

Guidance through garden

By Casey Neill

Quirky, colourful gardens are working wonders for children and parents at QEC in Noble Park.

The Queen Elizabeth Centre in Thomas Street is celebrating its 100th birthday this year.

The centre provides support, care and guidance to parents with children aged up to four years who are experiencing difficulties from sleeping and feeding to mental illness.

Launching its Jona Sensory Children's Garden on Wednesday 31 May was the first event to mark the milestone.

The day featured photo and memorabilia displays and fun exploring the garden.

There are tyres that make musical sounds when stepped on, a xylophone and a sand pit.

Plastic bottles filled with water of different colours hang from a tree.

Kids - and the young at heart - can turn taps on and off and watch water flow through a created mini-creek bed.

Mirrors ensure there are no blind spots.

Ti tree will grow into a space to explore, fake turf and real grass provide interesting textures, and plants are hardy to withstand little feet.

"We want the kids to be able to run through it," QEC systems and risk manager Janelle Crossett said.

The Jona Sensory Children's Garden was stage one of the QEC Therapeutic Gardens Masterplan.

A bequest from the estate of Walter and Alwynne Jona in 2013 prompted the project.

QEC refurbished its internal courtyards in 2015.

State two will be a family recreation, woodlands and kitchen garden area.

A staff retreat area, welcome garden and day program garden are scheduled to follow by 2020.



QEC board chair Mary Sayers tests out the new garden features with Victorian Governor Linda Dessau.

QEC hopes to share the new spaces with neighbour TLC Aged Care and even open it to the public on days when the centre is closed.

Staff are being trained in encouraging visitors to make the most of the gardens, and Deakin University is studying the effects.

QEC started as a baby health centre in North Richmond in 1917, developed into a nurse training ground and in 1934 became a registered public hospital.

Its focus shifted toward at-risk children as nurse training moved out of hospitals and into

the higher education sector and in 1986 became QEC.

The centre moved to its purpose-built facilities in Noble Park in 1998.

Families can live at the centre's 16-room ward for five days to receive intensive help from nurses, social workers, psychologists and more through group sessions and activities.

As well as the five-day residential program, there's a Day Stay workshop and an eight-week therapeutic playgroup program called Playsteps.



The newly-painted entryway.



A family enjoys the new garden area.

Participation in the 10-day residential program is by Victorian Child Protection Service referral.

QEC's outreach program includes 12 weeks of home visits to help with sleep, settling and more.

Qualified nurses also triage calls for help and some parents might just need advice over the phone or from the QEC website, while others are referred to more intensive programs.

To donate to QEC or volunteer, call Janelle Crossett on 9549 2705.