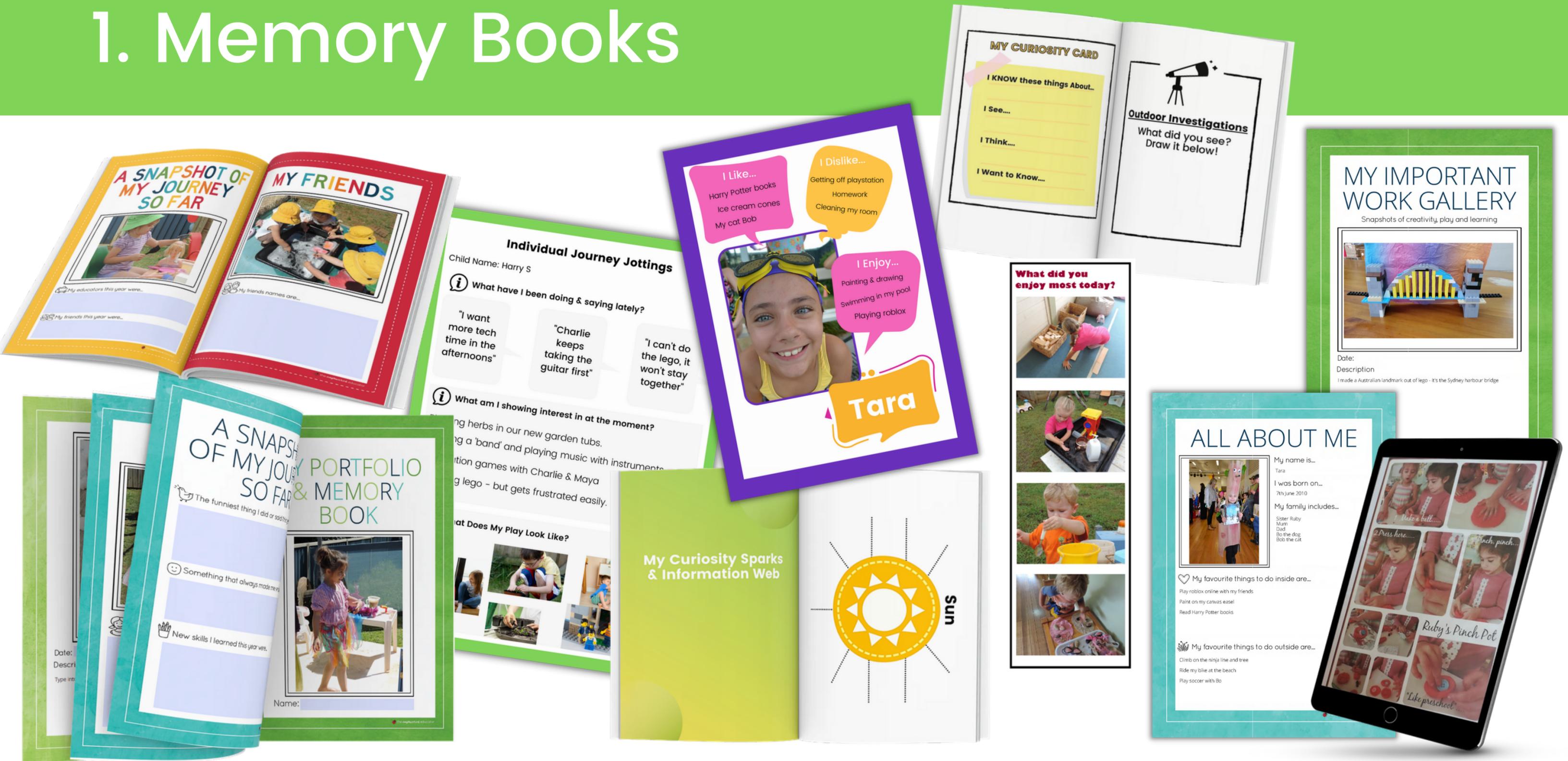


5 Ideas To Try

- ✓ Children's Memory Journals/Books
- ✓ Emotion Story Cards
- ✓ Children's 'My Day' Tool or Sticky Wall
- ✓ Favourite Place Race
- ✓ Visual Children's Survey



1. Memory Books



2. Emotion Stories



Our Day Tuesday

We used the squeeze bottles filled with water colours to make our sand cooking colourful!
We took the scraps up the hill to feed the chooks
We watched the magpies looking for worms
We practised our spatial awareness skills climbing through the big box tunnel
We sang Wheels on the Bus and played instruments outside in the sun

Our Moments in Time - Photo Gallery

How did we have fun last week? DATE: _____

the empowered educator
providing ideas and resources for early learning

3. My Day/Our Day Stories

What will you choose to do at school holiday care today?

