

The use of activity sheds in dementia care



Background

In a dementia care setting an activity shed is a designated space that can be used to meet the engagement needs of people with dementia with varying cognitive capacity. It should be adaptable to enhance an individual's abilities.

Why use an activity shed?

- To support meaningful engagement in familiar or interest-based activities that offer a multi-sensory experience.
- To foster engagement in an activity reminiscent of prior occupations that draws on past skills and knowledge and provides a sense of accomplishment and pleasure.
- To encourage positive social activity by bringing together individuals with shared interests and promote an atmosphere of camaraderie. Engaging in shared interests may facilitate the development of friendships.
- To promote independence with self-led activities and/or provide a space for supported engagement.
- To help build rapport and enhance relationships between carers and residents.
- To provide a space for the development of community projects that will enable residents to feel a sense of ownership of their home.

- To provide an additional meaningful destination in the care home environment, and perhaps the feeling of getting away from the main domestic spaces.

What is an activity shed?

- They can be multifunctional spaces to support various interests or set up specifically to support one activity, for example carpentry, craft, painting or gardening.
- They can be as simple as a table in a shared space, a workstation in an undercover area or a shed specifically designed to meet the needs of the person, or a group of people, with dementia.
- They are not gender specific and can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of an individual or a group.

Who is likely to benefit?

- Depending on the level of interest an activity shed can support people with dementia:
- Who may be experiencing low mood due to lack of engagement or loss of occupation.
- Experiencing social withdrawal and apathy.
- With reduced communication skills, who may benefit from engagement in a group setting.
- With an historic interest in workshop-based activities, interests/hobbies or profession.

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Setting up an activity shed

Some things to consider include:

- **Location:** Ideally activity sheds should be positioned to enable visual access from communal spaces. This promotes interest, supports easy observation from a distance, and can stimulate independent initiation of the activity by the person with dementia.
- **Environment:** Consider a space that can shield users from the elements and be functional in all weather.
- **Accommodation:** The space should comfortably accommodate at least two people with enough space for a person to be supported side by side with modelling, verbal prompting to sequence tasks, and physical support where required. Ideally the space should be able to accommodate two to three people as well as a staff member, with space to maintain a safe distance between participants. Allow space for wheelchair access. Ensure current guidance on social distancing and good hygiene are in place.
- **Ventilation:** Consider adequate ventilation for the number of people in the space, weather conditions (hot summer days) and the type of activity, e.g. sanding, painting or use of potting mix.
- **Lighting:** Lighting in the shed should be optimal for safety and engagement purposes. Task-lighting could be installed at the work-station to ensure appropriate lighting and make the completion of a task easier. This can be achieved through an angle poise lamp or strip lighting with an apron to minimise glare and shadows.
- **Signage:** The signage on the shed could reflect the chosen activity, to support context. Multi-use spaces could have a whiteboard/blackboard to promote an activity that may be running. If the shed does not have good visual access, consider the need for a finger-post sign that could guide people with dementia to the shed. All signage should be positioned no higher than 1.2m above ground, and have simple wording in a clear font that contrasts with its background, to make it easy to see.
- **Flooring:** Where possible ensure level access, and a minimal transition between the flooring outside and the floor inside the shed.
- **Contrast:** Consider a contrasting background to help engagement items stand out, to support people accessing items and tidying up independently. Consider outlining the shape of items for easy hanging and labelling shelves/cupboards with written and picture prompts of the items to be stored. Provide adequate space between items to support these being easily identified.
- **Design/ergonomics:**
 - A physiotherapist or occupational therapist could advise on the height and set up of workbenches, which should be able to accommodate

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wheelchairs and ergonomic seating. Consider height adjustable workstations that can adapt to individual needs.

- Consider use of non-slip surfaces, to accommodate physical function.
- Consider ergonomic tools that are traditional or have their origins within the generation(s) of people the people using the shed. Where possible, items and tools used should be original items or accurate representations in terms of appearance, weight, sound emitted, and texture.
- Consider ergonomic adaptation of tools to meet the functional needs of the individual.
- **Storage:** Consider dignity of risk when evaluating what must be stored away in locked cupboards and what can be left out for independent engagement. Ensure items that could pose a risk are able to be securely stored.
- **Access to running water:** Consider the addition of a plumbed-in sink or freestanding sink and/or drainage units to enable easy clean up and wet activities.

