



Final Report Innovation Grant Mini Muddy Fingers, NECA, Louise Peaker

Overview

Mini Muddy Fingers is a play and stay session for children between the ages of 0 and 5 within our Community Garden. With a combination of indoor and outdoor spaces, our project aims to harness children's eagerness and natural curiosity. Our facilities, incorporating planting zones, wildlife zones, woodwork zones and play zones, encapsulate Froebelian principles and promote learning through play in a natural environment.

The objectives of our Mini Muddy Fingers scheme include:

- Providing opportunities for children and families to take part in enriching activities they may otherwise not have had opportunity to be involved in.
- Nurturing learning in nature; encouraging learning and education through outdoor play; adventure fostering natural curiosities of pre-school age children helping them to realise social, intellectual, physical and emotional development possibilities.
- Encouraging sensory exploration to stimulate senses: touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing
- Inspiring children to try new things; to test their abilities; to experience challenges; to "have a go".
- Utilising and expanding existing onsite resources to support and encourage independent active learning
- Creating a welcoming, caring and stimulating environment where children and their families/ carers feel safe and happy.
- Valuing, nurturing, and being inclusive to all children, recognising each individual as a unique, important and appreciated member of the local community.
- Fostering a culture of acceptance, embracing diversity and promoting equality, inclusion and respect.

Specific SMART objectives detailed in our project application include:

1. Average attendance of at least 10 children per Mini Muddy Fingers session over 12 months.

Measured by: Attendance registers.

2. A progression in learning and development in 100% of children attending Mini Muddy Fingers.

Measured by: Observations, Learning Logs, Photographic Activity Diaries; working collaboratively with each child and their parents/carers to monitor levels of engagement and learning

3. An improvement in physical, social and emotional wellbeing of at least 80% of registered children; with the outcome of healthy, happy and confident children.

Measured by: Review questionnaires at point of registration and at regular intervals of attendance (3,6,9,12 months).

4. To host celebratory sessions at 6 months and 12 months, designed and led by the children to celebrate their achievements.

Measured by: Learning Logs, Photographic Diaries, Certificates/Awards.

The scheme aims to provide:

- Physical Development – physical activity, development of locomotor, body management, object control, and fine motor skills; carrying, moving, balancing objects and using tools; climbing, crawling, running, digging, sowing, harvesting.
- Personal Development – self-motivation, ability to choose, independence, confidence, curiosity, solution focussed approach, (encouraged to ask questions and think about solutions).
- Sensory stimulation – textures, smells, colours, tones and shades of garden plants and play resources (sand, mud, water); tasting vegetables and fruits grown by the children.
- Cognitive development – remembering, analysing information, asking questions, predicting outcomes.
- Curriculum – Science (living laboratory providing resource for experiments, observations, first-hand experience of plant growth, life cycles, eco-systems); Maths (counting, patterns, measurements); Literacy (learning names, recognising letters, making marks, increasing vocabulary); Art and Design (planning, designing, creating and constructing).

Summary

The start of the project was delayed until February 2020 allowing time for the formal grant paperwork to be received and signed and also to accommodate the Froebel short courses training for staff and volunteers; gratefully received as part of the grant award. This meant the project was unfortunately halted in its early stages due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has created significant challenges for the project; national lockdowns have forced the Garden to remain closed to the public for long periods of time. We estimate that over the last 12 months the project has been operational for inconsecutive periods amounting to less than 5 months.

During the lockdowns, staff and volunteers continued to attend the site and used their Froebel training to make developments and prepare for the project recommencing. This included:

- Creating a Bug hotel from recycled materials and items found around the Garden
- Building 2 new substantial mud kitchens from donated wood already on site
- Developing new large sand areas to walk, sit and play in, adding to natural textures (occupations) available on site.
- Creating different sized building blocks (gifts) out of recycled and donated wood.

Marketing leaflets/ posters were designed and distributed around local venues such as children's centres, community centres, schools/nurseries and job centres as well as circulated amongst local partner organisations and posted on social media. This generated increasing interest in the scheme; we maintained a presence on social media and kept in contact with local families ensuring that as soon as we were able to re-open our cohort of children were ready to attend.

When the Garden has been able to open there have been additional social distancing restrictions that have meant children and their families have not been able to interact with one another as fully as we would have hoped.

Despite these challenges we believe there have been significant achievements during times we have been operational. Our aim was to provide a safe and welcoming space for young children and their families in an area that suffers from significant deprivation (South Shields); a space that provides natural resources and ample opportunity for learning and development through play. It has become apparent over the last 12 months this access has become even more important for both our local families and our volunteers who have found the Garden a place to “escape” from the anxieties and stresses surrounding the pandemic.

