

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Carebears Cross Community Playgroup, Newtownstewart

November 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Carebears Cross Community Playgroup is a voluntary playgroup located in the centre of the village of Newtownstewart in County Tyrone. The playgroup shares a complex with the local Sure Start services but has its own purpose-built playroom. There is a dedicated outdoor area which provides space for the children to participate in imaginative and creative play. The staff also use a large indoor hall to accommodate the children's participation in energetic and physical play sessions. The children come from the local area and almost all of the children transfer to the two local primary schools.

There are 17 children of pre-school age attending a part-time morning session, with a significant minority (6) of the children identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Since the last inspection, an acting leader and an assistant have been appointed to work alongside the deputy leader.

The playgroup has a strong embedded community ethos. It is supported by local businesses and members of the community who wish to ensure the holistic development of each child, fostered by a caring and nurturing staff team.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Forty-one percent (7) of the parents/carers responded to the confidential online questionnaire. All of the responses were very positive, with all parents/carers reporting that their child is happy and that they receive helpful information about the progress their child is making. A small number of parents/carers responded with positive additional comments about the friendly and caring staff who go 'above and beyond' for all the children. They reported that their child has made good progress and staff prepare the children well for transition into primary school.

Inspectors also met with a small number of parents who all reported that their child is very happy at the playgroup. They stated that the staff listen and support them with their concerns regarding their child's needs and they implement additional strategies to help their child to settle in so they are happy and ready to learn.

All staff responded to the confidential questionnaire and responses were positive. The staff reported that they: are happy in their role; contribute well to achieving the playgroup's vision; and, listen to the children's views and interests to inform their planning, teaching and support.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (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 long-established playgroup vision, to “provide children with a place where the love of learning grows through play”, is underpinned by child-led learning experiences which develop and extend the children’s language and creativity.
- The well-structured development plan and reflective, detailed evaluations of focused action plans are informed appropriately by the individual needs and interests of the children.
- The well-resourced learning environment, which provides a very good range of real and authentic materials to complement resources, is used very effectively by staff to stimulate and progress the children’s learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The highly skillful staff scaffold and extend the children’s language, developing the children’s positive attitudes to learning and sustained concentration across all areas of the curriculum.
- Long-, medium- and short-term planning is guided well by insightful and reflective evaluations which inform well the future learning needs for all of the children. The staff have specific targets for children with SEN, however they need to be more focused and achievable showing evidence of the children’s progress to date.
- The staff’s work on the development of the children’s personal, social, emotional and early language skills is a key strength. The children’s behaviour is excellent; they confidently ask questions and discuss their work, and they have very good social skills.
- The playgroup has established strong partnerships with parents/carers and families and is a very highly valued, integral part of the community.
- The arrangements for child protection take full account of current child protection guidance.

Area for consideration:

- To ensure the targets in the individual education plans take sufficient account of the progression in each child’s learning.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The leadership and staff are highly committed to the playgroup's vision to "provide children with a place where the love of learning grows through play". The staff work collegially and effectively to ensure that the children are developing well their skills and positive attitudes to learning. The playgroup provides an inclusive environment that promotes confidence, independence and sustained concentration in all of the children during play.

The members of the management committee are confident in the leadership of the playgroup and play an active role in the strategic planning and identification of appropriate priorities of the development plan. They reported that the caring and nurturing staff have built strong relationships with families and children in the community. The management committee reported that committed staff aim to provide each child with a unique, inclusive and personal experience of learning in the playgroup.

The staff work collaboratively, and the well-structured three-year development plan guides well the detailed action plans and appropriate priorities based on the needs of the children. The team engage in rigorous monitoring and self-reflection, the outcomes of which set out clearly the improvement in the teaching and the positive impact on the children's learning. The early years specialist (EYS) provides good support to the playgroup and reports that the committed staff team and acting leader's proactive and committed approach is helping ensure the needs of all the children are met.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The well-defined areas of the learning environment provide spaces for the children to develop independence and have good investigative play experiences. There are many opportunities for the children to access authentic materials to extend and progress their learning. The books are used and referenced regularly by the children and staff during activities. The staff consolidate and extend the children's learning by making appropriate links to the children's home experiences and interests. The outdoor area has been redesigned so that children can participate in creative, sensory and exploratory activities to develop effectively their fine and gross motor skills. The indoor hall is used to provide opportunities for the children to participate in energetic play through activities such as dance and movement programmes, games and obstacle courses.

