

Unwrapping the cotton wool

SIX-YEAR-OLD Jamie Riordon is half-way up a tree. He's crouching in a narrow spot where the tree trunk forks. Beside him are two wooden sticks which he's attempting to hide.

He is deep in role play. "This is our hide-out," he explains seriously. And, pointing to the sticks: "These are our weapons. We have to keep them safe so nobody sees them."

But Jamie is a child. Should he even be up a tree? What if he topples to the ground and hurts himself?

He's in a partly-controlled environment, but the health and safety brigade are nowhere to be seen – and surely it is not even politically correct these days to talk about sticks as weapons?

by **Caroline McMorran**

reporter@northern-times.co.uk

At the bottom of the tree, Brooke Lowe, also six, looks up enviously at Jamie.

"I can't get up the tree," he explains in a mournful tone, but then adds more optimistically: "But Jamie has been here longer than me!"

By here, he means the Dornoch Allsorts After School Club which recently celebrated the first anniversary of an extremely interesting and thought-provoking pilot project.

Essentially, it's all about weaning young children out of an ultra-safe indoors environment, where they are most likely playing on electronic equipment with their parents in shouting distance, and into the Great Outdoors where they need to use their creativity and imagination for play.

Club chairwoman and director, Joan Bishop, says: "The feeling is that we're wrapping children up in cotton wool these days. You've got to make your own mistakes. Unless you've tripped and fallen, how do you know it hurts?"

Joan, who is in her mid fifties, says: "If I close my eyes and think about my favourite

childhood memory, it's about guddling in water or searching for treasure. There are no adults anywhere near, but there are other children.

"But if you ask the younger generation, it will be about playing on X-boxes in their homes with a parent or parents nearby.

"The worry is that children are not being exposed to the same risks that we were."

Amid warnings from child experts that the country is raising cossetted youngsters unable to manage risk, the Scottish Government decided to act. In partnership with registered charity Inspiring Scotland, they set up the Go Play initiative in 2010.

The scheme offered financial support to child care groups willing to encourage outdoor play.

A total of 27 groups from across Scotland succeeded in their applications for funding. Four were from the Highlands, one of which was Allsorts.

The others were the Care and Learning Alliance (CALA); the Highland Mobile Toy Library; and Youth Highland.

Established in 2002 and catering for youngsters aged four to 11, Allsorts was developed from a pilot scheme. Originally based in Dornoch's West Church Hall, they now operate from the canteen at Dornoch Academy.

Allsorts not only provides an after school service in term time but also a full day child care in the school holiday.

They received £20,000 over two years from Go Play to help them hold one session a week outside play during term-time and two hours a day in the school holidays. The club upped their outdoor sessions to two days a week in February and are going to three days as school re-starts this week.

Part of the funding was used for staff training and to purchase waterproof clothing and footwear for the youngsters.

Joan says: "Quite a bit of the funding went on staff training. We had to change our staff's perception of their function.



This shelter made from branches and vegetation cost virtually nothing. Children have had endless fun inside it. From left to right: Joe King, Jessica MacLennan and Louise Durant.

They were used to thinking of themselves as leaders and the ones in charge but, under the new system, they are collaborators. That took a bit of getting used to.

"Previously, we would spend a long time thinking about our play programme and telling the children what to do. Now, we listen to them and let them take the lead. It's known as Child-led Play or Free Play. Any structures or ideas come from the children."

Allsorts was helped to introduce the concept of Child-led play by the Inverness based Highland Children's Forum, who led four workshops for the children.

Joan arranged with Dornoch Academy head teacher, John Garvie, to take over an untamed section of a garden established to the rear of the school, and she also made contact with the local Forestry Commission office.

She explains: "The commission had just finished creating their natural play area at Camore Wood. What I was looking for was loose items such as logs or pipes. You don't need expensive playground equipment."

She vividly recalls the very first time the youngsters were let loose in the garden.

"They ran through the gate, spread out and a couple of them were well up a tree within minutes!" she laughs.

