

Working with small groups of children on the allotment.

Background

Speedwell Nursery School and Children's Centre rent a Bristol City Council allotment site about 5 minutes' walk from the setting. Luci runs weekly sessions there for families and it is also used regularly by our 2 year olds group. From our previous experience we know that the allotment offers us a peaceful environment, opportunities for sensory explorations the chance to be in nature and a purposeful way of working alongside each other. We have found it to be a particularly effective place to work with children who are particularly vulnerable or have additional needs.

Sarah had been working with children with English as an additional language, and Luci with those who were eligible for Pupil Premium, and we decided to come together and work with these children in small groups on the allotment.

Aims

Our aims for the children were:

to build their confidence

to develop their spoken language

to support their engagement in learning

to develop their empathy.



What we noticed

Building confidence

It was exciting for the children to go off site, and for some it could feel quite challenging. We made cards with photographs of 10 landmarks on the route between nursery and the allotment, and on our journeys we encouraged the children to look out for them. They soon made connections between the photographs and the landmarks themselves and enjoyed spotting them and seeing them again on their way back. Rather than just being led along by us, the landmarks activity gave the children a sense of agency over their journey allowing them to actively engage in it. They showed pride as they noticed or remembered landmarks and this seemed to have a positive impact on their self-confidence.



When we arrived at the allotment there were real jobs, like watering and planting that needed doing. By engaging with these tasks the children saw that their input was important and meaningful. Their explorations became purposeful, as they were able to see how the plants had grown as a result of their care.



One of the many advantages of the site is that we have a clear view of the trough from the plot itself and so the children could collect water on their own without feeling supervised. This allowed them to take control, giving them a sense of responsibility and independence. They learnt how to use the tap, watched the tank empty and refill and carried their full watering cans up the path to the plot deciding which plants needed watering. Their sense of achievement was evident, for example a child called over excitedly, 'Luci, Luci, I turned the tap on myself!'



Developing spoken language

The allotment is a quieter environment than the nursery and this allowed children more chance to be heard. Working in small groups also meant that we could pay closer attention to language details and check understanding. We realised that some children had more spoken English than we had previously thought, but because it was a bit tentative it had not been fully heard.

The stimulating aspects of the environment mean that the children were motivated to comment on their explorations, and we noticed that these shifts often carried on after the session. For example, a child who talks very little at nursery gave a running commentary on our way back: telling us what he liked to eat, spotting a bee on a flower, commenting on differently coloured cars and then relating highlights of the session to his key worker back at the setting. In addition to telling nursery staff what they had been doing, we noticed that in the weeks following allotment visits they sought us both out to talk to us, so maybe it allowed them to see us in a slightly different light. For example, one child referred to Luci as 'my gardening friend'. All of these conversations gave them the chance to review what they have achieved and learnt as well as strengthening their spoken English.



Supporting engagement in learning

Physical challenges: The allotment offers children a range of physical challenges for example: loading wheelbarrows with wood, balancing on logs and path edges, using canes and string to fence the gooseberry bushes, filling watering cans and keeping the big wheelbarrow upright. There were plenty of chances for problem solving for example, how to move a pile of logs from one place to another, and many of the children embraced these tasks and were enthusiastic about their achievements.





On the allotment there is enough space for large-scale constructions, and the children made houses and railways across the grass and the path. They used wheelbarrows as trucks, travelling up and down the paths and making 'beep, beep' noises when they were reversing.





Sensory and elemental explorations: Things changed each time we went down, and the children noticed these changes and we encouraged them to think about why they had happened. As we harvested our produce we were able to introduce the children to a range of smells, tastes and textures: spiky, pungent sprigs of rosemary, crunchy, peppery radishes, and sweet broad beans in their fluffy pods.







The water provided endless opportunities for sensory exploration for example: the coldness, hardness and fragility of ice, filling and emptying vessels, and making huge circles on the path with watering cans.





The natural world offers many simple but unexpected delights, for example Sarah taught them how to whistle with a blade of grass, which they found quite hard to achieve but really enjoyed trying to do.



Storytelling and imaginative play: We have 2 toy mice and a rabbit that live in the shed and there have been lots of games where they were wheeled around in the barrows, fed grass and even given baths.



We have tubs of chalk available and the path provides an expansive drawing surface that some of the children really enjoy using



We introduced songs about gardens and growing and they enjoyed singing, and acting them out physically.





We also spent some of our time telling stories. The children extended and adapted these to fit their own interests. They used our stack of wood and the willow den as backdrops to act out scenes from the 3 Little Pigs, and enjoyed pretending to be Mr Macgregor chasing Peter Rabbit through the vegetable beds.





