

Down to the sea again

You will of course have heard of Forest Schools, but in Sussex they've worked a variation on this with Beach Schools, and this report from participating nurseries sets the scene of these alternative outdoor explorations.

Along the Sussex coast there is growing interest in Beach School—a creative take on the Forest School approach that has captured the imaginations of early years settings across the country. As an island nation with nearly 20,000 miles of coastline, the beach is often nearer and more accessible than the forest and is a resource that should not be ignored. At Bognor Regis Nursery School in West Sussex the introduction of Beach School has proved to be a great success. Each group of children that has taken part has visited once a week for four weeks with their key person enjoying a variety of experiences, exploring their environment and experiencing all kinds of weather. Laura Craddock who leads on the project at the nursery reports that children have relished the opportunity. They have enjoyed the sense of space, and returning to the same place week after week with the same group of adults has given the children a real sense of purpose and security and has really helped them to establish stronger relationships.

All the staff from Bognor Regis Nursery who have participated so far in Beach School have expressed their enjoyment, saying that it has been hugely beneficial to their groups. It seems from looking at individual children's records and also the documentation from each groups' visits that the greatest overall impact has been on the personal, social and emotional (PSE) aspects of their development – especially interacting with others and feeling part of a group. Speaking and listening also featured strongly as all groups have included children who do not talk confidently in the nursery environment. All of these children engaged in conversation whilst walking to the beach or at the beach, and were more willing to contribute to conversations about their

Stopping for a moment while collecting seaweed



trips to the beach on returning to nursery.

Individual children have developed specific skills as a result of experiences during their Beach School visits and taken areas of learning on throughout the year. One child who was particularly interested in the way we used cameras to record the children at the beach developed his camera skills using stills and videos as a way of recording his play and creations throughout his Beach School experience and for the rest of the year.

The one group for whom aspects of Beach School have been challenging is the children in the Special Support Centre (SSC). The children were all prepared carefully for their visits with their own needs taken into consideration but for some the change of routine was just too challenging. For 60% of the SSC children who visited with their key person groups it was a positive and enriching experience. Children with communication difficulties particularly benefited and looking back through records and documentation it has become apparent that for one child with socio-communication difficulties his trips to the beach were the beginnings of his first friendship. Beginning at the beach, he played alongside a particular child and over the rest of this year their relationship has developed into a real friendship.

Beach School at Bognor Regis Nursery



Making rubbings

has also had an impact on the relationships between parents and key persons. In one group the key person worked closely with her parents encouraging them to participate with their children on their Beach School trips. Following the first visit in their block of visits, one set of parents were so enthused by their experience that they wanted to bring along their whole family. This group of parents did not previously interact with each other but as a result of their Beach School experiences the parents have developed a supportive friendship network that now extends outside the Nursery.

In Hastings in East Sussex outdoor education has taken a high priority for the youngest children over the last few years, so when a training opportunity³ for Beach School became available locally, it was too good an opportunity to miss.

The Fellowship of St Nicholas, a local children's charity, runs two nurseries in the area. Both operate under the umbrella of Hastings and St Leonard's Children's Centre and are less than half a mile from the sea. A member of staff from each nursery and the Children's Centre teacher, attended the training and returned enthused to use the beach environment for the children.

Despite living in a seaside town, they were surprised to find out that some families do not take their children to the beach, and involving families is also a developing focus for this work. Children from the nurseries now go to the beach one day a week for a six week period to explore the environment and ecosystem. Groups of six children walk down to the beach, wearing fluorescent jackets, along with three adults and undertake a variety of activities. In order for the children to see the beach under different tidal conditions, tide timetables are consulted and activities considered accordingly. The nurseries also consult with the Seafront Officers at the local council so that they are aware of the activities they are doing as some activities such as shelter building and fire making are subject to local regulations.

The first thing the children normally do when they get to the beach is to set up camp. This then means there is a place to eat the packed lunch, which they take down with them. Sometimes the shelter will be constructed from a tarpaulin, at other times it may be a pop-up tent. Hayley Duplack from Greenways Nursery has observed that setting boundaries and some agreed goals such as eating lunch together are important to provide a structure, but the beach also gives the children the freedom to set their own boundaries as they test themselves within the environment through limited risk taking. They are closely supervised, so there are no accidents, and one of the accompanying adults is always a first aider. While the Beach School sessions are risk-assessed, the nurseries take a view that benefits must also be assessed to make a fully rounded picture of the beach school experience.

When the tide is low, the children enjoy rock pooling. They use nets and buckets to investigate sea creatures and the ecosystem, returning all things to where they were found. A rule for 'one piece of treasure' is set to limit the amount of material that is brought back to the nursery, and time is spent

Lunchtime on the beach



discussing why some items are never taken away from the beach.

When the water is higher up the beach the children can also paddle in the water. Safety is paramount and the children use a small area between markers, with two adults supervising the children closely as they go into the water. The children bring spare clothes, shoes and a towel with them.

Awareness of the changes to the beach at high and low tide is part of the learning experience and children are curious to understand how the rock pools that they explored last week have disappeared.

The children also have a chance to create a fire using fire steels centred around a fire made by the adults, with children seated two metres away in a circle. One by one the children can have a go at toasting a marshmallow or toast on the fire. This activity is closely supervised and the children made aware of the fire safety rules, how to behave in the fire area and the consequences of not keeping to the rules. The children are also shown how to extinguish a fire.

The children's creativity is also encouraged and supported by the beach environment. They can build and create with the pebbles and wet sand, using tools such as spades and driftwood. Mark-making in the sand, taking rubbings of the textures of rocks and wood and finding words to describe their experiences contribute to their developing communication skills, and Hayley has also observed how once the children are familiar with visiting the beach they start to use it in the same way as the nursery, for example using stones as characters in role play activities.

The beach provides an environment that reaches into all areas of learning: physical development through climbing rocks, scrambling on pebbles, balancing on groyne, building shelters; learning about the world

through observing creatures, the weather and the changing environment; and personal and social education through collaborating with other children and with adults, and developing empathy and friendships through meeting new challenges together. The walk to the beach is also an important part of the experience as it provides opportunities to observe and find out more about the local community.

Spending a September afternoon on Hastings beach for the Earlyarts training day made me look at the beach differently and see some of the potential of this exhilarating and ever changing space for young children's learning and development. For although you can say that there is roughly 20,000 miles of coastline in the UK, the closer you look, the more there is: every indentation of the coast, every outcrop of rocks is more to explore, and once you start looking through a child's eyes at the infinite landscape of stones and sand or grasses and groyne you can see the boundless possibilities for their imaginations.

Acknowledgements:

Laura Craddock at Bognor Regis Nursery School, West Sussex; Mary Allsopp at Hastings Town Children's Centre; Hayley Duplock at Greenway Nursery, Hastings Town Children's Centre and Toni di Niro at St Nick's Nursery, St Leonards Children's Centre, East Sussex.

Resource:

Have a look at the range of professional development opportunities at www.earlyarts.co.uk

References:

- 1 Source: <http://www.cartography.org.uk/default.asp?contentID=749>
- 2 <http://www.bognorregis-nursery.w-sussex.sch.uk/default.html>
- 3 The training was run by Archimedes Training Ltd <http://www.archimedes-training.co.uk/beach-schools.php>