

Appendix 9: The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery, Fife

Introduction & background

“The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery is a community led project that offers a fulltime outdoor preschool care service and education in the Howe of Fife.

Our vision is to provide a spacious play environment in local woodland and countryside that offers the child an opportunity to develop curiosity and learning through engagement with nature, the seasons and the elements.

With child and adult made structures that offer shelter and warmth we believe that each child will be made to feel comfortable and at ease within the natural environment regardless of the weather! Our staff are trained and experienced in working in the outdoor environment and facilitate a unique opportunity for local children to grow from and with nature.”

Key elements of the outdoor nursery are WATER, EARTH, AIR and FIRE.

The Secret Garden has been awarded:

- Play Scotland Award for Best Practice Provision
- Nancy Ovens Award

Source: Secret Garden online leaflet <http://www.secretgardenoutdoor-nursery.co.uk/>

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The Secret Garden was set up by Cathy Bache, opening as a registered nursery in 2008. The daily sessions are supported by two part time co-workers, Bryony and Roz. They are recent graduate HNC students and both enthusiastic proponents of the child-led, play based approach.

Due to its pioneering nature with its focus on an outdoor nursery provision every day, in all weathers, across the seasons, the Secret Garden has received much interest from the early years sector and media attention.

With school experience initially as a drama teacher and then as nursery teacher, Cathy registered as a childminder in 2004 in order to develop the Secret Garden on a small scale. She has not been ‘Forest School’ trained but rather is self taught and attends wilderness, bush craft and other similar courses. Her practice reflects both best practice in the play work field as well as the ‘outdoor learning’ sector.

The children attending the Secret Garden come from a wide catchment area, both locally (e.g. Auchtermuchty and Letham villages) and further afield (e.g. St Andrews). Three children attend 3 days per week, others less frequently per week. At present the nursery has a maximum group size of 12 to maintain an adult: child ratio of 1:6 (3+ years) and 1:4 (2 years old).

Cathy feels it is important for a child to begin to experience outdoor practice from an early age (2 years), to develop confidence, a relaxed attitude, and physical and emotional resilience. She has observed inexperienced older children finding initial

difficulty in this new setting, and they take approximately 6 – 8 weeks to be absorbed in the group and an additional 2 weeks to develop physical confidence. In contrast the 2 years olds absorb the experience comfortably through initial observation of others and progress very confidently.

The Care Commission has been supportive throughout the development of the nursery and regards it as very positive with its outdoor focus and child centred approach. Cathy feels she has been 'unusually lucky' with her local CC officer, Morag Peggie, and manager, Thirza Wilson (based in Dunfermline). The Secret Garden has partner provider status with Fife Council. The nursery is due to be inspected shortly by Sandra Edwards, St Andrews Nursery, Fife and part of the 'Equate' team who monitor partner providers. The registered building is Letham Village Hall, although this building is hardly ever used!

The Secret Garden staff are developing its own curriculum based on a CfE, where the children are fully engaged with their senses, and where 'nature is the teacher' and with reference to Bob Hughes's work on 'evolutionary play'. Two 'spirals' of development for the 'emerging child' have been adapted from the 4 capacities of a CfE and are each represented as one inner and outer spiralling circle. Spiral 1 is 'the inspired creative child' where the inner circle shows the creative journey of the individual child and the outer circle shows the collective creative journey and where the individual links with the rest of the group. Spiral 2 describes 'the confident happy child' where the inner cycle shows how the child relates to self and the outer cycle shows how the child relates to others and the environment. Pictorial symbols such as 'rowan' are used to identify the developmental stage the child and group have reached both individually and collectively.

The Secret Garden also runs training events such as weekend workshops. With regard to the Forest Kindergarten Feasibility Study, a number of Early Years officers and staff from North Lanarkshire settings (Cumbernauld College) have attended these events.

Site visit

On 18th February the site was visited by Penny Martin on behalf of Creative STAR Learning to record a 'day in the life' of the Secret Garden. The weather was sunny and breezy. The previous week had seen heavy snow which Cathy Bache reported as a real boon for play and adventure – with igloos being built and used by the children.

Based in Letham, Fife, the nursery uses the wood at the top of the hill, accessed by a steep road leading from the village and then into a track to the site. The wood is divided into 2 discrete west and east compartments by the access track. The west wood has most of the 'permanent' structures like the tepee and tarpaulin sites. It is open larch/ sycamore plantation with little understorey but with honeysuckle, some rhododendron and plenty of dead wood/ brash. The aim is to manage the woodland as a community resource. The west wood has a wilder feel with Scots pine on the higher ground with mixed broadleaves including ash below, plus some steep drops/ old quarry areas so access here is more carefully managed. It is privately owned but the owner allows free access and use by the nursery.

The following observations are made using annotated pictures taken on the day:



The children are dropped off at the play park in Letham at approximately 9.30am and met by Cathy and Bryony. They may play there a while. They then put on their coats, safety vests (for the walk there) and bags and walk up the hill. When a car approaches they wait by the side. Otherwise the children lead the way.



The two year olds (maximum 2, because of adult:child ratios) are transported in a double buggy. The remaining five children (3 – 5 years) demonstrate how they can climb walls safely on the way. One boy (3 years old) tells me about the fungi he has found and names them from memory.

