

# On ice

Being outside when it is snowy or icy provides wonderful experiential learning, **Nicole Weinstein** discovers on the Isle of Wight

**T**he very essence of feeling the cold, what happens when you tread on ice or walk through frosty grass simply can't be learnt any other way than by direct experience. Which is why Little Larks, an outdoor family provision for accompanied children from nought to five years, embraces this season.

Forest School leader and outdoor learning consultant Kathy Grogan, who spent 11 years on behalf of the local Wildlife Trust running weekly woodland and coastal learning sessions for under-fives on the Isle of Wight, launched Kathy Grogan Learning Wild, which includes Little Larks forest school group, earlier this year.

She says, 'When children see the frost twinkling on the trees and plants, there is a feeling of magic in the air. Ice and snow bring an excitement that other weather conditions can't compete with. Children love to make ice crunch under their feet.'

'Being on the South coast, snow is a such a rarity that we make sure we make the most of it. The children – and adults – need no prompting to keep physically active while they build igloos and snow animals, make trails and explore.'

## A COLD START

With very low temperatures a month or so ago, children have had plenty of opportunities to explore the morning frost and icy weather – and they even managed to scrape enough snow together to build a tiny mouse-sized snowman with a seashell hat.

'Children are always fascinated by ice and love exploring icy puddles and frozen mud, often by sliding across it or by picking it up and looking through it. We've made ice mobiles by filling shallow plastic lids with water, laying string across

and adding leaves and berries, which get frozen into place,' explains Ms Grogan. 'The frozen discs can then be hung up in the trees with string. If it's not quite cold enough, you can cheat by taking them indoors and popping them in the freezer.'

As our children don't encounter snow very often, they love to explore it. It generally takes the place of mud and they enjoy digging in it and using it in the mud kitchen to make snow pies and decorate our mud cakes. We have made snow animals like owls and rabbits by gathering up snow on a gatepost or a tree stump and shaping the snow into an owl shape with little leaf ear tufts, or a hedgehog complete with twiggy spines.

'In the past, during snowy sessions we have built an igloo using plastic tubs as moulds to make the bricks. The children can pack the snow into the tubs and tip out the snow bricks, like they would a sandcastle from a bucket. Add a little food colouring to make a multi-coloured structure.'

## WITHOUT A TRACE

Little Larks is a 'leave no trace' operation, where base camp is set



**The children at Little Larks being creative in the snow, cooking food and exploring the elements**

up with tarps for shelter and upturned buckets for seats and is packed away at the end of each two-hour session. Weekly sessions currently take place in the west of the Isle of Wight with up to 25 children in each one, the majority of whom are three- to four-year-olds.

Activity zones are set out around the space for children to access freely. This usually includes a mud kitchen, a digging area, water with big paint brushes and rollers, a den-building kit and a cosy story space.

There is also an activity box with magnifiers, dressing-up items, bug pots and nets, which the children can help themselves from.

Families are welcomed as they arrive, they sign in and children lead their own learning, with adults on hand for support. Hot and cold drinks are available. Resources for an adult-led activity which ties in with the season and the weather on the day are available if the children are responsive to it, but the interests of the children take priority.



Ms Grogan says, 'Parents understand that our focus is on the process of learning rather than a product, and the amount of mud on a child's outdoor clothing is a better indication of learning than a made item to bring home.'

## ACTIVITIES

- During the winter months the group makes kites and streamers when it is breezy to explore and play in the wind.
- They make bird feeders to keep birds healthy in icy conditions when natural food is hard to come by.
- The children enjoy mark-making using sticks in frosty grass. They often take sticks on an adventure to jump in puddles; measure how deep the mud is; explore a rockpool or clamber over logs and rocks.
- Staff put up rope swings to keep children physically active.
- On cold days they light a campfire and cook up simple snacks such as toast and popcorn. Popcorn is cooked

between two wire sieves attached to a wooden pole with wire. Children can whittle their own toasting forks and sit on parents' laps while they toast their slice of French stick or brioche, watch the dough turn from white to brown, then hone their fine motor skills while spreading their own butter.

- At the end of the session, everyone comes back to base camp to chat about the day and make plans for the following week, while enjoying snacks and hot chocolate.

## KEEPING COSY

Practitioners need to be extra vigilant during the winter months and watch out for signs of hypothermia. Doing a first-aid course with an outdoor element helps raise staff awareness of this. Shivering is an early sign, so staff need to watch out for it.

Ms Grogan and her team of four Level 3 Forest School leaders always do a visual check of what children are wearing when they

## ideas for snow and ice

- Heat up water in a Kelly kettle and pour it over the frozen mud. Children can use trowels and sticks to mix the mud and get sensory pleasure from sinking their hands into the warm, soft substance.
- Cook campfire snacks, including dairy- and gluten-free options such as garlic mushrooms on the end of a stick and spiced fruit punch.
- Make 'log dogs' by attaching chunks of wood to a piece of rope for the children to drag through the woods. Taking them for a walk in ice or snow brings a different dimension to the activity, creating trails, exploring depth and discovering more about the properties of ice and snow.

arrive and chat to parents about what is required.

A hot drink, a snack and a place to sit out of the wind or rain is always available, usually set up by staff before the start of the session. The coldest weather tends to be on the beach when a north-easterly wind comes off the sea, so windbreaks are created with a tarp where children can shelter from the elements and snuggle up with a story and cuddly toy if they need to rest or warm up.

There is also a see-through tarp which enables children to enjoy a cosy spot, out of the elements, while still able to enjoy watching the raindrops trickling down.

To stay safe and comfortable when it is extremely cold, both adults and children are encouraged to wear several thin layers, waterproof footwear that keeps toes warm and a waterproof outer layer of jacket and trousers. Spare pairs of gloves, wheat packs, warm hats and socks are kept in the safety bag for anyone who needs to borrow them. Wearing the right clothes goes a long way towards enabling children to spend extended periods happily learning outside.

'One of my favourite bits of kit,' says Ms Grogan, 'is a flysheet from an old eight-man tent which we use as a storm shelter. We spread it out, all holding the edge, put it over our heads, pull it down behind us and sit on the edge. The heads of the adults around the edge keep the storm shelter up while the little ones sit in the middle. Propping the middle up with a stick helps too. This makes a lovely cosy shelter for us to enjoy a story and a cup of hot chocolate at the end of the session or during showers or squalls.'

## ABOUT THE PROVIDER

- **Little Larks** operates from selected woodland and coastal sites on the Isle of Wight.
- It runs **two-hour weekly sessions for up to 25 children** under five years old and their carers throughout the seasons.
- **Little Larks** offers a holistic approach to child-centred learning with long-term programmes throughout the seasons and qualified staff.

## MORE INFORMATION

- Kathy Grogan, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/436063176603938>