



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How increased play ensured children at Harmeny Education Trust felt safe and secure during a time of instability

What was the challenge faced?

When schools closed during the first lockdown in Scotland, the staff, teachers and management at Harmeny Education Trust, a grant aided special school with accommodation for children and young people with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs, had to think differently about learning to ensure the valuable relationships they have with their children could be maintained and continue to flourish. Harmeny currently cares for 22 children on a residential basis and 6 children who attend as day placement pupils. Harmeny provides a care and education setting for those children 365 days of the year. It was therefore imperative that all the children in their care felt secure and safe while things in the outside world were so uncertain, and too much change would raise anxiety levels.

Any changes in learning and teaching, and routines, were tailored to the individual needs of the child. Staff knew which children would flourish in cottage, who would benefit from online learning, and who was most vulnerable to the changing circumstances.

What change in practice took place?

Children began to be taught in the cottages where they live instead of their normal classrooms, with teachers and educational support staff allocated to a single cottage to reduce the risk of spreading any infection. The children within each cottage vary in their ages and so this was the first time they would be learning together. This had a positive impact on their confidence as older children began to help the younger ones.

Harmeny is surrounded by 35 acres of woodland and this was used for outdoor play, managed by the care and education staff across the site. During a normal school year, day and overnight trips are organised and these still happened, but in the surrounding woodland. This meant that the children could go camping and attend 'forest school', experiencing all the opportunities these bring including personal development and help to build self-esteem – it all just took place a little closer to home!

A second playtime was introduced into the afternoon of the school day, which meant time spent indoors was broken into smaller chunks and was more focused, and play became much more integrated into learning. Go Karts were purchased to support this additional play, with driving tests and licences put in place for this activity to make it a life skill activity for the children. The Scrapstore Playpod was able to open and this involved the children playing creatively with junk objects.

Separately, a combination of online learning from home or blended learning with on-site learning at Harmeny was provided to day pupils depending on each child's needs. It was important to keep relationships between pupils and their peers and pupils and staff strong during this time so staff also went to their homes of pupils and accompanied them to local parks to keep within lockdown rules. Online weekly get-togethers with all children were established, and charitable fundraising kept friendships connected between the cottages and with the wider Harmeny family and gave the children an insight into helping others less fortunate than themselves.

Who was involved in making the change?

Harmeny gathered the thoughts and ideas of children and their families to inform the thinking and planning by staff, teachers and managers. Learning is tailored to individual needs as much as possible and decisions are geared around the needs of each child and everyone involved in their care has a say, including the child.

What difference did this change make?

Using the countryside setting to learn outdoors meant that children were not in the same place all the time. The additional playtime was so successful in reducing 'cabin fever' during the school day, and this is remaining in place.

The Harmeny annual Christmas show which brings excitement and anticipation also brings increased anxiety for some. This year it was recorded and watched online, and this was felt to reduce stress levels and enable all children to watch this together.

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