

A towering success

A whole-school outing to the Tower of London by Alice Model Nursery School was repeated this year because of its impact on the children and their families. By **Fran Paffard**

We all know the value of getting children out and about, but we also know what a performance it can be. Risk assessments, permission slips, adult:child ratios, spare clothes bags, packed lunches, transport costs... the list goes on. It's not surprising that the practicalities put many settings off leaving their base.

However, at Alice Model Nursery School in the heart of Tower Hamlets, east London, there's such a strong tradition of exploring that the staff take all this work in their stride. And through the outings, they bring together a mixed group of families, including Bangladeshi, African-Caribbean, English, Romanian, Somali and Chinese.

Many nurseries plan only one major outing a year, but at Alice Model, a whole-school outing is a common occurrence. Head teacher Lynn Cottle says, 'We take everyone out once a term, just to make sure the children experience those different environments, usually a forest trip, an animal excursion and, of course, the seaside.'

Another tradition is taking the children's mothers out on Mother's Day, then the fathers out for a Father's Day trip. The nursery staff also respond to children's interests and to events in the world around them, and again the whole school will be off on their adventures.

OFF TO THE TOWER

Four years ago, when the beautiful ceramic poppies filled the moat at the Tower of London for the Centenary of the start of World War

One, the school closed for the day and took all the parents and children to see them. It was a powerful experience that lives on in the memories of those involved. This year, just before Armistice Day, the school repeated the trip.

Many settings find it a real struggle to involve parents, both in the day-to-day life of the setting and in outings. At Alice Model, it has become an integral part of the culture. 'It's so important that children learn through these real-life experiences, and sometimes we find that families don't get out, and don't know what is available to them,' says Ms Cottle.

Not everyone knows that residents of Tower Hamlets can get into the Tower of London for £1, and children under five go free. Suddenly, a prohibitively expensive trip becomes a very affordable treat.

PREPARATION

Lots of work went into the trip beforehand. The children were fascinated by the poppies that they saw adults wearing and, of course, wanted one too. So, staff member Jo set up poppy painting and made poppy biscuits with the children. She also built a castle and put fairy lights around it, mirroring the torches on show in the moat, and the children were encouraged to build their own castles using big wooden blocks.

Enthusiastic about kings, queens and knights, the children researched castles and knights on the internet, while at storytime they discussed the difference between fiction and non-fiction books – a difference that came to life when the children visited the Tower.



The children were inspired by the wearing of poppies for Armistice Day



Through these experiences, the team aimed to build on the children's understanding of the commemorations. Reflecting on the earlier visit, one parent noted, 'Although they are very young, they understood why we went.'

The children were clearly making connections with events such as seeing poppies on television, and while they might not have fully grasped the significance of the poppies, one staff member said, 'They know they have a deep meaning; they know they matter.'

The team also wanted to build a legacy. 'It's important to remember,' said one team member. 'We're helping them make memories.'

A HUGE TURNOUT

On the day there was a huge turnout; nearly all the families came, including fathers, aunts, grandpas, as well as younger children. The great turnout is due in part to meticulous planning – notices go up long before the trip 'so that families can plan for that date', and letters are sent out telling parents 'what they will see, and lots of useful advice, what to bring, what

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to think about'. However, the success of the trips is largely due to 'us', says team member Lutfa. Every member of staff engages with parents at every step of the way, always with a can-do attitude.

Babies, grandparents – everyone is welcome. Staff member Sufia says, 'I know in most primary schools, mums can't bring the younger children, that seems a real shame.' One obvious benefit is that, in general, the children are the responsibility of their parents, freeing up staff to accompany the few children who don't have a family member with them.

THE CROWN JEWELS

At the Tower, different things appealed to the children. Some were amazed by the Beefeaters' costumes – while 'Musa was gobsmacked', said one staff member.

The soldiers in their uniforms were an instant source of awe and wonder. Interestingly, the Crown Jewels were a bit overwhelming, as the room was crowded and the jewels quite hard to view. The children were more fascinated by the replicas in another gallery and planned to 'make their own ones'.

Some ideas dawned slowly on the children, as the difference between story and history became a reality in front of their eyes. So, the crown is real, and we have a real queen; to three-year-olds used to fairy stories, this is a dazzling idea.

A group of girls were fascinated by the ravens as they preened and strode about the battlements; one girl enjoyed imitating their gait. Another group was fascinated by the history of the menagerie housed in the Tower, and the life-sized models of animals that now populate the grounds. How, wondered the children, were they made and what were they made of?

Inside the tall grey towers, the rooms glowed red and gold, with sumptuous furniture and extraordinary stained-glass windows capturing the children's imagination. 'We counted 204 steps and managed to climb them all', said one. Everyone loved the sentry boxes that you can take turns getting into.

One parent recalled the missed opportunity from her own childhood. 'I lived in Aldgate when I was little,' she explained. 'My dad used to take us at weekends to walk

around the Tower. We never went inside. I never knew it was only £1.'

LASTING BENEFITS

The benefits to children and parents soon became apparent. The children started to make new connections in their learning, with those who had previously built castles now building with a clearer vision of what they wanted to recreate and a skill and persistence that weren't there before.

One father introduced himself to another and spoke about the trip, so providing the beginnings of a new relationship. Teacher Ernestina says, 'It's such an informal way for parents to be together and to get to know each other. The nursery is so diverse, we have parents of all sorts, from all kinds of places, but when they are together like that, the barriers come down.'

The trip becomes a thread that runs through the school year and children, parents and staff will all refer to it – sometimes months after it happened. Staff respond to children's interests stemming from the trip, so a spark ignited at the Tower may be smouldering away months later in children's learning.

It has become self-evident in nursery practice that where trips are concerned, small is beautiful. They are certainly more manageable, and undoubtedly a smaller group makes for a more intimate episode. The ambitious scale of the Alice Model trips, however, offer an extraordinarily different experience.

The confidence and involvement of parents and children are a testament to the impact of these whole-school outings. Partnership with parents has been more often trumpeted than realised in practice, but here there is a genuine non-hierarchical shared experience.

Getting children, many of whom come from families at a disadvantage, to engage with the wider world broadens their understanding of the world, builds their confidence and raises their own 'cultural and social capital'. The common culture created by these memorable adventures gives a palpable difference to the community of the school.

The nursery staff are concerned that their children should not forget their history, but at the same time they are also creating a powerful shared history. ■

Some of the children inside a beefeater's sentry box at the Tower of London (main picture)



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