Free Range Fun!

DATE:

Lego & Mobilo Engineering - Sticky Vertical Wall - Build Challenge Cards	Dramatic Play Area - Hairdressing/ Barber Prop Box & Dress Up Box	Tech Tent - Wii Sports Games (After 4.30pm only)
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Have your say about today!

What did you choose to do today? What is one thing you'd like to do again?

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What did the children tell us? Where will this lead us?
...and is to boring"
open ended elements to playground area including pegs, ropes, measuring tools, clamps, sheets, cardboard boxes so they
space and direct own play with more autonomy and creativity.

What would you like to do at after school care?

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Today I imagined I was...



I helped my friends today when I...

How do I feel like I did well or did the most today?

I'm not the best at this yet but I did try when I...

My Day Today

Date

My Day in photos



How was my day today?

Today I was....
Happy
Busy
Tired
A little sad
Today I ate.....
Well
Just picked
Loved eating
Today I drank bottles.
Today I lept from to
Today I reated from to
Today I used the toilet
By myself
With help
With a few accidents

Educator Notes

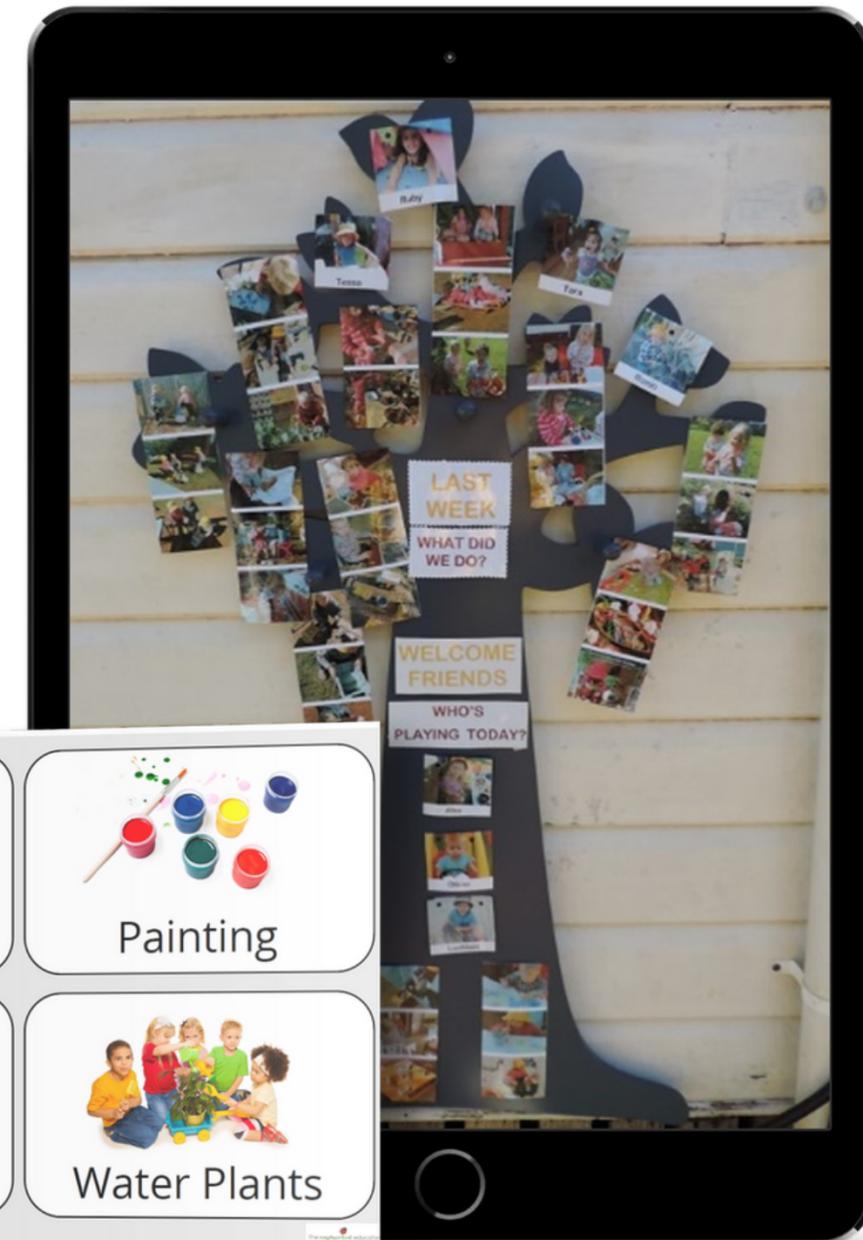
Next time I come to play



Date: Tuesday 7th - Dress up play this afternoon "scary nurse and vampire princess"

