



investing in children

Re- Evaluation for Investing in Children membership: Walkergate Children's Centre

Walkergate Children's Centre continues to be a hive of activity, providing a comprehensive service for children aged 0-5 years, as well as parental involvement and training.

The staff team remains consistent from last year and they have continued to be pro-active in encouraging the children to make choices and decisions for themselves, even as far as fitting the curriculum around their interests.

The daily timetable remains the same. A mix of structured sessions with lots of open play. When I visited Walkergate Children's Centre this time, circle time had just finished. The children (a lot of them new) were off to the toilets, and washing their hands, then making the big decision – **to play outside or to stop in**. Most of the children already very familiar with the daily routine ran off to get their coats and play outside.

Outside there are lots of choices to make:

- **Bikes**
- **Barrows**
- **Toys and games**

Inside, the children wandered around to find out what was on offer and what they could do. As I sat and watched, children came to ask for help to put on their coats. Stella told me she was **'going out'** and she was quickly followed by a few of her new friends. Darcy fell over outside, but one of her new friends helped her in to see Mrs. Walkden and he told Mrs. Lawrence how Darcy hurt herself.

I sat and chatted to Mrs. Lawrence and Mrs. Walkden about last year's special project during which Katie joined us with a tray and brightly coloured pegs to put in – **which she chose from the shelf next to us**. James played in the sand not too far away, he had gone out to play but soon came back in, hanging his coat up like a good boy.

As we chatted another little chap ran in and helped himself to a drink of water from the water cooler. Soon a little group gathered as they decided they wanted a drink too! He told me **'this is where you get the water from, you need a cup, if it spills it goes in there.'** It was very busy while we chatted. Mrs. Lawrence and Mrs. Walkden took time out to tell me about:

The Rising Sun Project

The Rising Sun is a country park in Wallsend, it has a Giant's Den garden which is not open to the public, but can be booked. It is a space that provides woodland, mud, shelters and nettles. This was a project to enhance the children's learning through creativity and the outdoor environment.

The original idea stemmed from a progression in thinking by staff. By observing what interests the children had in nursery and their love of the outdoors, the staff team gave consideration to how they could further develop these emerging themes.

Some of the interests of the children were:

- Connecting pipes
- Building bridges
- Making shelters
- Fire engines and fire station

As well as being outdoors.

The children were already working with an artist in schools who was creating art from what he children expressed an interest in and following on from this they approached the Rising Sun and their project began.

For four weeks earlier this year 38 children from Walkergate Children's Centre visited the Rising Sun Country Park.

The staff team wanted:

- The children to be in a natural environment without distractions
- To enable the children to explore, investigate, construct, work together and use their imaginations in safe but challenging surroundings
- To give value to children's experience

This environment was for the children to do what they wanted to do. The staff team imposed no structure to the afternoon, the children were let loose to explore their outdoor surroundings.

The staff team observed the children playing and took notes on how the children played and what they played. The purpose of these observations were to develop further opportunities within the Children's Centre setting.

Not wanting to be left out Reuben said to Mrs Henderson that he had some monsters and **'I need to draw them in your book.'** He drew a picture of a monster and Jessica approached and said **'can I have the book when Reuben's done it cause I want to draw some monsters.'**

Guided by the children, the staff team took note books and pens for the children the following week. As well as bowls at the children's request. Bowls to collect things in and bowls to mix things in i.e. mud.

Mud emerged as a favourite for some children and this led onto making mud in school with more of the children. Ellie said **'I like making a squelching noise.'**

The children's interest lay in four main areas:-

- **Explorers** – the children explored the area, went on adventures looking for giants, tigers and bears. One of the children found a giants boot, a key and a scarf
- **Collectors** – some of the children collected acorns, leaves, anything they could find.
- **Stick people** – they make bridges, went fishing, built houses
- **Climbers** – some of the children climbed the walls, climbed the stairs and of course climbed the trees. Ellie told Leah **'Do you know why I don't get stuck, cos I'm 4!'**

Some quotes from the children recorded by the staff are as follows:

About the mud hut at the Rising Sun – **'It's a mountain. It was very dark, it had sticks in it.'** **'I made a hole in the mud'** said Joseph. Lewis also said **'its like a mountain.'** **'We saw acorns and we went inside a bundle'** said Meghan and Abigail. **'I was trying to make a bridge.'**

Reuben said that he thought he might see **'a tiger, I might be scared and it will eat me up.'** Jamie thought he might see **'rabbits hopping and eating carrots'** and **'we might see a giant and we might see a giant beanstalk.'** Josh thought he might see **'a ghost with hair.'**

Back in school the adventure carried on the children got to:

- Make mud and get muddy again and again
- Make perfumes and potions in their mixing bowls
- Make things out of clay **'which was like mud!'**
- Make art

All of the sessions were held outside:

- Mud – was created with soil and water, another week compost. The children enjoyed the mixing of it

- Mixing – they mixed different things together to create beautiful perfumes with herbs etc.
- Clay – following on from their fascination with mud, they were able to make something to keep
- Create art – working with Nicola the children created some beautiful pieces of work
- A silk painting of a giant and their adventures at the Rising Sun

Daniel said **'I'm painting the pond next to the mud where Charlie found the boat.'**

Charlie said **'I'm making a jelly monster.'**

Lewis drew **'the ladders where I went right to the top.'**

Abigail said **'this is a groovy picture.'**

As well as some individual silk paintings the children also created colour collections.

Another art session outside, where Nicola encouraged the children to think for themselves, she wrote **'the children were not told what to paint but I rather let the activity happen.'**

This whole adventure was done in negotiation with the parents. Parents were fully involved and kept informed of the whole process and were aware of what the school were trying to achieve. The school also bought waterproofs to protect the children's clothes. Parents were asked to talk to their children after each visit to see what the children enjoyed and talked about. (Please see attached). Some of the children enjoyed the bus ride there.

Scott said **'I went on the bus.'**

Ellie said **'It was great fun and I can't wait to go back.'**

All of the photographs, comments and feedback sheets I have used came from the classroom. Every photograph taken, every comment made was written up and displayed for all the children to see and to talk about with their friends.

This is only a brief snippet of the exiting time the children had at the Rising Sun Country Park. It also highlights for me how much the children's play has been able to affect what happens in school. Whilst all of the children benefited from the follow on activities in school, not all of the children got to visit the Rising Sun. The two groups that didn't, got to visit the 'Seven Stories,' a children's world of books and imaginative play. **This group of children had a budget of £200 to buy their favourite stories for their reading library at school.** Once again affecting what happens in their school.

The day to day routine within Walkergate Children's Centre is still all about choice. Special projects and special visits happen when and if they can, time and money prevailing, but it is very easy to see that the children at Walkergate Children's Centre can make decisions, do make choices and can have an impact on what happens in their school. The staff team not only listen to the children, they watch and observe their likes and dislikes, and create more imaginative and interesting ways to enable them to 'have a say.'

A new project for this school year is already underway. Mrs. Gregory is currently discussing with staff about a 'Participation Budget' working with Nick Brereton and money from a central pot from Newcastle City Council created for children and young people to make choices about where money is spent in their city, so it's a case of watch this space.

However, for the purpose of this re-evaluation and in respect of the continued commitment to children's participation in what service is provided at Walkergate Children's Centre, I would certainly like to recommend that they do remain Investing in Children members. With a big thank you to all who helped me gather this information.

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