



Nature as Teacher

As a Partner Provider of Fife Council offering Preschool Education we have a responsibility to both the Council and parents to evidence what we do in the woods and how we do it; substantiating this very open word of 'education'.

We have created our own Nature as Teacher Spiral Curriculum:

1. The Confident Happy Child and
2. The Inspired Creative Child.

The foundations of our Spirals are built upon the Four Capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE): Confident Individual, Successful Learner, Responsible Citizen and Effective Contributor.

Within our Spirals are symbols taken from Nature which represent the depth of the CfE and the Experiences and Outcomes that lie within it.

Being a nursery that functions solely in Nature we believe that one of our challenges is to ensure that those that offer us funding, be it in the form of preschool funding or any other funding award, have confidence in our practice of holding and extending the learning journey of each child that attends the Secret Garden. This will be seen through the evidence we offer on a day to day basis, aware that the form and content of evidence will change as our seasons so change.

We don't have physical paper files for each child, instead we carry a woods laptop wherein lie our photos and individual children's notes.

The electronic files contain observations of the children, feedback from parents, copies of e-mails from parents concerning their child, any record of complaint, incidents or bad accidents. Included in this file is also a record of 1-1 conversations with parents/carers and keyworker about the progress of the child, which happen 2 -3 times a year. Quite

what and how much evidence is recorded by us is most definitely affected by the seasons that we work in.

The following account is how we see our role of confidently holding the child all year round, providing an exemplary play environment and also collecting useful evidence of the child's time in the woods.

Most children attend the Secret Garden for a minimum of two days a week, Monday to Thursday being 8 hours, and Friday a 4 hour session. Gathering evidence on a Friday can be challenging: we have a swift walk up the hill, settle for play, stop for lunch and then head back down the hill. With the hurly burly of the short day our priority is on the child and the experience.

The children who attend 2 or 3 days will obviously accrue more photos and written information; the caring adult gets to know these children more intimately and see the play, social and discovery dynamics more clearly, witnessing greater change through the year.

So how is it that the seasons affect us and our ability to evidence what occurs in the woods?

Nature has a beautiful way of embedding cycles and seasons into our psyche; the subtle change in temperature during the day originating from the sun, the visual change of the moon that children delight in, sun rise and sun set times changing as the year passes by. Here in Britain the ancients didn't resist this change in the seasonal cycle, instead they adapted and formed their lives around what Nature offered them; creating ceremonies – and structures - to mark these particular moments in the year.

So for us out in the woods all year round, these ancient ways have particular importance to us and for the sake of this explanation of our year and what occurs in it we will choose the Summer Solstice as our year end/beginning: our longest day of light in the year.

It is at this time of year that there are endings and new beginnings in the life of the Secret Garden: the oldest children are preparing themselves for departure from the woods to step into the next phase of their young lives by heading to school; and in this time of lightness and bright the younger children that remain with us gain emotional strength and resilience as they step into the play and intellectual spaces that have been opened by the departing children.

These summer months are a time of gentle ease due to the sunshine and warmth – not so many layers, no need to keep searching for the shelter from the storm, it's as if any part of the wood is open to play;

spontaneity and discovery, flexibility and inquisitiveness naturally go hand in hand. There's a need to watch the sun, care for our bodies, but often the darkness and shadow of the woods offers us protection from the heat and allows a freedom to our bodies and movement.

The canopy of the woods offers pattern, texture and light in our lives: how many shades of green do we see? How many flowers, fruits, evidence of creatures, new life, nests and egg shells? The sheer abundance of Nature is seen all around us.

The children are in the flow of this bright season; having gathered independence and confidence, those about to leave have self assurance of themselves and their environment – they lead, others follow, adults appear superfluous. Adults breathe easily and have time to attend to tip tapping at lap top in perfected conditions temperature and weather wise, as well as within the dynamics of the group. A time of recording and ensuring at this year end/beginning all parents/carers hear of the successes and achievements of their child.

