

Nurture in Nature

Case Study: Can nature support young children's wellbeing and put the Six Nurture Principles into action?



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Context

The Six Principles of Nurture provide a framework for understanding children's behaviour, wellbeing and development. Rooted in research, they help practitioners create environments where every child feels safe, valued and ready to learn.

This case study explores the impact of consistently including more outdoor learning opportunities for nursery children on their developmental and wellbeing needs. It takes place at Weoley Castle Nursery School, Preschool & Early Learning Hub in south Birmingham.



Principles of Nurture

1. Children's learning is understood developmentally
2. The classroom offers a safe base
3. Nurture is important in the development of wellbeing
4. All behaviour is communication
5. Transitions are significant in the lives of children
6. Language is a vital means of communication



Observed Challenge



Each year we have noticed increasingly varied needs of children arriving at nursery. Many having lower development than expected in areas such as communication and self-regulation, possibly caused by less access to physical play at home due to devices and technology. Technology also appears to be having an impact on children's wellbeing, attainment, levels of concentration and involvement. This is a familiar picture playing out across the city and further afield.

We were curious about how we could improve our existing provision and implement something new to help address what we have been observing year on year.

When reflecting on our teaching approach, we acknowledged that we already use the HighScope Approach effectively. Drawing on the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) research about supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in the early years, we decided to develop a nurture-based, whole-school approach. This was further informed by visits to Glasgow to explore their 'Towards a Nurturing City' work, and ultimately inspired us to create 'Acorn Woods'.



Action Taken

The EEF research highlights what educators can do – provide outdoor learning in natural settings. Evidence shows that outdoor learning in nature can improve social skills and resilience when compared to traditional indoor activities.

To achieve this we needed to overcome barriers, such as staff and parents' initial views towards being outside in colder weather, access to an outdoor space and other general logistics. These barriers were not overcome easily, it has been a journey that we continue to walk.



"There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing."
— Alfred Wainwright

If you have limited outside space or if it's a concrete jungle, how can you bring in Nature?

We had limited funds, but an idea! Utilising an old caretaker garden, we developed a natural space into a sanctuary for learning, teaching and wellbeing for both children and adults. The space now includes a large mud kitchen, sand pit, allotment beds, and crates for growing and taking care of plants and vegetables.

Education and health are closely linked

There is evidence to show that a strong focus on wellbeing for children can increase academic achievement.



"Promoting the health and wellbeing of pupils and students within schools and colleges has the potential to improve their educational outcomes AND their health and wellbeing outcomes".

Public Health England 2014





Impact & Observed Challenge

Children learn by repetition and practice, so we visited the garden weekly, through all seasons. With this regularity, we noticed the children grew in confidence, practiced skills and increased in their independence and resilience.

Competence builds confidence and we all want confident learners with secure attachment and wellbeing. A regular relationship with this outdoor space has allowed for our children to flourish and for many to be seen in a different light.

“ *“I couldn’t do it before, now my muscles are stronger. Look I can do it!”*

Child E finally being able to access the rope swing.



Our experience over the last few years have highlighted many benefits for regular, whole class nature play sessions in the woods.

For those children that need movement to think and regulate, this starts their day in a positive way as we walk to the site.

Children who benefit from a quieter space can find it, and the sounds and sights experienced whilst outside in nature, increases communication for many, especially for our EAL learners.

We observed children at ease, focused, leading their learning, and being inquisitive, and adults scaffolding learning as a partner in play. Sounds great, right!



'Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn'.

- Benjamin Franklin

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

As children observe and nurture plants and insects, they learn and practice care and empathy for others – an essential and positive life skill, and it makes you feel good when you help someone!

A child's level of wellbeing is intrinsically linked to levels of involvement and motivation to learn. The indicators of involvement correlate with the three characteristics of effective teaching and learning in the EYFS – playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically. (EYFS)



These characteristics are in abundance in Acorn Woods!

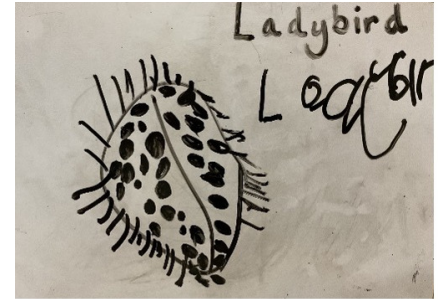


"No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

- David Attenborough



Reflections



“

“The Ladybirds like me. I have to be gentle and they stay on my arm”

Child A

”

Wellbeing

The job of an early year's teacher and practitioner in 2026 is both rewarding and challenging. It is so important when thinking about wellbeing of our learners to also look at the direct link between our own wellbeing. An unexpected outcome of focusing on Nurture in Nature has been the positive impact on staff. Being outside in the fresh air has offered staff a new way to observe and interact with children whilst positively impacting their own mental health.

“I always feel better after being at the woods, it’s almost like a system reset, for myself and the children.”

Staff member

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Wellbeing, according to the Oxford Dictionary is the state of being comfortable, healthy and happy. I’m pleased to say that Nurture in Nature supports us in the pursuit of reaching this for our young learners and staff alike.

“Acorn Wood is their 'happy place'. They return from their days there noticeably calmer and refreshed. I notice that when they return from the woods, they are more patient with each other and will use their problem-solving skills to negotiate with each other more easily. As a parent, the benefits of this extend to our family experiences at home being calmer and more fulfilling, the impact of the woods knows no end.”

Parent

”

So... how could Nurture in Nature support you in your setting?





Further Reading

[Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing in the early years | Education Endowment Foundation](#)

[EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers](#)

[HighScope Home - HighScope](#)

[Local School Nature Grants - Learning through Landscapes](#)