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Victorian 'messy play' educator a finalist for national award

A Victorian early childhood educator with a commitment to sustainable learning, focused on 'messy play', has been named a finalist for the Outstanding Educator Award in the 2012 HESTA Early Childhood Education & Care Awards.

Dani Campbell — Early Learning Centre Coordinator at Coonara Community House in Victoria's Upper Ferntree Gully — has been named a finalist for her 'against the grain' learning methods, which encourage children to essentially play in the mud.

A strong believer in the importance of play-based learning, Ms Campbell supports children's development by focusing her sessions on indoor-outdoor learning, where children can move freely between the two environments.

According to Ms Campbell, many guardians initially raise concerns about their children playing with sticks and in the mud, until they learn that she designed the play areas herself with safety and sustainability as the top priorities.

"Despite rising calls for environmental and sustainable practices and awareness, we are increasingly reducing children's exposure to the outdoors," Ms Campbell said.

"Most parents are excited by the idea of their kids playing outdoors and in the mud, because it reminds them of their own childhood, going on adventures and getting lost in their imaginations.

"Parents occasionally have concerns for their child's wellbeing, particularly in colder months. However, we have an intense parent awareness program that clearly demonstrates the value and importance of what we are trying to do."

Ms Campbell designed the new ground areas at her facility with safety and sustainable principles at the core. Her design is now being used as an exemplar at the City of Knox for new public and facility-based playgrounds in the area.

Ms Campbell is also heavily involved in indigenous early childhood development, visiting Alice Springs every two to three months, where she and her team mentor and support indigenous staff and children.

The winner of the Outstanding Educator Award — and Advancing Practice Award — will be announced at a gala dinner during Early Childhood Australia's National Conference, at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre on World Teachers' Day, Friday 5 October 2012. The Outstanding Educator winner will receive a \$5,000 ME Bank online *EveryDay* Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant.

HESTA is one of Australia's largest super funds, with more than 750,000 members and \$20b in assets. It is chosen by more people working in health and community services than any other fund.

Visit hestaawards.com.au to book tickets for the event or learn more about the awards.

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