As a result, we have successfully registered over 90 children for the project and have achieved an average attendance of 9 children per session. Whilst time spent at the Garden is

unlimited, on average children have been spending 2 hours per session playing/learning on site. We have observed developments in the children over a short period of time and were able to gather some successful examples of the impact that our project can have and the learning and development that can be achieved in such a short space of time due to the resources that we have available.

Lessons Learned

The short courses for elements 1 and 3 have proved to be extremely valuable to the Garden team and have provided further opportunity to enhance the Mini Muddy Fingers provision. The knowledge provided during these courses allowed the team to explore in detail the Froebelian approach and experience first-hand aspects of interconnectivity and forms within our Garden as well as linking the gifts and occupations to existing resources on site. This knowledge has been taken and used to enhance the site further; the development of our mud kitchens and sand areas has been particularly well received by the children that access the project. To complement these additions, our team have also planned to build a water wall to enhance the natural play experience further.

Our original proposal outlined how we would compare and contrast the children's starting points and review data with each child and parent/ carer at months 3, 6, 9 and 12 to evidence learning outcomes and developments. This has proved difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, the project sessions have been so detached it has been difficult to establish at what point the interim reviews should take place. Secondly, some children are attending more often and for longer periods of time and therefore have had more access to our resources and more opportunities for learning within a particular time period. Taking this into account we propose to adapt future reviews completing them after a set number of sessions attended as opposed to after a set period of months following registration.

We have been able to record some observations of learning taking place at the Garden with staff recording activities that children have taken part in and documenting developments through photographs. Whilst this has successfully demonstrated the positivity of the project we feel that it is something that can be developed further in the future and that observations, case studies and storytelling can be much more of a focus to evidence the development and learning taking place naturally.

Within our funding proposal we also described our commitment to facilitating child designed / planned celebrations at 6 and 12 months. Unfortunately this has not proceeded as planned, largely due to the impact of COVID and the minimal levels of operational activity but also because of the age of some of the regular attendees. The average age of children attending is 2 and many of those that come along have yet to develop communication skills. This is still something that we wish to deliver on and we plan to use our knowledge of the registered children alongside the established relationships with their families to co-design a future event celebrating the achievements each has made throughout the project.

Ultimately, the experiences that have been shared with the children attending the Garden have been positive and enriching. We wish to continue with the Mini Muddy Fingers project as long as possible, continuously developing and adapting to the children's needs and ideas for as long as we are able to.

Outcomes

Despite difficult circumstances over the last year we believe significant progress has been made:

Outcome 1. Engagement –maintain consistent participation (average attendance of 10)
Mini Muddy Fingers takes place every Tuesday and Thursday. With over 90 children

registered, we have achieved average attendance of 9 per session so far with some sessions being attended by over 20 children. This is extremely positive especially when taking into account national restrictions and social distancing measures having to be implemented across the site.

Outcome 2. Enjoyment - consistently high level of enjoyment/ appreciation by all children, parents/ carers.

During each session every child provided feedback on their feelings using emoji sheets. This feedback has confirmed that 98% of children felt happy at the Garden. Positive feedback received from parents/carers include:

“Me and my 2 year old absolutely love it. The staff are so so friendly and welcoming, there is so much to do and it's something very different for the kids. Can't recommend this place enough!”

“A very friendly and beautifully run outdoor play space for families. There has been so much hard work gone into this place and it shows. We were welcomed by a fantastic team and included in all of the activities. This is a fantastic community resource, which encourages children to explore the outdoor learning environment and learn new skills”

Outcome 3. Skills and Experience – children develop new skills, identify new or enhance existing interests, and enjoy new experiences.

Observations have documented some of the positive participation and learning that has taken place during the project. We have seen our families try new things together and develop new skills outdoors, please see further details in the case studies below.

Outcome 4. Health and Wellbeing - an improved sense of health and well-being, sense of security and feeling safe at the project.

The Garden's natural environment has benefits for health and wellbeing and encourages physical activity. Additionally, as an outdoor accessible space during COVID the Garden has proved to be a lifeline for our families; providing a safe and secure place to enjoy the outdoors, have fun and learn. Parent feedback summarises the impact we have achieved in this respect:

“[Covid] has impacted on the mental wellbeing of many children and adults. Having your community garden has been just the right place where children and adults can go and enjoy themselves and feel safe doing so. I am sure I can speak for others that attend your community garden just how valuable your organisation of the events are very important to us all”

Outcome 5. Social Value – increased sense of social value and feeling of community.

The feedback we have received from our participants, both children and adults confirms that there is a real sense of community for those that attend. The commitment and support we continue to receive from our local residents confirms our Garden is a valuable community asset for all.

