

Sharing From The Start Newsletter



The 'Sharing from the Start' project involves early years settings throughout Northern Ireland and the Southern border counties forming cross-community and/ or cross-border partnerships, and the children taking part in joint curricular classes, improving educational outcomes and promoting good relations. The initiative is supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

The response to coronavirus (COVID-19) has demonstrated that community life is essential for everyone's health and wellbeing. Over the past 12 weeks we have all become more aware of the value of social connections, neighbourliness, sense of belonging, control, and mutual trust.

Over the past three years 99 nursery and preschool settings have engaged in the Sharing from the Start programme; community connections and community involvement have been important components within this. Settings planned shared session and activities with the hope of establishing links to extend and develop its involvement in the wider community.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, communities have sprung into action. Neighbours have connected and looked out for each other more than usual, informal support groups in local areas were set up to support people in need.

The senior Early Years specialists involved in Sharing From The Start are especially delighted to hear how some of the staff and committees from the settings stepped forward as volunteers, and faced challenges posed by this pandemic. They would like to acknowledge the ongoing work and commitment, staff have planned home learning activities for children, maintained virtual contact with pupils, they

have been a pillar of support for parents and families, some have packed and delivered food parcels, while others have been maintaining contact with the most vulnerable in society.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has been difficult for families, people have had different experiences and yet through all of this there has been a sense of belonging. Communities have come together to acknowledge and give thanks for key workers, we have applauded our front-line staff, symbolised hope with rainbows in the window and supported and cheered for Colonel Tom Moore.

We hope that these positive activities and attitudes can be built upon and developed during the planning for another year of Sharing from Start.

Sharing from the Start is administered by Early Years working in collaboration with the National Childhood Network and the Fermanagh Trust. Together these three organisations have a strong track record and over twenty years experience of working for the benefit of children and good relations development.



Forward



Dear Reader – welcome to the 5th edition of the SFTS newsletter. This newsletter celebrates the wonderful work of pre-school settings as we come to the end of third year of Sharing from the Start. Fantastic work has taken place in pre-school settings involving practitioners, children, parents and the wider local community supported by the Early Years Specialists.

The last three months have proved a huge challenge for us all - how do you share in the middle of the biggest public health crisis in one hundred years? What we have learnt during this time is that the value of sharing and partnership working is much more than personal contact – its about working collaboratively, bouncing ideas off one another and sharing good practice. As one of the preschool leader explained when talking about their partnership and the ongoing online meetings with her partners “its great having the support of our neighbours, the old saying ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’ has never been so true!”

In recent weeks we have in touch with all the settings currently involved in Sharing for The Start, to explore the challenges and opportunities in the coming year and how together we can step up and work collectively building on the foundations laid over the last few years. What has been most heartening from these conversations is the value settings place on their partnerships and their determination to continue to work together in the coming year. It will be challenging but collectively we will succeed and ensure Sharing from the Start is an exemplar of Partnership working.

Lauri McCusker

Director of the Fermanagh Trust

Belfast preschools Holy Cross and Springhill



Belfast preschools Holy Cross and Springhill have taken part in a variety of sessions this year including visiting each other's settings for stay and play sessions, a trip to the pantomime, a visit to indoor physical play centre and a Christmas Carol singing for all their families.

Their curriculum focus was Personal, Social and Emotional development and energetic physical play to coincide with the needs of the children. They have really enjoyed taking part in the programme and found it very beneficial. Through partnering together they have developed community links with the children, parents and staff. All the children have enjoyed making new friends and sharing new experiences with them. From visiting each other's settings they have been able to take away some new ideas to develop their own settings and they're very much looking forward to continuing with the programme in the forthcoming year.



Donegal preschool partnership visit to Library



As part of their work together on the Sharing From The Start programme Ramelton Community Playgroup and Learn n Play Preschool Letterkenny visited Milford Library. This fitted in with the partnership's focus on communication activities and for some of the children this was their first trip to a library.

The staff in Milford library had lots of activities organised. They started off with a story and song session. This was followed by a character hunt. Everyone enjoyed finding the characters and marking them off on their sheet. The children then coloured strips of paper and glued them together to make flowers which were then displayed in each playgroup.

After some lunch together they had a music and movement session. It was a successful morning with everyone enjoying the trip with their friends and joining in with all the activities. Lots of ideas and skills to take back to the classroom. Children learned how to sit quietly and listen to the stories, exploring sounds, pattern, repetition and rhythm. Also explore the use of books and ICT for enjoyment and a source of information. Hopefully, after seeing how it all works, the children may in future visit the library with their parents.