A year further down the line and the outdoor play sessions have gone from strength to strength. Rain, hail or shine, the youngsters are regularly to be seen outdoors.

"Before all this started, our numbers had been quite low. We were getting an average of six to eight children. We are now getting an average of 16 and on occasions reach our capacity of 24," reveals Joan.

"We've attracted different children as a result of this. When we set up first, we were there to support working parents. We're now an activity club offering fun and adventure.

"We are now getting children who WANT to come, not children whose working parents want them to come.

"We did think we would get more chil-

dren in the older age groups. We have attracted a large number of olds probably because of the benefits of outdoor play.

"We've noticed that the youngsters are more 'parallel' with other children."



Lucy MacLennan (left)



Sure-footed and fearless, young Jamie Riordon is usually to be found half-way up a tree during outdoor activity sessions at Dornoch Allsorts After School Club.

Wool from our youngsters



and vegetation cost virtually nothing to erect yet the... From left to right: Joe Kinsella, Reece Macleod, Maclennan and Louise Durant.

children in the older age group but in fact we have attracted a large number of four-year-olds probably because their parents know the benefits of outside play from nursery. "We've noticed that when they're indoors the younger ones mostly play 'in parallel' with others but when they are

outside they play much more together."

Allsorts has a committed and enthusiastic team of workers including manager Heather Nic; senior play worker Lucy Williams; play worker Jenny Hardy and eight relief staff.

The ratio of staff to children for indoor sessions is one to ten and for outdoor sessions one to eight.

So, climbing trees aside, what do the children do in the garden?

A favourite pastime is digging holes, then pouring water in and playing with the mud. Another pursuit the youngsters find endlessly exciting is searching for treasure and building dens.

The pipes placed in the garden have been, at various times, a seat, a slide, a tunnel and a house.

"The youngsters do their own thing and they kind of take the lead from each other. When one starts climbing trees, others will follow. We are always round and about and sometimes we set up challenges," continues Joan.

She is not overly worried about the youngsters hurting themselves, saying: "According to research children, generally speaking, will not do things beyond their level of capability."

The club has formed links with their local Highland Council countryside ranger Ian Paterson as well as the Forestry Commission ranger Andrew Murray.

"They have run a lot of workshops for us, for example how to light fires and make dens," says Joan. "We quite often have a

fire and toast marshmallows. The kids love that and the staff have found that the children chat round the fire so it's a great opportunity to find out what new things they have tried to do."

Last year, the youngsters were

helped to make vegetable plots which they planted up and harvested. They also built a small shed at a woodwork workshop held last summer. The children later asked for hand and foot holds to be placed on the side of the shed to enable them to climb on to its roof!

The funders have not just handed over money and left Allsorts to get on with it - they have visited the group regularly to check on progress. Former Scottish Minister for Children and Early Years Adam Ingram also paid a visit last year.

"The feeling is that we're wrapping children up in cotton wool these days. You've got to make your own mistakes. Unless you've tripped and fallen, how do you know it hurts?"

Says Joan: "Inspiring Scotland are very hands-on funders. They initially visited us monthly and we are required to evaluate our progress.

"There were various outcomes we hoped to attain such as increasing children's problem-solving skills, their self confidence, their ability to work in a team and to take risks. "We had to devise ways of measuring their progress and have done so through taking photographs and videos as well as talking to the youngsters."

Allsorts' funding from Go Play runs out at the end of the year but Joan is confident the outdoor activities will continue.

"What Inspiring Scotland try to do is leave an organisation stronger, and make them more sustainable," she says. "We can show that outdoor play is building more confident children.

"The investment in outdoor play has given us a new lease of life and really has changed the direction of the club."

Back in the garden, it's drizzling slightly but that doesn't seem to be bothering Lucy Maclennan and Rosie Milligan who are clad in pink coloured waterproof coats. They're intent on pushing a little wheelbarrow filled with leaves, dirt and undergrowth.

Asked what's in their barrow they reply: "Cous cous!"



Lucy Maclennan (left) and Rosie Milligan with senior play worker Lucy Williams.

After School & Holiday Club

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