

## October 2008 Newsletter

*Dear Parents and Friends of Cowgate*

*Let us celebrate September before we move onto October, wasn't it a beautiful month. October looks to be very beautiful too, I am hoping that our Rowan trees hold onto their leaves until the end of the month, they are spectacular at this time of year.*

*This newsletter brings, a warm message from our very dear Lian; a request from Bambini's; information on our training day; visit from Professor Tina Bruce;; Nursery of the Year Awards; a request for email addresses; information on the Parent Council; I have included a synopsis of a chapter from 'Playing Outdoors' by Helen Tovey at the end of this newsletter, you may wish to purchase this wonderful book. I always place these 'interesting' chapters at the end of the newsletter to support your choice in choosing whether or not to read it.*

*A Message from Lian*

*"I would like to thank my colleagues and our families for their words of support following my nomination for the staff awards. Even if I don't get any further*

*in the awards, it is reward enough to know I have your support. You know who you are!" Lian Higgins (29<sup>th</sup> September 2008) On that note...*

*I am delighted to inform you that the Cowgate Staff Team are now finalists of the staff awards 2008. We will be attending the ceremony in November.*

*Bambini's*

*La Camera dei Bambini staff have asked me to inform you that they are fundraising to buy another double buggy. Every Monday they plan to have a selection of baked goodies to sell. So watch this space.*

*In –Service Day October 27<sup>th</sup>*

*Our in-service day in October surrounds the development of literacy. The content of the training is based on the highly recommended publication 'Essentials of Literacy'. This excellent publication is aimed at supporting staff to educate children in the deepest sense. The following synopsis was extracted from the introduction.*

*"When interconnected knowledge and understanding work in close harmony with tried and tested practice*

wisdom, then practitioners and parents work well together. The result is that children flourish in their development and learning.

To bring this about, practitioners need regularly to review and reflect on practice, and to see whether it is in tune with new developments in the understanding of both child development and subject knowledge. Inevitably, we find that we need to make some adjustments and changes.

But the changes need to be interconnected to make a consistent, logically coherent whole (Bruce & Spratt 2008:1).

In the book the authors stress the importance of a whole-child approach to teaching communication, language and literacy. At the training our staff will be given information about a range of approaches on how to teach literacy, we will be reminded about why these approaches are important. We will be discussing the importance of finger rhymes, action songs, poetry cards and nursery rhymes as well as theoretical topics such as the idea of the 'whole child', observation, communication with and without words, and brain development. The training will explore how to further develop practitioner understanding of how children develop and learn in general, and emphasise the importance of knowledge

*about child development in all its aspects in order to best support them. This includes consideration of the unique child, positive relationships and enabling environments. We will get so much out of this training I am sure, we will share our findings with you in next month's newsletter.*

### *Visit from Professor Tina Bruce*

*The author of 'The Essentials of Literacy' Professor Tina Bruce is visiting us on October 24<sup>th</sup>. We are very much looking forward to Tina's visit. Tina is an early years specialist as well as an author. You may have noticed our signage around the centre outlining Tina's 12 features of play. These 12 features are often called 'inspirational' features. The following 12 points enable play to take place.*

- 1. Children need first-hand experiences which need not always be fun. Tina says "children cannot play if they are sitting at tables".*
- 2. Children make up their own rules while they play. Being in control is an important part of play.*
- 3. Sometimes something a child has made earlier becomes a 'play prop'.*
- 4. A child must want to play and must be in the mood.*
- 5. Children role play and pretend to be other people.*

6. Children 'pretend play' which is not necessarily rehearsing for later life.
7. Sometimes children play alone.
8. Children play in pairs / parallel or in groups.
9. Children sometimes make play agendas or scripts. If adults want to join in they must follow the child's script and not impose their own.
10. Children 'wallow' in their feelings. A scale of involvement, developed in Belgium by Professor Ferre Laevers, enables us to decide how immersed in the situation they are. This is important as in Tina's words "concentration is the greater predictor of academic success".
11. When children play, they show their skills and competencies.
12. Finally play helps co-ordinate and integrate what the child learns, and brings together all the different aspects of a child's development.