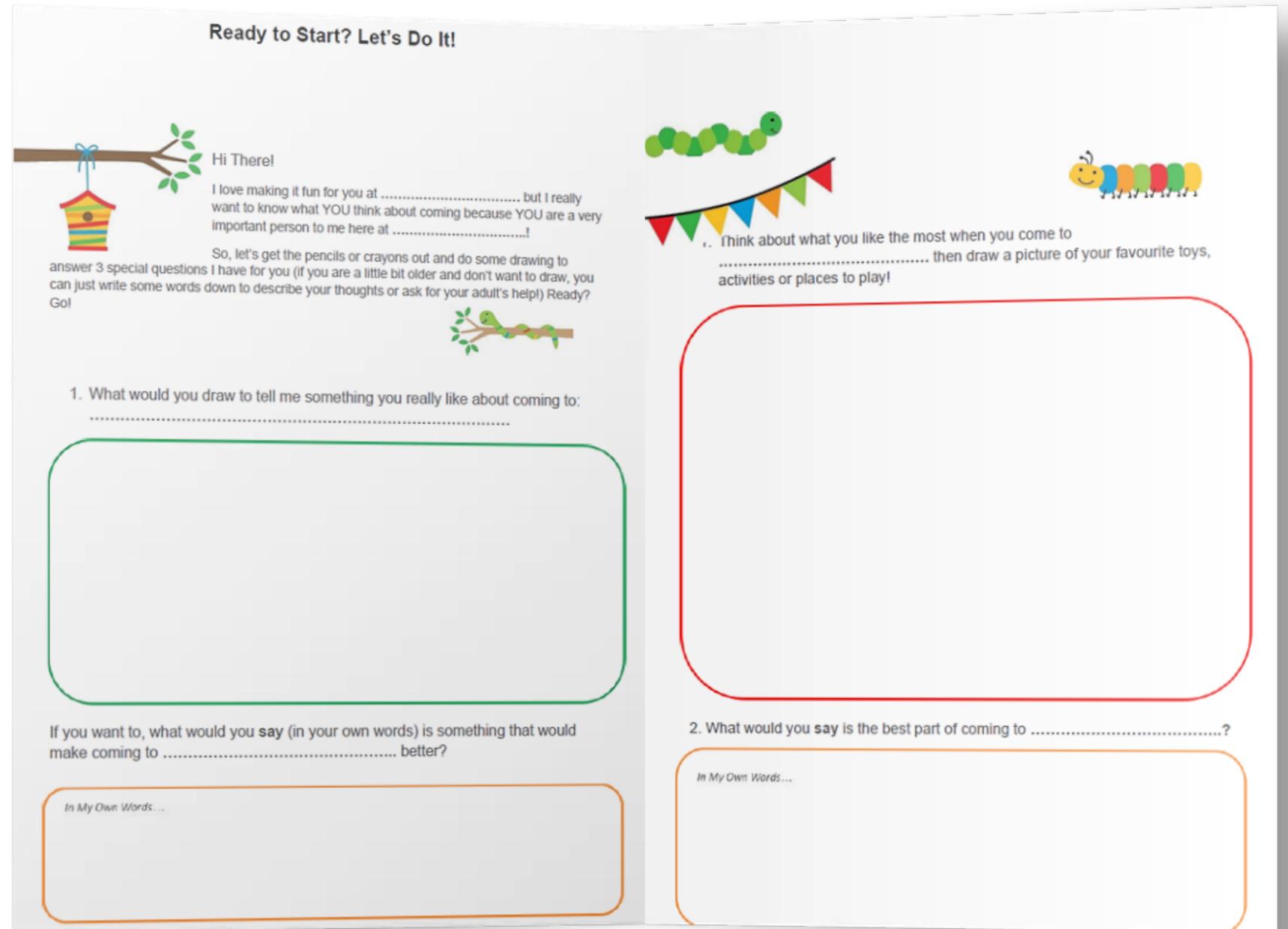


4. My Place Race



 Nature Walk	 Help Clean	 Sand Play	 Painting
 Explorer Basket	 Pack Up Time	 Water Play	 Water Plants

5. Children's Survey



Where To From Here?