The staff are very skilful in their interactions with the children; they naturally wait, support and scaffold the children's learning in a highly effective manner. They use consistently open-ended questioning and relevant 'props' during story time and other activities to extend the children's language and develop their problem-solving skills in all areas of the pre-school curriculum. All the staff use their professional learning to provide focused short language activities for all children that promote and develop the children's learning across the curriculum.

The long-, medium- and short-term planning promotes clear progression, allows for extension across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum and is linked well to the children's interests and needs. The regular observations inform appropriately the short-term planning and the detailed evaluations guide well the curriculum planning.

The staff provide a wide range of digital resources such as 'talking pegs', 'Beebots', metal detectors and headphones which the children use effectively to develop their oracy and early mathematical skills.

The children's health and wellbeing is exemplified through provision of a healthy snack and regular physical activity indoors and outdoors. The children select independently their snack and participate in tidying up, during and after activities. They are very aware of self-hygiene and manage confidently routines and transitions. They are empathetic towards each other and can express their emotions with the adults and peers during play. They are also aware of how to keep safe when in the playgroup and when participating in walks in the community.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The inclusion of the children with SEN is prioritised and the learning experiences provided by staff are of a high quality. The individual education plans (IEP) contain appropriate targets to guide well the staff to support each child's needs. The staff have identified the need to ensure the IEP's measure clearly the progression in the children's learning.

The staff use a speech and language toolkit to assess all children's language needs so they can provide early additional support to the children with speech, language and communication needs. Consequently, the staff have embedded a UK-based programme to support the language development of all children and, in particular, of those children identified as having early language development needs. The children requiring further additional support are referred appropriately to the services provided by the Allied Health Professionals within the local Health Trust.

The staff value and seek actively professional learning opportunities to develop further their own knowledge and understanding to improve provision for the children. They are skilled in scaffolding, modelling and extending language, in a warm, natural and motivating way throughout all activities. The implementation of strategies and skills they have gained, through targeted professional learning and development, are having a positive impact on the children's learning and the development of a calm, inclusive learning environment.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff's work on developing the personal, social, emotional and early language skills of the children is a key strength in the playgroup. For the time of year, the children's behaviour is exemplary and they sustain high levels of concentration across all activities. All of the children are enthusiastic and confident learners and

readily ask questions to develop their knowledge. They investigate and problem solve, use books to extend their play, and access resources independently to develop their collaborative play with each other and the adults. The children are engaged during story time, are able to retell the story and make reference to previous learning of stories and life experiences.

The children use a range of early mathematical language during indoor and outdoor activities. They have a good knowledge and understanding of positional language, number recognition, measurement, shape and colour and can apply their learning incidentally during their play. The children spontaneously sing number rhymes during their outdoor play.

The provision of the World Around Us is highly effective in the indoor and outdoor learning environment. The majority of children access and use independently real and authentic materials to extend their learning. A small number of the children make reference to their home learning experiences of farming during their activities and share with confidence these experiences with the other children and staff during play. The majority of the children use regularly stimulus displayed around the room to enhance and develop their designs in construction. They work together and have good levels of perseverance when working with their construction models.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The playgroup prioritises open and supportive communication with parents/carers, as evidenced by: their open-door policy; provision of resources through the lending library and learning packs; monthly newsletters; a digital application (app); and, informal and formal meetings to keep parents/carers informed about the playgroup's activities and their child's progress and achievements. A comprehensive induction process eases the transition from home to playgroup for both children and builds the confidence of the parents/carers in the staff. It also allows the parents/carers to become familiar with the playgroup's environment, routines, and expectations.

The management committee reports that the well-established connections with the local community are promoted through various playgroup events, such as Halloween walks around the local town, the Christmas Play, and the children's end of year graduation celebrations. These events provide opportunities for the local community to celebrate and support the work of the playgroup. The parents/carers and the wider community acknowledge the high-quality provision of the playgroup and provide funding, resources and time to support the staff. They report that the playgroup is central to the Newtownstewart community; this is evident in the collaborative network and relationships established with the health visitor, Sure Start provider, and the local primary schools, providing a continuity of provision for the children.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrate that the arrangements for child protection take full account of The Department of Education's (DE) current guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Carebears Community Playgroup provides all children with high quality, inclusive and child-led learning experiences which is underpinned by its vision to provide children with a play environment that nurtures and enhances their learning skills. This vision is achieved by the strong, collegial and highly effective staff team, their in-depth knowledge of the children and families and the well embedded relationships with the wider community.

The inspection has highlighted an area for further consideration which will support the playgroup in its improvement work: to ensure the targets in individual education plans take sufficient account of the progression in each child's learning.

An aspect of highly effective practice in this playgroup which should be shared more widely is:

- the highly effective staff interactions which support and extend skilfully the children's learning in all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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