

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Well-being and social cohesion outcomes of woodland activities at National Trust sites

The organisation: The National Trust

The project researcher: Jade Bartlett

Participant group: Family Learning groups in Devon

Number taking part: 32 Adult Learners

Activity: Outdoor Adventure

Top 3 messages:

- 1. Supporting opportunities for family access to woodland sites and activities can allow parents to feel confident that they are enabling their children's growth and development.*
- 2. Seeing their children engaging in a relationship with nature and having the opportunity to 'get out' with their families can help parents to feel good.*
- 3. Being in the company of other families can enable parents to feel confident, accepted and safe. They can also feel supported with expert staff on hand. Parents observe social well-being benefits for their children through interactions with other children and adults. And by sharing experiences with their children, parents can feel more confident and accepted within their own families.*

Background

This project was undertaken for the National Trust (NT), a national organisation.

The focus of this research was the Family Places Project, a three year Big Lottery Funded partnership between the NT and Family Learning (FL) in Devon, Cornwall and Torbay. As part of this project FL tutors and NT staff worked together to identify good NT places for family learners to visit –

places that would inspire learning, increase confidence and give the families a chance to learn new skills together.

Research focus

Research remit - to explore what types of well-being Family Learners involved in the project might achieve through visiting NT woodland sites and engaging in staff-led activities with a partner organisation. This better understanding of the use of outdoors sites contributes to the current NT's national strategic agenda 'Getting outdoors and closer to nature'

Context

Between September 2008 and September 2011, 157 new learning opportunities were provided and 2264 participants visited a NT place to learn about their local heritage, gardens and countryside.

Around 33% of the project's outdoor time was spent focused specifically in a woodland environment.

Different groups of Family Learners visited Halwell Woods: South Pool, Overbeck's Woodland: Salcombe and Gallant's Bowers: Dartmouth.

They undertook activities such as bug hunting, mirror walking, smelly cocktails games and stick men making. Each session included a woodland walk, a fire and refreshments.

Some families were from areas of social disadvantage and some parents were targeted for attendance due to their particular learning, social or emotional differences.

The sessions allowed the learners to return to the sites in their own time, and go on to use the skills they had acquired to benefit their local community.

Expectations

Stakeholders in the project included National Trust staff and Children Centre staff. Most stakeholders expected participants' would have a positive emotional experience from taking part in woodland activities, through feeling happy themselves, happy observing their children

enjoying themselves and happy as part of a family having a good time. A range of stakeholders also suggested adults would experience psychological well-being via woodland activities. These stakeholders predicted that supporting parents to successfully manage their family, in the unknown and challenging context of the woodland environment and with its learning opportunities, could increase their feelings of competency and control. In turn it was hoped by some that this raised psychological well-being might contribute toward future participation in adult learning.

Methods used

The research was largely conducted via 5 minute individual interviews, recorded by dictaphone on site during woodland activities. Interviews were undertaken during activities or walking along side respondents during woodland walks. Session times were relatively short and respondents had to divide their attention between looking after their children and answering questions, but short interviews as a method could flexibly accommodate and incorporate respondents' attention on and engagement with their children as part of the data collection. It was sometimes challenging to establish an effective researcher-respondent relationship using these vox-pop style interviews, in such a short activity time frame. Some respondents appeared to lack self-confidence when responding, perhaps feeling shy and put on the spot and it was sometimes difficult to achieve depth in such a short exchange. However, conducting short interviews at different events and locations and with a range of participants, allowed common themes and ideas to emerge. The data was then analysed by looking at participant's responses to identify when they were indicating that a type of well-being was being achieved or not. This was collated and it was analysed as to who, what or where the trigger for the well-being indication was.

Results

The results collected showed a number of different levels at which participants were considering their experiences. During evaluation of the data it became apparent that parents had answered the interview questions with their own well-being in mind but also with perceived or observed benefits they considered for their children. This was taken into

account when analysing the data. Therefore, within the well-being indicator descriptions are the direct well-being benefits the participants have described for themselves, but also the benefits that they have perceived for their child. The perception of benefit to their child leads to an in-direct well-being benefit for the parent as described below in terms of competency, confidence and control.

Psychological Well-being - Feeling competent, confident and in control, Developing oneself.