*Tina has been an inspiration to us all at Cowgate. We are all very much looking forward to her visit.*

### *Nursery of the Year Awards*

*We have been invited to the Nursery of the Year Awards, on November 21<sup>st</sup>, in London. Our director has very kindly offered to pay to support us with funding. We will keep you posted on our progress.*

## *E-mail addresses*

*If you would like to have various communication sent directly to your email please provide me with your email address.*

*My email address is:*

*[lynn.mcnaair@cowgate-nur.edin.sch.uk](mailto:lynn.mcnaair@cowgate-nur.edin.sch.uk).*

## *Information on our Parents Council*

*The remit of the Parent Council is to act as a bridge between the parents and the centre on a range of developments.*

*The objectives of the Parent Council are:*

- To promote productive relationships in the centre community.*
- To develop and engage in experiences which support the holistic development of the children.*
- To support the centre in its work through fundraising, eco-school development, healthy school work and so on.*

- *To promote communication and interaction between the centre, the children and their families and the whole school community.*

*The Parent Council meets four times a year on a Wednesday evening in the family room @ 4.45pm. These meetings are open to any parent. Its membership is drawn from parents, staff and (hopefully) children's input.*

*Please do try to make the next meeting; you will be made very welcome. Linda (Rooney) facilitates the meetings if you would like to attend one of the meetings or join the parents council please let Linda know.*

### *Lovely Anecdotes*

*We have wonderful news to share...*

*Alexandra has gone onto Roseburn Primary School, her parents Sam and Scott attended a recent curriculum evening at the school. There was a 'lighthouse of achievement', which portrayed photographs of children who were achieving in class along the bottom of the lighthouse, there was an odd photograph further up. Sam and Scott despaired*

*where was Alexandra they exclaimed...they looked up, and Scott is a tall man), and there...two from the top was our very dear Alexandra! Sam and Scott were delighted and celebrated with Alexandra. No surprises there...she is now and always has been a little shining star.*

*Emily has moved to East Linton, and the teacher is concerned that Emily will be running the class pretty soon as she realises with Emily knowledge and skills the teacher may be made redundant. Emily, in true Cowgate form, has already been in the East Linton Gazette!*

*Rosie popped into today to collect Jasmine and she is loving school! Lynn (mum) said "When I pick her up she is just beaming".*

*How wonderful it is to hear about our children who have moved on. They do so well at school. We are all delighted, thank you for sharing these precious moments with us 😊*

## *Padraig Slippers*



*We are not forgetting our dream to buy Padraig Slippers. We are exploring ways to fundraise for them, any ideas?*

*We believe Padraig slippers would be wonderful for the children in the centre, made with pure wool. Dyed and crocheted by hand and fitted with a soft cosy sheepskin lining and tough leather soles for long lasting comfort. These slippers have the elasticity to mould to the child's feet without being constrictive. Can be worn either inside or outside and are machine washable. The staff are hoping to buy some too 😊*



*Thank you for taking the time to read this newsletter.  
Have a wonderful, fulfilling month.*

*I will leave you with a little thought...*

*“Treasure yourself... and... don't sweat the small stuff...”*

Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships Outdoors  
(Tovey2007:123).

*“Making the environment beautiful and challenging is not an end in itself: it is a means to an end. And the end is more important than the means. So it is what children {and adults} do when they play out of doors that is the heart of the matter”. (Drummond 1995:3)*

*When an environment is rich and challenging, it is all too easy to assume that the children’s play will be equally so, but this is not always the case. I have seen mundane play in the most aesthetically beautiful environments and rich, sustained play in environments that appear unpromising but with sensitive adult support can provide scope for creative and innovative play. This is not an argument for impoverished environments, but an argument for the role of the adult. The key is how adult and children adapt to each other in transforming spaces and in sustaining play.*

*“Children who spend all their time in the open air may still observe nothing of its beauties. The boy who sees the significance but if he does not find the*

*same awareness in adults the seed of knowledge just beginning to germinate is crushed". (Froebel, cited in Lilley 1967:146)*

*Research, although very limited, has been mostly critical of adults' roles in children's play outdoors. Hurt et al, for example, noted that there can be 'an implicit agreement between staff and children about what one does outdoors as opposed to the indoor situation' (1989:81). They found that the adult role changed from being mainly interactive indoors to being predominantly monitorial outdoors. This notion of an 'implicit agreement' is important. The more adults adopt a supervisory role the more likely it is that children will use them for routine help, to arbitrate disputes or even see them as people to avoid. This, in turn, can reinforce the monitorial role and a style of interaction is set up, which, without reflection, can become a pattern that is difficult to change. Adults communicate powerful messages about what is expected, what is important and what is trivial. Often these messages are hidden and implicit, and therefore more pervasive in their impact.*

