

Nature Kindergartens in Fife

Fife pre-school establishments have integrated weekly nature kindergarten sessions in local woodlands for children in a sustainable way since 2007 with support and in-house training from Fife Council. The purpose of this case study is to examine how this approach has been adopted, the support given to settings and examples of very good practice observed.

The Establishment of Nature Kindergartens¹

Chris Miles, a former Early Years Co-ordinator, set up a unique training programme for pre-school staff to assist them in getting children outside into woods and other nearby greenspace. Over an 18-month period more than 60 pre-school establishments became involved and started taking their children to local woodlands. The Fife model used in-house training aimed at staff who were committed, keen and prepared for the challenge. It included:

- Attendance at an initial conference where a Norwegian educator, Anders Farstad spoke
- Pre-school staff identifying and organising access to suitable woodland near their establishment
- 3 days training which included time spent in the woods with a forest ranger and observing a forest kindergarten session

The funding for this training was spread over 2 years and came from the ring fenced staff development budget and the Child Care Strategy. 200 pre-school staff received the 3-day training sessions. The budget primarily was spent on staff cover costs.

Support from Fife Council has been continued. A series of one-day training sessions organised by a Development Group to allow partner providers and staff who did not receive the original training have continued. Brief yet comprehensive information is provided about:

- Clothing
- Examples of rules and expectations
- Notes for helpers and guidelines for staff
- Resources and contents to carry in a rucksack
- Sample risk assessments
- How to link nature kindergarten experiences to Curriculum for Excellence
- General advice on site selection, transport, ratios, toileting and need for regular visits
- Useful organisations and contacts within Fife Council
- Scottish Preschool Play Association (SPPA) Forest Kindergarten booklet

¹ Extracted from Robertson, J., Martin, P. and Borradaile, L. (2009) *Forest Kindergarten Feasibility Study Appendix 8*
Forestry Commission Scotland

Currently almost 80% of local authority pre-school establishments have regular weekly nature kindergarten sessions in local woodlands throughout Fife. Some nurseries use beaches or a mix of different natural habitats. This case study features two settings that use local woodlands and are recognised as having very good practice.

Torbain Nursery Class

This setting is part of Torbain Primary School in Kirkcaldy. The school covers a mixed catchment including rural and urban areas. 140 children attend on a part time basis. Every child has the opportunity to visit Raith Woodlands on a weekly basis throughout the year. There is a “break” from December to mid-February, agreed in consultation with parents. The children are dropped off at the woodland site at the start of the session and collected from the woods at the end of the session by their parents or carers.

Clentry Nursery

This setting is a stand alone nursery for Kelty village. It has places for up to 200 children. The children have the opportunity to attend Blairadam Woods, which is owned by the Forestry Commission. The nature kindergarten sessions vary according to the availability of parent helpers and the days which children come to nursery. Each class visits the wood on a weekly basis but children who attend are those who express an interest. It is a child-led decision. The visit begins and ends back at the nursery building.



The entrance to Blairadam Woods, Kelty

Establishing the nature kindergarten sessions

Torbain Nursery sent two staff on the training offered. This inspired the nursery to find suitable local woodlands. After visiting several sites, the Raith Estate which is privately owned proved most suitable. The staff wanted a site with the following features:

- Easy access
- Not on a main road: no traffic noise
- Safe parking for parents
- Not a park but a woodland that felt wild

The staff undertook a risk assessment and set in place practice and procedures to ensure that the nursery day happened outside. Parking was an issue to begin with, but now the parent’s park in a nearby residential area and walk with their children to the woodland site. The nursery bought waterproof suits for the children which are loaned to the children for up to one-year. They are replaced if a child outgrows the suit or it wears out!

Clentry Nursery had been using Blairadam Woods for many years on an occasional basis. After the training, they gradually increased the frequency of the visits. They have a supply of spare clothes which can be borrowed on the day. This was built up over many months. Lots of children now arrive at nursery wearing their own outdoor clothing.

Both nurseries operate flexible ratios which are lower than at their setting. At Clentry a minimum of two staff attend every woodland visit. Parents, carers and grandparents readily assist at both nurseries all year round.



