



CASE STUDY: Child First in Northampton

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The nursery is one of five Child First Day Nurseries, a small chain of settings operating with the aim of putting children first, *'turning acceptable practice into exceptional practice'* and offering children and their families a high quality day care experience. The nursery is situated in Moulton, just outside Northampton in a Georgian lodge with three acres of gardens and woodland. It is registered for 90 children and is open each weekday from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm for 50 weeks of the year.

EFFECTIVE OUTDOOR PRACTICE

The nursery's last Ofsted inspection report (Jan 2010) noted that *'Exceptionally good use is made of the substantial grounds the nursery is set in, with the support and assistance of an ecology group, to promote learning outcomes for all children'*. When I visited in early May it was easy to see how the inspector had reached this judgement. The outdoor environment is recognised as a vital part of the provision for children's play and learning. In all but one room children have direct access to outdoors and during my visit both staff and children spent the majority of time in the garden. The whole three acre site is used by children for playing, discovering and exploring. Children and staff enjoy freshly prepared food that they have grown themselves. They make dens and cook on the ['Rocket Stove'](#) in the woodland. The whole environment is busy, it changes and evolves as children's play moves from area to area. Staff are attentive and playful collaborators in children's activities. Children make good use of bricks, wood, tyres, and other free and found materials to pursue their interests and ideas. At lunchtime their outdoor play stops, but rather than waste time and energy tidying up, everything remains in situ ready for children's return. The nursery has also successfully incorporated the use of outdoors into the care routines and children have sheltered areas to eat and sleep outside. It was a delight to watch staff and children eating and chatting at low tables outside in the covered courtyard. Both the sleeping area and the courtyard benefit from airy wooden structures that have been designed and built to provide shade and shelter from extreme weather conditions, as well as providing a sense of enclosure for the staff and children using them.

BENEFITS AND POSITIVE IMPACT

Ofsted has also recognised the value of children's outdoor experiences; *'children gain an excellent understanding of the food chain and engage in a wide range of activities that contributes successfully to them developing a healthy lifestyle and a very good understanding of the natural world. Children gain practical, first-hand knowledge of how to grow food, as they are actively involved in most aspects of growing the vast range of fruits and vegetables. Once harvested, they help to prepare the seasonal vegetables, before they are cooked on the premises daily and served as part of the nutritious, well-balanced meals and snacks. They gain an increased vocabulary and learn about caring for living things. For example, they talk about sowing the seeds, which plants need to grow in the greenhouse, poly tunnel or in the ground, and what is needed to help the plants grow. Children make a clay oven that they use to toast marshmallows, cook sausages and warm soup, under the close supervision of staff. ... They enjoy pond dipping, where they observe insects and wildlife in the pond and talk about the fox who only comes out at night'*.

The nursery prospectus states that staff recognise that their role is *'to assist children on their learning journey, supporting them to reach their own decisions and judgements and providing guidance not instruction'*. This philosophy is clearly embedded in the everyday outdoor practice at the nursery. Staff embrace the natural 'mess' of children's open-ended explorative play in the garden and woodland and the benefits to children are clear. They have good relationships, they are curious, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, articulate, and confident, and they enjoy and persevere at the activities they have chosen.

Further Information:

Outdoor Matters offers training and onsite advice about creating an enabling outdoor environment for children under five. The Outdoor Matters website includes case studies, advice, information and research on making effective use of outdoors. www.outdoormatters.co.uk