Indicators of psychological well-being were associated with parents talking about the woodland visits enabling them to make good choices for their children and their way of parenting. Quotes and observations suggested parents were achieving positive psychological well-being by enabling and choosing experiences for their child that they felt to be necessary and significant for them. Consequently parents appeared to be achieving feelings of being competent, confident and in control in relation to their child's positive well-being and development.

"I mean when I was a child I roamed the woods for hours, I feel the children don't get that opportunity as much now really, and that really bothers me... to get out as much as possible in non-shopping environments as well, we do so much shopping with our children. We don't do enough nature with them, outdoor stuff - you know. I'd like to do more of this sort of thing."

This was the most commonly referred to route to well-being for parents from the woodland sessions and parents accessed it in multiple but associated ways:

- By making a good choice for their child - making what is perceived to be a necessary and good choice of activity (time spent in outdoor/natural world) on behalf of their child and observing their child benefiting from it.

"For the exercise, so they can do something tangible... I think a lot of life these days is not something you can touch, is it... so the more they can affect change in their environment then the happier they'll be, I fancy. Good preparation for life really."

- *Through learning experiences* – learning more about their children's abilities, or learning new activities to do with their children or seeing their children in the act of learning, within the natural world. Evidence for this route to well-being and feelings of developing oneself seemed to emerge through parents talking about the learning experiences they had had in relation to their children's well-being. Parents appeared to feel they had developed themselves via learning new activities to do with their children, learning about new places to go with their children, observing their children learning new things and developing their family by learning about each other and each other's abilities.

"I mean to be honest with you, I'd have never thought of coming here with a picnic so that's something, that's nice so I'll do again. Yeah and the mud slinging – I'd never do that – too messy! Lazy mummy..."

- *By acting on the impetus of recollected childhood memories* – remembering positive experiences from their childhoods of outdoor and natural spaces and finding opportunities to offer their children similar opportunities.

"When I grew up in the summer holidays we used to spend all our time outside, now kids seem to spend all their time indoors playing, playing computers or TV's or stuff, so I just want them to spend as much time as they can outdoors, being happy really, they are."

- *Via reinforcement of existing beliefs and ideas* – the opportunity to reinforce their understanding of the value of nature to their children.

"You know I think they learn different stuff from sitting in front of the TV all day, you know they are very happy doing their own games, building their own little things, shelters and stuff in the garden which is nice, I just think they'll grow up knowing a bit more about the world."

These last three might also be linked to making good choices for their children in that they are concerned with reinforcement of parent's beliefs through aspects of their own biography, observations and beliefs.

"I think it's very important as well – you're talking about bringing children into woodlands. I think that's being outdoors in general. But they just learn so much – and they're not scared of a twig or its good for them."

Emotional well-being - Experiencing positive emotions

People seemed to feel good spending time taking part in activities in and around woodland. This indicator of well-being emerged frequently possibly because describing what they had enjoyed and felt happy about was relatively straightforward for participants. Feeling good was regularly associated with shared parent - child activity.

"It's just the chance to get out, spend some time with [child's name], just the two of us, for bonding, that kind of stuff really"

Emotional well-being - Feeling optimistic about the future

This sense of feeling good was evident when asking participants why they had chosen to come on the activity and if they would use the woods again. Some participants had been to a similar sessions before and wanted to have a similarly good experience again. Participants who had not been before signed up because it sounded like a promise of fun. Over half of the participants who expressed optimistic feelings about the future did this through talking about did so expressing their interest in returning to woodland environments, coming on similar sessions or bringing other members of their family to the same place. A number of participants were looking forward to trying some of the activities they had experienced during the session at a later date in the woods. One participant commented that their child had been looking forward to the session and 'thinking about it for days'. Another participant had hopes that their child's good experience in the woods would grow on them as they got older.

"I think it's great for the children, it's wonderful for them to be in nature in the outdoors, I think it feeds their soul, its feeds their imagination, it's great for them to learn about things so they can get an appreciation of it and they will come to love the environment and look after it as they get older, and I think that comes right from day one... when literally I strapped her on my back and we went and I think hopefully that grows as they get older, and that will always be there."

Observations and the data suggested that the majority of participants left the sessions with optimism for the future, looking forward to continuing and growing their and their children's relationships with woodlands, the National Trust and the Children's Centre / Family Learning project.