Enjoying snack outside in the woods in January!

Learning and Play Activities

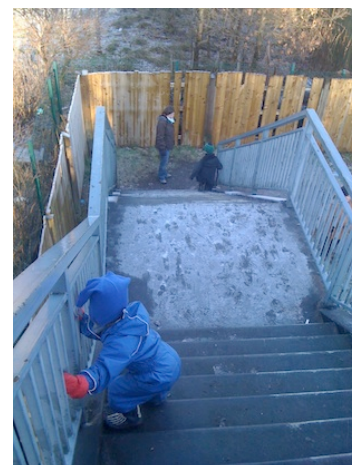
At Clentry, the woodland visit began with a walk through the village. Time was made to stop and look at objects or events that caught the children's attention. For example, the children were very interested in a plant growing in the roof guttering of one house. The staff pointed out the numbers on the doors of the houses.

When the woodlands were reached, a brief safety talk took place where the children reminded each other of the rules about being in the woods. This included finding an adult when the whistle was blown, staying in sight of an adult, keeping an eye out for "jaggy bits" on the ground and what to do if a dog bounds up. The children were then free to run ahead to the bench and wait for the adults to catch up.

The rest of the session was free play and snacks. The children enjoyed playing hide 'n' seek which demonstrated active learning through play. Some of the benefits observed in this activity alone include numeracy through counting, different children assuming leadership and the different environment to the nursery's outdoor space that provided increased physical challenge. Also during free play a small group of children collected twigs and sticks to make houses and there was a litter pick initiated by the children which led to a discussion about the environment in relation to this. Snack was very popular with children and adults. Flasks of hot water enabled warm drinks. Plenty of food was available. One parent observed, *"Their appetites grow when they are outside."*

Staff find that regular forest trips can be very effective in developing young children who are finding it difficult to cope in a structured classroom environment. Parents also learn from the forest experience that staff model. This can impact on the learning experiences they share with their own children.

At Torbain Nursery the children spend the whole session from start to finish in the woodlands playing around a small cliff and steep slope that adds height and a sense of adventure along with a view through and above the trees. All staff within the nursery class are present and stay all day. The sessions are planned from the children's interests, just like at an ordinary nursery session.



At both nurseries, it was clear that the whole session was a real world learning experience. For Clentry children, the management of dog poo, the walk through the residential area and the crossing of multiple roads and the big bridge all provided opportunities to manage everyday risks and learn experientially about being outside in their local area. The games and activities observed were highly imaginative and cooperative. The environment provides challenging physical activities. "When my daughter climbs a tree, I have to look the other way," laughed one parent.

Using the children's interests and experiences to plan next steps in learning

Both nurseries record the children's observations and events in the woodland sessions in line with their work back at the centres. This was used both in the woodland sessions and in the centre as planning for next steps. For example, at Torbain nursery, the colours and shapes of leaves were examined and discussed the next day based upon specimens collected by the children.



One child's map show the natural wonders observed en route



This drawing is based upon "Jack and the Beanstalk" role play in the woods.

Torbain Nursery Nature Kindergarten Daily Plan Date 22/9/10

Observations	Next Steps
Walked to the stream - struggling to keep up with others, but it's much better now as keeping on track. We cleared the stream it was full of sticks kids then able to observe water flowing.	Take the fast boys alone for a walk so they can go at their pace.
very keen to run he was constantly being told to stop and wait. Rebecca, Jodie, Mia and I were sitting on the fallen log.	talked about leaving little ducks in their own habitat.
noticed a snail on a leaf on a branch up above our head. We watched it for a minute then left it to hide.	
Notes	

Number of children present 15
Number of adults 4

Example of Torbain Nursery's daily plan. This is used at the woodlands and back at the setting which demonstrates that the experience is part of the ethos and routine at this nursery, with clear connections made between the children's experiences at both places.

Impact of Nature Kindergarten Experiences

Staff from both establishments strongly believe that the weekly visits to the woods adds value to the children's experiences of nursery. *"All the capacities of Curriculum for Excellence come to the fore in the woods"* said one Clentry Early Years Officer.

