

Improving boys' literacy skills: Greenfields Children's Centre

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Region: London
Remit: Early years

Provider background

Greenfields Children's Centre is located in Southall, in the London Borough of Ealing. The setting consists of a children's centre, a maintained nursery school and early years registered provision but it considers itself as 'one' in an integrated service. All three aspects of the provision have been inspected separately and all are judged [outstanding](#).

Brief description

This example of good practice shows how staff at Greenfields Children's Centre approach teaching, in particular, how a meticulous approach to assessing children to identify any gaps between different groups helps staff to close those gaps quickly. Greenfields Children's Centre is particularly effective in narrowing the gap between girls and boys, especially in literacy. Staff use a range of innovative and imaginative strategies that are highly effective.

This is part of a set of eight good practice examples showcasing good practice in early years to support the report: ['Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?'](#).

The good practice in detail

The headteacher's view of teaching is simple:

'Teaching is where children and adults go on a journey together. Our teaching is based on children's play and how children experience the world around them. We are very flexible in our working and follow the children's interests. As adults, we provide a scaffold to learning. We want to provoke children's thinking, challenge them and recognise those 'magic moments'.

Senior leaders recognise the importance of establishing children’s starting points through close partnership working with parents. Staff then set clear targets for children, including long-term targets, which are broken down into small steps. Senior leaders recognise that assessment is a continuous process and an integral part of teaching.

Using assessment to plan effective learning experiences

Key workers are responsible for the assessment cycle and this is overseen by qualified teachers (who are also key workers). The nursery’s [last inspection report](#) confirms that, ‘assessment at all ages is precise and focuses on the individual child, which leads to highly effective planning’.

To plan effective learning experiences, the centre looks closely at:

- what children know and can do already
- what interests children
- the characteristics of effective learning to identify how children prefer to learn.



Staff talk about allowing children to drive their learning. Staff have introduced ‘listening stories’ for individual children. They use ‘project’ work and ‘philosophy’ sessions to inspire and ignite children’s interests. For example, during a philosophy session, children showed an interest in space. As part of the space project, children made a planetarium in the tree house by:

- blacking out the interior of the tree house to make the sky
- researching information about the planets before making paper mache models
- adding ‘glow in the dark’ stars.

Children said, 'we tried to block out the sun' and explored different ways of 'stopping the sun coming through'. Once successful, the children enjoyed taking torches to the tree house and making the stars glow while singing 'Twinkle, twinkle little star'.

Tracking progress leads to improvement planning

In 2013/14, leaders and managers noticed that boys were not doing as well in literacy as the girls. This is not an issue confined to Greenfields. Literacy is low across Ealing at end of Early Years Foundation Stage. The gap between boys and girls is a national issue too. In 2014, 52% of boys achieved a good level of development compared with 69% of girls. The 17 percentage point gap remained the same as in the previous year.

At Greenfields, staff looked at the provision to identify what needed to change in order to close this gender gap and considered activities that would inspire boys. Improving boys' literacy skills became a key focus in the centre's development plan.



Senior leaders set targets for improvement in literacy for all children. Specific success criteria included:

- 95% of children to be working within 30 to 50 months and above
- 35% of children to be working within 40 to 60 months and above.
- the quality of teaching for reading and writing will be judged as good and outstanding.

Boys' literacy

Staff quickly identified that boys appeared less interested in writing than girls. One senior leader explains,

'To motivate boys to engage at mark-making activities, first we need to capture their interest. Often when boys are engaged in mark making, they talk about drawing superheroes and different modes of transport. Boys like drawing and mark making on a large scale. Shared drawing also

captures children's interest and motivates them. Concerns about the gap between boys' and girls' achievement in writing are not new.'

Staff introduced a mark-making project to ignite boy's interest in writing. The project included a range of resources and activities to engage boys in mark making on a larger scale, particularly outdoors. For example, boys used chinks to make marks on the ground. The boys report:

- 'I can write my name'
- 'round and round ... I can draw a circle'
- 'I am drawing mummy, she has two eyes and a big smile ... she is happy.'

The mark-making project has supported the boys to acquire and develop a range of skills, including:

- working together and in small groups
- giving meaning to the marks they make
- playing alongside others
- forming recognisable letters
- sharing and taking turns
- developing concentration
- using a range of tools to make marks.

The centre's staff also increased their focus on teaching children about letters and the sounds they represent (phonics) by:

- building up a bank of resources to share across the centre
- training support staff in teaching phonics
- teaching children in similar ability groups.

Staff also introduced 'listening stories' for individual children. Children and adults work together to make a story about what interests a child, such as 'Adam the Mathematician'. The adult tells the story of the learning that takes place and identifies how to extend learning further. In one example, the child says, 'I love helicopters' and the adult writes, 'you were able to use the available resources carefully and demonstrated a sense of safety and control when placing each of the blocks and planks in the position you wanted them.' The adult extended the learning further by encouraging the child to explore the internet in order to develop awareness of print.

This approach to literacy and engaging boys has been a success. The centre's assessment information at the end of 2014 shows that boys had caught up with the girls.

One teacher said, 'literacy for boys doesn't have to be an issue if you approach it in the right way'.

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