Biophilic Well-being - Feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature and feeling close to nature

A sense of feeling good in relation to being close to nature or engaged in a relationship with nature were commonly expressed outcomes of participation in the family learning sessions. When talking about natural connections and well-being derived from them, adult participants talked about their observations of their children being engaged with nature, their families being able to engage with nature together and their own personal engagement in a relationship with nature. The majority of participants who expressed feelings of engaging in a relationship with nature acknowledge this as an opportunity to 'get out', where 'out' was described in multiple ways including enjoyment of fresh air, beautiful places, non-commercial (no cost) spaces and somewhere that can be returned to for a continuation of these experiences. Respondents described satisfaction in having the opportunity to experience pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment and playful interaction with the outdoors, the fresh air and the woods. A smaller proportion of those experiencing closeness to nature felt this had been specifically achieved through the organised activities they had participated in.

"Because nature is a natural playground"

"She likes picking things up and looking at things"

"I love the green and the serenity of being in the woods".

Social Well-being - Feelings of being confident, accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships, supporting others through social relationships

Participants mainly seemed to achieve social well-being from taking part in the woodland activities with other families. Participants said that the

involvement of other parents, other children and members of staff from both organisations in planned activities, all impacted the social well-being they seemed to achieve. Participants described a feeling of well-being from being part of a group with other parents and perceived well-being benefits for their children from their interaction with other children and adults. Part of this social benefit seemed to be related to the support participants felt was provided by having 'expert' staff available to both help them care appropriately for their children and share their 'expert' outdoor knowledge.

"when I'm on my own with him or something...I'm always thinking right, got to do more things with him all the time, but when you're with a group, it's somehow a bit more relaxing, as long you can just go with the pace and they're telling you where to go next and what to do next which I think is better"

"Just the chance to get out, spend some time with [child's name], just the two of us, for bonding, that kind of stuff really"

An interesting aspect of the achieving of social well-being by respondents was how a shared experience between parent and child was mentioned as a particular source of feeling good for parents and families. This experience was regularly one related to learning about or engaging with the natural world.

Reflections

Conducting this research appears to have shown that The National Trust's partnership working with the Children's Centres offering 'Woodland Adventures' seems to lead to positive well-being development for the families involved. This well-being has been identified as Psychological, Emotional, Physical, Biophilic and Social. It is believed that we have proved that by offering parents and carers opportunities to take their young children out into woodland environments and take part in activities, the NT working with local CCs can positively impact the parents and families involved. Increasing feelings of competency and confidence in parenting skills. The parents observed benefits for their children through interaction with others, interaction with nature and learning opportunities. Through having made the choice to take their child on these sessions they (the parent/carer) feel that they are positively

effecting their child's development and thus feel like positive and effective parents. This leads to greater confidence and feelings of optimism about their abilities to parent and about their children's lives in the future.

This study shows the importance of and the possible outcomes from the NT working in partnership with other providers for families and the difference to these families that can be made when working together.

This is an interesting study that is not without its limitations and it would be interesting to consider further research into parenting choices leading to competent parenting.

Summary of findings

Rank (most reported)	Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors (who, what and where)
1	Psychological	Supporting opportunities for family access to woodland sites and activities can allow parents to feel more confident that they are enabling their children's growth and development.
2	Biophilic	Parents can feel good in relation to observing their children engaging with nature and from having the opportunity to 'get out' with their families.
3	Social	Parents can feel confident, accepted and safe in the company of other families, they can also feel supported with expert staff on hand. Parents perceive social well-being benefits for their children through interactions with other children and adults. By sharing the woodland activity experience with their children parents can feel more confident and accepted within their own families.

- 4 *Emotional* *The sessions enable parents to take part in structured activities with their children, this can lead to experiencing positive emotions from sharing experiences with their child. The locating of the activities within a woodland environment assists in parents feeling positive emotions associated with being in a 'beautiful, peaceful' place.*
- 5 *Emotional* *Parents can feel optimism that past positive experiences can be replicated at the sessions they choose to attend. They can feel optimistic that positive experiences are able to be replicated in the future either at another similar supported session, by returning to the woods or by bringing additional members of their families to the woods.*

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