

HOP: HAPPY OUT PROJECT

Outdoor play at Mary Geary's Childcare Setting



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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mary Geary's childcare setting has been in operation in Carrigtwohill, in East Cork since 2003. Currently, the service caters for 390 children from the ages of 8 months to 12 years. Play is highly regarded within the setting, especially outdoor play, which is reflected in the vast range of space dedicated to outdoor play and the diversity of play experiences provided within the settings. Scattered across the three acres of land there are a number of fixed structure play structures, a large playing field, a small animal enclosure, a woodland area, a sand and mud kitchen, a number of Astro turf pitches, a greenhouse, a tyre climbing frame, an indoor play cabin and a bike trail.



Image 1: Mud Kitchen

This research used a qualitatively driven creative approach to explore children’s experience of the outdoor physical space provided for the After-School service by the setting. In one sense, adults control After-Schools in terms of the overall design and layout of the facilities, the type and amount of resources available, the rules and regulations set out, and the timetable of events. At the same time, children create their own culture in after-schools by building hideouts, forming groups, engaging in secretive behaviour, and participating in play activities. Once formal events (homework and meals) are completed, children are encouraged to participate in unstructured play activities outdoors. This research aims to capture the multifaceted nature of children’s outdoor play activities within Mary Geary’s setting.

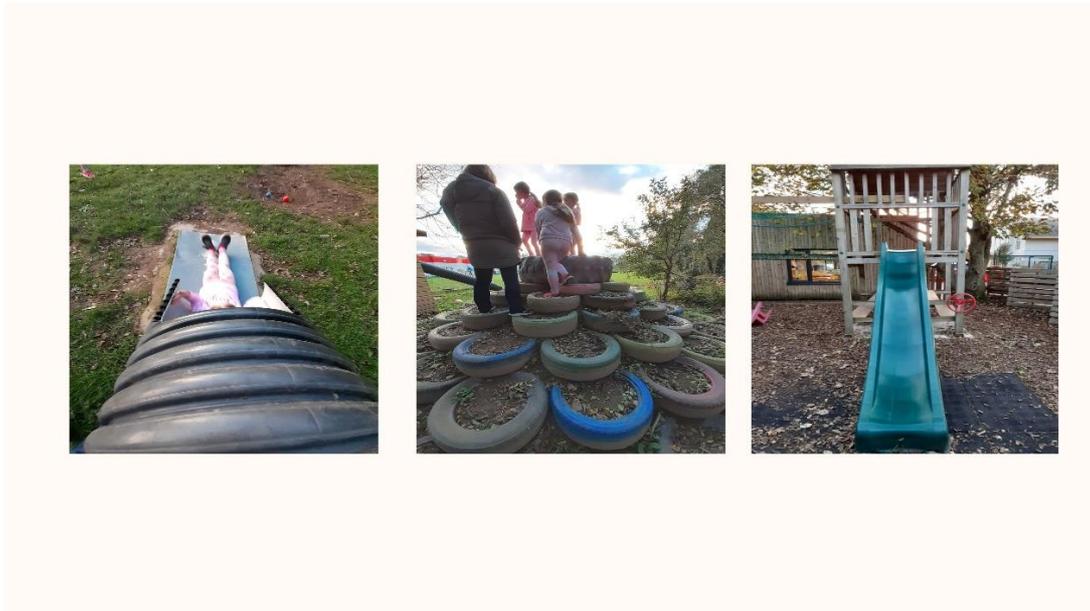


Image 2: Selection of outdoor play structures

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

Nineteen children between the age of six to eleven took part in this research. Parental consent was obtained before commencing the research. An overview of the participants is detailed in the table below.

Rooms	Number of Girls	Number of Boys
1 st class	4	0
2-3 rd class	2	4
4-6 th class	5	4

In keeping with the recommendations made by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), consent was obtained from children, separate from their parents. The aim was to ensure that children made an informed decision about their participation in the research.