Summer marches on, school term starts, the Secret Garden settles into the dynamics of new leaders as we approach the Autumn Equinox; the harvesting and gathering in time of year. In the woods we adults are watching the new dynamics; witnessing much change in play, skills, and a shift in the energy of the group as it reforms after the exodus. The change in the air appears and a sense of the need to prepare . . . there's a bid to ensure photos are being taken that say something real about the child and the group; how do our Spirals support the individual and the group? Can we be sure that this is really happening? There is a harvesting and reviewing of our practice, shadowing Nature's own place at this time.

Slowly, slowly the season is changing and then a rapid blip in our calendar when the clocks are forcibly changed by one hour and suddenly the end of our day in the woods is dramatically different – who would have thought 1 hour over a 24 hour period could make such a difference? The sun settles down one hour earlier and the temperature drops a few degrees at this time of day.

The canopy of the woodland changes; we have more light streaming through and the forest floor greets the leaves and larch needles as they tumble and carpet. Days can be damp, wet, windy; we're stepping into the months of enforced movement, activity and development of genuine life skills that will give these children confidence to engage in all weathers throughout their lives.

The adult focus is to keep the energy of the group in good spirits as the weather changes and chills. Our awareness is on the individual and the

group; watching for emotional and physical struggles, being creative about how to engage children in activity when they'd rather give up and sit in the cold: movement games, stick collecting for fires, exploring distances of woodland, shelter building that offers wind and rain protection for huddled groups at snack time.

We notice the 3 year olds of last year standing strong this year; engaging their peers, explaining how to do things, scooping up the skills and displaying them as highly competent survivors and explorers. We capture these moments on camera and in our observations, we highlight the coping mechanisms of the younger children, seeing the slow changes of physical and emotional resilience but knowing that to record is the best way of looking back next year and glorying in the huge steps each child has taken.

Moments on our laptop can be snatched, not the same relaxed ease as in summer. Some days the camera and laptop never get out of the rucksack such is the need for adult support to ensure the group gets through the day happy and at ease. And this style of being takes us to the Winter Solstice: this is simply the preparation for the real winter that will greet us when we come back after the Christmas holidays.

Our return to the woods from the mid winter break brings us back to . . . the light. The Solstice brings a rapid change to woodland play, lengthening the days but this isn't the time of year to be complacent. February is often the rudest month so it's checking our woods stores on the bright dry days so that we have fuel ready for the wet, windy, possibly snowy days. The ground below us is preparing for Spring but it's some time before the bulbs, buds and new shoots will strongly appear.

It is the Spring Equinox that brings the real shift in energy, spring really is in sight and perhaps the wind will abate some. Warm sunny spots, quieter days of gentle movement beginning, not so much need for the adrenalin activities that have kept us going since that clock change 5 months ago.

And on to Easter, a ritual community celebration, digging the garden, parents, friends, grandparents coming out to play in the richness of the sun and head into the 'busy, busy months'.

Easter – Summer Solstice are the 'heady' months, the thinking, writing, reviewing months:

- Improvement and Development plan to be reviewed with evidence of said improvements and developments from the year that has passed. Whilst the summer energy is approaching, new shifts in focus for next year, identified and implementation to

begin . .

- A 'story' written for each child that will be leaving the woods, a Transition Report in formal terms, but in reality a bubbling account of how the child has manifested in the woods as a Confident Happy and Inspired Creative Child; a record of their time with us that shares their joy of being, most importantly of all, with their parents/carers
- Conversations with all other parents/carers to take them and their children into the 'new year'

All the above need the photos, the words, stories and achievements of the year that manifest in the summer light of the Midsummer Solstice.

New children enter the woods at the age of 3, some having been on the waiting list a year or more, their parents awaiting the 3rd birthday with eagerness and hoping their child will embrace this new world with the same enthusiasm . . . the new beginnings can happen at any time of the calendar, each season offering a different challenge to child and the adults holding the transition from home or an indoor care environment to the woods.