**Family Nature Play & Outsider Decider** **Training during Covid pandemic**

Roots and Shoots Highland recently ran a series of family nature play & Outsider Decider lifeskills training sessions in Aviemore, as part of a South Highland OWL Special Project Grant. We wanted to share our experiences in the bulletin in case it is of use to other OWL groups who might be interested in doing something similar. So here goes!

**Family Nature Play**

We’ve run lots of family nature play sessions in the past, where we provide simple resources to support parents and pre-school age children to play together and meet new people outdoors. Our kit includes a fantastic trolley that we use to transport what we need to our sites. The kit list for these sessions included hammocks, mud play stuff, bug hunting equipment, teeny buckets for collecting/transporting materials, native animal soft toys (plus the odd dinosaur) etc. We generally enjoy an hour of child-led play, then bring everyone together for a hot drink, snack and story. We then offer an optional facilitated activity related to the story - something to take away either as an idea or as a physical item, for example making a stickperson or creating a leaf butterfly. If there is any time left a little more play often goes down well before everyone leaves the session together – all within 2 hours.

**Outsider Decider** **Lifeskills**

The Decider© Lifeskills are simple CBT-based skills for monitoring and managing strong emotions. With OWL Scotland support, Abriachan Forest Trust has run training in partnership with NHS Highland in ‘Outsider Decider’ – how to help people learn these practical skills through fun outdoor activities. Our OWL Special Project Grant was to develop a new nature play programme for families with young children that integrated the Decider Lifeskills to support proactive positive mental health.

**Our sessions**

We ran a series of 6 weekly sessions in woods on the outskirts of Aviemore, one in the morning and one in the afternoon (to make the most of the travel and set up/take down time). The timings were set to work in with parents collecting older siblings from nursery and primary school. Families were referred through local health visitors, with remaining places filled through social media promotion. The sessions started with nature play, and then once everyone was sitting having a snack and drink, we facilitated a gratitude circle and then introduced a Decider© Lifeskill. We focussed on the skills we thought would bring most benefit for families with small children, such as 54321, Name the Emotion and It Will Pass. We did simple activities to explore the skills, and read relevant story books such as the wonderful Colour Monster.

Family feedback was really positive and everyone seemed to return a little more confident as the weeks passed. The sessions were enjoyable to deliver and families shared their stories of using some of the Decider© Lifeskills they’d learned to great effect. The main benefit seemed to be actually spending time with other families with young children, in the real world, in a time when socialising even outdoors is highly restricted and no other parent and toddler groups are able to run.

**Covid-19**

We’re still a little unclear if ‘straight’ family nature play sessions can go ahead under current Scottish Government restrictions (and at which of the new levels!). Provision of ‘training’ sessions have been exempt from the rule of 6 / 2 households guidance – and so we decided these sessions could run, with our infection protocols in place, as we were ‘training’ parents in Decider Lifeskills. We had a maximum of 5 families attend each session (with a waiting list so if we knew one family couldn’t come, we tried to fill that space). Adults of different households maintained physical distance from each other, and the children didn’t – basically the kids were acting as a ‘bubble’ within each session. The only time we wore masks as leaders was when making, and giving out, the hot drinks and biscuits. At other times we tried to stay 2m from the families.

For hands-free handwashing we set up a **tippy tap** from a rope strung between two trees, and asked everyone to wash their hands on arrival and before snack. We used warm water and an insulated water container when the temperatures started to drop. With a spray bottle of liquid soap/water mix (which takes less water to rinse off than straight liquid soap), we were pleased how little water was used through the day – important when you have to carry everything in! All kit was either sanitised, or swopped out, between the morning and afternoon sessions.

We bought a few extra bits of kit that all worked really well. We bought more hammocks so families had the sole use of one each, and we swapped these between the morning and afternoon sessions. We bought 5 ripstock nylon **‘picnic blankets’** and pinned these to the ground under the shelter to facilitate families sitting 2m apart from each other. And we used **Hypochlorous acid** to clean kit between sessions. You can buy a spray bottle ‘machine’ off the internet, add water and normal table salt, plug it into a USB charger to electrolyse and the salty water turns into a chlorine-smelling nontoxic disinfectant. No waste, and way cheaper in the long term. We’re huge fans – as are lots of dentists who’ve been using it to disinfect their kit from viruses and bacteria for years.

**Other tips in case they’re handy**

**Introductions** – Even the most confident-seeming people did not appear to introduce themselves, or actively start to chat with other adults they didn’t already know. We helped to facilitate socialising by asking everyone to introduce themselves and their child/ren when we were all settled down with a drink. We also asked everyone to share one thing they felt grateful for just then. This worked really well. Some people kept it at a light level (it’s not raining!) but others shared more personal things about their lives, that then made it easier for others to connect with them later on in the session.

**Spare waterproofs** for adults and little ones are very handy. Some parents didn’t own the right kit for their kids to play outdoors – and others did, and ensured their children were all kitted up, but had forgotten their own jacket or waterproof trousers. We’ve built up a stock over the years through grants and donations.

**Hot drinks** and a nice biscuit are always popular and help people feel ‘hosted’. Providing proper coffee is always a winner with folk who enjoy coffee!

We’re more than happy to chat further about our experiences - get in touch at Rachel@rootshighland.org

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