

Early Explorers Preschool: “Wellies, Words and Worms”

Qualified teacher Alison Wakeford reflected carefully before deciding how to spend the EYPP funding that 13 children were eligible for at Early Explorers Preschool, based at Mile Oak Community Centre in North Portslade. Six of the children who qualified have been supported to make smooth transitions to reception classes, although the time window on this occasion for purposeful spending on behalf of those children *before* transition was very short. For the seven other children Alison reviewed records of language development using Tapestry observations and videos, colour-coded Development Statements Trackers and consultation with key workers and parents. Language was a high priority in identifying attainments gaps within the setting. Alison is very aware of the triadic relationship between children’s early language, thought and cognitive development. Children with higher attainment in language are able to use language for thinking and are able to develop concepts earlier than children with lower language attainment: language ability will affect learning in all areas of the EYFS. Alison checked to ensure that any additional Communication and Language needs of the children who attracted the EYPP were being met effectively through regular adult interventions, and that small group work was enabling all children to make progress in early phonics. This process was an interesting one. “We offer lots of high-quality adult interventions here, such as Write Dance, Derbyshire Language Scheme activities, Letters and Sounds and early phonics, and I became aware that these interventions were already interrupting the children’s play quite a lot during each session. I didn’t want to plough EYPP funding into more of the same,” Alison explained. She felt very strongly that Early Explorers needed to offer the children something really different, exciting and motivating, and looked for something which would enhance language but also encourage independence and confidence, enriching the quality of adult-child verbal interactions and creating new opportunities for sustained shared thinking.



At this time staff were having conversations with the parents of children who were eligible for EYPP funding and asked them to consider their child’s needs and what their child liked best about preschool. In response, almost all of these parents made reference to their children’s love of outdoor play, whether it be at preschool, at the park, in the forest or on the beach. Most of the EYPP children either lived in flats with no garden or had limited access to the outdoors unless specific outings were planned by parents. Alison is aware of the need for adults to make the most of the potential for high level learning outdoors, and said “All these opportunities for extending children’s learning outdoors can so easily be missed.”

Early Explorers Preschool has the advantage of three outdoor areas, including a large tarmac playground used for physical play and ride-on equipment, an 'outdoor classroom' which is also tarmac and is often set up with resources for scientific and mathematical exploration and discovery and a large 'garden' which has become more safely accessible due to new steps and a gate, and is a large, gently sloping expanse of grass, encompassing trees and bordered by fences and a brick wall.

Over the next few days Alison and her staff observed the play habits of the EYPP children, paying particular attention to *where* they chose to play, *how* they interacted with peers and the *quality* of play which resulted. There were some clear outcomes. During free-flow play *most* of the children and often *all* of the children eligible for EYPP, chose to play outdoors. Some children would have been happy to ride bikes up and down the long playground for the whole session. Language was stimulated by exploratory play and problem-solving in the 'outdoor classroom', but the most social interaction, sustained shared thinking and independent learning was taking place in the relatively undeveloped garden. The EPPE study found that sustained shared thinking was a particular kind of interaction which occurred more frequently in effective preschools (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004).

In the garden, staff had gradually begun to introduce very simple resources based on their observations of the children's natural inclinations for play in this environment. "We have been careful not to rush in and over-do things here," Alison told me. "As we have seen the children's interests develop, we have offered a few basic, open-ended resources. When we saw them digging we offered spades, large spoons and buckets. When they began to 'make food' by

"There is some evidence that outdoor learning environments can change behaviour, for example, by increasing group interaction, but.....it is clear that, for learning, the quality of interaction between Early Years Professionals and children is more important than the quality of the physical space."