Outdoor learning at Knockmany Forest



Playtime Eskra, McClintock Pre-school and Denamona Pre-school visited Knockmany Forest, Augher, as part of their work together. The three playgroups link up for shared sessions and they were delighted to visit this facility on their doorstep. The children really enjoyed the outdoor learning with their friends.



The playgroups' leaders recognise the benefits of being involved in the programme and have said they wouldn't be able to do these things on their own – by working together they are more opportunities for the children. Parental engagement is another benefit and the groups have been heartened by their involvement and positive feedback.



Omagh Integrated Nursery, Omagh North Nursery and Christ the King Nursery



The Omagh partnership this year developed two key curricular areas, the Arts and Physical development, delivered through the topic of 'People Who Help Us'. Their sessions were delivered through a series of 'play dates'. Children enjoyed getting to know one another and feeling confident in their new surroundings.

They had a variety of play and craft activities which supported the children's development as well as promoting the development of friendships and co-operative relationships with the children and staff from our partner setting.

The children have really enjoyed travelling on the bus to the host setting. This was an experience which some children had never had before. Leaders commented that they have also been able to give the children new experiences to use and work with resources that they do not have in their own settings. The staff offered to share these resources in the future. Not only have they been able to share good practice, but share good resources also!



The children have grown in confidence as they have experienced regular visits to a new setting, with new peers and adults. This has helped them as they prepare for their transition into Year 1. The parents were able to get involved with 'school life' by volunteering for the sessions. They really enjoyed seeing their children interact with others and loved visiting the other settings. The children whose parents volunteered had the opportunity for a lovely 'shared experience' with their parents. They took pleasure in showing their parent what to do and how to follow the routines of each setting.

Nursery leaders have experienced an array of benefits from involvement in this programme including funding, networking with colleagues, fostering children's horizons, providing opportunities for parental involvement and creating new friendships within the local community.

Funding and support has enabled them to engage with partner settings as frequently as they'd wish with no concerns over transport costs. It also enabled them to purchase additional resources to facilitate each session. Not only have the children developed new friendships so has parents/carers and the staff in each setting.



Principal of Omagh Integrated Gavin Gallagher commented "As an Integrated Primary School & Nursery, the promotion of equality, good relations and respect for cultural diversity are all key components of our ethos and practice. With that in mind, the opportunity to engage in Shared Education is a very welcome one for our school as a whole, for our staff professionally and socially and of course for our pupils. The added element of parental involvement this year has been a successful one and this strengthens links and creates greater respect and understanding. As a school, we are grateful for the guidance offered to our staff in planning for Shared Education. The programme has proven to be a manageable one in terms of preparation, paperwork etc and because of this, staff have been able to focus more upon the key elements of integration, sharing practice, delivery of curriculum and building relationships. We look forward to continuing to engage in Shared Education into the future."

Cross-border partnership craft and play



Bligh's Lane Nursery School in Derry, Stepping Stones Playgroup in St. Johnston and Cockhill Community Pre-School in Buncrana have partnered together as part of the Sharing

From The Start programme. By working together the three early years settings have achieved educational outcomes including language, personal, social and emotional development. Their shared sessions have focused on the curriculum subjects The World Around Us and The Arts.

Earlier this year the children enjoyed making beautiful Valentine's cards and they produced lovely letter shapes in their emergent writing. With their new friends the children also availed of miniature world play, firefighter play, water play, dough play, painting, sand play, construction play and home corner play.



The children were able to talk about whom their card was for, whom they loved, who was in their family etc. There was a relaxed atmosphere as the children from different settings sat together sticking, drawing, colouring and writing. As well as exploring these skills, the children were reflecting on their feelings and emotions with regard to others. They were able to talk about what their family members do for them, for example and appreciate this in their own way.

Together they made chocolate hearts and explored the processes of "melting" and "cooling" as well as using their senses of taste and smell. The children could learn about other emotions as well as love and be able to talk about feeling happy, sad, angry and scared. They could develop their writing further by learning the letter shapes of each other's names.



Ballymena Nurseries – embracing difference and celebrating similarities

This year Ballymena Nursery, Castle Tower Nursery and First Steps Playgroup focussed on Personal Social and Emotional Development as the educational outcome for Sharing from the Start As early years settings only have one year together they decided to work around emotional development as it is central to pre-school education.

