

The great outdoors

Manager of Carlton Hill Community Nursery, **Marion Breslin**, explains why escaping the confines of the nursery's four walls is so important to her setting...



"Planting seeds, watching them grow, harvesting them and finally enjoying eating them is an authentic, real life experience children never forget."

MARION BRESLIN

The best memories we have from childhood often involve being outdoors – climbing trees, looking after animals or simply playing in the park. In my case, having grown up on a farm in rural Ireland, they are of my love of growing flowers and vegetables, and playing with natural resources. I bring this passion for the outdoors to my practice, with the aim of enabling the children in my setting to have a similar experience, even though we're an inner city London nursery.

Parents these days have little time to spend supervising outdoor play with their children and some children miss out on exploring their environment, so it's important for us to create a rich play and outdoor learning environment in the nursery.

Taking the inside out

We put a lot of time into helping practitioners understand the value of outdoor play. We share ideas at staff meetings and recently created a series of activities to cover all six areas of learning for the outdoors.

Photographs of the activities and information about them are displayed in the shed in the garden, serving as a reminder of how we can ensure the children get a holistic learning experience each day and that no area of development is left out. It's added to on a regular basis, whenever a new activity is created by a member of the team. I'm sure everyone will recognise that every team has some very strong practitioners and some who need guidance and role-modelling in order to help them to learn and understand why we do things the way we do. Having visual as well as written support materials enables this to be provided in a much more meaningful way.

Purposeful planned activities, together with spontaneous learning experiences, ensure our

outdoor curriculum is of as high a quality as the indoor curriculum. Having a staff team that know and understand how their key children learn best is very important, as we all know that some children make more progress when outdoors: they learn through free play and discovery rather than set indoor activities. And any activity indoors can be brought outdoors to provide a different learning experience.

We are fortunate to have a large outdoor space which, over the past year, has been totally re-vamped, thanks to funding from our local children's centre. Being part of the consultation for the new outdoor area was very important for us as practitioners, as we know the needs of the children, and the equipment and layout of open space that will provide the best opportunities for them to develop a sense of freedom, and be creative and active learners. Gone is the old fashioned metal climbing frame and tarmac surface; in their place is a mini allotment, an age appropriate climbing structure, wicker huts, a willow tunnel, a fairytale story telling area and, most important, a covered shelter to enable all-weather outdoor play.



Growing potential

Giving the children the opportunity to grow their own vegetables and flowers has been a great addition to our outdoor curriculum. Being able to get involved in the process of sowing seeds, watching them grow, learning to take care of them, harvesting them and finally enjoying eating them is an authentic, real life experience that they'll never forget. While we have a large area to dedicate to our mini allotment, every setting can create these experiences – be it with a set of small window boxes or large organised spaces. It's the quality of engagement that counts.

Every day, either during a set activity with



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 www.leyf.org.uk



the practitioners or our chef, or during free play time, the children look at the vegetables and check how they're growing. The favourite activity is getting the hose out and watering the garden (the adults and children getting watered as well as the vegetables...). We have left one area of the allotment free from planting because the children love digging – they learn not to dig up the vegetables we've planted and use the free space to sit in, get dirty and look for worms.

Through the vegetable garden the children have also learned about the origins of the food they're eating, and this has linked in with our healthy eating programme. Together with our local children's centre, we're working on a target of improving the health and weight of the children in our local area. This is a national problem, but with our LEYF (London Early Years Foundation) Food Policy, a healthy, well-balanced menu and our own outdoor curriculum, we're contributing to trying to improve the health of the children who attend our setting on a daily basis. Recognition of LEYF's commitment to providing healthy meals for the children has come with being a finalist in the *Nursery World* food awards this year. Coming from inner city London nurseries this is a great achievement, and providing a diverse outdoor curriculum has helped achieve this.

Rain or shine

BE PREPARED TO MAKE USE OF YOUR OUTDOOR SPACE REGARDLESS OF WHAT THE WEATHER IS DOING...

■ We have a sign in our cloakroom area, which reads 'It's not the weather that is bad, it's the clothing'. This is a reminder to parents as well as practitioners that outdoor play is vital no matter what the weather is like.

■ We bought outdoor waterproof suits and these have been put to very good use over the winter months.

Practitioners don't have to explain muddy garments, and parents feel much happier children being outdoors when they're well-clothed.

■ The winter months – and especially snow – can provide great spontaneous learning experiences. For some children, last winter was their first experience of snow, and with the support and enthusiasm of our practitioners a sense of wonder, fun and purposeful learning took place in the short time it lasted.