



Environmental Audit for Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

Welcome

Creating an inclusive and supportive environment for children with diverse needs is essential for fostering learning, development and emotional well-being. In preschool settings, where children are building early relationships, navigating social expectations and exploring how they learn best, a thoughtfully designed environment can make a powerful difference. It ensures that all children, regardless of their communication style, cultural background, sensory profile or developmental needs, feel safe, valued and empowered to participate.

This environmental audit is designed to guide educators and early childhood professionals in creating learning spaces that are inclusive, equitable and responsive. It supports reflection on a broad range of elements, including classroom layout, sensory considerations, emotional regulation, communication supports, family partnerships, team wellbeing and inclusive teaching practices. By carefully considering how physical, social and emotional environments interact, educators can create a setting where all children can thrive.

This tool has been developed with reference to current research and evidence-informed strategies, particularly those supporting neurodiverse children, children with disabilities and children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For those seeking to explore the evidence base and further resources behind these strategies, we encourage you to refer to the references provided at the end of this document.

Getting started

The Environmental Audit for Inclusive Preschool Classrooms is a reflective tool designed to help educators assess and enhance their learning environment to better meet the needs of all children. To use it effectively:

Review the categories

Begin by exploring each category on the checklist, such as classroom layout, routines and predictability, communication strategies, emotional wellbeing and family partnerships. Familiarise yourself with the key practices being observed to understand the full scope of the audit.

Make observations

Walk through the classroom both when it is empty and during active learning times. Pay attention to how the space supports sensory regulation, communication, social interaction, emotional safety and physical accessibility. Observe how children engage with each other and the environment, and note which areas seem to support or challenge inclusion and engagement.

Identify priorities

Based on your observations, identify specific practices or areas that could be strengthened. Use the guiding questions at the end of the audit to prioritise next steps. Consider quick wins for immediate impact, alongside longer-term changes that may require planning and collaboration.

Involve parents and carers

Partnering with families is vital to creating truly inclusive environments. Seek insights from parents and carers about their child's needs, preferences and cultural context. Share your observations and planned changes, and work together to ensure strategies are consistent and meaningful across home and school settings.

Review and reassess regularly

Inclusion is an ongoing process. Revisit the audit periodically, especially after significant changes or when new children join your group. Regular reflection will help ensure your environment continues to evolve in ways that support the diverse and changing needs of your community.

Date:

1. Classroom layout

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
The classroom includes clearly defined areas for different activities (for example, play, learning and break spaces), with furniture or floor markings (such as tape) used to indicate boundaries.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Areas for quiet work or sensory breaks are incorporated into the environment to support children who may need a low-stimulation space.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Seating is arranged to allow easy movement and to ensure all children have a clear line of sight to the teacher.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Sensory needs are considered when placing children near windows, high-traffic zones or potentially distracting areas.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Visual 'clutter' is minimised by limiting bright patterns, busy artwork and unnecessary displays. Highly patterned carpets, curtains or furniture are avoided where possible.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
The classroom layout prioritises clear pathways and minimises obstacles to ensure children can move freely and safely.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
The classroom is fully wheelchair accessible with ample clear space to accommodate the movement needs of all students, including those with mobility challenges.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Equipment is appropriately sized for children of different heights and abilities, and is accessible to all children, promoting inclusivity.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

2. Sensory-friendly environment

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Lighting is soft and consistent. Natural light is used where possible and blinds or curtains control glare. Fluorescent lighting is limited and flickering bulbs are avoided.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Background noise is reduced, devices are turned off when not in use and classrooms include soft furnishings (for example, carpets, curtains) to absorb sound. Children who are sensitive to noise have access to headphones or designated quiet areas.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Seating and materials are varied to suit different touch preferences. Hard chairs are padded where needed and children can choose to sit on cushions, rugs or soft seating.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
The room maintains a consistent, comfortable temperature. Air conditioners or heaters are used mindfully to avoid distracting sounds or strong air drafts.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Strong scents from cleaning products, air fresheners or perfumes are avoided. When scent-producing materials (like paint or food) are used, windows are opened or fans are used to ventilate the space.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Sensory tools such as fidgets, squishy toys, textured items or vibrating cushions, are available for children who need support to focus or self-regulate.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Children are given opportunities to take sensory breaks, and movement is offered proactively as part of the day (for example, stretching, quiet walks, active movement).	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Quiet spaces or zones are provided where children can retreat and engage in low-stimulation activities.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

