

Developing an outside living classroom



Olivia Foley shares with readers Hungry Caterpillars' approach to enthusing and training staff with limited experience of the outdoors

Over the past two years, we have developed fantastic outside living classrooms, off-site forest schools and an array of recycling and environmental initiatives across all of our nurseries. This required all our decision makers, managers and practitioners to be fully on board and committed. And so, motivating, training and upskilling has been the challenge for the team at Hungry Caterpillars.

Our nurseries are predominantly West London based, which means that access to the outdoors is limited - not just for the families attending but for staff too. Understanding the background of our staff team and their limited experience of the outdoors was unquestionably our starting point for the project and influenced our approach. Change is tough enough, but when it's outside of your experience it's even harder.

Our plan

We started with a series of workshops, meetings and in-house training sessions with the aim of developing the team's commitment and confidence by giving them ownership of the project. Each staff member had the opportunity to have their say, access relevant training and develop their skills through practical workshops. It's great to see how staff rise to a challenge when they feel part of the plan, know their input is truly valued and have time to develop skills.

Our achievements

At these events, we established the following:

- vision and aims for the project
- barriers to achieving our vision and a plan to overcome these
- environmental projects / issues to tackle
- benefits for our children and families
- outdoor champions at each of our nurseries
- training plans for all staff.

Appointing a lead person was the next step. We were really lucky to have a senior practitioner, forest-school trained, who jumped at the chance and demonstrated such passion for our plan that she was at bursting point. Having a passionate leader who is up for the challenge is so important, and if you don't have someone ready for the challenge then training is imperative.

We now have a steady stream of staff across the company working through forest school training. Wow! What a difference they make in motivating and inspiring the rest of our team. In addition, the training means they are truly confident in their practice and able to pass on their skills and knowledge to their peers.

The results

Less than two years later we have five fully qualified forest school leaders, two external forest school sites that children access on a regular basis, numerous environmental projects and a growing list of staff who are fanatical about the outdoors and providing fantastic learning opportunities for our children.

Staff can't help but be inspired by the impact the outdoors is having on the children's learning and development. There is nothing more inspiring than children planting, caring for and then eating the fruit and veg they have grown or listening to the excited 'oohs' and 'ahs' as children switch on the lights of their recycled plastic-bottle lighthouse that they built themselves.

At Hungry Caterpillars, we have learnt that it takes a certain type of person to lead on the outdoors, but motivating and building the confidence of the whole team is the most important part.

Practitioners, regardless of their background, have a whole host of skills and experiences that they can share and develop. Tapping into that is imperative and the key to success. ■

- Olivia Foley is the founder and director at Hungry Caterpillar Day Nurseries, a group of 10 West London based nurseries.

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