*All too often the key phrases of adult talk which dominate an outdoor play area can be negative phrases, such as 'Mind out. Be careful. Don't do that. Take turns. Put on your coat. Don't play on*

*the grass'. The implicit message here is that, despite children's free choice of activity, adults remain firmly in control, judging the play, arbitrating in disputes, requiring permission, organising activities and so on. Children have more control outdoors. There is more space and, therefore, greater physical freedom than indoors and children can, if they choose, ignore adults, move out of sight and avoid their requests in a way that is rarely possible indoors. Physically, children are often more competent than the adults and they can run faster, balance on high beams and manoeuvre through small spaces in ways that many adults feel insecure and uncertain of their role, they try and reclaim some power and authority by adopting a controlling monitorial role.*

*My work with a wide range of educators on in-service training courses suggests that there is considerable uncertainty about the role of the adult outdoors. They identify a tension between giving children the freedom to play yet also wanting to ensure children's safety and feeling pressurised to achieve curriculum outcomes. As a result the adult's role in children's play veers between under involvement as play is organised and directed with predetermined learning goals. As Malaguzzi has said, 'children are dangerously on the brink between*

*presence that they want and repression that they don't want' (cited in Edwards et al 1993:158).*

## *Time*

*How time is organised can support or inhibit the quality of play outdoors. Rich sustained play needs time. It has its own rhythm and momentum, sometimes intense, but short lived, sometimes extending over many hours, days or even weeks. When children have long periods of time for play they can become more deeply involved and engrossed, and the stereotypical notion that young children do not stick at anything for long is often challenged. Leavers identified involvement and persistence as indicators of deep level learning (Pascal and Bertram 1997).*

*However, when adults control time by breaking it up into time-tabled slots or imposing restrictions on access to outdoors or are over zealous in the use of routines, children's play is disrupted or curtailed. Children themselves begin to devalue play knowing that there is little point in starting to build an elaborate scenario in the sand, for example, when the time outdoors is short lived. Involvement and persistence can be severely limited by seemingly arbitrary temporal restrictions.*

### *Free movement indoors and out*

*When play can move freely between indoors and outdoors the pace becomes more relaxed and unhurried. Children can make choices as to where they play over time. Research by Bilton (2002) suggests that when rigid time barriers are removed the quality of the play and activity improves dramatically in the indoor, as well as the outdoor areas the pace is less frenetic and pressure of space reduced.*

*Free movement between indoors and outdoors allows play to evolve and helps children to make connections in their learning as the following examples illustrate:*

*Matthew and Aaron aged 3, mixed water and sand together to make 'dinner'. They spread the mixture in some flat boxes and then fetched confetti and bottle tops from the nearby collage area to sprinkle on the top. These were then taken to the block area, slid inside a hollow brick to cook and subsequently transported round the garden on trucks before being delivered to the home corner with a flourishing announcement of 'Pizza delivery!'*

*Quin, aged 4, played with the water wheel and gutters outdoors. He moved indoors to the*

construction table and made a wheel from the construction straws. He then carried it to the water tray and poured water on the wheel, making it rotate. An adult suggested he find a way to support the axle which kept bending. He then ran outside to inspect the large water wheel then back to the construction table where he joined four wheels on one long axle. With great difficulty he carried this to the outside water tray so that the ends of the axle rested on the side of the tray. He then tested each wheel in turn under the water falling from the large water wheel.

These two examples illustrate how temporal and spatial fluidity can enable play to follow its own momentum and gain in complexity. The second example illustrates how the adult can extend the play. Rigid boundaries would have limited the scope of the play and foreclosed the possibilities of making connections.

Over-reliance on a rigid routine, clock watching, perpetually preparing for what comes next, change adults into controllers and monitors of time, rather than enablers. While some routine is necessary to provide a secure and predictable rhythm of the day, flexible and fluid organisation of adults' time can protect space and time for children's play and free it from unnecessary interruption. Research in reception classes by Rogers and Evans (2006) found that

*calling children away from play was the single most disruptive factor in the quality of children's role play. This, they argued, was because children need time to negotiate roles and develop their ideas but also because the social groups on which the play depended were terminated as a result of the disruption (Rogers and Evans 2006:52).*