A rut in the road regularly fills with water which is good for splashing in. That is the only water available. Cathy is disappointed the wood has no natural streams for extending water play.



On the way Cathy discusses with the children where they want to head for in the woods. They decide to go to the 'Crystal Gnome Den'. The children lead the way into the wood.

It has taken about 20 – 30 minutes to walk to the wood. Cathy tells me they have done it in 10 minutes sometimes!



The buggy is parked by the East wood. The two 2 year old children will walk from here. They collect their bags too.



The walk up the hill is steep but all the children manage this with confidence and adult help.



An informal path leads around the woodland perimeter.

Other, less obvious routes criss-cross the wood.

Some access points through the wood are marked with rags



The woodland floor is uneven with sticks but all the children show remarkable physical competence (gross motor skills) including this 2 year old who walks confidently. Cathy has observed a range of physical competences when a child enters the programme, with some falling frequently, but the ground is cushioned with leaves and the child is encouraged to get him/herself up again. 'Seasoned hands' are observed to pick themselves up if they trip, with little or no complaint.



Arriving at the Crystal Gnome Den, Bryony uses a wheelbarrow stored nearby to wheel in extra bags and provisions stored securely on site.



The group decide to stop here for free play and exploration. They 'hang' their bags themselves on the 'pegs' of a fallen larch.

The bags are mainly German made 'Waldfuchs' which are a good size for small children with external attachments/ pockets and seating mat included.

Free play – climbing skills on fallen trees, exploration and transporting – both as individual and cooperative play



The woodland has natural features to spark curiosity – who lives down this hole?

A centipede is collected in the wheelbarrow with larch cones. A photograph is taken as a record.

The previous session the children observed red squirrels and deer.



Stopping for snack time mid-morning. This include a hot drink.

The seating mats are put down in a circle, the group sings a song with actions before sitting down (the two year olds observe).

More free play follows.

Lunch takes place in the same spot.



Toileting arrangements:

Nappies are changed in a transportable pop up tent.

For older children, the staff have found the children respond well to organised toilet times (e.g. after snack time/ lunch). The boys choose a tree to wee against. The girls will sit on a fallen log. Latrines were dug in the wood but to avoid overuse it is now policy to collect 'poo' in compostable black bags (a collapsible toilet seat is available) and take these off site to dispose of.

After lunch the children decide the group should move to the spiral den. Lots of active play and climbing activity continued here.



The children demonstrated skills in climbing and descending safely (shuffling down backwards until they were near the ground). One boy pointed out dead branches that should be removed for safety. One boy fell from this tree onto leaf litter when he leaned on a branch. He recovered quickly and learned about dead branches. No child climbs above a height of 6 foot (where they can be reached by an adult stretching up). This height limit is also set in the insurance cover for the nursery.



The group gathered to listen to some stories, one read to them from a book and Billy Goats Gruff which they joined in with.

One boy chose to listen to the story sitting on the tree trunk.

Individual children picked up books left lying within the wood near group activity and looked at them quietly.



It was interesting to note how the children interspersed physically active play with times of quiet reflection, in a peak and flow pattern, throughout the day.

This appeared very much child led.



The two year old boy spent a long time in quiet exploration within an old coppiced stump, fitting a piece of loose bark around the stems.

An older boy investigated hanging something from larch 'pegs'.



Time for friends to be together.



Back at the Crystal Gnome Den – review time. Cathy sat down with her black book and asked the children to sit quietly with her. She asked them what she should record as the story for that day. Different children remembered different elements – games played, what they saw, new faces, what the weather was like.



Some added their own drawings at the bottom of the page. One child drew a log – ‘we need twigs and skin on it’ Cathy – ‘what do we call its ‘skin?’ ‘Bark!’



The laptop is brought on site. Records can be put on this including photographs from the day. These can be shared with parents and carers collecting the children.

Here the children are looking at some of the pictures taken – some by them.

At 3:45pm the children are asked to put their high visibility vests on to get ready to leave the wood.

The staff are currently aiming to develop self sufficiency in all the children – so they can manage their own coats, bags etc.

The older children walk with Roz to the White Tent to return some of the stores in the wheelbarrow.

Cathy takes the two year olds down the slope to collect the buggy, and the group rejoin to walk down the road to the village playpark where their carers collect them at approximately 4:30 pm.



The White Tent is located on the edge of the wood.

There is an open area of ground with a fire site, plus a metal store.

Some rope swings and den structures are located nearby.



The metal lockable store, plus wooden blocks/ wheeled toy stored under a tarp.



The White tent has a wood burning stove. It is useful in cold or wet weather and for cooking or making hot drinks.



There are other tarpaulins/ shelters in the wood to use as a base camp for the day, plus a range of informal dens made from sticks and brash.



There are several fire sites, plus a low rope climbing area for balancing.



Natural and ephemeral art found throughout the woodland and within the tent, using twigs, berries, grasses and seeds.

MANY THANKS TO: CATHY, BRYONY, ROZ AND THE CHILDREN FOR SHARING THEIR DAY AT THE SECRET GARDEN.