

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Little Acorns Playgroup, Derrymore

February 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Little Acorns Playgroup is situated in purpose-built accommodation, within the grounds of St Mary's Primary School in Derrymore, on the shores of Lough Neagh. There is a dedicated outdoor area, most of which is under a canopy.

The children attending the playgroup come from the village of Derrymore and surrounding rural area and almost all transfer to the local primary school. There are currently 19 pre-school children and a small number of underage children attending the part-time session. A small number of children attending the playgroup have special educational needs (SEN). The pre-school staff also provide an after-school club for primary school children.

The well-qualified and experienced team comprises of a leader, deputy leader, assistant, and SEN assistant. The management committee has been recently reconstituted, with a small number of re-appointed members changing roles and a significant number of new volunteers. A new early years specialist (EYS) has recently started working with the playgroup staff.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents and staff in advance of the pilot inspection.

A very small of parents responded to the questionnaire and a small number of parents met with inspectors. They were wholly positive. The parents who met with inspectors were particularly appreciative of the individualised support the staff provided for their children and the guidance given to them to support their children's learning in the home environment.

Almost all of the playgroup staff responded to the questionnaire and their responses were also wholly positive.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the playgroup to consider how well the playgroup:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The staff and management committee has a clear shared and strategic vision for the playgroup that is being realised through highly effective collaborative working and the development of a community of learning. The staff and recently appointed EYS need to build an effective partnership to support continuous improvement in the playgroup.
- The inclusive, well-organised and thoughtfully resourced learning environment promotes the children's independence, confidence, and enjoyment of learning.
- The high-quality staff interactions support progression in learning for all children; all children are making very good progress from their individual starting points across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The collaborative and child-centred approach to observation and assessment informs effectively the short-term planning which is tailored to each child's individual needs and interests.
- The playgroup prioritises a safe and inclusive environment where every child feels valued and celebrated. The staff recognise the children's unique talents and interests and aim to support their holistic development through working in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders.
- The well-established links with parents and outside agencies empower the staff to implement highly effective tailored strategies to support all children, in particular those with SEN.
- The excellent partnership that exists between the management committee and staff has enabled significant improvement work to be undertaken and impacted positively on the children's learning experience and outcomes.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Area for further consideration:

- For the staff and recently appointed EYS to build an effective partnership to support continuous improvement in the playgroup.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff and management committee are wholly committed to their shared vision to create a calm and inviting learning environment where every child receives the support and resources necessary to develop their confidence and independence.

The staff view self-evaluation as a vital tool for staying responsive to the evolving needs of the children and their families. Well-established and thorough self-evaluation processes are in place to identify what is going well and areas for further development. Targets within the well-considered action plans have been identified appropriately through: careful observation of the needs and interests of the children; wide consultation with parents; and, evidence-based educational research.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

In the last two years, the staff have prioritised the development of the learning environment. They have created well-organised, thoughtfully resourced, and calm play areas that promote well the children's independence, confidence, and enjoyment of learning. The outdoor area has been transformed by the staff, management committee and parents, and offers the children a rich learning experience across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Indoors, the staff have created an open floor plan so the children can transition easily between activities and choose resources to extend their play. The recent introduction of a flexible approach to indoor and outdoor learning empowers the children to choose where and how they learn.

Staff interactions with the children are of a consistently high quality. Staff members demonstrate a sound knowledge of each child and tailor their interactions to support the children's individual needs. They encourage the children to problem-solve and integrate skilfully mathematical language into everyday activities, for example, using a missing piece from a floor jigsaw to explore pattern, shape, size, and space.

The staff team have worked collegially to review and implement comprehensive long- and medium-term planning which outlines clearly progression across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. The staff make creative and effective use of digital devices to record photographs and observations of the children's learning and share this information immediately with each other through their linked devices.

Through collaboration, the staff use these insightful and regular observations and assessments of the children's progress to personalise the short-term planning. The staff have identified appropriately the need to refine the short-term planning to reflect more fully the breadth of the learning experiences that are provided to the children.

