

## Gardening with parents and children



A number of parents at the *Willows Children's Centre* in *Ipswich* had expressed concern at their children's clothing becoming very wet and muddy during outdoor play. They wanted to know why their children were engaged in such play and what they could be learning from it.

The Centre has a policy of open access to the outside area at all times and wanted to communicate more effectively to parents how children benefit from activities such as digging and splashing in puddles.

Centre staff did, however, acknowledge that some of the children were going home with their clothes very dirty and wet a little too often. The digging area in the garden was very large and a number of puddles formed whenever it rained. Needless to say, these puddles were very popular with the children. The Centre provided boots and spare clothes, but there was a limit to the number of changes that could be made.

In addition to this issue, during a home visit, one parent had expressed an interest in growing vegetables, and this matched a desire among the staff to improve the temporary 'vegetable garden' in the Centre, which consisted of a collection of plant troughs. These looked quite attractive during the summer but became less appealing once the plants died back and the cold, wet weather set in.

The Centre wanted to involve parents in a project to plan and improve both areas – the digging space and vegetable garden. They decided also to encourage parents to grow herbs and vegetables at home with their children – and share their experiences with staff. It was felt that a gardening project would also generate lots of two-way discussion about food and healthy eating.

A company called Growing Places listened to what the staff and parents wanted and then helped to design and change the garden areas.

A smaller digging area was created with two vegetable and herb beds alongside it and, in the corner of the garden where the large puddles had previously formed, a new sensory garden with a range of different surfaces, smells and textures was established. This contained plants, mixed gravel, bark, pebbles, children's seating and a compost bin.

One area of paving fills with water when it rains – so the children still have puddles to splash in and ride through.

A questionnaire was sent out to all parents to ask them how they would like to be involved in the project – including to those families who attend the Stay and Play group. There were only a few responses



but this did help to identify some parents who were already growing food at home, or were keen to. Some offered their time and others advice – and even spare plants and seeds.

A more successful way of generating interest proved to be talking directly to parents – and getting children and families engaged in small-scale activities, which were shared between home and the setting. For example, children chose seeds to grow and observe over the Easter holidays.



There was also good parental support for a Nursery and Reception trip to Jimmy's Farm. The day involved looking at animals and doing some planting, and learning all about the ingredients that are needed to make things grow. The children, parents and staff had to collect representations of light, air, water and nutrients before the seedlings could grow and blossom into fully formed plants and flowers!

The headteacher, who is also joint manager of the Children's Centre, came in to work with the children. She demonstrated, and encouraged them to join in, 'chitting' potatoes (taking cuttings from potatoes to grow new plants).

One member of staff attended a 'Food Growing in Schools' course. She found it very useful and has come back with activities and resources to share with the team.

Children and families have been encouraged to use the range of fiction and non-fiction books and magazines in the Centre, school and local library for research on gardening, seeds and vegetables.

Parents have a greater awareness of the value of creative outside play. There are fewer complaints about wet or muddy clothing because parents now appreciate what their children are doing and because the Centre has responded to their concerns and made efforts to reduce the level of mud and puddles in rainy weather.

More opportunities for discussions about learning have been created. Parents and children share observations with staff about gardening, growing food and healthy eating. One boy was thrilled with growing something from seed for the first time. His mother brought in his runner bean plant to show everyone. The family were given a plant for each child at home, string, canes and a book to extend the activity, and the mum bought runner beans to cook and eat at home in preparation for their future harvest. She described the whole experience as a 'real achievement'.

### Future plans

Contact has been made with local allotment holders who are willing to come in and spend time with parents, children and staff.

The local library is planning an event to help children and parents identify useful websites and to lend books around the growing theme. This will make the library manager a more familiar figure to families and highlight the activities and resources available in the library. A local author, David Bedford, is planning to come and work with children around the theme of healthy living.

In time, the Centre hopes to establish an outdoor policy that will be developed with, and shared by, children, staff and parents. Everyone is also hoping for a good harvest!

