

Case studies: Learning environments in varied contexts

Childminder

Sharon Powell is a childminder in Kent (Little Willows ECEC). She looks after 6 children aged between 8 months and 3 years. Little Willows ECEC has a strong outdoor play-based philosophy so that the children spend a lot of time in the garden or the local woodlands. Sharon's intention is to provide an environment that meets the needs, curiosity and stages of development of each child in her care. She believes the type of environment she provides helps the children to grow in confidence so that they become independent in their learning. Experiences the children have access to include:

- opportunities at ground level or where children can lift themselves up including water table, sand pit and wooden cable reels;
- continuous provision including loose parts play, mark making and sensory play such as hiding objects in the garden/sandpit, oranges and mint in the water play or oats and messy spaghetti in tough trays;
- growing fruit and vegetables;
- investigating mini beasts in the wormery and bug hotel; observing birds on the bird feeder.
- playing with leaves, flowers, pebbles and wood.



Day Nursery and Preschool on large site

Dimples day nursery and preschool is based on a 8-acre site. It caters for 140 children a day from 3 months upwards. The children have some access to technology although it is not seen as a priority. For example, they may watch a short educational clip if linked to a topic of interest or play with a ICT toy, although technology is limited and monitored; the emphasis is on using the large outdoor area.

The youngest children have their own designated space with a canopy so that all children have freeflow provision to the outdoors regardless of the weather. The staff often take the children off-site and there is a forest school area accessed via a gate from the main nursery gardens. Here, two yurts are used for indoor play and sleeping. There is a fire circle and lots of natural features including stinging nettles which are deliberately left so the children learn about risk.



The practitioners believe that this continual outdoor engagement supports children in becoming confident risk takers who love a challenge. The setting considers there are wide range of benefits from the environment they provide including:

- * sensory engagement with different smells and textures;
- * a connection to nature and a love of living things;
- * important opportunities for the children to challenge themselves physically;
- * a sense of calm and wellbeing which supports children if they become excited or upset;
- * many opportunities to explore in different ways.



Day Care with two buildings



Stables Day Care has one building which caters for children from 3 months to 2-and-a-half years over three rooms, and a separate building which caters for 2-and-a-half year-olds upwards.

During the colder parts of the year the children are generally outside twice a day (an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon).

Once a week they visit an outdoor learning area which is a large wooded environment a short walk from the main site of the setting. On site there are a variety of outdoor environments for the children to access including:

- a separate area for babies;
- a garden covered with soft surface which includes sandpits, water, a mud kitchen with access to an outdoor tap;
- a secret garden with freeflow access for the older children, covered with chipped bark and containing lots of loose parts for creative play including planks of wood, crates and tyres;
- a large grassy area which provides a fenced space, belonging to a neighbouring school, where children can run and engage in more physical type activity;
- a yurt where all of the school-leaving cohort spend the entire summer term outdoors with the yurt for shelter.

