

OUTDOORS

Crime stoppers

Fighting Crime with 18 three-year-olds

Bettina Sebek of the German Kindergarten in East London

A growing challenge for inner-city nurseries is the lack of suitable outdoor space. Nurseries have no or very small private gardens to provide a rich and creative outdoor learning experience. And often the limited public spaces available are perceived as unsuitable, unsafe and uninviting for children to play in. However, our nursery, on a housing estate in East London, has taken a radical approach to inhabit underused public space to create better outdoor learning for our children.

THE PLACE AND THE PROBLEM

Morland Estate in Hackney, North London is a typical inner-city housing estate with a wide social mix of residents. There are apartments that provide social housing, there are older residents that have lived on the estate for decades and there are relative expensive privately-owned flats on the estate, because it is located in a central and desirable area of East London.

Over the years the estate has seen change. The central open space, which used to be a basketball court, has recently been transformed into a community garden, with planters and seating surrounding the big chestnut trees in the centre. This gives local residents the opportunity to start gardening and get involved in outdoor activities. However, the benches also serve the local drug dealers as meeting points to conduct business. The walkways that criss-cross the estate are ideal delivery and escape routes and there are nooks and crannies; house entrances and bin storage areas that are perfect hiding places. Our nursery, a bilingual German-English setting, opened in part of the Estate's community hall. The nursery provides childcare for up to 18 children and has virtually no outside space of its own. However, on all sides, it backs onto public green spaces within the estate. The nursery staff had the choice of either staying inside or only ever going to the nearby park to avoid drug dealers in a perceived hostile place during outdoor play.

SEEN AND HEARD

With a hands-on and direct German approach to the problem, we firstly assessed the risks involved in playing outside in the open spaces. We cleared the grassy areas of rubbish, picked up cigarette butts, made sure dog bags were available (giving out Kindergarten nappy bags to local dog owners). And we talked to the users of the space – residents, dog walkers, gardeners, staff from the local school opposite who used the benches for their lunch break, postmen and women, local authority maintenance staff, childminders working on the estate, the residents association and patrolling police men.

Then, every day, we went out there with a small group of children to play. We put out a paddling pool, a trampoline, bikes and trikes and scooters, created a mud kitchen and a sand-play area, planted giant sunflowers and herbs. In short, we made ourselves seen heard and known in the community.

The children soon became part of everyday life on the estate. The community garden saw a vast increase in use. It was transformed by the liveliness of its new occupants. Families who use the Kindergarten and live nearby started using the outdoor space after pick-up. Families living on the estate started to view the community garden area differently; it was now seen as a family space, a play space where children roam free. It also meant that the drug dealers frequented the

place less and less and avoided it altogether when children were playing outside. Even though the space as such hadn't changed, the use had. The lesson is that drug dealers don't want to conduct business in front of little children. Rather than being deserted and hostile, the space had become a communal space and unattractive to conducting crime.

NEIGHBOURS' CONCERNS

Some local residents were concerned about our approach and the children's safety. It is understandable that long-standing residents, who had witnessed various crime waves within the estate, would have a different perspective on the safety of a place. Watching children play on benches that had been the site of drug dealing, violent crime and anti-social behaviour takes some getting used to.

Months after the children first started playing in the estate's community garden, our manager, Patricia Sokoll, received a call from Hackney children's services, informing her that an estate resident had called them to report a safeguarding issue with the children in our nursery.

The resident had claimed that nursery staff neglected their duties by letting the children play unsupervised and that the nursery garden had no fence. Such allegations automatically lead to the local authority having to inform Ofsted and this, in turn, triggered in this case an Ofsted inspection.

SAFEGUARDING AND INSPECTION

In the light of an imminent Ofsted inspection, our team reviewed our safeguarding arrangements once more with a local authority safeguarding officer. The simple but effective measures that we had put in place seemed to not only have kept the children safe but also increased community cohesion, positive and healthy use of green space in the city and thus the quality of life of children and residents of the estate.

As part of our safeguarding measures, we:

- ✓ talk to neighbours, users of the communal space, stakeholders, parents who use the Kindergarten and to other families who pass through
- ✓ operate an adult-child ratio of 1:4, or higher, outdoors
- ✓ have a garden supervisor who watches the exits
- ✓ mark boundaries where the children can go or play, using cones
- ✓ operate robust outing procedures
- ✓ report any incidents
- ✓ work with Hackney Learning Trust, Morland Estate TRA (tenant-resident- association) and the Safer Neighbourhood team

The Ofsted inspection that followed the safeguarding complaint went well, with the report concluding that 'Safeguarding is effective' and listing the measures that we had taken to ensure children's safety and well-being. While Ofsted, of course, has a duty to ensure a safe environment for children, it also has to ensure that the best possible learning environment is offered – after all, one of the Characteristics of Effective Learning is 'Playing and exploring'. To truly foster this, children need real opportunities to show curiosity about real object, events and people.

THE SOLUTION AND THE FUTURE

We demonstrated that it pays to engage in the community. Any nursery is part of a bigger picture and needs to reach out and connect to its surrounding area. We ensured that we became visible in our community as this is the first way to engage effectively.

Our story continues. We have been working with the tenant's and resident's association to secure funding for a natural play space on the estate. This play area will be constructed over the next six months, will help improve and enhance the outdoor play opportunities for children and will positively influence the living standards on the estate as a whole.

Surprisingly, a simple action like children playing outdoors changed the perception of a communal space. It made criminals retract and it created a new enhanced environment for the community. Nurseries are an integral part of communities; they must engage and connect. They must inhabit public spaces and not hide behind fences. They are a vital part of building strong communities.

The criminals might have moved only a few blocks, but the new strengthened community and the enhanced environment is very real. The next generation of children on the estate will grow up in a much-improved environment and might feel less need to turn to crime in the future.

Bettina Sebek is director of the German Kindergarten in East London

Column

MORE INFORMATION

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