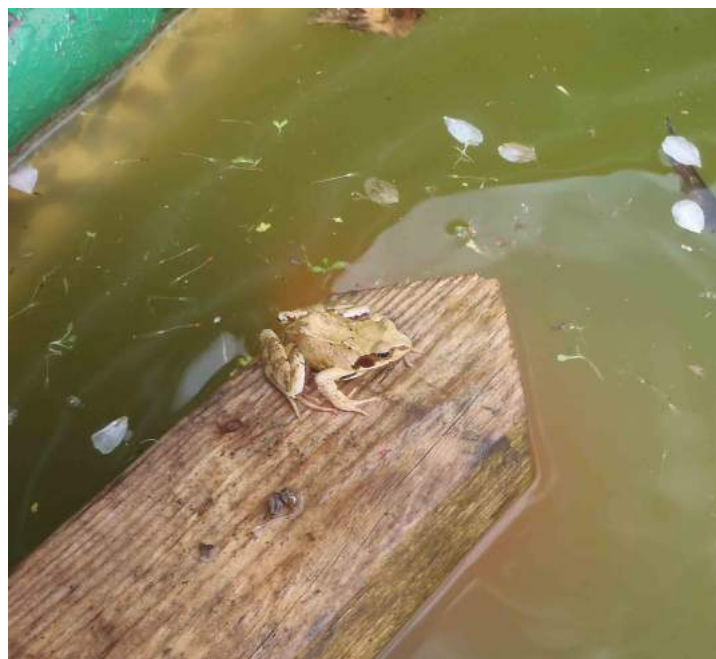
Developing empathy

Whenever the children took the lid off the compost heap, turned over a log or picked up a stone they found a world of wildlife. Many of them were very interested in this and we talked about these little creatures and what they needed to be able to thrive. Looking at worms and woodlice gave us great opportunities to think about how we might be kind towards them.





One child who struggled to be kind to others was able to consider how he might be scaring a frog in the water butt. With encouragement from us he went from being quite rough to taking on the idea that he needed to be gentle with it, reminding the others to talk in soft voices. He thought the mummy frog might be missing her baby and wondered if they were calling to each other. At one point he stood watching it singing a quiet song about a frog. This encounter allowed him to explore events in his own life in a calm and tender way, and later when Sarah offered him a ride in the wheelbarrow he accepted and said, 'I trust you'.



In the same way, by planting things and seeing them grow the children gained a sense of ownership of the allotment and became invested in caring for it. Looking after plants and wildlife gave children the opportunity to think about what these fragile things need and how they might best care for them. They considered the plants and animals and by thinking beyond their own requirements they developed their sense of empathy.





When our new pear tree was not looking well we talked encouragingly to it as we watered it. Luci drew the pear tree in chalk on the path and the children drew on the leaves they hoped it would have. (This seems to have worked well and the tree is looking much better.) In addition to sowing seeds on the allotment itself, some children took seeds home to look after, and we had regular updates on how well they had grown.



Some children have discharged feelings of distress and aggression by running, shouting and hurling wooden blocks into the water butt. With appropriate supervision the allotment provides as safe space for this boisterous expression to happen in a way that we could not easily achieve in nursery.



The allotment is a calm and spacious environment. We noticed that several children who struggle and act aggressively in larger groups were able to be quieter and gentler in our sessions. We wondered if we all sometimes underestimate the stress that some children experience from being in big groups, and whether our expectations of their social capacities are always realistic.

We chose to work with different combinations of children staying mindful of some of the difficult dynamics that can occur between them. This gave us the chance to see some of them in a different light for example; we noticed how one girl was able to shine when she was away from a specific group of boys. We emphasised that the allotment is a place where we are caring not only to the plants and wildlife but also to each other. We noticed that some children were keen to tell us when they had helped another child and we encouraged them to be proud and positive about their own kind behaviour.



What next?

Working in this way has proven beneficial for some of our more vulnerable children, and we would like to offer it again next year. The allotment is a cost effective resource and we feel that it would be positive for as many children as possible to have the enhanced experience that it offers. We would like to extend it across the setting, and could make allotment visits part of the settling in process for new children with their parents. This would have the additional benefit of introducing new, and possibly socially isolated parents to the allotment, and could link with the family sessions that Luci currently runs.

On our most recent visit to the allotment one child expressed dismay when it was time to leave. Luci asked 'Would you like to go to the allotment again?' and he replied, 'Yes, again and again and again'.

Luci Gorell Barnes and Sarah Hampson

June 2016