

Developing **creativity and language through open ended play**

Last time we met with Chris Thomas and the children who attend School Lane Children's Centre (formally Canal Playgroup) was in our summer 2017 issue, when they introduced us to the 'Mystery Box' and explained how it had become an integral part of their planning.

At the time they were based in a multi-use community hall and were having to set up and clear away all equipment and displays before and after each session.

Not any longer! In September they moved to a disused classroom in a local primary school. The room was empty due to the change in school admission age in Powys, and also came with its own outdoor space. This was a dream come true...

Chris and her team were finally able to realise their vision. They had always wanted to create an Early Years setting that encourages child-led and open-ended play through the use of recycled, natural and everyday items.

We asked Chris to explain her vision and how this sits within the Foundation Phase Framework.

'We feel that using recycled materials helps to develop the children's creative skills and language development. Our resources are all open ended and can be whatever the children choose them to be. If we don't have a particular item for them, the children are encouraged to make their own by recycling and using natural items.'



Foundation Phase:

Talking Point

'We have tried to replace plastic with as much natural & 'real' home items as possible. This helps develop the children's creativity instead of the item just appearing and the children not having to think about their play, which in turn helps them to develop so much more.

'By using real objects such as china tea cups, plates, teapots etc teaches the children that they cannot throw them about without consequence and that things have to be respected and looked after.'

Sharing ideas

The groups Facebook page (School Lane Children's Centre) is bursting with ideas and inspiration that can be adapted into any setting.

The first thing you notice is how welcoming and homely the setting looks. The children's activity can be permanently displayed and artwork is framed on the walls. You also notice all the lovely natural materials – the logs which form the seating area for circle time, the lovely wooden crates in the book area. You soon learn that these were generously donated by local businesses.

There is also a huge supply of recycled objects which form the basis of the children's loose-parts play and are great for exploring creativity. Old DVD's, records, toilet roll tubes, tin cans, log slices, springs etc. Everyday items such as old car number plates are great for developing number recognition.

The children's exploration isn't just confined to the indoor space. The outdoor space is just as inviting. There are plenty of opportunities to get mucky in the mud pit. "Even the children who don't like getting dirty loved it. They found the amount of mud on their wellies funny!" "The children are growing in confidence all the time from their mark making to making balancing ramps out of old crates and planks of wood."

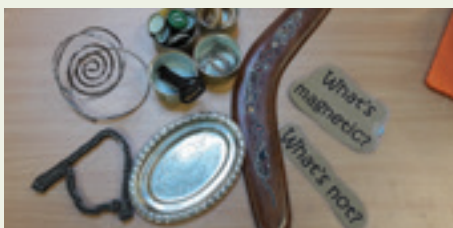
Recognition

Since the setting opened in their new premises, the work that Chris and her team have been doing has received a lot of positive feedback in Powys. With open evenings being arranged for Flying Start and Foundation Phase, and visits from other settings.



'Fabulous continuous provision'

Karen Swann Foundation Phase Advisory Teacher





Mystery BOX

Since moving into their own setting, the children's play has gone from strength-to-strength. We were curious to know how the Mystery Box had transferred over from the pack away setting. This is what Chris had to say...

'The Mystery box is still going but has taken on an open-ended effect. We don't focus on a main object now it all begins with the children's free play and ideas and develops from there, which encourages more children's ideas and creativity.'

'The outcome is still recorded; however, the children don't have the plastic prompts to use any more and are once again using their imagination and creativity to develop ideas and items.'

'We feel that this is working much better and it supports quieter children with their ideas as they can play in smaller groups and voice themselves easier as opposed to a larger group. The setting is now a non-pack away and this benefits the children's play so much more as they have become familiar with all the materials and know what resources are on offer.'

Further reading:

Smalltalk magazine (summer 2017):
Foundation Phase: Talking Point
- Mystery Box (pg 10 & 11)
www.walesppa.org/shop