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Pioneer nursery stays outdoors - in all weathers

Enthusiastic parents see kindergarten as antidote to sedentary lifestyle

Severin Carrell, Scotland correspondent
The Guardian, Monday 30 October 2006

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Freddie and Alastair clambered around their childminder's garden snugly dressed in their unofficial uniform: chest-high waterproof trousers, rainbow braces, thick jumpers and welly boots. Blond and ruddy, the pair, aged two and three, earnestly heaved stones about and wrestled with a wooden wheelbarrow before bounding off for their daily session on the open-air trampoline.

These two boys, wrapped up like seafarers against the squally autumn weather that often drenches their corner of north-east Fife, are about to be pioneers in a nursery education experiment. And it is a project that could make many urban parents fearful.

Their childminder, Cathy Bache, is planning to open Britain's first outdoors nursery, a lottery-funded kindergarten where the children will be taught and entertained in a wood. All day, every day. Whatever the weather.

Ms Bache, 46, has been given £10,000 by the lottery-based Awards for All scheme to help create an open-air nursery for up to 24 children alongside Monimail Tower, a recently restored medieval tower that once formed part of a summer palace used by the ancient bishops of St Andrews.

Monimail, which sits in a sheltered dip in the hills just south of the Firth of Tay, was bought in ruins in 1985 by a group of Edinburgh psychotherapists as a therapeutic retreat. Now owned by a trust, its residents are environmentalists running a "sustainable living" commune. Another donor, who has asked to remain anonymous, has pledged £20,000, the first big sum raised by the Secret Garden's well-connected local parents and supporters.

When the Secret Garden nursery opens next autumn, the children will have none of the games and equipment seen in a normal suburban nursery: plastic see-saws, cushioned vinyl floors and sterilised building blocks. Their curriculum will be devoted to nature walks, rearing chickens, climbing trees, "mud play" and vegetable gardening. Their playground will be the forest, and their shelter a wattle and daub "cob" building with outdoor toilets.

The children Ms Bache cares for are oblivious to the weather, she said, even sub-zero temperatures.

"We've recently had two full days with seven hours of solid rain, and the kids don't bat an eyelid. As soon as it rains heavily here, there's a stream comes down the wee road outside - they build dams on it. They loved it."

"When it gets particularly cold we light a bonfire and play running around games. In February we were out all day in minus six and the children were perfectly happy. I thought: 'If I can stay out in this, we can stay out in anything'.

It's us that imagines they're not going to like the weather. It's a cultural attitude, but if you're warm and dry, you don't notice."

When they graduate to primary school, alumni of the Secret Garden can expect to be expert in poisonous fungi and able to spot dangerous yew berries or foxgloves, the flowers that contain the toxin digitalis, at a hundred paces. "They know what poisonous means, and they really do avoid it. They learn so quickly."

Ms Bache borrowed the idea for the Secret Garden, which will cost at least £100,000 to open, from Norway. "It's embedded in their cultural life, being outdoors, in the same way it's embedded in ours to stay indoors," she said. The Childcare Commission, Scotland's childcare regulator, "think it's fantastic. They're 100% in support of what I'm doing."

A primary school and drama teacher for 20 years, Ms Bache left teaching to run a small childminding business from her home on the edge of Letham, about 15 miles west of St Andrews.

After six months keeping the children indoors, with a few hours' play in the garden, she realised the kids thrived outdoors. So, like Alastair and Freddie, they stayed there. "In a normal nursery you might have to learn about shapes, but these children know the difference between an oak tree and a birch tree, which is a lot more complex than a square and a circle," she said.

Ms Bache looks after 17 children during the week. Their parents are enthusiastic about her approach. Kirsty Licence, 40, a doctor and Alastair's mother, believes the nursery will be an antidote to Britain's increasingly sedentary, over-protective culture. "Childhood obesity is a big problem, and one of the things is that children spend too long inside."

The risks can be exaggerated, she added. "With the best will in the world, all children will pick things up even when I'm watching them," she said. "But I do think they're probably too protected in a lot of environments. No one wants them to come to any harm, but they've got to learn - in as safe an environment as is possible."

Katie Connolly, a graphic designer, said her sons, Freddie and Magnus, four, preferred it to their other nursery. "There isn't much outdoor space there and they get frustrated. They talk about the things they do here a lot more, and they bring home bits of fungus or a rosehip necklace and tell me all about it.

"The most important thing is that it is a real confidence builder. Strangely, it can be pouring with rain all day, but when they get home they don't even mention the weather."

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