The shared sessions this year focussed on promoting inclusion and diversity through a range of play activities supported by the use of the MIFC Respecting Differences resources.

When invited to participate in the Mid and East Antrim EMBRACE celebrations to celebrate the diversity and culture of the Borough the partnerships accepted eagerly. They visited Ballymena Town Hall to engage in their EMBRACE activities of cultural music, dressing up, music, dance, story telling and craft making. The children enjoyed a range of activities at The Braid to celebrate Chinese New Year. They listened to traditional stories, made paper lanterns, danced with fans, dressed up in traditional costumes and played their own music. Parents, children, staff worked together sharing traditional experiences and activities supported by members of the local community.

This typified what they did over the weeks of embracing differences and celebrating sameness. Back in the individual settings children continued through a range of activities to explore other cultures and to learn more about the cultural traditions of children attending the settings. The children have come to form friendships with each other, recognised each other's names and demonstrate the ability to be caring towards each other.

Feedback received back from parents was excellent, one parent said..... "Id never have thought I'd step inside your school". Staff are looking forward to another year of working together.



Wide range of educational outcomes for Loughinisland and Crossgar preschools



and playing instruments. The children sang so enthusiastically in front of their very proud parents/grandparents/carers and all received a present from Santa.

For World around Us Day the two preschools came to together to learn about different kinds of animals that we would not see in the zoo or in our environment. A very enjoyable day and lots of learning, meeting different species, watching the animals movement and discussing their habitats, colours, food etc

Parents were commenting on how the children could not wait for these “Wee days”... “It’s just great to have something like this, so lucky”.. “my goodness, weren’t they brave with the snake” etc... “Thanks girls for all your hard work and efforts into making this so enjoyable for the kids”... “looks like they all have had a fab day”... “they will sleep tonight”

Some feedback from the children included “I loved Crossgar being here yesterday, are coming back another day?”...“Are we going to Crossgar again some day?”...“I loved playing with the Crossgar boys and girls.”...“When are we going to see them again?”



Staff and children from Loughinisland Playgroup and Crossgar Preschool visited each other’s settings as well as taking part in a series of activities to enhance their learning and provide the children with new opportunities.

Educational outcomes were focussing on PSE, Communication & Listening Skills, World Around Us, Physical Wellbeing improving (Mental Health & Wellbeing) – Parents were encouraged to join in and for some parents it was a chance to meet up with old friends they hadn’t seen in a long time.

Visiting each other’s settings the children got to make new friends and use different resources. They enjoyed both indoors and outdoors, story time and music time. As part of Children’s Mental Health Week they had a session focussing of physical wellbeing and mental health and wellbeing – Story, songs, snacks and lots of physical activities which the children really enjoyed.

Loughinisland Preschool visited Crossgar Preschool for a Christmas Singalong. A great party morning with a special visit from Santa – singing Christmas Songs

CPI Community Childcare, Castlefinn and Happy Faces Playgroup, Clady

This Donegal - Tyrone cross border partnership’s work together this year involved free play , messy play and a physical session with a Football coach. Children loved learning with their new friends and focussing on this physical area of the curriculum . Staff expressed how successful their involvement in Sharing From The Start was and they are looking forward to working together again in the future.

Jolly Pirates Preschool and Tonagh Nursery – Lisburn

Jolly Pirates and Tonagh Nursery's children took part in action songs and rhymes, listened to stories from their local librarian, shared snacks together, played together and came together at the end of the session to discuss their day and say good bye. The more they progressed through shared sessions, the more interactive the children became with each other.

During their joint Christmas party the children enjoyed an interactive performance from Aldo the Magician and had a party snack together. The parents then joined in for a story and play, Christmas sing along and dummy tree, where the children had the opportunity to give up their dummies by hanging them on the dummy tree for Santa's baby reindeer.

When the children discussed going to visit their partner nursery again they would be excited and ask how many days? A lot of children and parents looked at the photos of the sessions on display in each classroom. They used a book called 'The Smeds and The Smoos' to extend the links within their settings, as the characters are blue and red, like their jumpers. The children really enjoyed the story and the links that it had to the blue and red jumpers. They also dressed puppets in jumpers from each other's settings for circle time discussions. The leaders of Jolly Pirates and Tonagh commented that has been a great opportunity to get to develop friendships and work alongside other preschool settings sharing good practice.

