

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Walk Tall and Proud in the Trees- Nature Workshops Young Carers project

The organisation: Nature Workshops

The project researcher lead: Jane Acton

Participant group: young carers aged 9-13

Number taking part: 8

Activity features: At total of 25 hours in local woodlands over 5 days in school summer holidays. Sensory, educational, physical and social focussing on individual needs and learning styles. Included games, tool use, bushcraft, arts, cooking, talking, thinking, laughing, splashing.

Top 3 messages:

1. Top 3 most referenced well being indicators 'safe and supported within and through social relationships', 'developing oneself', 'connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook'
2. Measurable improvement in motivation and self awareness by parents and teachers.
3. One unexpected outcome was 2 brothers became ardent recyclers at home.

Background

All the young people care for sick relatives who might have physical or mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems. All live in areas high on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010. 1 girl has learning difficulties and cares for both her parents who also have learning difficulties 3 boys with identified ADHD or behavioural issues at school.

The research was conducted with the parents and teachers prior to the events in the woods, with the young carers during the sessions and with the parents and carers after the time in the woods was finished.

The site is managed by Cornwall Wildlife Trust for wildlife. It is therefore only lightly managed. It is not heavily visited by local people as it has not marketed in this way. Natural succession takes place making it necessary to be extra vigilant for loose branches or even whole trees after high winds. It is a bluebell wood in spring when we cannot access the space for our activities. There is no obvious coppicing or other management in the areas we generally use. One large chestnut tree dominates the space we use with many sycamore and beech and the growth is of medium density.

Research focus

The objective was to improve the self esteem and well being of the young people whose lives are dominated by caring for their sick relatives. The focus therefore was to find out if the sessions do indeed do this.

Context

All participants are young carers which means they often or daily care for the needs of their parents or other significant adults in their lives. Issues they have to deal with are physical disabilities such as a young mum with MS whose deteriorating condition has led to disfigurement which led to our boy being teased at school. This led to his explosive behaviour in the classroom which eventually led to him being diagnosed with ADHD and being prescribed Ritalin.

Other issues our group have to deal with daily with their parents are depression and mental health problems, drug addiction and managing prescriptions, wheelchair bound parent and parents with Downs (mum) and learning difficulties (dad) where our girl looks after the whole family.

Staff and Tutor details: 4 staff members All from our agency: 1 researcher ethnobotanist, 1 Forest School Session Leader and bushcraft expert, 1 Assistant Session Leader with youth work experience and skills in special needs, 1 Assistant Session Leader Montessori trained and works as a Family Support Officer during term time.

Volunteers: On site time 30 hours x 2 people plus pre and post research time, set up arrangements for venues, families, transport and schools approx 60 hours.

Expectations

One teacher pre intervention comment was:

I imagine they will be given the help and support they need to succeed and that having that experience and being successful will in itself, help boost their confidence and help them kind of come back to school in September feeling like they can succeed in the next academic year.

One parent pre-intervention:

He'll thoroughly enjoy it I reckon. It'll teach him too, to sort of like help him control himself a bit with his temper, his temper just losing it and keep hold of it a bit longer than he does

Methods used

- Using a hand held digital recorder: We used this method with a set of questions which were used to aid discussions and explore relevant issues with the parents and teachers before the activities took place. This allowed us to revisit baselines, hopes and expectations in relation to the young people.

- Each member of staff had a note book which was used during the sessions and immediately after each session.
 - On the last day the children were asked to write down words to complete sentences. I think we may have mentioned the word 'poem' but we pointed out they could write just what they saw in each of the 4 directions, plus up and below and how they felt.
 - Emotional Literacy Checklists: These are a set of questionnaires we are licensed to use developed by child psychologists to be used with groups of school children or individual young people over time. The process requires the child, parent and teacher to complete the forms and we use them to set baseline data before the intervention begins and measure distance travelled after the sessions in nature have come to an end. We then worked with the Royal Statistical Society to further analyse the data using Pair and T tests.

Results

Here is a selection of the results, names have been changed. Numbers relate to how many times this well being indicator was counted.

The top most popular well being indicators were as follows:

143 'safe and supported within and through social relationships'

Teacher post intervention 'We haven't picked up any poor behaviour around the school at all. And if he'd have picked up one detention a week, which he was doing, he'd have been on report to his form teacher by now and he's not...So he's certainly under the five detentions, that's under one a week - not heard from him. He's doing lovely.'

Sea Scout leader post intervention 'I've noticed a marked improvement, for me the significant thing this year was the coast to coast walk which he did, I think we touched on it beforehand, and that's still etched in my mind, the determination on his face that he was going to finish it, with a bit of help and coaching from the two adult helpers who were walking, but he carried his own bag, he did it all the way you know, and that to me was fantastic.'

Staff : this is all very different now, and like remarkably different from day one.

105 'developing oneself'

Parent : 'I've seen a change in Tim over this summer holiday which is nice you know'

Parent : he's more accepting of people's ideas

Parent She's all of a sudden started to find new friends that do different things whereas before it was all friends on the X box now she's got new friends and going out skating

83 'connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook'

Parent: they are actually starting to clean up after themselves, and they're not expecting me, I have to say 'excuse me' but they will do it whereas it used to be before 'yeh, I'll do that in a minute' and it never got done.'

Parent he's grown a little bit more understanding.

Parent I do think that they realized how beautiful it is out there, instead of being stuck in, they've actually realized how lovely woodland places is or just to go to a field with trees. Like Michael will go to a field with a tree with his mates and stuff. It's nice! And they want to go camping now!

