

# Going Out to Play with Fred the Ted



"It's about children's rights!" said Fred

## Creating Ongoing Dialogue with Young Children

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## Creating ongoing dialogue with young children

Children have a right to be consulted over matters which affect them. Over recent years, it is recognised that consultation should not be one-off or occasional activities that are done to children by adults. Instead, there needs to be a clear commitment from practitioners to ensure that genuine participation in decision making processes is how a pre-school establishment operates. It defines the ethos within a setting.

### **The difference between consultation and participation<sup>1</sup>**

In a consultation, the people seeking your views have the ultimate power. They decide what they will ask about, how they will ask it, the means by which views can be expressed, the time frame and to what extent the views expressed will influence their decision.

Participation implies joint ownership of the decision making process and active involvement of all parties. Power is shared.

In practice, any attempt to promote children's participation will involve consultation too. There are different levels of participation – and we need to be clear with ourselves and with children what level of participation we are offering.

All young children can express very clear preferences. However they need to be asked in ways that they understand and be free to respond using a variety of means appropriate to their age and ability. Children enjoy and benefit from being able to voice their opinions. It can help them to become more confident and independent. Such dialogue makes events more meaningful and relevant to children's interests.

By creating a ongoing conversation with children in different ways, it helps practitioners ensure that the children are leading the learning.

This workshop and these notes give some ideas as to how to make this happen. As a general rule, the more multi-sensory an activity, the more accessible this becomes to all children. In many ways this is a collection and celebration of lots of good ideas from different people and settings. Thank you to all the participants on outdoor EY courses for your input!

The title comes from using "Fred the Ted", a loveable teddy bear who helps children learn about being outside and with whom children feel comfortable and able to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions about their outdoor space and other places further afield.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Never Too Young – How young children can take responsibility and make decisions* by Judy Miller (2009) published by Save the Children ISBN 978-1-84187-075-5, P6

### **The need for creative approaches to creating dialogue with children**

Firstly, remember that if you ask for children's views and thoughts then carry through the process and ensure these are acted upon. Think about times when you've been asked for your thoughts which have then been ignored or discounted... it isn't nice.

Simply asking children what they think does not always work for a number of reasons

- ✧ Children may not understand the question
- ✧ A child may be more interested in pleasing an adult and want to give the perceived right answer
- ✧ Not every child can express themselves verbally

The books listed at the end of this handout provide lots of ideas for engaging children in having their say.

### **Don't be afraid to ask for "Yes/No" answers!**

If you work with very young children or those who need more support, it is best to begin with a straightforward "yes/no" responses – it's a quick way of gauging thoughts, getting simple information and testing views. More complex responses can come later. Similar ideas include using happy and sad tokens to express a preference or a "thumbs up/down" approach.

### **Don't let children suffer the consequences**

If children make a decision, then this requires follow through to check the consequences and help children make changes as necessary. For example, if the children decide to grow plants in an unsuitable place, then ensure these are checked upon and help the children to decide where the plants could be moved to which might work better.

### **Where to go outside**

Whether it is to different parts of the school grounds or different places in the local area, finding out which place children prefer to visit is an important part of the preparation. Try some of the following:

- ✧ Show children photos of different places. Which one do they like the best? With some children, a choice between two places is plenty. Others can cope with more choices. If a child is unable to verbalise their choice, then look for indicators such as length of time spent looking at a photo and their reaction to it.
- ✧ Have a range of natural and other resources available for children to pick up, feel and talk about. These should reflect the different places. For example, a visit to a park may be shown with some fresh grass. Sand, shells and/or seaweed can represent the seaside. A small branch could represent trees or woodland.
- ✧ Have a look by flying in on Google Earth. Remember to check this out beforehand as sometimes the images are outdated. The streetview can be helpful so that children can see in advance where they are going.

Try asking the children to rank their responses if you have three or more options.

### **Learning more about an outdoor space**

To help children explore a new place or outdoor area, collect a pairs of interesting objects – the children can help you decide what these are. Hide one of each object in the outdoor space. The children then pick an object and see if they can find and bring it back its pair in a central spot. This activity can be good for getting children to look close up at a familiar outdoor area. Thanks to Sue Thorburn for this suggestion.

### **Favourite parts of the outdoor space or school grounds**

In a small group, the children take turns to show Fred the Ted their favourite part of the school grounds. At each place, a song can be sung of the children's choosing or an activity relevant to This is described in more detail on this blog post:

<http://creativestarning.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/story-of-fred-ted.html>

If photos are taken at each stopping place, then print them out and another day, see if children can retrace their journey. The choices about where to go and what is discussed are useful for finding out more about what children like to see and do outside.

### **Adopting a place or space**

Repeated visits to a special place outside can develop a strong sense of belonging and ownership. Very often the children will invent names for different parts of that place. Draw up a map and put these features and their names on the map. If every child has a copy, then they can take it to and from home and use it as a way of talking about where they went and what they did. For example, the children at Cowgate Under 5's Centre refer to their Forest School site as "Stickland".

Give children the opportunity to create a model of their special place. This usually works best in situ where children can use natural materials. Have materials for labelling the model ready. This provides a great context for ascertaining children's thoughts and feelings about their special place.

