

Pumpkin Patch Nursery: Phonics and Forestry Skills

Pumpkin Patch had very clear ideas from the outset about EYPP spending, according to Katrina, the manager. The first was to support the transition of a child to Reception. The child's mother expressed concern that her son, Harrison, who has been identified as having Special Educational Needs and who was eligible for the EYPP, was the only child from Pumpkin Patch making the transition to this particular Primary School this year. Harrison was invited to an open morning at his new school. In addition, Victoria Gardener, the SENCO at the Nursery, liaised with the SENCO at the new school to arrange four extra visits to the Reception Class. The first was a meeting to discuss Harrison's individual needs and the following three were post-transition visits where Victoria supported Harrison to become familiar with his new environment, observing his adjustment and indicating to his new teacher areas in which he may need more support. On the first visit, Victoria was able to share the Speech & Language Therapy Programme Harrison has been following at Pumpkin Patch, with his new teacher, together with details of his Individual Support Plan. Victoria was also able to outline the ways in which Harrison's key worker, mother and grandmother had been involved in his learning so that his home learning environment could continue to support his school learning. The characteristics of Harrison's preferred ways of learning were discussed as well as his need for short breaks during some activities. Harrison's mother is convinced that this extra support has helped him to settle well at his new school and is relieved that the knowledge and understanding Nursery staff have gained of her son has not been lost in the transition to school, and that continuity has been maintained. Staff at Pumpkin Patch are keen to build on their successful work in this area in the future and improve transitions for all children according to their individual needs.

Reflecting upon transition has also led staff to consider the 'School Readiness' of the EYPP cohort and how they might increase opportunities for these children to be prepared and receptive to learning in their reception class. Harrison's new school sent a list to Pumpkin Patch, of the skills they might expect of children leaving nursery including some independence in self-care, the ability to communicate their needs and some knowledge of letters and sounds. Katrina had felt there was a lack of structured phonics teaching at her nursery for some time and seized this opportunity. "I realised that a lack of phonic knowledge may put children at a disadvantage on entering Reception, as phonic knowledge is the basis of reading, which in turn is central to accessing information in all areas of learning," she explained. Katrina sensed her staff did not feel confident in this area but she was determined to change the way phonics teaching was perceived in the setting, through training and increasing knowledge and confidence. Katrina



consulted Anita O'Hara, owner of the setting, whose sister is a Reception Teacher. Anita arranged for her sister to deliver training in basic phonics teaching to all staff at Pumpkin Patch. The six-hour training session took place on a staff inset day and involved 'Phonic Puppets,' activities about the letter 'characters', activities such as mark-making specific letters in shaving foam and cornflour, puzzles and games to play. A parents' workshop helped to increase awareness of the importance of the home learning environment and the role of parents in their child's learning. With every new letter learned, each child is given a phonics pack full of activities to take home. "Staff have really enjoyed the training and I



think they are all more confident because everyone took part instead of one or two people doing the training then feeding back to the rest,” explained Katrina. “It’s been a lot of work producing the Home Packs but parents’ comments have been so positive....they know they are giving their children a head start for school and feel excited and empowered...and staff have been really enthusiastic, as lots of the activities are really fun to organise and do motivate the children,” she continued. Staff are monitoring the impact of the programme by assessing children’s progress through red/amber/green colour-coding of development statements in Literacy and Physical Development. Although it is early days, staff have noticed that working with their parents and achieving success has increased the confidence and wellbeing of the EYPP cohort, and is creating ‘can do’ attitudes towards learning which are also an important part of school readiness. Parents are becoming much more involved in their children’s development and progress, through the phonics project, and most importantly, especially for children who attract the premium, parents are ‘on board’ supporting their children’s learning *before* transition.



Pumpkin Patch Nursery offers Forestry School as an optional enrichment activity, working together with ‘Circle of Life,’ who specialize in delivering Forest School to young children. The introduction of EYPP Funding has ensured that all children are able to access this exciting project as part of their learning at the nursery. Katrina felt that the EYPP cohort and some of their peers had been missing out on the opportunity to learn different skills in different ways, in a new environment, such as exploring the outdoors, working in small groups, learning how to build shelters, use tools and cook over an open fire. “Since we have been offering Forestry Skills I have seen shy children develop confidence and really come out of themselves and shine,” Katrina explained. “A child in the current EYPP cohort, who is looked after by his grandparents, has developed a really strong attachment to a staff member, through our forestry skills sessions. We have been able to observe and record the positive impact of this on the child’s Personal, Social and Emotional Development, wellbeing, confidence and enthusiasm for playing outdoors,” Katrina continued. “The forest offers children learning opportunities to extend their vocabulary, develop language, problem-solving and social skills and acquire healthy, positive characteristics of learning such as persistence and trying out new ideas,” Katrina added. At the end of each session the children are given a print-out of the experience with a write-up, photos and links to the EYFS curriculum, enabling them to share their adventures with their families. The Interactive Learning Diary in use at Pumpkin Patch is an effective means of reviewing and sharing the impact of EYPP projects. Parents are excited and enthusiastic about their children being offered this opportunity. One parent of a child eligible for the EYPP

commented, “It’s been an enormous hit. He’s really developed confidence...he does not stop talking about the experience, before and after...it’s a great opportunity for kids to get hands-on learning, do loads of exciting activities and get a healthy woodland walk.”

Pumpkin Patch have been pleased to see that the Phonics and Forestry School projects are also feeding into one another and helping to enrich other areas of the curriculum. Staff are capturing this through their key person observations and find it very rewarding when an idea tried out in the forest makes its way into the Nursery, showing that the children are making important links between their experiences and developing sound characteristics of learning, essential for school readiness.



Katrina is monitoring the impact of these projects and if evidence shows that outcomes are improved for the EYPP cohort this term, further training for staff in both phonics and forestry skills will be undertaken to develop the projects when the next tranche of EYPP funding becomes available. Staff visited Reflections Nursery in Worthing when they initially introduced Forest School to Pumpkin Patch. Reflections Nursery is based on the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning and its inspirational Director, Martin Pace, Author of 'I Love Forest School,' is a great advocate of using the outdoor environment as the classroom. Katrina would like to make a follow-up visit to Reflections and is also keen for staff to visit Little Barns Farm School in Horsham to broaden their skill and expertise in teaching outdoors, reach more children and families and ensure that EYPP funding continues to make a difference.

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