*There is also a reciprocal relationship between children's autonomy and adults' time. Strategies to promote children's independence and autonomy outdoors can reduce the management demands on adults. If children can find the resources they need, access appropriate clothing for different weather conditions and help each other with difficult tasks this frees time for adults to spend observing or interacting with children.*

*I watched a nursery adult supervising Ellie, aged 13 months. Ellie was intent on crawling towards an attractive stretch of grass. Every time she reached the grass the adult lifted her up and brought her back to the hard surface saying 'That's yucky wet grass'. This was repeated many times until Ellie gave up and turned her attention to something else. Had the adult allowed Ellie to get wet or provided appropriate clothes for crawling on the grass, time that was used for controlling and constraining could*

*instead have been used for engaging with what it was that Ellie was interested in and for playfully exploring the wet grass together.*

### *Setting up resources for play*

*Adults often spend considerable amounts of time setting up resources outdoors and arranging them in interesting configurations. A team of five practitioners I worked with on an in-service training course were shocked to discover that, collectively, they spent 20 hours a week setting out and putting away outdoor resources. While it is important that resources are well planned, look inviting and stimulate new ideas, nevertheless, it is hard for children to play with someone else's creations. In a small scale piece of action research we observed what children did with these carefully prepared scenarios. Invariably, within a very short time, set-ups had been dismantled or changed leading to a tension between adults and children as to the ownership of the play. For example:*

*Resources had been set out as a picnic with a tablecloth, food, crockery, and cutlery. A boy surreptitiously removed each plate, cup and saucer, one by one. He then carefully picked up the tablecloth, swirled it around his shoulder and ran off.*

*The 'tablecloth' was, from his perspective, a favourite superhero cape. Staff unaware that this had happened despaired that their carefully set up activity had been 'ruined'. They were 'set-up' for the day feeling annoyed and frustrated.*

*A well-organised, but freely available picnic basket complete with tablecloth would perhaps have protected the play of children who wanted to play picnics, but also saved adults, considerable amounts of time and avoided a boy having to retrieve, illicitly, the resources he needed.*

*This raises questions about why adults spend so long setting up elaborate play scenarios, such as building a train out of open-ended materials. This seems to negate the value of open-ended materials if they are prepared by adults, rather than transformed by the children. Far more valuable would be if resources were attractively presented and the adult free to help children discuss, negotiate and problem solve how the train might be built. Questions such as 'Is this a good space?', 'what resources do we need?', 'What could we use for seats?', 'Do we need to build a station?' can act as prompts. Helping children to see the symbolic potential of features of the environment is an important strategy. 'Maybe these lines on the ground could be the train track'.*

*When provision is responsive to the previous day's observations, careful selection and arrangement of materials can be important ways for adults to invite new possibilities, suggest new combinations or encourage a continuation of play from the previous day. For example after observing children's interest in rolling things down slopes, a range of planks, wheels, barrels and 'rollable' resources can develop and extend play.*

### *Sensitive responsive relationships*

*Pascal and Betram have identified three key principles which underpin effective adult engagement with children:*

- *Sensitivity: This is the sensitivity of the adult to the feelings and well being of the child and includes elements of sincerity, empathy, responsiveness and affection.*
- *Stimulation: This is the way in which the adult intervenes in a learning process and the content of such interventions.*
- *Autonomy: This is the degree of freedom which the adult gives the child to experiment, make judgments, choose activities and express ideas.*

*It also includes how the adult handles conflict, rules and behavioural issues (Pascal and Bertram 1997: 13)*

*Sensitive, responsive relationships underpin an affective adult role outdoors. Adults who listen to and engage with what children are trying to do can be a rich catalyst for play. This is not easy and observations of interactions with children often reveal misunderstandings. Is the child painting a wall with a large paint brush and water interested in covering the wall, filling in the rectangular patterns, pretending to be a painter and decorator, or exploring the evaporation of the water on the wall? Interaction based on assumptions as to what we think a child is doing is fraught with difficulty and leads to interactions that can be clumsy and intrusive.*

*Wells used the metaphor of throwing a ball to indicate the importance of the conversational exchange with young children:*

*“Like throwing a ball – first ensure that the child is ready with arms cupped to catch the ball, throw gently and accurately so that it lands squarely in the child’s arms. When it is the child’s turn to throw, the*

*adult must be prepared to run wherever the ball goes.  
(Wells 1986:50)*

*'Catching the ball that the children throw us' is a frequent metaphor in Reggio Emilia, Italy and adult and teacher relationships are likened to a game of ping pong. 'Supportive adult relationships are based on keying in to the rhythm of the game and modelling an attitude of attention and care' (Edwards et al 1998: 181).*