Parents comments included-

'... enjoyed this so much as she made a lot of new friends. Which I think is the important part of it'

'... loves getting to play together with Jolly Pirates'

'It's very good mixing with other children. ... loves playing with ... and ...'

'Great idea mixing with other children. ... loves making new friends.'



Sharing From The Start practitioners implementing The Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference programme

The MIFC (Media Initiative for Children) Respecting Difference Programme is an intervention programme aimed at improving long term outcomes so that children, practitioners/teachers, parents and communities become more aware of diversity and difference issues and positively change attitudes and behaviours to those who are different.



Over ninety staff involved in the Sharing from the Start Project attended training on The Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference programme. Including the partnership pictured, Bees Nees Early Years Centre and St Finnian's Preschool Newtonwards who have been implementing the programme and finding how well it complements their shared sessions together.

It was developed by Early Years and the Peace Initiatives Institute in the USA. It combines media messages around diversity with an early years programme. Together they aim to promote positive attitudes to physical, social and cultural differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. The messages also address bullying behaviours. The messages are reinforced in the early years setting through the use of resources and interactive activities that prompt children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to the issues explored in the media messages.

The use of interactive activities in the training provided opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their own values, attitudes and prejudices. It also enabled the exploration of MIFC resources, with time for participants to reflect on how the materials could be used to enhance the NI and ROI preschool curriculum and to support the implementation of their shared sessions.

The implementation of this programme in the 45 nursery and preschool settings is enhancing the outcomes currently being promoted by the Sharing from the Start, 'to improve educational outcomes and cross-community cohesion, inclusion and diversity through Shared Education'.



‘Messy Play’ – with Ardstraw Playgroup and Little Flower Playgroup, Sion Mills

In February this year Ardstraw Playgroup and Little Flower Playgroup Sion Mills visited the Bog Hall in Sion Mills for a sensory play session. Joined by parents and grandparents, the children enjoyed the shared learning with their friends.

Everyone shared in the fun ‘messy play’ experiences, e.g. feeling rice krispies on their feet, playing with dolls, sponges and water, playing with flower petals, cocoa clay with vegetables, crazy foam, feet painting, etc. A few children needed to be encouraged by an adult to take part in the experiences and thoroughly enjoyed them when they did! Children learned new language associated with these sensory activities and discussed the names of the products and what they felt on their feet like hot, cold, slimy and slippery.

Their shared session had a very positive impact on learning. Personal, Social and Emotional development was developed by playing and interacting with peers from both groups and adults and building upon relationships, and gaining confidence. The World Around Us was progressed as children had opportunities to experiment, and free exploration of the environment, using their senses, observing changes as they took part in the ‘messy play’. The Arts was developed as children expressed their ideas, extended their creativity and developed originality of thought.

The playgroup leaders commented on how they have benefitted from this partnership so much and as well as the shared sessions and getting to know each other, the parents and family members have stated that they enjoy seeing the excitement in their children when going to meet their friends again. The playgroups have really built a relationship over their involvement in the project and have been able to telephone each other about other matters rising within preschool and advise each other not only around Sharing from the Start activities which is a great support to have. Without Sharing from the Start they would not have these opportunities, shared sessions, experiences, building friendships/ support, etc.



Steelstown and Raphoe Nurseries

– St Patrick's Parade

Steelstown Nursery, Co L'Derry and Raphoe Community Playgroup, Co Donegal, are in their third year of the Sharing from the Start programme. Staff from this cross-border partnership have observed and reflected on the positive impact the shared education experience has had on their children, parents, staff and the wider community. Ms. Rabbett, from Steelstown nursery stated 'I believe these shared outings are a great benefit for all the children coming together and respecting each other and their environments..... It is great to see the children interacting and sharing their space, and remembering their friends names that they played with in Raphoe.....staff have been able to share different ideas and experiences with each other'.

In March this year the partnership facilitated, what would be, their final session of 2019-2020. It was a cold and wet morning, but the sense of community spirit shone through. The children played with one another in the playground, with many pockets of friendship evident. The staff teams were confident interacting and organising the logistics of the session and the numbers of parents, grandparents and local community congregating at the gates waiting for the parade to begin was overwhelming.

