

# Follow me

A setting rescued from closure by parents is providing outstanding provision with creative and critical thinking at the heart of its practice. *Marianne Sargent* explains



**B**roomhall Under 3s in Sheffield prides itself on delivering Ofsted rated 'outstanding' provision that fosters creativity, independence and imaginative thinking in even the youngest of children.

The staff are united in the belief that creativity is born of an inner confidence that is achieved only within a caring and supportive learning environment, where children are given the freedom and space to follow up their individual interests and learn independently.

'It's having the confidence to communicate what you're trying to achieve with other people,' says Jill Wilkinson, who manages the nursery alongside colleague Theresa Fletcher. 'It's saying we're fully aware of what a child should be doing, but that he won't do it under pressure. He

has to enjoy being with us in the setting first.

'We're lucky because we've got a really caring and supportive team. We've worked together for a long time and we share the same values.'

The setting was, however, threatened with closure earlier this year, after Sheffield City Council withdrew its funding, but its future – and outstanding practice – was saved by the staff who now run the setting in partnership with parents as a social enterprise. In addition, the nursery has taken on staff from a nearby early years setting that was forced to close due to the same funding cuts.

'We felt that what we did was really worth keeping,' says Mrs Wilkinson, who was already a member of staff at Broomhall before the cuts. 'All the staff work well together and are very experienced and supportive and know their jobs really well.'

**Broomhall looks to empower children with open access to resources**

## FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The nursery currently has 19 children on the roll, and just under half of the children speak English as an additional language. The setting is arranged across two large rooms that the children can access independently with free-flow between.

Previously, the children were divided into babies and toddlers. However, staff decided to change to an alternative family-grouping model and the children are no longer separated by age but play and learn together.

It is this freedom of movement and open access to resources that Mrs Wilkinson believes empowers these young children and gives them the confidence to work and play independently.

'The babies come on because the older children are there and the older children learn how to be kind to younger ones. We also have ➤

children with special needs and we encourage everyone to look after each other,' she says.

'When the children arrive in the morning they know which room they would prefer to go into where they feel most comfortable. They know where things are and they can carry on doing something that they already started.'

'Our planning is completely child-led. Bearing in mind that these children are only two, we embrace what they want to do and build on this. For example, today a child picked up a doll from the home corner and put it in the water and started washing it. So then this afternoon we will put all the dolls out for the children to bath.'

'We've got various types of construction and we'll enhance it to encourage creative play,' adds Mrs Fletcher. 'We've got cars in there and we've added a train track at the moment because the children are really enjoying building bridges.'

Mrs Fletcher reflects on what this means in terms of working with children who are as yet unable to communicate their thoughts and feelings verbally.

'It comes with experience,' she says. 'We tune into their body language, what their signals are and what they are trying to communicate.'

'We know the families and what the children have been doing after nursery. We pick up on what each child wants and incorporate it into the continuous provision. We use our observations and learning journeys to enhance the areas for each child, whether they're under two or two.'

## CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKERS

Both managers believe that building positive relationships lies at the heart of helping children to become confident, creative and critical thinkers. The children are given space to explore the continuous provision around them and allowed to come up with their own ideas.

'We don't lead the children, but we show positive role modelling and play,' says Mrs Wilkinson. 'We interact with the



children a lot and value what they do and listen to what they say. We give them a chance to talk to us and build their confidence that way. Our ethos is that you teach life skills with whatever you do.

'We aim to give children the confidence to experience things and experiment with carrying them on further. Because they feel comfortable in the setting and with the other children the other things more often than not just follow.'

You know as an adult if you are put under pressure and you don't feel confident and comfortable that you don't really grow. It's just the same for the children.'

The nursery encourages imaginative play by providing a range of treasure baskets that contain objects made from a variety of natural and man-made materials. Even the youngest of children demonstrate creative thought as they explore and use the materials in original ways.

Very young children will mouth and bash the objects together and experiment with using them alongside other toys such as cars.

Then as the children get older they find more creative ways of using the various materials. Staff have observed children playing together to build structures, using pieces of bark to make wooden barriers in small-world farms and adding shells to



## MORE INFORMATION

- *50 Fantastic Ideas for Creativity Outdoors* by Alistair Bryce-Clegg, Featherstone Education
- Broomhall Nursery and Broomhall Under 3s, [www.broomhallnursery.org.uk](http://www.broomhallnursery.org.uk)
- *Helping Young Children Think Creatively* by Ros Bayley and Lynn Broadbent, Lawrence Educational
- *The Little Book of Treasure Baskets* by Ann Roberts and Sally Featherstone, Featherstone Education
- *What Does it Mean to be One?* and *What Does it Mean to be Two?* by Jennie Lindon, Practical Pre-School Books

the water tray. 'We have a heuristic area,' says Mrs Fletcher. 'But we also place heuristic resources in our small-world area because these work really well together.'

'The children often tend to use the heuristic resources alongside other toys. They really can enjoy doing what they like with the resources.'

The children's creative use of the materials has sometimes been surprising, as Mrs Wilkinson explains. 'These resources develop quite a lot of play that you wouldn't expect,' she says. 'For instance, we had a new child who'd had a week off and was feeling unsettled. He was sitting with the crunchy materials and was quite upset.'

'I was sitting by his side and some other children came over and started to tickle his face very gently with some crinkly material. Then he began to do it to the other children and that was lovely because it wasn't the purpose we'd put them out for.'

She adds, 'Children of this age are not really bothered about the product; it's the process they like. We have done things as simple as putting colouring in the glue. The children just dribble it in a pattern. They're not bothered about sticking anything on it. They just become engrossed in doing that.'

The nursery benefits from a large outdoor space, which Mrs Wilkinson explains has been sculpted and arranged so that it encourages the children to experience and respond to the natural phenomena that they see around them.

'We've got a huge amount of green space with trees and a sensory area. There are bamboos and bushes, a small play area, a grassy patch and a little bench.'

'There's a pathway that runs through the sensory area that leads inside bushes where the children can go in and watch everything that's going on outside as well as listen to the noise when the wind's blowing. There's also a wind chime and we've planted herbs like rosemary and lavender.'

Just the same as indoors, the children are encouraged to follow their own agendas when using this outside space.

Mrs Wilkinson explains: 'This morning a little boy who is just one brought me some sticks and twigs and we spent a long time piling them up for squirrels because we have a lot of squirrels in the area.' ■