One unexpected unplanned outcome:

52 being engaged in a relationship with nature

Parent They know how to recycle. They now, you know like with the cardboard and all they know how to recycle you know instead of just ripping it into pieces it'll get put in the bucket and stuff..it's more to the fact that they're like woods and its very clean

Poem

To the east camp and Jane cooking
To the south I can see a holly bush
To the west I see a river and the fields
To the north my brother and friend in another river
Above I see tall trees
Below I see my little nest
Inside I feel happy that I came
I give thanks for all there is

One case study

One young man whose mum was diagnosed with MS and when he started to get teased at school because his mum's speech was slurred and her disability more obvious he started to lash out. A year later he is diagnosed with ADHD and when we first met him he was on Ritalin aged 10. At the time of this research he was 13.

Clips from the transcripts:

During the sessions: One lunchtime in the biggest of the dens all 12 of us tucked in each of 3 groups having working on one aspect of the lunch including bread making, pesto, pasta, cutting vegetable for the sauce including tomatoes, onions, mushrooms and 'something like cucumber'.

'I wish I could come every day'

this is the best meal ever because everyone has helped to make it and everyone is eating it'

'Can we have this meal every day?'

'Invite me again, every year gets better'

The main thing about thing about all of this is the teamwork' (2)

Lots of long silences, chewing noises and a few 'mmm' and 'so nice'.

2 teacher post intervention interview- interviews took place before the sessions started with all the children's teachers and parents. Among other things there were asked what they would like to see happen or change in the young person. 2's teacher hoped he would be more sociable and less critical of other people:

'Generally he has slightly improved in his relationships with other people in school. There are a couple of people who wind him up but generally in class he's not putting people down as much in class. He'll accept there are different abilities and students with different needs and he is a lot more tolerant of them so far'

2's teacher also hoped his self esteem would improve:

He still has low self esteem. With his homework he'll say 'I couldn't do it'. But now I think he's just using it as an excuse for not getting round to doing it. At the moment once he starts the task he'll get on and do it, so it's just the getting started whereas before I think he genuinely couldn't do it'

Other differences she reported:

He seems calmer,, not so aggressive, he doesn't seem as moody or grumpy and , yeh a calmer person and he's only had one or 2 management tickets this term both for not doing homework. Whereas last year there was a lot more name calling, naughtiness and lots more tickets'

2's mum and dad post intervention interview -before the sessions they said they hoped 2 would have better social skills.

Generally speaking (2) is a little bit more willing. He's not so argumentative like he's out there now with the little ones which is something he would never do, he would be like 'I'm not going out there'.

'There are a couple of kids his age a few doors down who he's never ever spoken to and he's actually gone out there and introduced himself to them. So he's got a lot more confident. John from the young carers project was here yesterday and he said he saw a difference in the boys and that (2) was a lot more willing to be involved compared to last year when his behaviour was unacceptable. This year there hasn't been any negative feedback. So he's benefiting from it. (2) seems to be at a stage where he's not so paranoid about leaving me. I don't whether he's grown a bit more understanding, not quite sure why that is yet but he's giving me a lot more space where he wouldn't usually leave me. He would flap around me which would stress me out so his confidence has grown in as lot of ways.'

Emotional Literacy Checklists

These are the words from the researcher who helped us from the Royal Statistical Society in relation to each of the 5 parameters:

Empathy - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children, parents or teachers.

Motivation - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children or teachers. But the data suggest there is an effect for parents (an increase).

Self-awareness - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children. But the data suggest there is an effect for parents and teachers (increases).

Self-regulation - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children, parents or teachers. Here a larger sample may show evidence of a difference for parents and teachers.

Social Skills - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children or teachers. But the data suggest there is a slight effect for parents.

Reflections

One teacher pre intervention comment was:

I imagine they will be given the help and support they need to succeed and that having that experience and being successful will in itself, help boost their confidence and help them kind of come back to school in September feeling like they can succeed in the next academic year.

Post intervention:

I think he's a lot happier – he's come back into year 8 with more of a smile on his face, less negative, less willing to blame other people for things

So he has come back more positive, but we're lacking a little bit in the classroom – little bit of negativity, little bit of walking out still but not as bad as before, when he was in year 7 – they are the main things, main changes – he seems to be a lot more positive.

- Many of the teachers had not spoken to the children specifically about their experience of being in the woods compared to the parents who often asked them as they arrived home. Therefore they felt less able to report specifically on these impacts.
- Teachers were looking for the children to develop self control or for the development of the child. They were not expecting and did not look for, for example 'closeness to the natural world' or 'optimism for the future'.
- The Emotional Literacy Checklists might be best done at home before the sets of sessions start and when they have all finished, not in the woods.
- One teacher in the post intervention interview did not seem able to refer to the child's behaviour since the intervention. The teacher was dismissive of improvements in the child referring back again and again to the behaviour of the child pre intervention. This was not a teacher who was seeing the child on a regular day to day basis. Rather this was a 'specialist' teacher who only actually saw the child when they had been misbehaving. In future it is important that we see the teacher the child chooses if at all possible.
- We used a team of research supporters. The volume of data would have been very difficult to manage otherwise.

Action points

1. Top 3 most referenced well being indicators 'safe and supported within and through social relationships', 'developing oneself', 'connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook'
2. Measurable improvement in motivation and self awareness by parents and teachers.
3. One unexpected outcome was 2 brothers became ardent recyclers at home. This is an outcome many people working in similar ways would like to see happen ie that time in the natural world might imbibe a sense of responsibility among the participants. This might be an area which deserves more investigation.

We hope to have some of the young carers who are now over 14 to come do Level 1 Forest School training with us and also to secure another small pot of funding to work with young carers again. This time we would encourage peer support with the young people we worked with here to help mentor new young carers and have them working in their communities as Tree Inspectors, using OPAL surveys and underwater litter pickers via SAS and BSAC.

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