

stretching the boundaries

Marion Breslin, manager at Carlton Hill Community Nursery, explains how her team use the local environment to enhance children's learning and build a sense of community...



Whilst we must **teach children** about **stranger danger**, we must also be realistic and teach them about being **friendly** and helping our **neighbours** and old people too

When we think of 'enabling environments' and supporting and extending children's learning we are more often than not focusing on the indoor and outdoor environment of the nursery. However, it is just as important to use the environment outside the nursery boundaries to give children the opportunity to learn from, and be part of, their local community. Indeed, we need to build the view of the nursery being at the centre of the community.

It is important for the children to build up a sense of community from a young age, to learn about where they fit in, and to begin to understand the value of having local services. It doesn't have to be complicated or cost money, as even a walk to the end of the street can be different each time – for example, as the seasons change trees change, the weather changes and seasonal fruits and vegetables change in the shops.

Being able to walk down the street, say hi to people who we know and have people know where we come from is lovely. For the children, to have people acknowledge them instead of just ignoring them helps to develop a sense of pride in who they are, in their nursery and where they come from. Taking a ride on the local bus or tube, (especially outside sections) and talking about what you can see – the shops, churches, mosques, hospitals or other buildings around – can have very real meaning for the children.

Forging links

In the current difficult financial climate it is more important than ever to support local services such as small local traders, and taking the children to buy their own fruit and vegetables from them will allow the children to

build relationships with people and develop connections which will benefit the nursery also. When putting on events it helps to have these links with local shops and services as they will be more willing to support your events if you have supported them throughout the year also.

Getting known in the local area has value in terms of marketing the nursery too. When we go out we have hats, bags and jackets with the nursery name and logo on them. Recently, after having a fun session in the local park, one of our settings was approached by a parent and asked about where they came from. She was so impressed by the activities and the practitioners' monitoring and engagement with the children that she asked about visiting the nursery with a view to sending her child there.

Creating a community

Developing links with the local community support officers and the police is also a great idea, as this relationship is another important one. They come and speak with the children in the nursery, take walks around the area with



them and teach them how to stay safe – which benefits the nursery in terms of security too.

In today's very insular world children might not even know who lives next door or have even talked to them. There is a sense of fear about talking to people we don't know, and whilst we must teach children about stranger danger we must also be realistic and teach them about being friendly and helping our neighbours and old people too.

In one of our LEYF settings the manager has developed strong links with the police and support officers to help develop a



findoutmore

Marion Breslin is nursery manager of Carlton Hill Community Nursery, an 'outstanding' setting run by the London Early Years Foundation. For more details, visit leyf.org.uk



project with teenagers in the area that had been vandalising the nursery garden. Instead of using the police to give them warnings she has invited the teenagers into the nursery to work on projects with the children and families. This has worked very well for them as the teenagers have been given the opportunity to build structures and grow produce which they can be proud of; so now, instead of vandalising the garden they are protecting it as it has value to them. The nursery has also made links with the local old people's home and children visit regularly to sing and perform for the residents there. This is a great learning experience for the children, as our older generations are great storytellers and it gives them great joy when the children come to visit them.

The local environment can provide an exciting context for first-hand experiences for the children. In urban areas there are always local shops to visit, local libraries to support or a post office and park to visit. The connections children make with their local environment can last a lifetime. If in the very early years we can build these connections and values in children they will hopefully take these with them throughout their lives and become very community-minded and responsible adults.

Out and about

The benefits

- It will teach children to respect, and allow them to get to know, the local area
- Positive publicity – you can fly the flag for your nursery
- New and real experiences for the children are plentiful
- You can encourage children to see themselves as part of a community
- If you support local businesses you may find them willing to help you

The difficulties

- Staff-to-child ratios for going on short or long trips can prove problematic
- Weather – you must have the right clothes to go out come rain or shine
- The reluctance of staff and parents to take trips might have to be overcome
- Traffic levels and safety on the streets must be considered carefully