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Developing the indoor and outdoor environments to support and promote children's communication skills: Townsend Children's Centre

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Brief description

The indoor and outdoor environments have been developed to support children's language and communication development in all aspects of work in the children's centre. Effective partnership with families has resulted in community ownership.

Overview – the centre's message

'When I joined in January 2008, the Children's Centre was an empty shell, devoid of personality but bursting with potential to be a haven for local families. Set in half an acre of grounds and with an abandoned play area just outside our borders, we set about nurturing the setting, as we nurture our families and practitioners. Our qualified teacher, Kelly Yates, leads the way, involving our families at every step of the journey. Observations of the children at play have shaped the development of the indoor and outdoor environment. The combination of the physical environment and nurturing ethos has had a positive impact on the overall wellbeing of our community.'



Naomi Unwin, Children's Centre Manager

The good practice in detail

Kelly Yates started work at Townsend in July 2009, following a period without a children's centre teacher. She found spaces that had become cluttered and there was no ownership of



Kelly Yates, teacher

them by parents and carers or staff. Kelly was looking at how to remodel the areas when it was confirmed that the centre was going to be allocated room in the annex (formerly part of the primary school before it was closed in July 2008). She says: 'We had the opportunity to start with a blank canvas and get the space for children right. We wanted the families to feel ownership of the space, as well as wanting it to be beautiful and valued. We didn't want it to look like a classroom'.

Parents and carers were involved throughout the process. This included gathering resources, deciding on furniture, and promoting the use of natural resources for play. Parents and carers searched for attractive, durable resources on the internet, as well as collecting them from beaches, forest and parks. When the space was nearly finished, the centre brought six children into the annex for a morning to observe how they used the area, in order to arrange the room to suit the children. The inside area can be set up as a beach or a tepee and is changed every two to three months to keep the children's interest, based on observations of what they are doing. There is also a book area – a quiet space used in 'stay and play' sessions to encourage parents and carers to talk to their children. Even when the centre is busy, families can find a quiet space.



The garden was started the following year using the same process: a blank canvas for families to build on. Parents and carers found stones for a gravel pit and chose plants for the garden. They presented the staff with an array of ideas and suggestions, and then worked with the gardener to come up with a design. The centre made good use of parents' and carers' skills, which made them feel involved and valued. The outdoor area includes a 'bug hotel' built by the dads' group. A mud kitchen, large tree stumps and a tunnel at the top of the hill provide opportunities for exploration, climbing and jumping. There is a rope with knots, chunky chains with padlocks and keys, and 'fairy holes' around the outdoor area. Already, parents and carers use the garden every day, including weekends, with some families using the garden regularly even if they don't come into the centre.



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The impact on children's development

Inspectors identified the impact on outcomes for families who attended the children's centre as outstanding. The greatest impact can be seen in the nursery, where the use of the spaces in the centre and outdoors is shown in the difference in children's behaviour. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are extremely well supported by the centre's approach to developing areas to promote communication. The annex and garden provide havens of quietness and space to be still, which support the emotional development of children who are demonstrating aggressive behaviour. The use of the outside space in particular is making a difference to some of the youngest and most vulnerable children. Alex Jones, the senior childcare worker says: 'The



environment is especially effective for energetic children who love outdoors. We tried den-making with the dads' group and have seen how this has helped children's progress in language and speech. Children have very quickly started to develop one or two word phrases, closely followed by stringing sentences together. This is also improving the relationships between dads and their children, and has resulted in some dads now attending other sessions at the centre.'

Staff have found that outdoors engages the boys more, and complement this by the use of 'Every Child a Talker' strategies, using commentary and conversations rather than questions or instructions. Parents and carers are encouraged to be involved through a session on



'Every Child a Talker – Top Tips for Parents'. They are provided with a storybook, goody bag and guidance about using language. It is suggested that they do not ask questions all the time and that they play with each other and not the toys. Parents and carers are encouraged to listen to what is going on and to what children say. 'The best tool is modelling by staff, so that parents and carers can watch and learn from staff: child interaction and the use of positive language they see in the centre.' says Kelly. Families now use the spaces to promote communication

even when no activities are planned. In 2011, Townsend Children's Centre received the Elizabeth Jarman Award recognising their outstanding use of 'The Communication Friendly Spaces™' approach.

Townsend Montessori Nursery

The centre works closely with the on-site early years provision to further support children's communication skills. Alexander Shepherd, the nursery owner, says: 'When we took over the nursery, our aim was to create a safe and interesting environment to aid communication.' Nicci Shawyer, the nursery manager, adds: 'The Montessori ethos is about providing opportunities for creating language. For this, there needs to be an order and structure to the environment so that the children feel at ease and know where things are. Security for a child is a strong base for communication, especially where there is a complicated and confusing home life'.



The nursery is still developing its spaces. Parents and carers are encouraged to come in and see what children can do and are recognising that children need time to develop new skills.



Each child is unique and the nursery and centre work together to facilitate needs and support progress. The nursery has sought feedback from parents and carers about the impact of the spaces on their child's love of reading. Communication and language are also being introduced through practical activities, such as growing vegetables and making lunch, to encourage the children to learn sounds. The mud kitchen in the garden is particularly well loved by children and parents and carers alike.

The centre's background

Townsend Children's Centre is a phase two centre that opened in January 2008. It is situated in Bournemouth, one of the 30% most deprived areas of the country. There are high levels of workless households with a significant proportion of the reach area in receipt of disability living allowance. Mental health issues are significant within the local population.

The majority of the population are of White British heritage with a growing population of Polish families in the area. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are well below those expected for their age. The centre is one of nine centres in Bournemouth.



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