### **My favourite walk**

Ask parents and children to bring in a photo of where children like to walk outside. Is it to a favourite park, forest, the beach or elsewhere? Sometimes it can be a visit to a library. This can help any setting broaden the options offered to children in terms of getting off-site. It also means that if you are able to undertake any of these walks, then this child can lead the way!

### **Organising resources**

Children need to be able to freely access the resources they need in order to play outside

- ✦ Put resources in bags or on low level shelves that children are able to reach. Have these close to the door leading outside or have shelving outside. Have double open-door sheds to allow easy access.
- ✦ Benches with storage work well in some outdoor spaces. Check you can lock the storage part.
- ✦ Photos or pictorial signs with writing work well. However some children may need 3D representation. For example, they may need to see an actual pebble or a small mirror. Transparent boxes work well here. Alternatively, glue or attach an object to the outside of

the bag. Some bags come with external pockets, e.g. Smartsacks which can be used to house an object.

- ★ Observe children's use of the resources. If no child is using one particular resource, ask the children what other materials may be better for them. Let children ask for resources which may not be present. Children appreciate having their requests taken seriously. Older children may like to use a "request box" and write their requests on a piece of paper that gets posted into the box.

### **What we like playing with outside**

Sometimes it is hard to know what resources should be readily accessible to children. At the Middlefield Community Project, the staff use catalogues such as "Argos" with the children. The children look at the toys for ideas and inspiration about what they can do outside with the resources they have available. This can help children understand that they don't need every resource but can creatively adapt what they have.

At Inverallochy Nursery, there is a choice wall. Each resource has a photo and a pocket. At the end of a session, the children, in conjunction with their parent or carer, visit the wall and put their lolly stick with their name on it in the pocket of their choosing. This is used to provide and plan activities for the next day. This works especially well as their nursery room is upstairs and not readily accessible to children so there is a need for careful planning as to what is going to be taken outside.

### **Give children choices over outdoor resources which are bought for the setting**

Cut out photos of 3 different items. Stick each of these to a jar. Let children vote for which one they wish the setting to purchase. It helps if you know the company has the items in stock and can supply promptly. Also discuss the idea of a fair vote and letting everyone have their say. You may wish for a relevant practical or sensory object to be put beside each jar to help children decide. Remember to talk about what each resource is and the pros and cons of each one so that children make an informed decision.

If it is possible to have several copies of a catalogue or if you have several unwanted catalogues, children can look at the outdoor resources and cut out the ones they like. This can tell you or help confirm children's interests about their activities outside.

To help children understand the cost of different items, have counters that represent amounts of money, e.g. 1 counter = £10. If your setting has raised money for outdoor play equipment and want the children to choose, then show children the range of options and have counters indicated or available for the children to count.

### **What Colours Would Work Well**

If you are trying to decide on colour themes for a mural or giving some outdoor furniture a lick of paint, then give children a sticky bracelet made from masking tape. Put this on each child's arm and let them collect colours from the environment. From here they can each choose their favourite colour to add to the mixing pot of ideas!

## Outdoor Clothing

Creative STAR have put together several boxes of outdoor clothing and accessories that schools and pre-school settings can borrow, for free, for up to one month at a time. Children try the clothes out to find out which work best for them. This means that if a school or setting decide to develop a stock of outdoor clothing, then they have experience of different sorts and can make a more informed decision that has meaningfully involved children of all ages. The aims of this enterprise project include:

- ✦ Children are actively involved in trialling the different clothes and give their opinion as to the clothing which they believe works best
- ✦ The class learns about how to manage outdoor clothing. For example developing a system to dry wet clothing, learn how to manage coming inside and dealing with any mud or mess, etc.
- ✦ Classes may use the box as a springboard into an enterprise project and take responsibility for fund raising for a class set of clothes
- ✦ Enthusiasm and interest is generated by trying out the clothes. This makes going outside purposeful
- ✦ It's an opportunity for parents and carers to see the range of clothing, the positive impact it has on the children's comfort levels and experience of being outside. They can also provide valuable feedback and advice
- ✦ Schools and settings save money buy making an informed choice about the best clothing to buy.

For more information visit this page <http://www.creativestarning.co.uk/support/try-before-you-buy-outdoor-clothing-boxes.aspx>

## Making your outdoor space more wildlife friendly

A good starting point here is to ask children what they think birds or other wildlife need to stay alive. This might produce a variety of opinions. However it is likely that food, water and shelter will come up in some shape or form. Show the children photos of different garden birds and talk about where they like to nest and the food they like to eat.

From here, take a basket of toy birds or puppets outside and ask each child within a small group to put a bird in the place they think would be the best place for the bird to build a nest. Do not worry if your outdoor space is completely barren of plants. Ask the children to explain their decision to the rest of the group. Encourage them to consider the need for shelter, food and water.

From here it is possible to investigate what food and shelter different animals need. This is a good opportunity to invite an RSPB volunteer into nursery or other professional to talk to the children. Show the children photos of different measures that can be taken to increase the biodiversity of an outdoor space and let them decide what might work. If possible go and visit or experience these, e.g. go and see a log pile or long grass and look for minibeasts. See if it is possible to arrange a pond dipping activity at a nearby pond.