Gaining consent from Parents

A debate has arisen within the social sciences about the need for parental consent when researching children's experiences (Hill, 2005). Masson (2000) believes that children who are competent and understand the nature and consequence of the research should be afforded the right to decide to participate in research without prior parental consent. However, current legislation, such as *Children First* (2011), recognises parents or guardians as children's primary carers and as such, responsible for their care and protection. Therefore, it is imperative that parental consent was obtained before commencing empirical research.

Parental consent forms were sent to the setting, who then distributed the forms to the parents. The forms gave parents information about the researchers and the purpose of the research. It also included information about the child's role in the research (see Appendix for more detail).

Gaining consent from children

In keeping with the recommendations made by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), consent was obtained from children, separate from their parents. The aim was to ensure that children made an informed decision about their participation in the research. Initially, an animated video was created and shared with the participants via the staff at Mary Geary's setting. The animated video was distributed alongside the parental consent forms. This short-animated video focused on giving information about the researchers, who they were and why were they doing the research. The video also gave a brief overview of the children's role in the research.

During the first visit to Mary Geary's childcare setting, consent flashcards were used to approach the issue of informed consent with the children participating in the research. Each child was given two consent flashcards: one happy and one sad smiley face symbol. A series of playful questions were used to discuss the issue of consent and ensure that the children were aware of their right to refuse to participate at any stage throughout the research process. Consent is not an isolated act but is negotiated continually throughout the research process (Arnott et al, 2021). Therefore, the children were able to take an active role in consent giving throughout the process.

Ethical Approval

This research received ethical approval from the ethics committee at Munster Technological University, Cork.

Research methods

The research drew on multiple creative methods to ensure meaningful engagement throughout the research process. Child-led walking interviews were done with each group of participants. As the researchers were unfamiliar with the outdoor space in the setting, the children used their expertise in the area to give a guided tour. Some of the walking interviews were done at speed as the children sprinted from one area to the next. In the spirit of the research, the researchers were able to keep up with the pace and record the conversations using a digital Dictaphone and also take pictures of places of interest that the children identified. The walking interviews produced data in the form of interview transcripts and photographic images of key spaces across the three acres of outdoor spaces in Mary Geary's setting.

Using the data collected, a storyboard (see image 3 below) was developed that captured the key findings from the walking interviews. Using the storyboard, feedback was sought from the children on the accuracy of the findings. From this focus group discussion, it was discovered that the soccer field had been omitted from the findings, which was then rectified. Once the children were satisfied that the findings accurately represented their experience of play in the outdoor space, they illustrated aspects of their outdoor play experience. These images were later used to create a stop-motion animation to disseminate the findings.