Children attending Clentry Nursery are equally enthusiastic. One child stated, *"I like hide 'n' seek in the woods. It's bigger. More hiding places."*

"The emphasis on regular visits to the forest is on emotional growth, focusing on offering broad based experiences in an environment that promotes security, routines, clear boundaries and repetitive learning opportunities. Children develop many skills including building their confidence, self-esteem, resilience, problem solving, team work and become more self-aware and reflective about their behaviour. These skills can be transferred into other areas of life. Children become better at coping with and expressing their feelings, and as a result, levels of confrontation and challenging behaviour are reduced." Head Teacher, Clentry Nursery.

Other observations included:

- Social skills noticeably improve during woodland session. *"Children blossom out there,"* stated Torbain's Depute Head Teacher
- The inclusive environment of the woodland. Everyone plays on an equal basis with the same materials. Boys and girls tended to play together more
- That many children are more willing to take physical risks, such as trying to crawl along a log across a ditch but were also more aware of their limits. This appears to develop their confidence
- In both nurseries there was a lower incidents of accidents happening than back in the centre
- Levels of cooperation increase without encouragement from staff
- A greater awareness of nature and natural processes
- Increased use of woodlands by children and their families outwith nursery sessions.

Torbain Nursery believed the woodland activities are essential to their approach to ensuring health and wellbeing as being the responsibility of all staff. The children gain independence through the routines too. There is the management of outdoor clothes and wellies. Snack in the woods feels different too. Some children have never eaten food outside until they attend nursery.



Exploring the properties of ice!

At a local authority level, the impact of nature kindergartens continues to be evaluated with parents as well as staff being involved. This has demonstrated that children are eating and sleeping better when they have attended a nature kindergarten session. Back at the settings, the outdoor spaces now have more natural materials such as sticks collected from the woodlands. Tree planting, keeping hens and other changes have also been noted. The impact has spread beyond nurseries with children encouraging parents to take them to the woods. Primary 1 classes are joining nursery classes. Other local authority services are also beginning to provide woodland sessions as part of their on-going support to vulnerable children and their families.



Trying to cross the ditch on this log was an absorbing physical challenge for several children, who kept perserving in spite of not succeeding on the first few attempts.

Managing concerns and worries about introducing nature kindergartens

In terms of issues faced, both nurseries had addressed and effectively managed concerns raised. For example, at Torbain Nursery the common themes were safety, illness and weather. This was mostly achieved through one-to-one informal talks at the outset with parents and other users of the woodlands. Grandparents have been found to be especially helpful and supportive.

When Torbain started its woodland sessions, one member of staff was particularly concerned about the expectations being placed on the nursery and the cost of waterproofs. *“I would wake up in the middle of the night, worrying about accidents happening and losing a child.” Within a month, she had adjusted to the new routine and now states, “Now I can’t wait for Tuesdays. I would defy anybody not to be happy when they see the children’s faces.”*

Other staff had their apprehensions too. *“All I could see was a cliff and a sheer drop. What a responsibility,”* said one worker. *“What if it didn’t work? I would have been so disappointed.”*



“What is this red mark?” asked one child which prompted a lot of ideas and thoughts.

Next steps

Torbain nursery staff continue to participate in training up-dates. At least one member of staff attends either Grounds for Learning conferences or Mindstretchers courses each year.

The nursery staff have been key to moving woodlands visits into the primary school, by accompanying the classes into the woods and giving support and sharing their expertise with class teachers. The staff are also monitoring the environmental impact on their woodland and intend to seek further advice here.

Clentry staff are keen to have a resource base in the woodlands but no suitable location has been identified.

Fife Council are planning to provide additional specialist training, such as Forest School Level 1 sessions to extend the skills and confidence of staff to provide adventurous and challenging activities for children during the Nature Kindergarten sessions. There is a development group looking at progression of experiences into primary school and beyond, linking into the Natural Connections Programme so that Fife children have the opportunity to access rich outdoor learning experiences throughout their time at school.

Thank you

Many thanks to Jane Mason and all the staff, parents and children at Clentry and Torbain Nursery for their time, comments and input into this case study.

Further information

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Walking back to the centre, observing and talking about the activities after a happy session in the woods.