

International Friendship and Story Telling group

My role as outreach worker for Earlham Early Years centre allows me to work alongside a multidisciplinary team and support a variety of groups within the nursery and in the local community using other settings including community centres and church halls.

For the past one and a half years I have worked alongside Dee Robinson of New Routes whose associated with the Red Cross and other colleagues from the Nursery, preschool and city council to run an Interface Learning Association project known as the International Friendship and Story Telling group. Aims have been to establish a group that offers friendship support and cultural awareness through telling stories from different countries.

The group welcomes people whose first language is not English, refugees, asylum seekers and people who are interested in befriending families from new communities. Our objectives

- To recognise and value different cultures and traditions
- To promote cross cultural communication
- To facilitate intergration of new communities in Norwich
- To promote community cohesion

Our role has continued to grow, in the past 18 months we have developed a new respect for and deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Whilst providing for the parents diverse needs we have looked equally at the children's needs by supporting their play and worked towards building on their Personal, Social and Emotional welfare fostered through a frame work to support children in their earliest years and promote

- A strong child
- A skillful communicator
- A competent learner
- A healthy child

With the use of the Birth to Three framework it has highlighted the holistic nature of developing and learning. We value the role adults play and further demonstrate that you do not need to spend a great deal of money on toys and equipment as most of our families are on very poor income.

The use of treasure baskets has provided endless opportunities to explore and promote language work from naming items to describing their use. The group is made up of families with a variety of nationalities many with a different grasp of the English language we support their learning and provide ESOL classes, basic training classes and practical sessions with a more hands on approach.

Through Art and story telling the families can express how they feel breakdown barriers and share with us some of their previous life experiences provoking strong feelings and emotions. As a group together we offer support and a listening ear when dealing with such intense memories. They tell stories through their art or relate and rewrite stories from their home lands these tales can be handed down to the next generation (their children and families).

I have attended and organised a venue inviting other practitioners for refugee awareness training led by Dee which provided a good opportunity to dispel myths about refugees living in Britain and an information pack was provided for them to take away we also finished with a wonderful feast. As a social aspect of the group we share recipes from the country of birth and cook together we all thoroughly enjoyed sitting around the table adults and children eating the meal that has been prepared each week different members of the group take turns to cook, one recipe book has been published and funding for a second book has been secured. It has been fun making notes and taking photos of the process with a little pinch of this and a great deal of that added to the pan (how much salt?)

Our group is all about

- Making new friends
- Developing and empowering families
- Inclusion
- Reducing isolation and promoting a community bond
- Joining in wider community activities
- Encouraging volunteers to come along and help out and find out more about what we do

I feel we have had a strong impact as we are all learning to value one another

- Celebrate differences
- Rejoice in each others strengths

- Support and understand each other differences
- Make us think about what we say and why
- See how unique we are

I also had to learn to speak slower Nazmir told me "you chatter chatter chatter, i don't know, in my own country I talk like that with my friends" as she gave me a hug. Together we have shared new experiences as we all learn by doing rather than being told. Community Music East practioners joined us for a music session where the whole family was encouraged to use a variety of instruments to make rhythms together. A puppeteer joined us to help create our own puppets to accompany a traditional fairy tale however the Shadow puppets were much more exciting for the children. We also had regular support from an artist who helped encourage creativity. The participants have told us how much they have enjoyed meeting each other, how lonely they had felt and how difficult it was to make friends and intergrate into their local community the reasons they gave for their previous feeling of isolation included being at home with young children, having English as a second language, culture, lack of money and not knowing what activities were available to them.

Being involved in both Birth to Three and the International group has made me look closer at how I work and take care of children. My other role is as a supervisor of a local Preschool called Little Sparks and we are lucky that a third of our children are from ethnic back grounds. We feel privileged as staff to be part of such a multicultural group as lots of preschools and nurseries in Norfolk do not see the numbers that we have. We appreciate that the cultural exchange has enhanced the childrens playing and understanding of others and has been so much fun. The principals of the frame work already underpinned a lot of my working practice recognising parents as the first and most important educators of their children and ourselves to value and celebrate babies and children. Clare's support has been invaluable and discovering more about Birth to Three has been a very rewarding experience it has made sense and given new meaning to enjoy working with younger children. As a multidisciplinary group we continue to meet and explore together, share ideas, thoughts and written materials.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my journey with you.