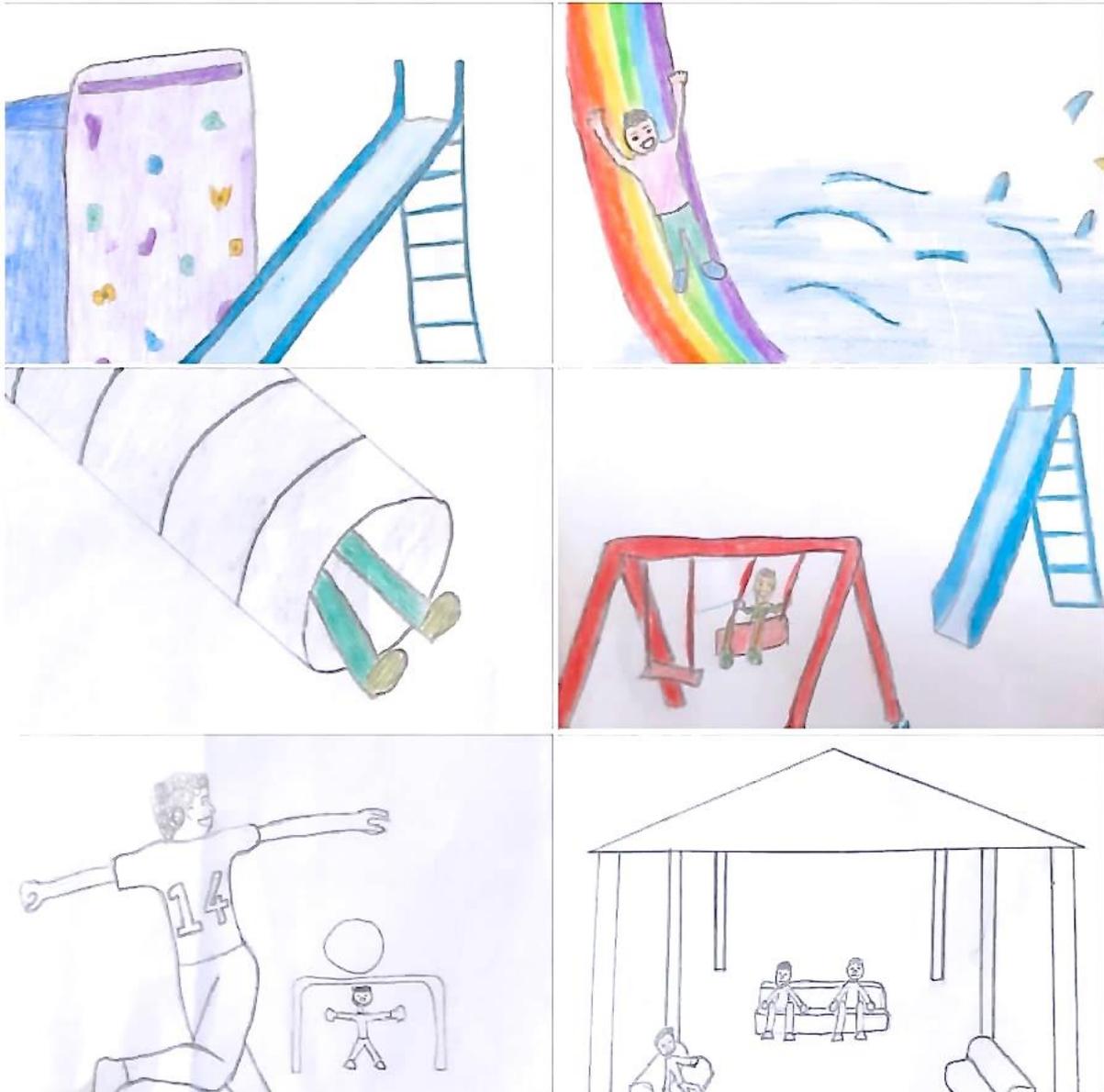


Image 3: Section of the Storyboard

The interpretation of the data revealed four dominant themes: Children’s relationship with nature and natural spaces; risky play and escaping the gaze of the adult; The role of friendships in forming a sense of belonging; and the role of pets on emotional wellbeing. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail in the Findings section of this report.

Chapter 3: Findings

Four dominant themes emerged from the data collections: Children's relationship with nature and natural spaces; risky play and escaping the gaze of the adult; The role of friendships in forming a sense of belonging; and the role of pets on emotional wellbeing. Each of these themes will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter.

Children's relationship with nature and natural spaces

Article 29 (1) (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to develop a respect for nature. The institutionalisation of children's time and space has limited their opportunities to play outdoors (O'Keeffe and O'Beirne, 2015). According to Louv (2005, p. 34), a lack of outdoor play contributes to the 'diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.'

Research has found that children who play outdoors are more physically active (Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000), show significant improvements in balance and coordination (Fjørtoft, 2001), improved concentration levels (Wells and Evans, 2003), experience lower stress levels (Louv, 2005), and demonstrate improved interpersonal skills (Yogman et al, 2018). Outdoor space 'provides an ideal context for children to express themselves, explore, move and learn' (Little and Sweller, 2015, p. 338). Through exploration, children gain an understanding of the natural world around them and forge a connection with their environment (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994).

