



Developing positive playtimes through the use of an infant School Council

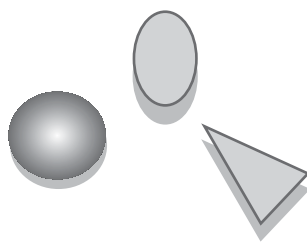
Bringing about positive change

This case study looks at how developing emotional literacy and citizenship skills can improve playtime experiences for pupils and staff, and demonstrate to children how they can make a difference to their environment and experiences. It highlights the kinds of training available to staff and pupils that will enable any school to embark on processes of democratic change, and the positive outcomes that can result.

Background

Tolworth Infants' School is set in a suburban environment in south-west London. It is a three-form entry community infants' school, sharing a large site with a sister junior school. It serves the local socially and culturally diverse neighbourhood where families live in a mix of private and public housing. Out of 300 pupils about 20 per cent are on the Special Educational Needs register and 20 per cent have free school meals, with a similar percentage having English as an additional language. This is slightly above the national average.

Tolworth's work in the area of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has included the general improvement of the outdoor environment, creating a wildlife area as a science resource and exploring 'green' travel. However, the most successful aspect of our ESD work so far has been the improvements in our playtimes.



Identifying our project focus

School playtimes were an issue for us as we observed that children were either continually seeking adult help to resolve conflicts or squabbling with one another, bringing playground issues into the classroom because they were unresolved and frequently wasting valuable teaching time.

The play area, whilst including an attractive adventure playground, was otherwise rather bleak and uninviting. There was also a space called 'the amphitheatre' that looked like a large, circular, but empty, pond. It was an area of hazard and children were often hurt when playing there.

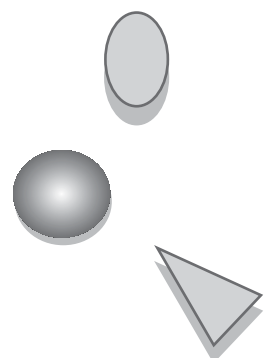
Another problem we identified was that many children lacked the skills to express their emotional needs and this also contributed to the conflicts. Children seemed unable to cope with unstructured playtimes and spent time either in over-exuberant physical play or else wandering aimlessly round the play areas. They did not have a repertoire of traditional playground games to fill their time.

Our mid-day meal staff saw their role as purely supervisory and, rather than dealing with the situations themselves, continually sent children to teachers for reprimands! We noted that certain children always seemed to be the ones identified as 'culprits' in the playground, but on closer investigation were often not found to be the catalyst for conflict. This frequently meant that the communication between teachers and mid-day meals staff was simply one of giving and receiving 'bad news'!

Our School Improvement Plan had already identified the need to improve the quality of our external environment. We had also secured funding, training and consultancy support for an ESD project from WWF under their 'Making it Happen' scheme. As a result of our playground observations, we decided to use our WWF award to develop a School Council and to put in place structures to develop our children's emotional literacy and citizenship skills. It seemed logical to put these two issues together and see if we could create a third development: a more positive playtime for all children and adults.



A new game in the playing area



What we did

Circle time and conflict resolution

All our teachers already had a 'circle time' each week but it became clear that circle time was interpreted differently in practice. It ranged from 'show and tell' news type activities to activities focusing on particular aspects of our PHSE programme. We decided that we wanted the circle times to support our School Council. We therefore arranged whole staff training to ensure a shared understanding of the purposes of 'circle time' and to give confidence to staff to be able to provide consistent, quality sessions in all classes. Once staff felt they had a clear understanding of how to use circle time to support a School Council, we were in a position to begin to introduce the Council to the children. We also looked specifically at conflict resolution and teaching children strategies for resolving their own difficulties.

School Council

The key issue to overcome at an infant school, is the need to get young children trained and skilled in how a School Council works, and able to effect some changes before they move on to the junior school. It is important that children see real change so that they have concrete evidence that they can make a difference.

The concept of a School Council was the focus of a whole staff training session and then two members of staff went on a training day to learn how to facilitate the Council. Once we had staff trained and aware, our next step was to introduce the idea to the children. This was done in class groups and eventually councillors were elected and trained by a representative from Schools Councils UK. This had the added advantage of training a member of staff for future councillors. We chose not to include Reception children in the Council meetings, but to seek out their concerns and issues by councillors visiting their classrooms following a circle time session.

