

Sure Start goes wild



Sure Start Redcar Coast and Dormanstown Children's Centre work in partnership with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust to support children and families in exploring the natural environment. They learn how to observe and value wildlife together.

Families with children aged from nought to nine are registered in the Goes Wild club. Older siblings and extended family members often get involved too. Each month, families are invited to join in a trip or an activity. This might include pond dipping; bird watching; making

“It can be hard to involve fathers and such activities can help to bring them on board.”

nest boxes; collecting up litter; planting trees; or visiting local moors, nature sites, beaches, estuaries and butterfly parks.

These outings bring families together in a group, where they benefit from shared experiences and build new friendships and relationships.

We know that young children learn best through first-hand experience, observing and talking with adults and older siblings as they engage in real activities.

The Goes Wild club is an ideal opportunity to demonstrate this to families and to show that valuable learning takes place through simple activities which children enjoy and engage in enthusiastically.

It also shows how important the outdoors is for education, as well as helping to establish a love of being outside and of physical activity.

Each family is given a pack of resources which includes a bug box magnifier; insect eyewear; pocket guides to birds, insects and flowers; a viewfinder; bug jars; and wildflower seeds.

“The children are now forever in the garden, looking for signs of life. I can't believe the difference in them.”

They also get 12 months free membership of the Wildlife Trust with quarterly magazines for parents and children.

This encourages the continuation of learning beyond the organised trips as children can read the magazines and use their equipment at home, in gardens and local parks.

A follow-up evaluation shows that equipment is being used to collect bugs and spiders, look for worms and birds, and peer more closely into fish tanks.

Parents are surprised to realise they can do so much locally and inexpensively. Many of the sites, although located nearby, are new to the families.

Parents report how much they enjoy learning new things for themselves and how they have become more aware of the importance of spending time with their children.

They also like to see their children interacting with the group.

Many have enjoyed the outings so much that they have returned, in their own time, for additional visits.

The Sure Start team have been inspired by the project and plan to set up wildlife gardens in children's centres in the authority. They also intend to establish all Sure Start centres as recycling sites – with families agreeing to compost and use recycling bins at the centres.

“I never thought I would handle insects, let alone watch my son do it!”

Could you:

- take families to local nature reserves in your area?
- contact your local authority parks and countryside department to see what events and services they offer?
- find out about Natural Heritage Events, Community Forests, Wildlife Trusts, the Countryside Agency and National Parks (many of which offer free events)?
- set up wildlife areas in your own nursery garden, using ideas from Learning Through Landscapes (see www.ltl.org.uk)?
- arrange for your setting to subscribe to a wildlife magazine to give you ideas?
- lend out viewers, digital cameras and reference books to families for home use, to observe and record sightings of birds and animals?