Outdoor play is an integral part of Mary Geary's settings. Currently, the children have access to three acres of land that host a vast range of outdoor play spaces, materials, and equipment. Some of the dedicated play spaces available include playgrounds with fixed equipment, climbing areas, a playing field, a woodland area, and a greenhouse. In addition to the 'spaces for children', the children had also formed connections to unofficial spaces, which Rasmussen (2004) refers to as 'Children's spaces'. For example, a large tree next to the AstroTurf area,

offered the children, particularly the girls, the opportunity to climb off the branches, carry out secretive activities such as carving their name in the trunk and offered a place to relax and chat with friends or read a book.

Each group of participants gave a guided tour of the greenhouse and expressed disappointment over the lack of fruit available. However, the research was conducted during the winter months, which impacted the types of plants that grow during this time.

Boy 1: I would like to grow more fruit in the greenhouse. We could show you the greenhouse now

Researcher: I would love to see the greenhouse

Girl 1: we used to have cucumbers before, but they stopped growing them for some reason. Now there are just tomatoes

Researcher: and lots of young people don't like tomatoes

Girl 1: I hate tomatoes

Boy 1: I love tomatoes

Girl 1: We used to have cucumbers and on a Friday we would go in there and pick them. Most things that are growing there are herbs that we don't eat

Boy 1: It is a bit overgrown and half the things are dead

Girl 1: it is basically only tomatoes because all the strawberries died

Researcher: Would you eat the strawberries if they were there

Girl 1: We would love to eat the strawberries. No one really waters the plants any more so they are all dying and shriving

Boy 1: I would like banan...no you can't grow bananas ...blueberries maybe, apples, peaches

A recent publication by Currid and Lafferty (2022) outlines guidelines for incorporating environmentalism and sustainability into school-age childcare (SAC) settings. According to the publication, SAC services 'have both an opportunity and an obligation to take an active role in caring for the environment and doing our part to contribute to a more sustainable future' (Currid and Lafferty, 2022, p. 6). Experience in nature can influence children's understanding and awareness of environmental issues (Broom, 2017). However, more

learning opportunities can be provided to broaden and deepen children's ecological knowledge (Currid and Lafferty, 2022).



Image 4: Inside the glasshouse

Risky play and escaping the gaze of the adult

Risk-taking is a necessary part of children's development, which allows them to develop the skills to manage dangerous situations (DJELR, 2004; Gill, 2007). However, the *Children's Independent Mobility on the Island of Ireland Report* found that children nowadays have considerably less freedom than their parents had a generation ago (O'Keeffe & O'Beirne, 2015). The real or imagined dangers of the outdoors and the increased emphasis on progression have restricted children's autonomy (Bergen & Fromberg, 2015; Buckingham, 2011). Children's time and space have become increasingly institutionalised as children spend

more and more time participating in schoolwork, cultural lessons, and sporting activities (Williams et al., 2009). The decline in unstructured free play at home and in school has meant that after-school childcare settings provide one of the few remaining spaces for children to participate in unstructured, outdoor play.

Through a play-based programme, Mary Geary's childcare setting offers a rich and diverse outdoor environment that celebrates unstructured but observed forms of play. Wilson (2012, p. 35) argues,

We should value the chance for our children to be overlooked and observed at the same time, the chance that offers them the possibility to discover things for themselves and to come to the world creatively. What we need to do is to find the circumstances in which real, everyday playability thrives for children and for every member of our communities and then treasure and nurture them until they grow to be big, strong, and playful.

According to Stephenson (2003), most children enjoy and seek out risky/challenging outdoor play. Risky play can be defined as an activity that *'involves thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and risk of physical injury'* (Sandseter, 2010, p. 22 italics in original). The children participating in this research mentioned a number of resources available in the outdoor space in Mary Geary's Childcare setting that afforded risk-taking, including bikes, a tepee made from an upcycled trampoline, a tree with a rope swing, and fixed play equipment. The table below illustrates how these affordances reflected Sandseter's (2007) categories of risky play.