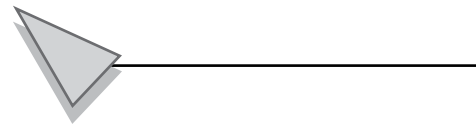
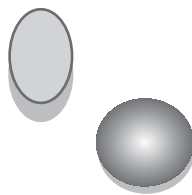
Problem:

Only one midday meals supervisor attended training because of working hours.

Solution:

Re-run training on an INSET day lunchtime / seek out ways of paying supervisors to attend training.





Playground environment

The first issue raised by the Council was the quality of the playground surface which was old tarmac and very gritty. It caused them to skid and fall, grazing knees and hands and getting the grit into wounds. They were very clear that they wanted a new playground surface. They also wanted to get rid of the playbark under the climbing apparatus as, to use their words, “it gets in your mouth when you fall”. A deputation presented their concerns to the Headteacher who responded by obtaining quotations for the cost of resurfacing the tarmac and the playbark area. The costs were related back to the Council who readily accepted that only one request could be afforded from the current budget. They then sought out the opinions of every class as to the type of games and toys they would like in the play area and, as a committee, made choices about the designs of games and toys to be included. They were given a budget for toys and selected them from a catalogue before presenting them to the school during an assembly, explaining carefully the organisation and safety rules. They submitted their choice of designs to be painted on to the new playground and these arrived over the summer ready to be enjoyed by everyone at the start of the year, except for the Year 2 children who were now in the junior school.

Part of the playground resurfacing also included support from our Parents / Teacher Association which funded some attractive benching round the five playground trees as well as supplying new picnic tables with games and activities on them.

Problem:

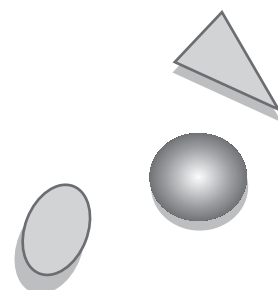
- Children with very limited writing skills were elected to be officers.
- Reception circle time has not developed children's skills well enough to enable the children to participate fully in the School Council processes.

Solution:

- Plenty of discussion about the qualities needed for each role and children asked to identify ways to overcome potential difficulties.
- In Reception, further work needed on social skills, working in small groups, etc for circle time to make sure all children participate, plus more focused work on children's emotional literacy.



The new playground environment



Friendship stops

We had used friendship stops in the past but, over time, they had weathered and damaged and were not well used by the children. However, the reintroduction of a 'friendship stop' was one of the solutions put forward by the Council to help 'lonely' children at playtime. To raise the profile and purpose of the idea, they held a competition to design a new stop with the winner being used on our friendship stop. All children, including Nursery, were involved in voting for the winning design. This reinforced the purpose of the stop to all children and facilitated plenty of discussion about friendship.

Playground buddies

Another of the Council's ideas was to have special playground 'friends' to wait at the stops to meet the children who were looking for a playmate. They wanted this to avoid children "looking a bit sad at the stop". The children then discussed and decided on the qualities a playground buddy would need. We were struck by their perceptive comments and also on their self-assessment as suitable candidates. One child decided he was sometimes too grumpy to be a buddy but we did persuade him that, as he could now control his moods, he was probably very capable of doing the job! All prospective buddies were interviewed and selected using questions the Council had devised. Distinctive bands were made by a parent for the newly trained buddies to wear when they took up their role. A clear code of responsibilities and duties was decided upon with the support of our lunchtime manager:

- six children should be on buddy duty each day
- there should be only one 'buddy day' per child per week
- any problems should be referred quickly to the lunchtime manager
- buddies should be trained in the 'game of the week'
- any complaints about a buddy would be discussed by the Council.

The Council officers presented all this information in a school assembly so that all children were aware of the purpose and roles of the buddies and able to apply for the job. Each councillor managed the applications for their particular class.



Playground buddies in action



Benefits of the work

We have demonstrated to children, in a very real way, how they can make a difference to their environment and experiences in school. We have given them the opportunities to learn about the democratic process and to see how it can affect change. But the work has also demonstrated to sceptical adults that little children do have clear opinions and ideas, and can negotiate good solutions on a wide range of issues, taking on board the consequences of decisions they make.