Introducing the activity shed

- It's important that carers and family members are informed about the purpose and value of engagement through an activity shed. They may also be the best source of knowledge of what the person enjoys doing.
- Develop an individualised activity plan for each person using the shed by involving the person and their family. This should take into account:
 - The individual's interests, for e.g. what did the person enjoy in the past? Did the person have a shed at home?
 - Sensory and functional abilities
 - Concentration timespan
 - The person's capacity to undertake sequenced tasks and the sequencing

modifications that may be required to promote inclusion and maintain dignity.

- Positive, enabling and suggestive (as opposed to directive) language should be used when engaging with the person.
- Schedule supported activities and motivate the person by talking about the upcoming activity with anticipation and enthusiasm.
- Introduce the person to the shed by offering to give the person a tour. This should be done when the person is comfortable and content.
- Introduce individual activities – sit with the person when they are comfortable and content, show them a related engagement item, e.g. tool, toolbox, plant or paint/paint brush. Observe how the person interacts with it, whether they identify the item and its purpose. Reminisce over past use and discuss/suggest engagement in the activity.
- The enjoyment of the activity is more important than the need to finish an activity or produce an end product. Observe reactions and gauge responses to the activity. Keep tasks within the person's capacity, to promote a sense of accomplishment and wellbeing. Begin with smaller sequences/easily accomplished tasks. If the person is confident and demonstrates ability, progress to gradually increasing sequencing and complexity.
- Each time the activity is presented, based on the person's capacity for memory retention, carers may need to follow the activity introduction sequence as outlined above.
- During the week, engage in meaningful conversation about the activity/accomplishment. Thank the person for their hard work. For example, "Thank you for planting those tomatoes", "I can't wait to try the tomatoes you planted", or "I loved looking at your painting, it made me feel so happy".

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- If appropriate, support family to engage with the person in the shed to promote communication and shared experiences.

Special considerations and precautions

- The activity shed and associated activities need to comply with the care home's standards for occupational health and safety.
- Knowing the person's background history prior to the introduction is helpful but not essential. Introducing a new opportunity for engagement may be as welcomed and be as beneficial as re-establishing familiar routines and activities.
- Monitor the person's engagement with the activity and ensure that you document and pass on the information to other carers if appropriate.
- Consider using volunteers for assistance in engagement
- The duration of engagement should be individually assessed. Staff should use the client's responses to guide their judgement. If the person is losing interest or showing signs of frustration/agitation, then slowly move the person away from the task.
- Even when confident that the person will benefit, be mindful that their response to the activity may vary. If something does not work initially, it is possible to reintroduce the activity for trial at a later stage.
- The activity ideally should be used for meaningful engagement rather than for distraction or redirection where the individual is already agitated/stressed/distressed.



Infection control and risk management

- Always follow the manufacturers' instructions for use, care and cleaning of the tools and equipment. Additionally follow any policies and procedures outlined by your organisation.

Useful resources and links:

- **Your shed and Dementia: A Manual** provides information on social engagement through men's sheds. It's developed by The Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA), which is the peak body supporting almost 1000 Men's Sheds and is recognised as one of Australia's largest male based community development organisations.
- **The Room Outside** is a publication that advocates well-designed gardens and outdoor spaces with ease of access to

enhance the lives of older people and people with dementia.

- **Volunteering Australia**, is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community.
- **Dementia and Sensory Challenges – Dementia can be more than memory** provides useful insights from Agnes Houston, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and noticed challenges with her senses. She discusses how to live a positive life despite these changes.
- **My home, My Life: Practical ideas for people with dementia and carers** is an insightful publication that brings together the voice of people with dementia and carers with the best learning from research and care experience to provide tips, strategies and real-life stories to support greater independence.