Categories of risky play	Risky play in action
Play with/Jumping from great heights	-Climbing the tree -Using the rope swing -Jumping over fencing -Jumping off fallen tree trucks
Play involving high speed	-Running -Cycling the bikes around the setting and up and down the mounds -Soccer
Rough-and-tumble play	This was not discussed or observed in the setting
Play with dangerous tools	-Carving names in the tree using scissors and sharp rocks
Play with/near dangerous elements/location	-Jumping in the Teepee
Play where children can disappear/get lost	-Building dens in the woods. -Hiding in the trees

Table 2: Applying Sandseter's categories of play

Frost (2009) argues that the rise in childhood injury – particularly bone fractures – is not related to increased participation in risky behaviour, but to the growth of '[o]bese, poorly coordinated, weak kids' (Frost, 2009: 212). While Gill (2007) believes that children's over-reliance on safety measures has impaired children's ability to develop the skills necessary for risk-taking behaviour. However, the children participating in this research believed that injury was a result of inexperience or younger children's inability to navigate their environment safely.

Girl 1: There used to be a swing there [by the tree] but someone got hurt and they [the adults] took it down

Girl 2: but it was a young kid, so it had nothing to do with the swing

Lyng (1990) believes that risk-taking can be a form of resistance or revolt against external control and management of our daily lives. While the children were aware of the rules in the settings, they were often ignored.

Girl: Sometimes we go to the forest as there is a teepee there. Well it is mostly the girls that do that, the boys just stay out of the rain

Researcher: What do you like about it

Girl: To talk. But you are not allowed to bounce in it. It is very sad.

Researcher: Is it because you will hit your head

Girl: No, you don't even hit your head. It is a big thing and if you hit your head you would have to be right by the edge

Boy: Sometimes, the boys still jump on it

Girl: They [The staff] will never know

Boy: We used to think there was a camera in there

Girl: And you got your hat caught in the top of it (laughs)

Boy: Once I got my cap stuck on the tree and we had to get a stick to whack the tree

Girl: And then we threw a pillow and then that got stuck as well. The boys tried to climb up the edge, but he fell.

Boy: (laughs)

Researcher: And was he hurt?

Boy: No, he just failed.



Image 5: Teepee and boardwalk

Schechner (2002) recognised the appeal of engaging in play activities beyond the gaze of adults. While staff members implemented safeguarding measures to monitor play activities, children found ways of escaping the gaze of the adult. The 'Tree' offered protection from adult interference and afforded opportunities for risky play. A table stood at the base of the tree and offered support for children to climb its branches or use the attached rope swing. The carved names on the branches were only visible to those standing on the table.

Girl 1: All the girls [have carved their] names up here

The researcher climbs on top of the table to take a look

Girl 1: There is my name, there is another girl's name, there is another girl's name, there is another girl's name. There is a girl's name over there, there is a girl's name over here and there are just all over the tree

Researcher: So you carved all your names in the trees. Are there any boys' names?

Girl 1: Ya, there is! Well, the boys carved their own names. So, there is one boy's name. The boys just carved all the weird things

Researcher: what did you use to carve it in?

Girl 1: A pair of scissors. It took a while.

Girl 2: I used a rock from the ground.

Researcher: And did anyone know you were doing it?

Girl 1: No one

The rope hanging from one of the branches of the tree afforded children the opportunity to experience disorientation, a play form Caillios (2001) referred to as the ilinx. Using the table as a starting point, the children would grab hold of the rope, jump off the table, and spin around in a circle. When asked what they liked about the rope swing, one girl stated that 'it was fun to spin'. While fun and excitement may motivate children's engagement in risky play, there are many benefits to this play form. Tovey (2010) found that risk-taking allowed children to develop new life skills and were in a better position to assess risk in particular situations. Furthermore, engaging in risky play develops children's gross motor skills and improves their coordination (Stephenson, 2003).