The staff prioritise the children's health and wellbeing. They have added recently thoughtful nooks and spaces, containing resources that promote relaxation and connection. For example, the outdoor tent filled with soft cushions and reading material is used by the children to relax and chat with their friends. Circle time is also used effectively to teach the children's strategies to support their health and wellbeing, for example, deep breathing exercises.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The learning environment supports effectively the holistic needs of all children. This includes the very effective use of a small 'quiet' space which is used, when required, to help children to manage their own emotions and feelings before re-engaging with the rest of their group. All staff are highly skilled in supporting children with SEN and use effectively visuals, sensory massage, and calming activities to help them to regulate their emotions. The well-established daily routines and the provision of small group activities outdoors provide security and reassurance for children, particularly for those with SEN.

Individual education plans for children with SEN are based on a sound knowledge of the child: their strengths, interests, and developmental needs. Staff work closely with parents and outside agencies to ensure they know and understand the needs of the child and respond appropriately to ensure the child progresses.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The observations of the children's learning show clearly that all children are making excellent progress from their individual starting points. The children are comfortable and confident in the playgroup. Almost all of the children settle immediately to productive play and access the resources they need to enhance their play experience. The children show great care for the play equipment and work together to tidy away resources.

Almost all of the children engage confidently with the staff and each other. They listen attentively during story time and make connections between the text and their own experiences. They engage enthusiastically in mark-making using a wide range of writing tools both indoors and outdoors, including using information and communication technology.

The children are developing well their mathematical knowledge and language through a range of well-planned learning experiences and a wide repertoire of rhymes and songs. For example, they describe objects in terms of their size and length and count the numbers on the dice when playing the Dinosaur Game.

The children respond well to the varied opportunities to develop their creativity. They regularly burst into spontaneous song and enjoy imaginative play. Their representational drawings are of a good quality and are displayed and celebrated in a variety of ways in the playroom. The children have well-developed fine motor skills and can use confidently scissors, pencils and fine brushes when engaging in creative activities. The staff make effective use of the outdoor space available to promote active and energetic play.

Most of the children talk confidently with adults and each other about the seasonal changes when exploring items on the interest table and playing outdoors. They enjoy experimenting and problem-solving with the increased range of natural and authentic resources. This enabling learning environment supports the children to engage in sustained and purposeful play for increasingly longer periods of time. The staff take time to celebrate the achievements of the children. They use a range of appropriate strategies to build the children's self-esteem and confidence, such as talking about awards and medals they have received from external competitions.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff and management committee have developed an excellent working partnership; the management committee are well-informed about the work of the playgroup through regular monthly meetings and attendance at weekly staff meetings. The recent introduction of a web-based information sharing platform by the management committee has enhanced further communication between committee members and staff.

Parents are valued as the child's first educators and the staff team work hard to support parents and encourage their participation. The team have developed purposeful links with parents through: the use of a digital application; 'Stay and Play' events; take home 'Activity Bags'; and, family-friendly fundraising events. The playgroup's feedback from parents through a recent questionnaire indicates that this has impacted positively on communication, relationships and enhanced parental understanding of how they can support their child in the home environment.

The staff value and actively seek out professional learning opportunities which support well the playgroup's development plan priorities and help them to meet better the children's individual needs. Partnering with the local primary school has provided beneficial opportunities for the staff to enhance further their understanding of how to support children with SEN. This well-established partnership has also impacted positively on the children's transition from the playgroup to the next stage of their education.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

The staff of Little Acorns Playgroup are committed fully to their vision, and they use it to guide practice and development within the setting. They have succeeded in delivering child-led provision that works in close partnership with parents, external agencies, and the community to ensure that each child receives the best possible start to their educational journey. Committed to continuous improvement, the highly dedicated staff engage actively in research and professional development to create a learning environment that constantly evolves and remains responsive to the individual needs of the children.

ETI will continue to work with Little Acorns Playgroup, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include the:

- effective use of technology by the staff to record the children's progress, collaborate and plan personalised support for the children; and
- highly effective strategies used to promote inclusion and wellbeing within the pre-school, in particular partnership working with parents and the educational psychologist and partnering with the local primary school for professional learning.

Little Acorns Playgroup is well placed to take forward the area for further consideration detailed in the body of this report.

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