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scooping up soil and offering it to one another, we supplied metal pots and pans....a kettle...wooden spoons and then some crates with sheets of Correx cable-tied to the tops, which has turned into a mud kitchen area; and when the children wanted to climb we gave them car tyres, scaffold planks and more crates and they began to build obstacle courses." Alison recognises that most of the learning which takes place in this area comes directly from the children pursuing their own interests and that staff interactions should follow the children's lead to maintain this. She would like to optimise the potential of this garden area as a learning environment without spoiling the high-quality, child-led play which has begun to evolve.

Aware of the recent surge of interest in Green Schools and Forestry Skills and the link between child-led outdoor play and increased opportunities for independent learning, sustained shared thinking and language development, Alison organised professional development for her staff which she hopes will increase their confidence in identifying potential learning opportunities in the garden area, as they arise and by following the children's lead. The Sussex Wildlife Trust were invited into the setting for a staff inset day, followed by The Outdoors Project who ran Forest School sessions every Tuesday morning for two hours for a block of ten weeks, to work with staff, children and parents in the garden. Early Explorers were also able to offer places, free-of-charge, to

staff from other settings on their inset day training, boosting cost effectiveness and helping to share expertise and generate exchange of ideas within the sector.

Alison has noticed an increase in the enthusiasm and morale of staff who are looking forward to 'Forest sessions'. "I think because they all had the same basic training on inset day everyone is on the same page and we are all moving forward in this together now.... it has also helped to create more of a team feeling after recent staff changes," said Alison. Staff training has focussed on supporting children's holistic learning, encouraging them to listen more outside, to observe their environment more closely and to foster children's natural curiosity with open-ended questions and encourage sustained shared thinking. The children have enjoyed activities such as hunting and identifying bugs and wearing 'sticky bracelets' to collect and attach small objects they find. Children have used 'colour palettes' with many shades of green, for example, then finding natural objects which match specific shades. Staff at Early Explorers have already noticed that children are excited about Tuesdays and cannot wait to get up into the garden. Alison says, "There is a definite buzz about Tuesdays at the moment and parents are really pleased that their children are bursting with news about their adventures at home time. It's giving them lots to talk about I think."

Alison and her staff plan to monitor the impact of this project through Tapestry observations of Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language as well as the Characteristics of Learning. They are collating photos and videos, using the Leuven Scale observations of Wellbeing and Involvement and Development Statement Trackers. Evidence is also being collected via staff supervisions and parental feedback through Tapestry and at family lunches. "Video will be useful for capturing sustained shared thinking and the spontaneous language children use at those times, and I would expect to see raised wellbeing and involvement in many cases. Of course I shall be monitoring the progress of our children eligible for EYPP closely in all these areas and I anticipate that we may see raised confidence levels, perhaps more resilience and more perseverance in many of the children. These are all great skills to be developing over the next year as part of school readiness, especially for our EYPP cohort who are potentially more vulnerable at transition," Alison explained.

Staff at Early Explorers also began to look at ways to achieve year-round access to the garden, which was dependent upon the availability of sufficient all-weather gear for up to twenty-five children per session, as the area becomes very muddy in wet weather. The setting previously owned ten sets of all-weather gear, meaning children could only visit the garden in winter in small groups. Staff found the transfer of muddy clothing between children dampened some of their enthusiasm for the outdoors, wasted valuable time and was difficult to organise. A grant for additional funding through 'Awards for All,' means the setting is now able to purchase enough clothing to enable all children and adults to access this rich outdoor environment together, in each session. They can also afford to continue their 'Forestry Skill' sessions when the current sessions finish and Alison is already considering offering these on a different day so that different children can attend. The initial roll-out of Forestry Skills has been aimed at 3-4 year-olds but Alison would like to extend the opportunity to the 2-3 year age group, halving the length of sessions and increasing staff ratios. She is also considering CPD for a member of staff to

'lead' Forestry Skills in the future as she feels that if successful, the setting could develop its own programme, using the outdoor environment to bring children on, close the attainment gap and enhance school readiness.

- Many thanks to Alison Wakeford and the staff, children and parents of Early Explorers Preschool, for their kind co-operation and the information they provided for this case study.