St. Bernadette’s Primary School, Natural Play Project

This project was supported by the CSGN Community Projects Fund 2013-14. The Fund is focused on projects undertaken for the benefit of, and/or involving children and young people under 16 years of age and is intended to support small-scale, community led projects that deliver green network improvements on the ground; increase community use of the green network and/or increase community involvement in the maintenance and enhancement of the green network locally.

Where: Antonshill, Stenhousemuir, Falkirk

What: As a further development of the School’s natural play project the school was awarded £2,700 to build a bespoke shed. “Woody” as the shed is called stores natural play equipment such as sticks, planks, tarpaulins, ropes, and ‘cooking utensils’ The shed is open during morning and lunch time breaks and any equipment is tidied up at the end of the lunch break by the pupils.

Why: As a newly opened school (2012) staff, pupils and parents worked hard to achieve Eco School status for the school within a year. As an extension to this St. Bernadette’s worked with Grounds for Learning to develop its playground and natural play provision. In the beginning the natural play equipment was stored inside the school, but this turned out to be impractical and resulting in too many barriers for play to happen.

Who: The project has involved teachers, support staff, pupils, parents, Falkirk Council and Grounds for Learning.

1. What are you most proud of?

We are proud of the fact that people want to come and see us to find out more about our natural play project. We have had many visitors from other schools and have given presentations at in-service days held by Falkirk Council.

It was very important for us to involve the pupils in every aspect of the project and give them ownership – we are proud to say that this has happened – the kids talk about “Woody” as if he is a living thing! These are some of the things the pupils were responsible for: running a ‘name the shed’ competition, sourcing and organising resources into ‘Woody’ the shed, delivering an opening speech, participating in risk/benefit analysis, creating Natural Play ‘rules’.

2. What was hard?

Initially it was hard to get the parents on board and get them to appreciate the project, not so much “Woody” itself, but the whole natural play project. There were complaints about mud on clothes and the danger of playing with sticks.

This resulted in a new look at risk assessments and with the pupils we designed natural play rules with agreed consequences for breaking the rules such as not being able to play with these materials for a period of time. A year later the number of incidents is nearly non-existent. In fact, data suggests pupils are more conscious of risk assessment in natural play than in many other areas of play and learning - many more incidents happen on the football pitch or in the classrooms.

With regards to muddy clothes – the children are now so used to playing with the natural play resources that they do not get very muddy. The school also has a bank of wellies and over jackets/trousers for the pupils to borrow.
The turning point in terms of getting parents involved in the natural play project came when a “stay and play day” was held. This gave parents an opportunity to observe the natural play and take part in it, discuss concerns over a cup of coffee and go through the “floor book” which depicts the journey from the pupils' ideas to the finished project. After the event we have had no complaints from parents.

3. What happened that you didn’t anticipate

We did not expect that it would take Falkirk Council as long as it did to allow us to build the shed in the playground. The builder, who had worked at other schools, turned out not to be an approved Council provider and he had to make changes to his insurance. In the first instance, Falkirk Council wanted him only to build at night and over the weekend, which was not practically possible. It was finally agreed that the building work could go ahead during the day and the builder made sure he was not working during school lunch time.

Because we looked into accidents and incidents at the school in general, changes were implemented - for example, the medical recording sheet was updated to enable adults to quickly record the causes of medical visits/accidents and ensure ease of future collation.

It was also decided to establish a medical station for minor complaints closer to the playground to allow maximum playground adult/child ratio and to speed up medical care. Previously, pupils with minor injuries had been taken through to the other side of the school to the first aid station by an adult, which meant there was less supervision in the playground and that pupils lingered longer as they were not seeing the play they were missing out on!

4. What would you do differently?

We gathered evidence of progress in many different ways including a whole school survey in January 2014 and then again in April. We also did class surveys and gathered feedback at the 'Stay and Play day'. In hindsight we should have completed the first whole school survey earlier in the process, ideally, in August to show the maximum project impact. In January, 67% of pupils agreed 'there are lots of interesting things to do in our playground' and this increased to 77% by April. In January, 87% agreed 'I really look forward to going outside at playtime', increasing to 90% by April.

In the class surveys we made the mistake of asking the pupils not what they played with, but where, which gave a skewed result in terms of natural play. It was evident from observing the playground that the natural play equipment was being well-used, but not always in the obvious natural play-areas. Effectively, the pupils had evolved to take Natural Play into areas such as the orchard.

5. What advice would you give to others?

- Speak to others who have undergone similar projects to get ideas on how to develop your project
- The support from Grounds for Learning was invaluable and gave us the confidence to develop our own natural play
- Get as many members of staff involved at the outset – the engagement and willingness of support staff is key to the success of the project. A staff training night to share the project aims and benefits of Natural Play was successful. We even built a den
- Involve the pupils from the outset and give them ownership of the project
- Hold a “stay and play day” for the parents early on in the process, so they see the natural play and the ingenuity of the children with their own eyes

6. What next?

St. Bernadette’s has now adopted a small space of ‘orphan’ land left over from house building near the school. Falkirk Council, the house builder and local residents have been
involved in the process of handing over the land to the school and it is now used as part of the class time-table. A variety of activities and lessons are delivered in the Orphan Land and the “den-kit” from “Woody” is taken down there for play and shelter. Our P.E. teacher uses it for orienteering. The school has received a £1000 community grant from Falkirk Council and will use this money for more tree-planting, bulbs and we hope to install a seating area and a small memorial to a former pupil.

This case study was prepared by greenspace scotland in conversation with St.Bernadette’s Primary School for the Central Scotland Green Network Trust