

ENVIRONMENTAL MASCOT

How can early childhood services improve families' sharing, connection and contribution to environmental practices within the home?

Alpine Children's Services (ACS) is a proud not-for-profit organisation that provides quality early childhood education and care throughout the Alpine Shire. In 2008, a small group of educators, management and parents came together to form the 'Green Team'. The Green Team was established to advocate for the environment and implement sustainable practices for our children, families and our organisation.

While working through the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative Victoria (AuSSI Vic) framework, which was designed for schools to improve environmental outcomes, we were faced with the challenge of how to engage children and families. We wanted to create a curriculum that connected children in learning about minimising waste, and it needed to be fun! We also recognised that many families were already exercising a variety of waste minimisation practices in their homes. We needed a medium to exchange these practices.

The inspiration for an environmental mascot was originally shared with us at the Sustainability in Early Childhood conference. The Green Team decided an environmental mascot would be a perfect learning tool for the children to share and learn about waste minimisation. One enthusiastic Green Team member suggested we adopt a polar bear from the World Wildlife Fund for each of our services. The polar bear was chosen because the primary threat facing polar bears is global warming, in part due to the issue of waste.

We understood the importance of connecting the children with their polar bear and so a Green Team member went to each service to formally introduce their bear.



Lenny and Leroy introduce Scraps to the toys at home

Each bear came equipped with a journal for families to share their waste reduction experiences. The children welcomed the new member of their group and participated in naming their own special bear.

Our service in Myrtleford, Mountain View Children's Centre, named their bear 'Nanook'. This is the Inuit word for polar bear (the Inuit language is traditionally spoken across the North American Arctic by Eskimos). The concepts of global warming and rising seas were discussed and the children soon understood this connection to the polar bear's survival. One child clearly pointed out, 'We need to protect our planet from the warming so that the ice where they live doesn't keep melting.'

At Lake View Children's Centre in Mount Beauty, the children have named their bear 'Envo'—short for 'environmental'. The bear has been very popular, helping out with scrap metal recycling, feeding the chooks, taking out the compost, harvesting the vegetables and even enjoying a bicycle ride to the centre. Envo's popularity has seen him featured in the local newspaper and has even made it to Facebook!

START SAVING

At Lyndhurst Children's Centre in Bright, 'Scraps' has also had the privilege of getting up to many environmental adventures at family homes in and around Bright. Scraps has also been busy improving practices around the service such as switching off lights, reusing paper in the office and feeding the worm farm. Scraps loves to network with other environmental leaders in the community such as our Water Education Officer from North East Water. Scraps creates a link between the children and the curriculum and is always seen sitting up the front ready to learn.

Families have noted that they thoroughly enjoyed reading the environmental adventures of other families in their community. This information sharing provides families with practical ideas on how they can minimise waste in their home. A smart meter now goes home with Scraps, Nanook and Envo to give families the opportunity to improve their understanding of their energy usage within their home.

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References

AuSSI Victoria: www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/www/html/3457-resourcesmart-aussi-vic.asp
World Wildlife Fund (WWF): www.wwf.org.au
Alpine Children's Services: http://www.alpinechildrensservices.asn.au/documents/newsletters/alpinegreengums_2ndEdition.pdf

LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

- Element 1.1.2** Each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.
- Element 1.1.6** Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and to influence events and their world.
- Element 3.3.1** Sustainable practices are embedded in service operations.
- Element 6.2.1** The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing.