

Report of a Pre-school Inspection
Play and Learn Playgroup

November 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Play and Learn Playgroup is a voluntary playgroup located in Holy Cross Girls' Primary School in North Belfast, providing a full-time session for 13 children in their pre-school year. The playgroup has its own separate entrance and outdoor play area, and the children regularly use the primary school facilities for physical development. There are two full-time members of staff: a leader and a playgroup assistant. A small number of children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The playgroup offers a breakfast club facility every morning for the children which is valued by the parents. The staff are supported by an Early Years Specialist who has recently started working with the playgroup.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents and staff in advance of the inspection. One-quarter of the parents responded very positively indicating their child is happy, making progress and that they receive helpful information regarding their child's learning. In discussions with inspectors, the parents reported that the staff are approachable, friendly and helpful with any queries they have in relation to their child's learning. The parents emphasised that they value the regular communication with the staff and the induction process which prepares their child well to start playgroup. All of the staff responded positively to the questionnaire and reported they are happy in their role and feel respected and valued.

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 shared vision, to provide a caring, friendly and "home from home" environment where all the children are happy, is achieved successfully.
- The children are at the heart of the playgroup and the staff's consistent use of positive affirmation is central to its caring ethos.

- The focus on the development of effective and supportive staff interactions to develop the children's learning is beginning to have a positive impact on the language development and the personal, social and emotional skills of all the children.
- The children are happy in the playgroup and enjoy the range of learning experiences provided by the staff.
- The recently established process of using observations to monitor progress across the curriculum is at an early stage of implementation. The staff should continue to monitor how effectively observations are used to inform the planning and individual progress of each child.
- Partnerships with parents are prioritised, and they welcome the opportunities to be involved in their child's learning.
- There are limited opportunities for investigative and exploratory play, and the development of mathematical language and problem solving, across the curriculum.
- Effective support for children with special educational needs (SEN) is not currently in place. Consistent processes to identify, monitor and support children with learning and developmental needs should be established.
- 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.

Areas for action:

- to establish robust processes for identifying, supporting and monitoring children with SEN;
- to use regularly the observations of the children's learning to inform the planning for the progression of the children's learning across the pre-school curriculum; and
- to increase the opportunities for the children to engage in exploratory and investigative play in the world around us and to develop their mathematical language and problem-solving skills.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff share and articulate clearly the longstanding vision of Play and Learn Playgroup to provide a happy, caring environment which is responsive to the needs of every child. The children enjoy coming to the playgroup and they engage enthusiastically in the range of activities planned by the dedicated staff team.

The management committee are supportive of the staff and value the importance and place of the playgroup within the local community. The Early Years Specialist has recently begun working with the playgroup and is providing support to the staff, linked to the appropriate priorities identified in the development plan.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Through the self-evaluation processes within the playgroup, the staff have identified appropriately the need to support and extend the children's learning through their interactions and questioning. Work has already begun and strategies, such as the use of open questions and giving the children time to respond, are used effectively and consistently by the staff to develop the children's thinking. This work is also beginning to impact positively on the children's language and communication, and personal and social skills.

The recently developed approach to planning, monitoring and observation is at a very early stage of implementation. The staff are making detailed observations of the children's play and are starting to align these to the areas of the pre-school curriculum. As this process develops, the staff should monitor and evaluate more robustly the progression in learning for all of the children across all of the areas of the curriculum.

There is a calm learning environment and a 'home-from-home' atmosphere which is in line with the playgroup's vision. All of the children choose where they want to play and display good levels of confidence and increasing independence. They self-register, put on their coats and choose independently their healthy snack. Language development is prioritised, and role play is well developed in the indoor area where the children use relevant topical language associated with, for example, being a doctor and a patient in the hospital to play imaginatively together. The children engage in increasing levels of sustained solitary, paired and group play and are forming friendships with one another. The staff use expression well in their storytelling which encourages the children to engage in conversations with their peers and to develop a love of stories.

The children's representational drawings and paintings are well developed, and they engage enthusiastically in a variety of mark making activities. There are limited opportunities for the children to extend their play through investigative and problem-solving activities and to develop mathematical language across the pre-school curriculum. The staff should incorporate these aspects within their planning to enable a consistent and shared approach. A wider range of natural and authentic resources would also enhance the children's play across the curriculum. The staff should consider carefully and routinely the safety and suitability of all resources used in the children's play.

The children engage in a small number of play opportunities to develop their gross motor skills. They ride bikes and build their own obstacle courses promoting balance and flexibility. They are encouraged to eat healthily through the provision of a healthy snack and the lunches they bring to the playgroup.

A small number of pastoral policies need to be reviewed, to reflect more accurately, the effective practice within the playgroup. The staff use consistently positive language and this practice should be better reflected in their positive behaviour management policy.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

In line with their vision, the staff value and care for all of the children within the inclusive and welcoming playgroup. They support the children in their play and learning and know the children well. This knowledge does not inform sufficiently the planning and setting of appropriate and achievable targets for the children and the processes for identifying, supporting and monitoring the progress for the children with SEN, including the use of individual education plans which are not yet established.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff celebrate the success of all children with regular, informal praise and through displays of their artwork and crafts. The staff celebrate the children's achievements with lots of photographs on display of their success both in the playgroup and at home. The achievements of the staff are also recognised with certificates of their professional learning proudly displayed. The children are very happy in the playgroup and have established very good relationships with the staff.

The children's achievements are celebrated regularly through, for example: the playgroup nativity; the end of year graduation; and the transition events to prepare the children for primary school.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The playgroup has developed positive links with the primary school, to which almost all of the children transfer. There is an effective transition programme in place with opportunities for the children to meet with their Year 1 teacher and to visit their new classroom.

The staff have established good links with the local community, including businesses such as the Ardoyne Association who have funded staff professional learning courses through Belfast Metropolitan College. Belfast City Council also provide positive experiences which enhance the children's learning, such as road safety talks and a visit from the 'Christmas Elf'. Parents and visitors to the playgroup, such as a postman, refuse collector, dentist and the fire service, talk to the children about their professions which stimulates the children's interest, curiosity and knowledge.

The staff value their close partnership with parents and are proud of the good relationships cultivated through the 'open-door' policy and the special events for mums, dads and grandparents to visit the playgroup and play with their children through "stay and play" sessions, breakfasts with grandparents and sports day. The parents are provided with regular opportunities to meet with the staff to discuss their child's progress, both formally and informally throughout the year. In addition, they are updated regularly with information on their child's learning using digital apps and monthly newsletters.

**F. CHILD PROTECTION
(Adult Safeguarding in organisations such as work-based learning,
further education etc)**

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

Play and Learn Playgroup is a welcoming and happy environment where the children are cherished and celebrated. The close relationships with parents are central to the happy and homely environment they create.

The inspection has highlighted a number of areas for action, as detailed in the report, which now need to be addressed. Play and Learn Playgroup will require sustained external support to help it address the areas for action. There will be a progress inspection.

5. APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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