Keep It Simple With The 3 Step Strategy

1

Draw or photograph your environment with fixed equipment. Reflect on how you can extend on this space using what you have available.

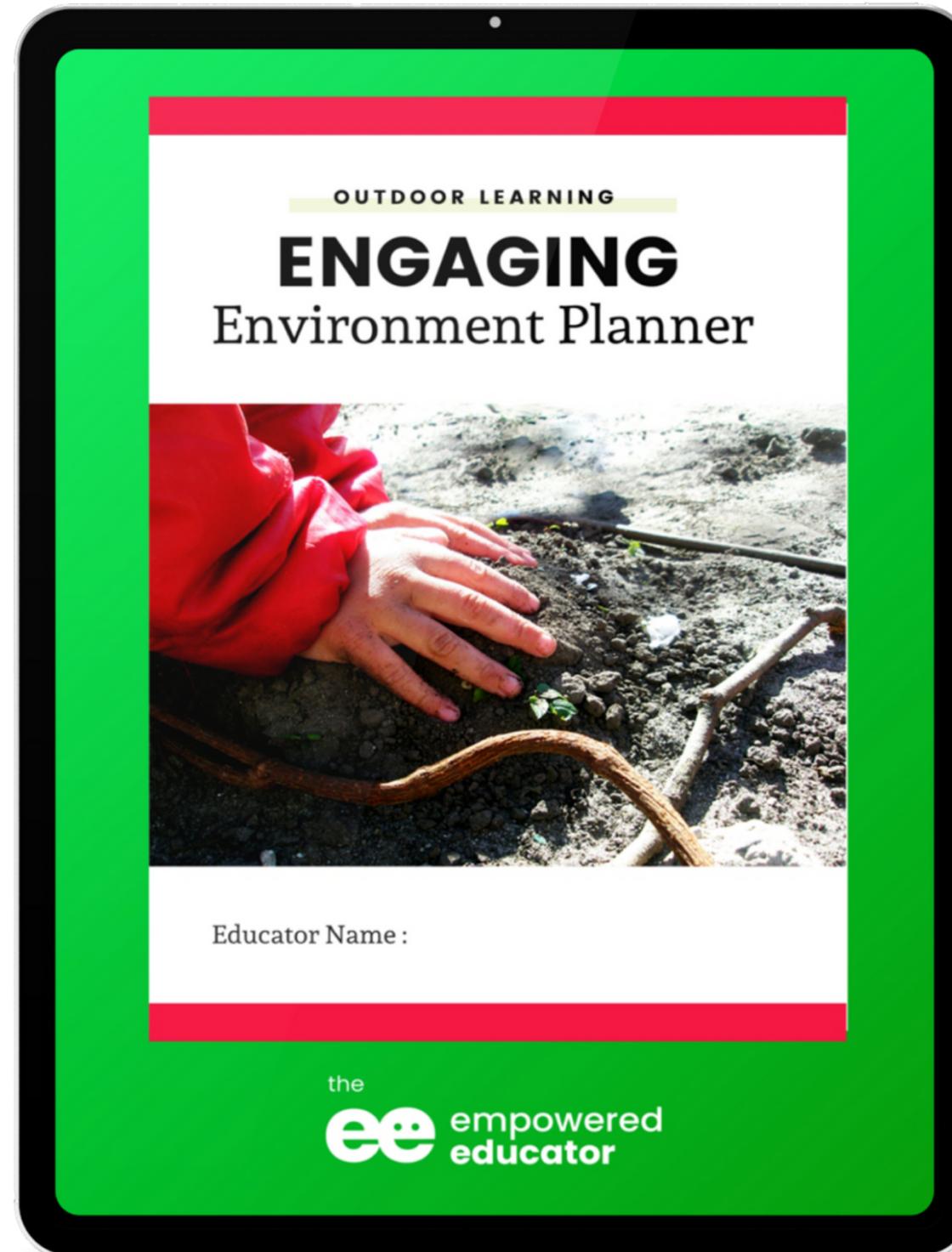
2

List core spaces & on your planner and make notes about the materials, spaces and resources that will stay, change or be removed.

3

Observe & evaluate engagement. Combine with informations from other forms of assessment to inform future planning and spaces.

Make sure to download your Engaging Environment Planner Handout



Make It A Regular Routine

1

Plan & Prepare

2

Change & Engage

3

Reflect & Evaluate

Keep Momentum Going...



Use the information you collect from your engagement planner to identify and show evidence of any changes, improvements or extensions you want to make to your environment and why.



Decide HOW you want to begin making those changes or improvements and what support you need to help you make it a reality (instead of procrastinating!).