Csikszentimihalyi & Rathunde (2014) believe that play is dependent on taking risks; by stepping beyond the comfort of one's skill (assimilation) and engaging in new challenges (accommodation), the player becomes engaged in the activity (flow experience) and enters a state of equilibrium. According to Csikszentimihalyi (1971), play without challenge soon dissolves into boredom.



Image 6: A cycle trail was created through the woods

The role of friendships in forming a sense of belonging

Mary Geary's Childcare setting caters to nearly 400 children from five different primary schools around East Cork. The social nature of play enables children to create friendship bonds through their interactions. Friendship is an important factor in shaping children's identity and influencing play activities. When outdoors, children have more opportunities to interact with larger groups, move between different playgroups and engage in physical games. Children form bonds based on their shared interests or experiences.

Hide-outs or Dens were used to signal lines of friendship, and also, they exclude others from entering the play space. The Hide-outs also shielded the actions and activities of the children from adults. Leverett (2011) believes that spaces where children experience privacy, gain a sense of belonging, and experience freedom and security can 'potentially be the products of

adult-child interrelationships and cooperation' (Leverett, 2011: 21). The vastness of the outdoor spaces ensures that children can escape the gaze of the adult. One of the older children enjoyed the freedom afforded to him in the setting. He stated,

We can have our own time, our free time to ourselves (Boy)

While hideouts offered some privacy from the constant gaze of the adults, they also caused conflict among some children.

Girl 1: This is the boy base where they plan all their things and spy on us

Researcher: This is the boys' base? And they won't allow you in there?

Girls 1: No

Girls 2: We have to sneak in there

[We arrive at another base]

Researcher: Is this your base

Girl 1: No, it is the boy's base again

Researcher: They have 2 bases!

Girl 1: That is their planning base, and this is their backup base

Researcher: And you don't go in there at all?

Girls: No, not allowed

Researcher: What do they do in there?

Girl 1: They plan all their secret plans

Girl 2: They spy on us too

Research has found that by three years of age, children tend to play with those of the same gender (Fouts et al, 2013)/ Thorne (1992) believes that 'sex segregation should not be understood as a given, but as the result of deliberate activity' (p. 121). In school settings, 'gender is a visible marker in the adult-organized school day' (Thorne, 1992, p. 119). Due to

the smaller number of children within the setting, school-age childcare (SAC) settings can limit sex-segregated practices (Cummins, 2018). However, segregation practices were evident in several play spaces in the setting, especially among the hideouts and the use of the AstroTurf.

Researcher: Why is the AstroTurf your favourite play space?

Boy 1: Cause I can play sports there

Researcher to Girl: Do you play in here?

Girl 1: Ya.. with the girls, not the boys

Boy 1: It is usually the boys that play here

Girl 1: And then the girls play in here when the boys are finally gone

While sex-segregation practices were common in the setting, an alternative group was formed to accommodate mixed interactions.

Girl 1: There is a girl team and a boy team and a mixy mix team and a Pokémon team. I am one of the mixy mix team

Researcher: What is the mixy mix team?

Girl 1: It is a mix of girls and boys

Girl 2: It is the girl team and the boy team, and you are on both

Girl 1: The girl team is just girls and the boy team is just boys and the mixy mix team is both

Girl 2: The Pokémon team is just boys and you have to have Pokémon.

Researcher: Do you like Pokémon

Girl 1: No, but they are banned. They are banned

Researcher: Why are they banned?

Girl 1: Cause not everyone, cause not all the boys have Pokémon. So, some of the time some of them feel left out so Pokémon are banned so there is no point in having a Pokémon team.

More research is needed to examine the interrelationship between gender and space in the setting.

