

A Practitioner's Guide
to
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING
Roberta's Outdoor learning Journey
Guest Blogger : Roberta – Welly
Wanderers Partnership

Roberta's Story- my outdoor journey!

Back in 2017, Thrive Outdoors started working with Glasgow City Council to create collaborative nursery partnerships across the city to explore outdoor play and learning. One of these partnerships was the **Welly Wanderers** led by the Jeely Piece Club and involving **eight local nurseries in Castlemilk**.

We caught up with **Roberta**, a practitioner working for a Glasgow City Council nursery who took part in the Welly Wanderers to find out what the experience was like for her.



So Roberta, tell us about your outdoor journey....

"I volunteered at the beginning because I have **no prior experience** of woodlands teaching. In my **30 years in nursery education** I have focused on a different kind of play; outdoor play was still structured with lots of external resources brought outdoors for the children to play with. We didn't use the natural environment and had plenty of undue risk assessment which inhibited children's natural curiosity and prevented them from learning from risk-taking behaviours.

The training we received was very interesting and easy to understand which was good as I was at a very basic stage of knowledge. It was good to work with other nurseries, a good opportunity to learn from their own stages of experience and to support each other.

I was **very wary at the beginning** as I didn't know what to expect from myself or the children.

It was obvious from the beginning which children were used to **walking!** It was a struggle for many of them to walk for any length of time, or to even carry their own backpack but they quickly gained the stamina.

I was surprised at the ability of the children, I expected to be continually risk-assessing them to the detriment of the project. But they have excelled at all manner of activities - physically, socially and mentally. **They are more independent than I would have given them credit for.** I would never have believed that children at 4 years old would be making snacks over a fire, going into streams with wellies, fishing, climbing trees....**all with such confidence!**

I thought **toileting** would be an issue, but all the children have used the toilet tent in the natural environment without question or fuss. They all soon got into the routine of unpacking packed lunches and tidying up after themselves without assistance. **Working in the fresh air has helped their appetites too!**

At the beginning...it was all a new environment for the children and they were unsure of it at first and found it strange to play due to **lack of 'resources'**, but as time passed they soon developed more **imaginative** play using logs, ropes, branches, fairy tree homes, swords, fishing rods, ducks, Pooh stick races, exploring flora and fauna. We were able to **embellish their stories** of the Gruffalo and Stick Man etc using the surrounding natural environment and enhance their understanding and fire their imaginations.

My own learning experience was phenomenal; hammocks, den-building, fire pits, outdoors cooking, fishing, swings...things I would never thought I would be doing! I felt professionally revived through this experience after many years in education, and **I would definitely encourage others to embrace the outdoors.** I realise now that I had been over-assessing potential risks for children and preventing them from fully experiencing and appreciating the natural outdoors. Now I



learned to be more relaxed and in turn the children learned more as they are risk-assessing by themselves and became more adventurous in their play.

I feel staff need to come out of their comfort zone; they may be wary but they need to give it a try not only for the children but for themselves as practitioners! It's all too easy to get into a rut, it benefits everyone if new adventures are tried. It is still a safe environment as everyone learns boundaries (the children are very good at this) so I would advise staff to be relaxed throughout the experience and enjoy it. I'm so excited and passionate about this learning experience for staff.

My whole outlook to outdoor learning completely changed! I became more aware of dressing for the outdoors and I appreciate all different types of weather. **I am accessing more outdoor activities in my personal life** too through this experience. **I found my job more rewarding**

My health also improved as I slept better and felt holistically rejuvenated through being in a natural environment.

My personal confidence increased through the project to the extent that I **delivered training to colleagues**, something I would never have attempted before!

It's just good fun! **It was good to feel the joy in my job returning.** I definitely looked at children differently since being a Welly Wanderer!"

Wow! Thanks Roberta! It is so fantastic to hear about your outdoor journey....

.....If you want to hear what other practitioners think about working in the outdoors, you can watch our film made for Scottish Government in early 2020 here -

<https://youtu.be/nte7WYO60Jc>

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Our handy hints and tips on #outdoorplay

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/thrive/>

Watch our range of videos we made on Outdoor ELC from parents, children and practitioners alike: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8062239>