

Profile: Davina Sinclair, Childminder

Setting Type: Accessible outdoor play

Davina Sinclair, a Glasgow-based childminder, applied for and was awarded £1000 from the ELC Inclusion Fund in February 2020 to develop and improve the outdoor learning experience for the children in her care.

She currently looks after nine children through the week, ranging in age from two to eight years and two of the children have additional support needs.



Davina emphasises inclusion in her setting



The challenge

Five years into her practice as a childminder, Davina was doing her annual review of policies and procedures. She noted that her weekly routine included going out every day to the library or indoor toddler groups and only one day was set aside to explore nature. One of her children, who has sensory issues and struggles to regulate his emotions, would sometimes find it difficult within these indoor settings. Outside, when he was able to dig in the garden or explore trees and wildlife, the child would be more able to self-regulate and would play much better with the other children.

Davina's garden space, although widely used in the summer months, lacked the equipment and the storage to provide engaging activities for the children year-round. The challenge was to create a garden space that would be stimulating, inclusive and fun for all of her children, whatever the weather.



Actions and approach

Davina places a huge emphasis on nurture and inclusion within her setting. She also advocates the benefits of mixed-age provision, and the positive interactions between her own children, three of whom are teenagers, and her childminding children. (Davina asked for a special mention for her 10-year-old daughter, "who is so helpful and like an assistant to me as well as being a great friend to the children".)

As a provider of ELC funded places, she sees it as her role to provide opportunities for children to learn and develop, explore and be curious. In recent years, her focus has shifted to more child-led planning, outdoor learning and spending time in nature. The fundamental drivers for her in creating a positive and productive setting are establishing a safe environment (emotionally and physically) and creating opportunities for connections and friendship. By developing the outdoor learning experience at her setting, she knew she could optimise the quality and quantity of outdoor playing and learning time.



Outdoor play is a priority

With the funding from the ELC Inclusion award, Davina was able to purchase good quality loose parts, a fire pit, resources for the mud kitchen, den building, ropes and pulleys, storytelling puppets and a caterpillar and butterfly kit. She was also able to put some money towards buying a shed for storage of resources and develop an additional small indoor play area where the children can have a snack, play with Small World toys and blocks and create arts and crafts.



Impact and evaluation

With the resources secured from the award, Davina says the outdoor play experience for all of the children in her care has been transformed. "This is evident in the sheer joy in the children's faces," she says, "when they play together, making forts, creating magical and mysterious potions, making their own zip line. The mud, trees, grass and garden have always been there but this funding has given us the ability to use it in so many different ways and experience nature play to the fullest."

She says that the children are able to access the resources themselves which has encouraged them to be more independent, confident and much more creative. The new equipment has enabled the children to stay outdoors for much longer, develop their understanding of how to risk assess situations and work more co-operatively together.

The goal of making her setting more inclusive for her children with additional support needs has also been realised.

"This funding allowed the child in my care with sensory issues to have a much more independent play experience. It broke down the barrier of dependence on others and helped improve his confidence as he learned to make dens, work pulleys, dig for worms, build ponds and learn about balance when building a tall tower."

"Due to the increased use of outdoor space, he was able to join in with the creative play with the other children much more as they used their imaginations to make up and act out their own stories as well as well-known nursery tales. This broke down barriers and allowed him to be more included. He was also able to learn more life skills in terms of risk assessing his play, especially when making burgers on the fire pit as he was involved in all aspects of the play – planning, building the fire and cooking the burgers."



"My child has loads of fun doing a range of activities offered, for example waterplay, mud kitchen, small world play with cars etc, ride-on toys, outings, building dens, mark making. You are doing a wonderful job of ensuring high quality experiences despite the pandemic. Continue to offer the love and support you do."

-Quote from a parent



Quality clothing is now available for fun outdoor play

Lessons learned

With more outdoor play comes the need for good outdoor clothing! Davina quickly realised that she needed to provide appropriate clothing for the children and was able to receive a government grant to cover some of the costs for this. She says that another ongoing lesson is how to manage the mud and provide washing and drying facilities for the children when they come in from the garden.

Most importantly, she says, "The main lesson learned is to slow down, plan less and listen to the children, their ideas, their stories, their worries and their dreams."

Next steps

Davina reflects that her overall practice has changed considerably over the past two years. She says that she and the children have enjoyed being able to connect more with nature, learning that they can do so much more than previously thought possible. She has increased her hours and now works full-time, having created an environment where she and the children are more collaborative in their planning. Her commitment to promoting a nurturing environment remains a constant, and she's proud that the children all comment to their parents that they love their "Davina days".

She'll continue to develop her outdoor provision, specifically looking at how she can use the mud kitchen and surrounding area to grow their own produce and develop the children's learning about biodiversity.