The role of pets on emotional wellbeing

Pets and animal bonds can be important to many children. The Action Plan for School Age Childcare found that some children wanted to be involved with pets during after-school hours. According to Thomas and Beirne (2002, p. 190), 'Empathy for animals is not only beneficial in its own right (i.e. for animals well-being) but also because an informed interaction with animals can aid healthy character development in children.' For instance, Poresky and Hendrix (1990, p. 54) found that children's attachment to animals correlated with increased 'social competence, empathy, and cooperation.' A systematic review carried out by Purewal et al (2017) found evidence of an association between pet ownership and cognitive development, emotional health, and socio-emotional behaviour. Furthermore, Daly and Suggs (2010, p. 110) suggest that pets are 'motivators and companions in physical and health education.' However, despite the increasing evidence indicating the holistic benefits that pets have for children (Melson, 2001), the use of pets in educational settings is under-researched (Daly and Suggs, 2010).

In Mary Geary's SAC setting, children have access to the rabbits and hens that are kept there. During the walking interviews, the children were asked about their experience with the animals. When asked which animal they preferred, it was surprising to learn that the hens were most popular. The participants were asked to describe their relationship and activity with the animals. The most common activity was caring for the animals. The participants described how they would pick up the hens and pet them. The rabbits were considered too 'shy' to be picked and were known to bite if they were picked up.

Girl: [I like] the chickens, you can pet them, and the rabbits are really cute'

Boy: [The rabbits are cute] cause they are fluffy and not because they bite you

In addition to displaying affection and interacting with the animals, the children would care for their needs by ensuring that they had food and water and that their enclosures were

kept clean. When asked about caring for the animals, the children described their experiences.

Researcher: What do you do to care for the animals?

Boy: You have to go clean them out, feed them, water them...

Girl: You don't have to clean them out

Boy: Only about once a week. Last year I used to do it every day I could. I offered cause I come from a farming family

Collecting the eggs from the hens was an additional responsibility that the children did willingly. Once collected, the eggs were deposited in the kitchen. Although the children were unsure what the eggs were used for, they would like to be able to use them for baking.

Girl: We never get to do baking. That is another thing that we need to improve



Image 7: The animals were well looked after and brought joy to the children

In addition to the animals already in the setting, participants mentioned that they would like to have more pets, particularly cats, dogs, and horses. According to Thomas and Beirne (2002), children are naturally drawn to animals. Creating opportunities for children to develop bonds with animals can teach 'responsibility and compassion' (Thomas and Beirne, 2002, p. 195). Furthermore, Nebbe (1991) found that animals used in educational settings reduced students' stress and increase empathy towards animals across the life course.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This study explored children's experience of outdoor play in Mary Geary's Childcare setting. This purpose-built childcare setting caters to children from 8 months to 12 years. This research was carried out with three groups of children from the after-school service in the setting. A total of nineteen children took part in this research, which took place between November 2021 and January 2022.

Recommendation

Connections with nature – The children have a rich outdoor environment at Mary Geary's Childcare settings. They have ample opportunities to explore the natural environment and are given the freedom to engage in child-led play activities. Consideration should be given to

ways of incorporating opportunities for environmental and sustainability learning that appeals to children's interests.

Connections to animals – The children appreciated the opportunity to care for the rabbits and hens in the setting. Some reported taking a greater role in the task than others. All the children expressed a desire to have more pets in the setting, such as dogs and cats. However, some children did express an interest in having farm animals such as cows and horses. Opportunities for field trips to working farms should be considered.

Rules about risk-taking activities – The affordance offered in outdoor play spaces allows children to push boundaries and test abilities (Henricks, 2014). Risk is a necessary part of play (Csikszentimihalyi & Rathunde, 2014). In Mary Geary's childcare setting, there are ample opportunities to engage in various risk-taking activities. However, a few rules are imposed within the setting as a way of promoting health and protecting against injury. Transgression of these rules often results in injury. It is important to make children aware of the reasoning behind the rules. Children who perceive an action or activity as potentially dangerous to themselves or others are more likely to follow the rules (Thornberg, 2008).

Space and Gender – Practices of sex segregation were evident during the research, which resulted in some children being unable to access certain areas in the setting. Consideration should be given to addressing these inequalities. A triangulation approach using behaviour mapping, walking interviews, and focus groups would allow for greater insight into children's perspectives of gendered practices within the setting.

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