The parade was led by a formal pupil Alan Goudie from the Raphoe Ulster Scots Pipe Band, playing traditional Irish music on the bagpipes. The children particularly liked having a Garda escort with blue flashing lights. All the children, parents, grandparents, and friends of the school for a very enjoyable event, despite the very wintry weather. The session provided an opportunity for children to celebrate the feast of St Patrick's day. They could also see first-hand the work of the people in the local community as they completed the parade around the diamond.

Parental involvement is an important part of the Sharing from the Start programme, it provides parents with opportunities to be involved in activities within their child's setting. Tara Moore attended this session with her daughter and expressed her delight at being able to participate, "it's been a wonderful experience. My daughter lights up when we speak about her trips to Raphoe. She now recognises "DON –E DOLL" (Donegal) and is much more interested in Geography and the differences and similarities between Derry and Donegal. I feel the real benefit of programme/project is the sharing of space and "territory", building their confidence in new, unfamiliar surroundings. Being hospitable and getting excited about new people and experiences is so important – perhaps now more than ever!"

I've been involved in this programme for the last 3 years and have participated in every outing from the start. Most children tend to live in their own little world and I believe these shared outings are a great benefit for all the children coming together and respecting each other and their environments. The children mix and play together and for most of them it provides a different experience outside of their daily routine. It is great to see the children interacting and sharing their space, and remembering their friends names that they played with in Raphoe . Also I believe it is so beneficial for all the adults involved as we also get to meet lovely people and we also gain as we share different ideas and experiences with each other.

Marie Rabbett – Nursery Assistant – Steelstown

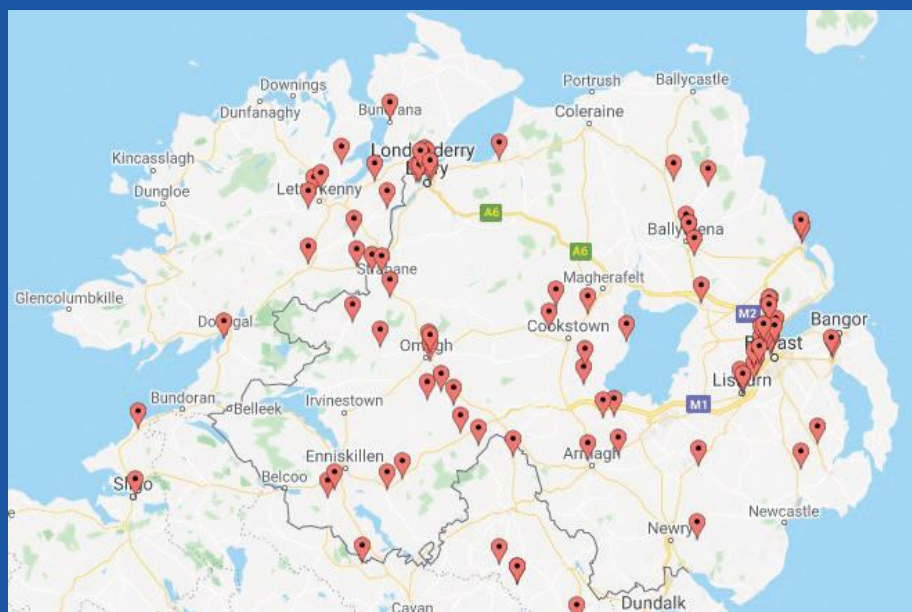
For the last 3 years we as a staff and community have had great days out with our friends in Raphoe – our children have got to experience so many different events and share this with new faces who quickly become "our friends". We look forward to every trip and in particular the parade for St Patrick's Day. All the children loved walking behind the piper and the Garda escort with flashing lights created a lot of excitement. It was nice to watch the children sing songs and dance together as we celebrated, ate our lunches together and played in Raphoe's welcoming setting. We are already looking forward to our next outing !!

Mary Mc Laughlin –Nursery Teacher –Steelstown

Some comments from Children:-

- "I liked the flags and the bus and the slide in Raphoe"
- "I like the bus and playing with the mud kitchen- My walk was too far and it was wet"
- "I liked the bees and butterflies in the tray. I played with my friends at Raphoe"
- "I got to sit in the Garda car and saw lots of cars too. My mummy came too."
- "I liked the teacher singing Molly Malone and the walk around the town "
- "I love playing outside on the scooters that have one wheel"





Location of preschools participating in Year 3 of the project. We are very pleased with the feedback and look forward to additional preschools becoming actively involved in the programme.



For more information visit www.sharingfromthestart.org

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