The benefit for the school as a whole is a lunchtime playtime where the majority of children are purposely occupied in play and are better equipped to deal with any friendship problems that may arise. We have less unnecessary 'telling tales' as children become more assertive and more able to resolve their own difficulties, choosing to involve adults more appropriately.

More adults feel confident in the ability of the children to take responsibility for their actions, staff feel more empowered themselves and the school ethos is greatly enhanced.

What's this got to do with Education for Sustainable Development?

Values and attitudes

- individuals, working together, can effect change
- empathy and awareness of the points of view of others
- a sense of responsibility for personal and group actions
- a desire to be an active citizen within the school community
- a sense of identity and self-esteem
- the need to make changes for the future benefit of others as well as self.

Skills

- cooperative and collaborative working
- problem solving through discussion and negotiation
- thoughtful and creative decision-making
- an understanding of democratic systems
- an ability to distinguish between wants and needs.

What next?

As an infant school, there is less of a learning time for younger Council members to observe the processes and to help to maintain the momentum of the Council when they are ready to take on an officer role. To overcome this we have devised an induction package for the start of the school year. The school has made the commitment to provide the facilitating teacher with time to do this important work over one week in September.

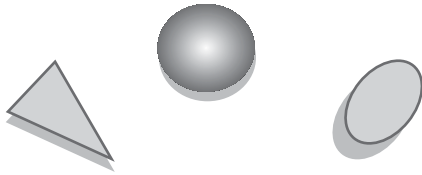
Staff, who have seen the benefits of a School Council here, have set up new councils when they have found promotions in other infants' schools, so the good work is sustained and developed in other school communities. As our junior school does not have a School Council, we have work to do to persuade the staff there of the benefits.



Cooperative play at lunchtime

Key success factors

- Staff training ensures a shared understanding and develops skills and confidence.
- The support of lunchtime supervisors is vital to changing playground behaviour, so paid training must be provided at times they can attend.
- Circle time can support the effective working of a School Council by developing conflict resolution skills and teaching children strategies for resolving their own difficulties, as well as providing opportunities to express ideas and opinions.
- Linking developing citizenship skills and emotional literacy with opportunities for action provides children with concrete evidence that they can make a difference.
- Giving pupils a budget enables them to bring about real change while developing an understanding of economic constraints.
- Clear codes of responsibility and duties, communicated effectively to the whole school, ensure understanding of the purpose and role of democratic structures.



Resources

Primary Schools Toolkit – a guide to setting up an effective School Council.

Available from Schools Council UK. Visit www.schoolcouncils.org

This site also contains information on training and funding for School Councils.

Friendship Stops available from Signs & Signwriting. Tel: 0121 707 6747.

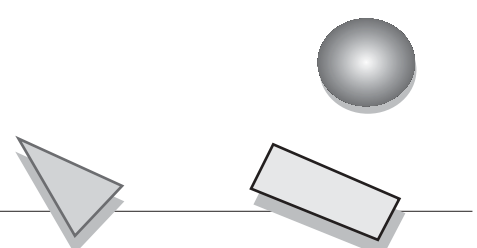
Training for Lunchtime Workers available from Leapwade International Training.

Tel: 01625 500696 or visit www.leapwade.co.uk

The WWF Schools' Case Studies Series

This case study forms part of a series designed to capture the work of schools as they journey towards Education for Sustainable Development. The case studies come from schools working at all levels – from Early Years to Secondary, but we hope that the principles and ideas are transferable. Free copies of all the case studies are available from WWF Education at the address below, or you can download them from the Resource Bank: Case Studies section of our dedicated ESD site, www.wwflearning.co.uk

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Acknowledgements

This case study was written by Elaine Joyce and Anne Porter, Tolworth Infants' School, Tolworth, Kingston on Thames.

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Published by WWF-UK, Panda House, Weyside Park, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR.

Printed by Arrowhead Printing Ltd, Alton, on Cyclus Offset made from 100% post consumer waste.

WWF-UK registered charity number 1081247

A company limited by guarantee number 4016725

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