Focus on planning and setting up your outdoor environment so it becomes an extension of indoor learning.

A space that invites and promotes curiosity, independence, spontaneity, exploration & connection.

Need Help To Create Change?

New E-Course For Educators Coming Soon...



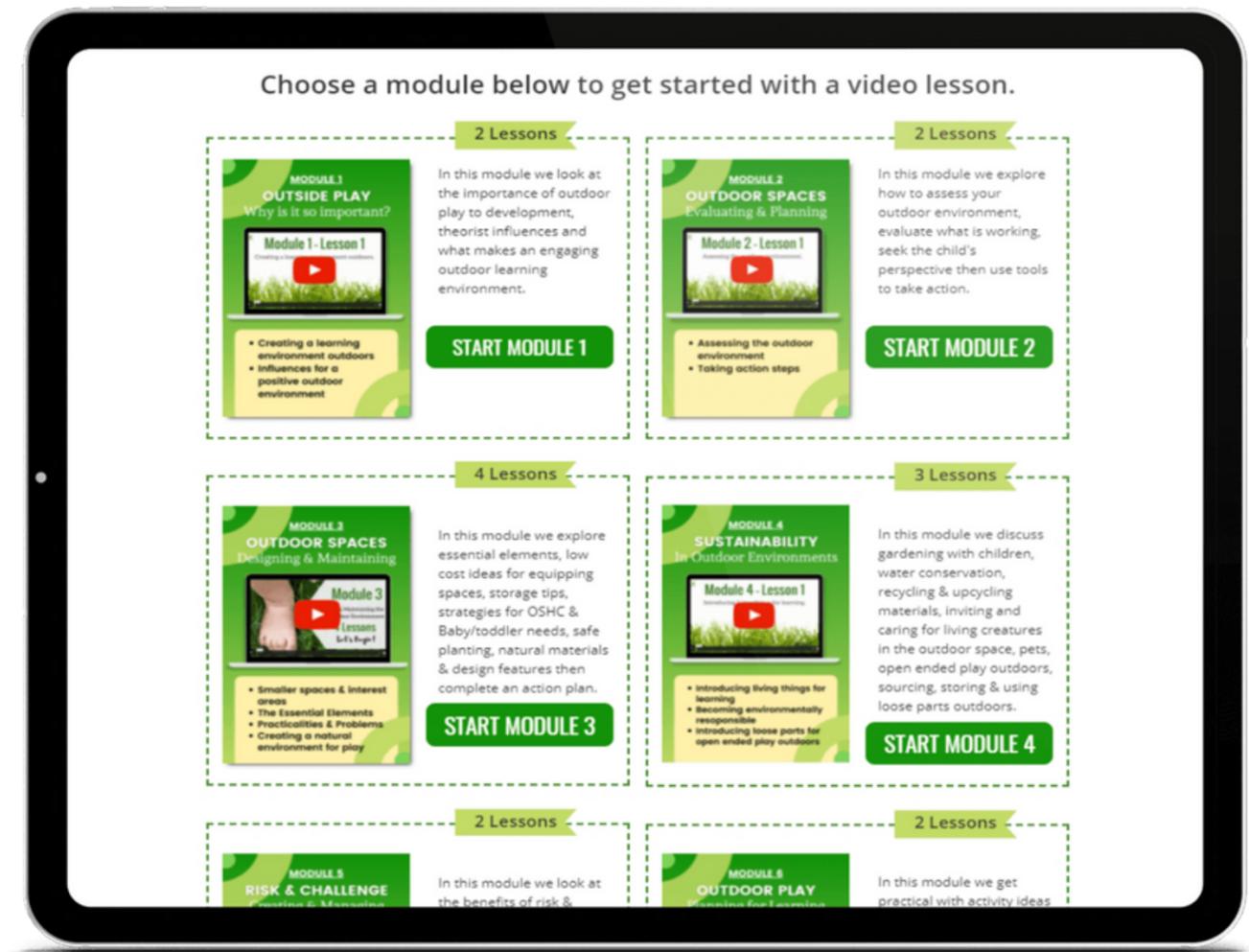
How To Design & Use Outdoor Spaces To Consistently Promote Learning, Exploration, Independence, Spontaneity & A Connection To Environment...

...without spending money you don't have on expensive resources or wasting time writing a separate outdoor program!



This is a step by step guide to the basics that will leave you feeling empowered and ready to approach your outdoor environment with a different mindset.

You've identified what you want to create or change and now I'm going to give you the tools to take action and make it all happen.



Thanks For Attending

