

Leaders Report 20/21

I would like to begin by thanking the staff, committee and parents for their continued support.

As we began the year with strict Covid restrictions a decision was made to split the sessions into two different groups. In this way we could monitor and prepare better for potential infection and help curb the spread of Covid. To begin with I worked closely with the Branching Out team and our own management committee to bring about the changes needed to open our setting safely in September. The purchase of Covid awareness stickers, posters and floor markings allowed the staff team and parents to quickly recognise the new format needed when using the building. Information from the Trust team and the EA was scant and big decisions were made based on generic emails and information from the on-going news reports.

After the decision was made to split the children into two smaller sessions I used the random alphabetical selection in the Admissions Criteria used by the group and the Education Authority booklet to offer the children morning and afternoon timeslots. As we had 27 children enrolled in our setting, the adult staff ratio needed to increase to 4 staff members daily and extra hours made available for immediate staff cover in the event of an emergency.

Together with the staff team, we set about dividing the resources into 2 lots. We continued with our non-school like layout and made a decision to use the outdoor area as much as possible, in line with Covid guidelines. It was very reassuring to know that the staff team were willing to work towards the changes. As restrictions in June did not allow for an Open Day for the new cohort, I decided to use the first week of September to invite each child with one parent in to the setting in time blocks. This proved highly successful as parents had individual time to explore the setting, talk to other parents and discuss ideas with the staff team. It was a much more relaxed and personal induction than the usual larger scale event. It also adhered to the strict Covid guidelines as laid out by the Department of Education.

As the year progressed we came to terms with all the cleaning that was needed between the sessions. This interfered greatly with our written work but was absolutely necessary. The complete staff team worked carefully to minimize contamination between the sessions. A surge in Covid 19 cases meant we again had to close with little or no warning. It was a very difficult and stressful time for everyone. Initially we provided our resources to the parents. Staff continued to link up with parents and children in a range of ways. We used Facebook to send out stories to all children so they could enjoy a book. We used Facebook to send out ideas via photo images and concentrated on nature based play to encourage outdoor physical play and also to allow parents to see the learning potential in activities that cost nothing. Via weekly and monthly emails we also shared our planning and learning schemas and explained in detail how activities could be progressed. The use of the SeeSaw app allowed all staff to interact with the children when they were unable to attend the setting. Everyone upped their game and used the Seesaw app in different ways. The parents reported that it really helped them with ideas and activities and that it kept the children connected to the setting and staff team.

The setting remained opened for Key Worker children and each day we had up to 5 children in attendance. This increased the work load for both myself and Patricia as we both provided onsite and remote learning for all the children. Local fundraising and a small grant allowed us to purchase home learning kits for each child. There was great excitement, photographic exchanges and parental involvement with all these kits. The remaining staff that worked from home spent long

hours researching, recording and emailing a range of ideas and activities that connected to the planning.

Again, as was last year and looking from a managers' point of view, the support on the ground was minimal from our governing bodies. We received no correspondence from WHSCT. I found this very worrying when the Department of Education was releasing all sorts of information that brought about significant change. Again I felt let down by the very services that carry out such stringent inspections on an annual basis. ETI and our new inspector Aisling Clerkin made their services much more available to the setting. This was somewhat reassuring but again a mixture of information had to be sifted through to arrive at rather sketchy answers. Toward the end of the year, and after yet another exchange of ideas with ETI, it was great to see our playgroup used as evidence of best practice throughout the North. Quotes, photographic evidence and resources were listed in the guide to the Department of Education's guide to Remote Learning.

Throughout the summer I met with other leaders for reassurance and support. Collectively we felt that the voluntary sector and pre-schools in general were completely overlooked. We felt undervalued and certainly not included in the EA as they planned support services for schools. I feel this is something that should be investigated more and certainly needs to be brought to the attention of the WHSCT, ETI, EA and the Early Years Organisation.

To date, our attendance has been consistent. Monthly photo books collect a visual reflection of the learning potential. We continue to offer some online support for those who need it. Overall I am very happy with the way the setting is operating.

I decided to reflect on the last year and a one-year development plan helped me collect my thoughts and provide new ideas for the future. The new safe-guarding proforma was updated and signed off by the management committee chairperson – Claire. Some other policies were updated to reflect the Covid guidelines and these were also signed off.

At Easter I informed the management committee of my decision to step down as leader of the Peter Pan Playgroup. After an emotional exchange, the committee totally supported me and worked with professionalism to bring about the changes needed in appointing a new leader. I really felt valued and respected during my last term in the setting and this was as a direct result of the management committee. I thank them and the staff team, parents and children for their wonderful send off, heart felt messages, well wishes and generosity.

Again, I would like to thank the committee team for their never-ending work. They carry so much and with such professionalism. We surely would not have the resources or the finances to run our setting if it were not for Claire, Mairead and Gemma. I have complete confidence in their ability to carry Peter Pan into a new year. Although times have changed so much, our committee team have been with us every step of the way and fully examine all information to make sure it meets the required standards. I would be lost and so very stressed without their commitment.

I want to wish the new leader, Nadine and the staff team a great year ahead. I would like it noted that I value the huge contribution the team made to the setting. The entire team were a delight to

work with and I have no doubt that this was totally reflected in the happiness and development of the children in our care.