“It's an amazing place with fab volunteers who now feel like family to us all”

Boy A, 2 years old Boy A joined Mini Muddy Fingers with his mum and was initially very nervous. He had never been to a place like the Garden before and was very shy. We established from his starting points review that before coming to the project he did not take part in any imaginative play at all, he did not imitate life or take part in pretend play, he was not moving things as part of play and was only seen doing repetitive actions a little of the time. After just 3 sessions at the Garden we saw a significant change in A. Each time he attended he became more and more comfortable with the environment and was keen to be involved in all aspects of the Garden; he even grew confidence to go into our chicken pen and meet and feed the chickens. Boy A developed an interest in gardening and was fascinated by the growing crops, exploring plants and vegetables across the site through touch. By the 3rd session we observed A sitting playing in the soil. He was using garden tools to move soil from one position to another repetitively. He then picked up a watering can and carried on playing, pretending he was watering plants in his piles of soil, giggling and laughing throughout. This demonstrates how our Garden has developed an understanding of nature for a child of a young age. The environment has encouraged creative and imaginative play based on imitating what he has witnessed as part of the project. Girl B, 4 years old Girl B has some physical disabilities. She attends with her grandmother who has custody of B and her sisters. They do not have a garden at home. B quickly developed a love of the outdoors; she attends every session whatever the weather. Her enthusiasm and passion for the Garden is passed onto other children and adults as she encourages them to be involved and to explore the Garden with her. B has a keen interest in every aspect of the Garden, particularly growing/harvesting crops and caring for wildlife. She has learned how to grow vegetables from seeds and how to pick them when ready, taking them home for her and her family to enjoy. At every session B makes sure she feeds the chickens; she knows what food they can have and has learned how to handle them correctly. B also enjoys finding bugs and insects across the Garden and has thoroughly enjoyed watching them in our Bug hotel. B was keen to have mini-beasts of her own so she carefully selected some caterpillars and built a house for them at her own home, mimicking what she had seen at the Garden and putting into practise all the things that she had learned. Through her experiences at the Garden B has developed a desire to nurture all nature and has an understanding and knowledge of life cycles and the elements needed to care for both plants and animals.

Conclusion

The short courses for elements 1 (principles and practices of the Froebelian approach to early childhood education) and 3 (The importance of engaging with nature and outdoor learning) have proved to be extremely valuable to the staff team and have provided further opportunity to enhance the Mini Muddy Fingers provision. The knowledge provided during these courses allowed the team to explore in detail the Froebelian approach and experience first-hand aspects of interconnectivity and forms within our Garden as well as linking the gifts and occupations to existing resources on site. Some of the ways we have applied our Froebelian knowledge include:

- There are no planned activities or strict schedules; the Garden is open access all day and in every weather and children have freedom to choose their activities; to explore, create, and imagine. Adults are on hand to support but not to direct.
- Children's learning through play and self-activity is encouraged by staff, volunteers and family members to be meaningful, to follow a child's individual interests.
- Play using natural resources (eg blocks of wood, sticks, leaves) have provided opportunity for children to learn about balance, develop maths skills of shapes and pattern, and engineer constructions, representing forms of life, forms of beauty and forms of knowledge.

- A range of open ended materials linked to Froebel's occupations (e.g. sand, water, mud/soil, clay, paper) are freely available to enable independent and active learning and long, uninterrupted, rich and sensory play. Resources are adaptable to present different challenges for children of different ages and with different experiences basing their individual learning development on what they already know.
- Each child is part of our community and is respected as a central element. Our approach encourages involvement; personal, social and emotional development; problem solving and decision-making cultivating relationships and celebrating diversity.
- Children are immersed in nature from the minute they walk through the gate with a variety of opportunities to engage with the natural world within open spaces, wooded areas, allotment plots, streams and ponds, providing ample opportunity for significant play and exploration.
- We promote understanding of nature and encourage children to really engage with the natural elements of the Garden including vegetation (trees, willow, flowers, and vegetables) and the varied wildlife (mini-beasts, newts, frogs, voles, birds including chickens). Children have learned to understand connectivity through life cycles and have developed nurturing and caring capabilities.
- We observe and listen to children, making resources available to their preferences and providing experiences appropriate to an individual child's need and capacity. We talk about our observations with the child and wherever we can we involve them in dialogue to reflect on those observations and learning that has taken place.
- We have developed partnerships between staff/ volunteers and parents/family members. We have established close-knit relationships and work together to enhance children's opportunities to play, securing community cohesion.

Governance

There have been no organisational or financial developments that have had an effect on the Mini Muddy Fingers project to date.

The future of the project however is uncertain as the majority of funding providers, including the Froebel Trust, have suspended their grant programmes and we have been unable to apply for funds to sustain the project as we had previously planned. It is our intention to recommence delivery of the project to achieve the timescales originally planned as soon as we are able to do so and to continue for as long as finances for the site will allow.

The Mini Muddy Fingers project has been wholly funded by the Froebel Trust however the wider Garden, including the volunteer costs, has now been awarded Lottery funding until 2022.