

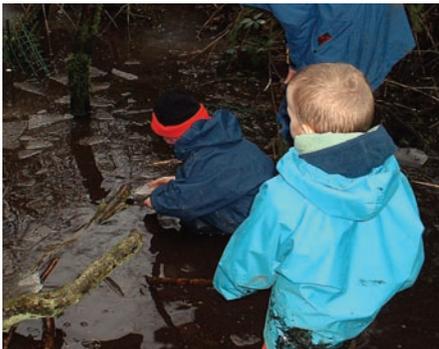
Redesdale Primary School  
A Woodland Pre-school Project

# Creature Worlds



## First Encounters

A project at Redesdale Primary School offers the children in the nursery the opportunity to freely engage with the natural world. Between winter and summer they explore and investigate a small area of woodland at the Rising Sun Country Park in North Tyneside. The area, formerly a quarry, is wooded with steep sides and, at its lowest point, marshy and pond like in wet weather. Each week the children visit for two hours. The accompanying educators' role is to support the children's investigations of the natural environment.



During the first few visits some of the children are restrained and tentative. After a few sessions this caution disappears and is replaced with a real sense of confidence and mastery. This has a liberating influence enabling a new autonomy and self-reliance to develop within the group.



*A consistent feature of children's explorations at the Rising Sun has been their theories about creatures, both real and imaginary, that live there.*



*What will engage and fascinate this group?*



## The Glass Crocodile

The frozen muddy puddle with its thick broken icy surface has a powerful, almost magical appeal. James, Mia and Courtney are captivated and begin to investigate.

Their ideas are revealed as they talk:

Mia: (standing on a log) 'I saw a crocodile'.

James: 'It's a glass crocodile – it's picking on me. It's telling me to get out of the water'.

Courtney: 'Don't you tell my friend to get out of the water' (she wags her finger at the 'crocodile').

The following week James, Mia, Courtney, Chloe and Lee are 'fishing' by the pond. James remembers the glass crocodile.

James: 'The crocodile!'

Courtney: 'I'm Prince Courtney and I'm going to kill him'.

Mia: 'That crocodile bit me'.

James: 'But I can see a friendly crocodile'.

Courtney: 'I've just killed them all'.

Mia: 'Oh no . . . where's my stick for that crocodile?'

James: 'The ice has cracked a little bit and I can see a crocodile coming... that's one. Put your hand on the crocodile and just stroke it'.

The ice breaks off.

Lee (poking the ice with a stick) : 'I didn't break it'.

James: 'Pick him up'.

Lee: 'It doesn't break the ice'.

James (whispering): 'Hello. Hello.

That crocodile wants a bone. I'm going to feed him'.

Courtney: 'That crocodile's nasty.

He's not my friend'.



## Back at Nursery



*The children's ideas are vivid and real. How to encourage them? Photographs of the children's experiences are used as a tool for recollection and discussion. The crocodile has become an important part of their world but is also a dragon or a dinosaur at different times amongst the group.*

*There is no visual representation of the crocodile within the nursery. The educators wonder about the use of imagery to support ideas. Perhaps drawing the crocodile now will bring children's individual imagery into the shared domain.*

*The scale is an important element to establish.*

*How big do the children think the crocodile is?*

*The educators want to be careful not to lead the children's decision-making process, so a roll of paper is offered and some oil pastels. The children take up this challenge of representation and a huge crocodile is drawn and displayed prominently.*

In the afternoon Chloe looks up at the crocodile drawn by the morning group. She knows exactly who it is and all about him.

Chloe: 'I've just seen... at the Rising Sun, down at the mud. He was so big, he'd just eaten Goldilocks. She's real you know'.

Educator: 'Have you seen her?'

Chloe: 'Oh yes, she just looks like me'.

Educator: 'You have to be careful you don't want the crocodile to mistake you for Goldilocks'.

Chloe: 'No, he won't because he likes me. I feed him worms – wiggly ones'.

Educator: 'That's why you collect them'.

Chloe: 'Yes so we can feed him and he won't eat us'.

*By now the crocodile has a personality and characteristics that the group are building together. A number of questions arise for the educators concerning the children's crossover worlds of reality and fantasy. This concept has become an important focus for the educators to support. The children are offered clay to make their own imaginary crocodiles visible.*



## More Creature Fascinations

Other fascinations in this area are observed. Holes in the ground are homes for all kinds of imaginary as well as real creatures.

James has become known as the 'creature finder' as it is he that created the notion of the glass crocodile.

Callum: 'Mrs B, come quickly, I've found a rabbit in the hole... there. You have to be quiet Mrs. White, I've found a rabbit for Gaynor'.

Gaynor: 'You know what the rabbit, it was doing, he was having his dinner and I'm going to put a stick in the hole and he won't know who it's from'.

Callum: (shouting down a hole) 'Hello bunny rabbits!'

Erin: (looking too) 'Ooh its all pink and lovely down the rabbit hole'.



Finding small creatures becomes quite a quest for some. The creature finders become experts in knowing where to look as their fascination grows and their fear subsides.



*The educators are sensitive to the children's fantasy creatures that exist in parallel with the real. The children seem able to slip effortlessly between the two worlds, accepting and engaging in one another's fantasies. The educators are aware that they too are part of this complex world.*



The educators create an area for investigation and research that will support children's lines of enquiry.

This factual research provides information and imagery that is valuable in supporting the children's painting, drawing and the development of fantasy play.

## Complementary Encounters



The same spirit of exploration and fantasy is part of everyday life at nursery creating a seamless transition between the quarry and school, outside and inside. Holly and Cristina make secret gardens for the creatures they also find at nursery.





Holly's activity transfers back and forth between the two environments.



Holly: 'This piece of wood looks like a slide – look, that could be for the garden oh no its too thin – I think I'll use a pine cone and this could be for the door mat. I know, this could be the path to the next house'.



Holly: 'I know - you feel a bit tired you. You can have a sleep here'. She lifts up the worm and puts it on to the grass.

Chloe and Courtney bring more worms over.



The focus for Holly is home building and she has become a master at it. Holly 'Everyone thinks I'm a good builder. (She begins a description of her slug house) A swinging bed, a slide, a scary ride, some cups for milkshakes, bridges, a bed, a lovely pine cone to eat – are you getting all this Linda? – Fluff, a lovely blanket, a little toy, a piece of wood to eat, a bite feather (*sic*), moss blankets and pillows, a big juicy leaf to eat. Isn't that the most wonderful home?'

Holly: 'Do you want them to sleep here? It's a great place. They can sleep and eat and play. I've got some great stuff. I'm making the garden now cos they have got bad legs'.



Walking up away from the quarry Holly says that she would like to stay there all night and see who comes to the house The home building becomes contagious, as other children are drawn to the activity.



The freedom the children experienced in the outdoor environment has added to the richness of their natural story telling and fantasy. They have found:

**A nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative and social connectivity.**

Lev Vygotsky

**Voices Heard**

Stephen: 'I'm very brave at the Country Park, very brave indeed'.

James: (to his mum) 'You can do anything you like and guess what, there are no toys'.

Adam: (to a worm on his hand) 'Hello little fella, don't be frightened'.

Bethany: 'I'm looking for worms, I'm nearly at the bottom. I think I could do this all day'.

Elise: (climbing a tree) 'I'm taller now, this is my house. I'm slipping with the mud. I'm allowed to get dirty!'