3. Routines and predictability

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Clear and predictable daily routines are established and followed consistently to support children's sense of security, confidence and independence.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators communicate the daily schedule using consistent, child-friendly language, along with verbal cues, gestures and familiar transition strategies such as songs or timers.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Visual schedules, such as pictorial timetables or cue cards, are displayed at children's eye level and are actively referred to throughout the day to support transitions and reinforce understanding.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
First-then or choice boards are available for children who benefit from more structured task sequencing.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Visual cues are updated or moved as the day progresses to help children track their routines and anticipate what comes next.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children are supported to understand changes in routine through advanced warnings, social stories or transitional prompts.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Consistency is maintained in lesson structure and transitions, with visual or verbal reminders used to signal the beginning, middle and end of activities.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Children are encouraged to use visual aids or tools to communicate their needs, whether related to sensory overload, emotional reactions or social interactions.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Every child is made to feel respected and supported in their learning environment.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

4. Emotional wellbeing

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Strategies to support children's emotional wellbeing (for example, naming emotions, mindfulness, breathing techniques, co-regulation) are embedded into the daily program and given significant time for repetition and practice.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Emotional regulation tools (such as calming jars, breathing cards, wobble cushions or emotion thermometers) are visible, accessible and used intentionally throughout the day.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators use consistent emotional language to model and support emotional literacy.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
All staff use a shared approach and common strategies to ensure emotional support is consistent across educators, settings and routines.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children are guided to recognise their emotions and supported to express them safely through words, visuals or alternative communication methods.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Quiet spaces or 'calm corners' are available and introduced proactively as a strategy, not as punishment or time-out.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Educators co-regulate with children, offering a calm presence and supportive strategies during heightened emotions.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Visual supports (like emotion faces, social stories or regulation charts) are displayed at children's level and embedded into daily interactions.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Emotional development is included in planning, and families are informed to support consistency between home and school.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

5. Inclusive communication

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Children are supported to communicate and understand daily routines using a range of tools, including visuals, gestures, sign language, AAC devices and structured supports like first-then or now-next boards.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators provide and model the use of visuals, communication boards and key word signs across different settings (for example, indoors, outdoors, routines).	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Communication support tools (like visuals or AAC devices) are accessible, well-maintained and used across settings (for example, indoors/outdoors, group/solo play).	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators simplify their language when needed and break down complex instructions into smaller, more manageable steps.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators intentionally use and define a wide range of vocabulary across play, routines, and group experiences to support language development and word learning.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children are given time to process and respond during communication exchanges.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators observe and respond to non-verbal cues sensitively and consistently.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Important words from a child's home language are learned and used to promote a sense of belonging and facilitate understanding.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children are offered choices throughout the day using verbal and non-verbal formats to support autonomy and expression.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

6. Social interactions and peer relationships

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Peer relationships are scaffolded through small group work, parallel play and supported peer interactions.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators model and prompt respectful social behaviours, such as turn-taking, sharing and conflict resolution.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Social skills are explicitly taught through stories, role play or visual scripts.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children learning English or who are non-verbal are supported to join in play and group activities using inclusive strategies.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Play-based interactions are observed and guided to support inclusion and prevent exclusion or isolation.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Groupings are flexible and intentionally planned to support diverse interactions and friendships.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children have opportunities for both collaborative and independent play, respecting different social comfort levels.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Children's strengths and interests are used to build connection and support social engagement with peers.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

7. Representation and belonging

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
The classroom reflects the cultures, languages and identities of the children and families.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Visual materials throughout the environment represent a range of skin tones, family types and abilities to ensure every child feels seen and valued.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children's own photos, names and work are displayed.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Cultural celebrations and everyday diversity are embedded meaningfully.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Children see themselves in the books, toys and storytelling practices used daily, not only in special displays or cultural weeks.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Gender diversity is respectfully represented in materials and language (for example, avoiding stereotypes like 'mums cook, dads work').	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Efforts are made to represent First Nations/Indigenous cultures authentically and in consultation with community voices.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Displays and materials are regularly reviewed with families and children to ensure continued cultural relevance and respect.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

8. Family partnerships

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Strong partnerships are built with families to strengthen the child's development and enhance their functional skills.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Family communication preferences (for example, phone, text, translator, face-to-face) are honoured to build trust and access.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Parents are actively engaged to gather information on the child's routines, medical considerations and preferences.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Family input is used to create individualised plans, with activities and routines adapted to support each child's needs.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Regular, open exchanges of ideas and feedback are encouraged, allowing both parties to contribute meaningfully to the child's growth and inclusive learning experience.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Opportunities are created for families to contribute to the curriculum (for example, through storytelling, cooking, sharing traditions).	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Communication methods are tailored (for example, visual schedules for families with low literacy, translation where possible).	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Families are included in goal-setting for their child's learning and social/emotional development.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Consent and trust-building are prioritised, particularly with families who have experienced trauma or discrimination.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Family feedback is actively used to shape program planning and environmental decisions.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