For more information see these blog posts:

Wee Green Fingers: <http://creativestarning.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/wee-green-fingers.html>

Creating Bird Friendly Schools: <http://creativestarning.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/creating-bird-friendly-schools-and.html>

## **Gardening – Choosing What Plants**

Knowing what plants to put in an outdoor space can be hard. If it is possible to have cuttings of a range of plants and a photo of them, then this can help. For example, a cutting of lavender can help children understand more about the multi-sensory properties of a plant.

Kirrimuir Nursery took a group of children to their local garden centre to see the range of fruit trees that could be grown in their locality. A member of the garden staff showed the children each fruit tree and shrub and answered questions. At each one, the children tasted the fruit produced. This had been prepared by the nursery teacher to ensure children were able to make a meaningful decision.

A good way to find out which flowers are suitable for bee, butterfly or wildlife gardens is to take children along to the seed packets at a local garden centre or supermarket. Many now carry a logo which allows for quick identification. The children can find the logo on the seeds then decide which ones they wish to purchase.

## **Creating a mud pit or digging area**

Many children love to dig in soil and use this medium in a variety of play scenarios. There are many possibilities when it comes to mud provision and working out what is most suitable can be fun. Here's one possible approach to finding out children's views.

- ✧ Take children on a walk along a muddy wet path. Do they like and enjoy walking through the muddy bits? Let them play in the mud.
- ✧ Have a deep tray with some shop bought top soil in it (do not buy compost – if feels completely different). Nearby have containers with sand, water, leaves and fresh green materials and clay which the children can access freely and add to the topsoil. Have a range of tools such as trowels, rakes, sticks, wooden and metal spoons, pots, pans, etc.
- ✧ Watch the children play. What materials do they choose to add to the tray?
- ✧ Move the tray and other containers to different parts of the outdoor space. Try it on a table and also at ground height. Which works best? Think about the use of a wall. Some children like to throw mud at walls. In one nursery, the mud play area was extended to make the ground part of the muddy area as well as an old water tray.
- ✧ There are lots of photos available via Pinterest and the Early Years blogs. Remember to only download ones which are posted under a creative commons licence. Otherwise contact the author and ask their permission. Show children a variety of muddy areas such as garden borders, big wet mud patches, mud kitchens, etc. See which photos provoke a positive reaction. Ask children to put a counter or stick on their favourite photo.
- ✧ Share the results of the practical observations and photo comments with parents and carers via a noticeboard. Ask parents what they remember as children about playing in mud. Ask parents to add post-it notes to the photos with their thoughts. This is an ideal time to see if there are concerns and how they can be mitigated.

## **Deciding where to put seats and benches outside**

Very often benches and seats are put in the wrong place and are not suitable for children's play needs. The trick is to find out where children like to sit and in what arrangements they naturally like.

- ✧ Put out lots of old chairs into the outdoor space or school grounds. See what the children do with them and where they are moved to. One nursery that did this found that the seats

almost always ended up behind a row of bushes. So they ended up letting them stay there. It could be that children want and need moveable seats.

- ★ Look at how the children use the seats. Do they put them in rows, circles, waves? Take photos of where the seats are put and the formation. This will let you know what is needed.
- ★ Offer alternative forms of seating. Tree stumps and half logs can be popular. Some children like carrymats and the opportunity to lie on the ground. Others like sitting in trees.

Have a look at the Creative STAR Learning Company's Facebook page. There is a whole album of photos dedicated to seats outside! You may find that children simply prefer seats they can move about within their play-based learning.

### **Creating sandpits outside**

Generally the bigger the sand experience the more satisfying it is for children.

- ★ Take the children to the beach and observe their behaviour. What do children do in sand? What materials do they add to their creations such as shells or seaweed? How important is the addition of water in their play?
- ★ To involve the children in deciding where a sandpit should go, experiment with a box of sand or a bag of sand on some tarp. The children can decide where to move it and play with it and then you can discuss how it went. If there are children who do not communicate verbally, then look for their reactions to the sand in different places. Is it ignored in one area?

### **Developing a music wall**

The staff and children at Mile End nursery investigated sounds outside and what every day items could be used to make music. From here they developed a list of items which the children felt would make a good music wall which was put on the parents' noticeboard. They each asked their parents what they could contribute and the children wrote their names beside the different items they could bring into nursery. The school janitors helped make some instruments too.

### **Useful Reading**

*Starting with Choice – Inclusive Strategies for Consulting Young Children* by M Dickens, S Emerson and P Gordon Smith (2004) published by Save the Children ISBN 1-84187-085-4

*Listening to Young Children – The Mosaic Approach* by Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2001) published by the National Children's Bureau ISBN 1-900990-62-8

*Talking and Thinking Floorbooks* by Claire Warden (2006) published by Mindstretchers ISBN 095448836-9

*Never Too Young – How young children can take responsibility and make decisions* by Judy Miller (2009) published by Save the Children ISBN 978-1-84187-075-5