*'Tuning in' to children is another metaphor that is frequently used, this time a musical one. Both of these metaphors emphasise the active, reciprocal, responsive role of the adult whose intention is to engage with, understand and respond to children. However, it needs to be recognised that understanding intentions and meeting minds is not easy. Even though we attempt to be in tune, the notes can be discordant and, at times, distinctly out of tune. Children can be tolerant of out of tune singing, but are dismissive if we start to sing a very different song in response to theirs. We can miss the ball occasionally, but if we do not return it the game is over. The important thing is the adults' intentions, the wanting and striving to understand combined with an informed understanding of young children's play and learning.*

## *Supporting Risky Play*

*Stephenson's (2003) research indicated, it is the adults' attitudes that make a difference to children's physical risk taking outdoors. Smith (1990, 1998) goes as far as to argue that risk defines our pedagogical relation to children. When adults are uncertain and anxious about children's safety outdoors they communicate this to children. Younger children especially look to adults for confirmation of whether something is safe to explore or climb, and quickly 'read' the adults' assessment of the situation. If adults look permanently anxious then children either catch this fearfulness or choose to ignore it, but in so doing their ability to discriminate really risky situations is impeded.*

*Adults have a key role in supporting risk and challenging outdoors.*

*This can include:*

- Developing shared understandings and expectations within the staff team so that individuals feel supported and 'safe' to be risk takers themselves.*
- Having realistically high expectations of what children can do. Knowing children well enough*

*to make informed decisions as to when to intervene and when to stand back.*

- *Developing a positive disposition to challenge, seeing it as something to be relished, rather than feared. Fostering children's autonomy and celebrating achievements however small.*
- *Reflecting on gender differences in attitudes to risk. Is risk tolerated or encouraged more in boys' than girls' play? Research referred to by Little (2006) suggests that often it is.*
- *Developing a language to talk about risk and safety, helping children to understand that being safe is under their control and to know how to do things safely. For example:*
  - *It's best to hold on now but when you feel safe enough you can try letting go;*
  - *It needs a lot of practice to be able to do that;*
  - *Coming down backwards might be a safer way;*
  - *Josh found a very safe way of doing that shall we see how he did it?*
  - *That was good you remembered to check there was no one at the bottom of the slide before you pushed the box down.*

- *Being prepared to say a firm 'no that's dangerous because...' in the rare situations it is needed. Children can feel safer to take risks and be adventurous when there are clear boundaries and when they trust adults' judgment of a situation.*
- *Teaching skills that will help children to do things safely, for example, ways of controlling speed coming down a slide, safe ways of handling a saw at the woodwork bench or holding an insect, and so on.*
- *Modelling a flexible, innovative approach to situations, 'that's a good idea, let's try it', rather than the more rigid, cautious approach, 'we can't; there's no time; we don't move things; we mustn't make a mess; we're not allowed'.*

## *Questioning*

*I have a powerful recollection of being four and taken round the school garden by a well meaning teacher. We stopped to look at the flowers. 'What's that called?' she asked pointing to a rose. I remember thinking 'Why is she asking me? Doesn't she know it's a rose?' In this moment of confusion I replied 'I don't know'. I can still feel the mixture of indignation and humiliation as she replied 'it's called*

*a rose dear.' Young children are often confused by a style of interaction where questions are not puzzling and for finding out, but are used for testing. Power is located with the adult and children begin to see their role as answering, rather than asking questions.*

*If you want to read more about this innovative book you can buy it at most good book stores.*

*I thought you might like a copy of this poem, it always makes me smile.*

*When children come home at the end of the day,  
The question they're asked as they scurry to play  
is, "Tell me what you did today?"  
And the answer they give makes you sigh with dismay.  
"Nothing, I did nothing today!"  
Perhaps nothing means that I played with blocks,  
Or counted to ten, or sorted some rocks.  
Maybe I painted a picture of red and blue  
Or heard a story of a mouse that flew.  
Maybe I watched the rabbit eat today,  
Or went outside in the garden to play.  
Maybe today was the very first time  
That my scissors followed a very straight line  
Maybe I learned a song from beginning to end,  
Or played with a special brand new friend.  
When you're in nursery  
And your heart has wings,  
"Nothing" can mean so many things!!*

*That is all for this month... have a lovely month.*