9. Staff relationships and wellbeing

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Staff work collaboratively, showing respect and empathy toward one another.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
The team supports each other's wellbeing and acknowledges personal stories or challenges.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
A positive team culture is maintained through communication and mutual support.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators have opportunities for professional reflection and debriefing after challenging situations.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Mental health and wellness resources are accessible and promoted among staff.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
New staff are mentored and supported in understanding inclusive and trauma-informed practices.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
There is space to acknowledge and celebrate staff diversity and individual strengths.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Professional learning on topics like neurodiversity, cultural safety or restorative practice is regularly provided and discussed as a team.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Time is allocated for peer observation, mentoring, or collaboration during work hours to support continuous improvement.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

10. Reflective practice

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Educators reflect on their responses to behaviours that challenge and the impact of the environment.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Staff are encouraged to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Reflection is used to unpack challenging moments and plan supportive responses.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Reflection includes an anti-bias lens, educators examine how their own assumptions or experiences influence their responses.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Documentation is used as a reflective tool (for example, educators revisit learning stories or observation notes with colleagues or families)	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators seek feedback from families, children (where possible) and peers to inform their practice.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Topic	Consistently implemented?	Comments/Actions
Time is allocated regularly for team reflection, not just reactive, but proactive planning for inclusion and support.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	
Educators are encouraged to keep reflective journals or collaborative planning notes as part of their practice.	☐ Yes	
	☐ In progress	
	☐ Not yet	

Reflections

Which areas of your classroom environment consistently support inclusion, wellbeing and belonging?
Where are there gaps?

Are your strategies embedded and consistent across the day, or do they rely on certain people or moments?

What are three specific aspects of your classroom environment or daily practice that you would like to improve or strengthen? For each one, outline the change you want to make, how you plan to do it, and your timeline for implementation.

Goal/Area for improvement	Strategies for success	Timeframe
For example: I would like to add more materials that reflect a wider range of skin tones, cultures, religions and family structures.	Audit current materials. Create a wishlist with input from families and staff. Purchase or borrow diverse books, posters, dolls and puzzles. Review and rotate items each term.	End of term 3.

References

Autism Toolbox. (2019). Understanding autism: environment.

<https://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/understanding-autism/environment/>

Cigala, A., Venturelli, E., & Bassetti, M. (2019). Reflective practice: a method to improve teachers' wellbeing. A longitudinal training in early childhood education and care centers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02574>

Cross, A. F., Traub, E., Hutter-Pishgahi, L., & Shelton, G. (2004). Elements of successful inclusion for children with significant disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 24(3), 169–183.

Custode, S. A., Bailey, J., Sun, L., Katz, L., Ullery, M., Messinger, D., Bulotsky-Shearer, R. J., & Perry, L. K. (2023). Preschool language environments and social interactions in an early intervention classroom: a pilot study. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 46(3), 338–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10538151231176176>

Gatfield, O., Hall, G., Isaacs, K. & Mahony, J. (2018). Guidelines for creating autistic inclusive environments. Brisbane: Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism.

Lombardi, C., Bladen, A., Foley, M. T., Galante-DeAngelis, M., Larrabee, K., & Robinson, J. (2023). Promoting reflective practice in an infant and early childhood training program. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 44(4), 451–465. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.22056>

Murphy, C., Matthews, J., Clayton, O., & Cann, W. (2021). Partnership with families in early childhood education: exploratory study. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(1), 93–106.

Murray, L., Eadie, P., Fong, M., Liley, K., Markham, P., & Hardy, K. (2024). Educator wellbeing and family engagement in Australian early learning settings: perspectives of early childhood educators and families. *The Australian Educational Researcher: A Publication of the Australian Association for Research in Education*, 52(2), 1017–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00751-y>

National Autism Trust. (nd). Sensory audit for schools and classrooms. <https://education.gov.scot/media/i3nm5bkt/sensory-audit-tool-for-environments.pdf>

The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2022). Inclusive environments. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-03/Inclusive_environments%20final.pdf

The State of Queensland (Department of Education). (2021). Autism Hub: environmental audit. <https://autismhub.education.qld.gov.au/resources/functional-behaviour-assessment-tool/help/environmental-audit>