

CWLWM NEWSLETTER – SUMMER TERM 2021



# Welcome to the Cwlwm Summer Term Newsletter!

**This newsletter concentrates on the importance and benefits of play and the impact that Covid-19 has had on children, parents/carers and childcare and play settings. Cwlwm partners are delighted to present a series of case studies written by representatives of the Early Years Childcare and Playwork Sector which highlight their experiences and journey over this last year.**



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# Let Children Play



## 1 The Importance of Play

Over the last year, interruptions to schooling, enforced closures of businesses and a move to parents/carers working at home has affected many childcare settings, leaving them with far fewer children attending than normal and many temporarily closed.

Play is a need and right for all children. Quality play environments offered by childcare settings support children's psychological, social, cognitive and physical development. It also supports their mental health and wellbeing. Childcare settings can help our children to recover and to thrive through Covid-19 and are also essential for our national economic recovery. Now more than ever, Wales needs to support the childcare sector to ensure our communities can continue to benefit from all it has to offer.

Covid-19 dramatically diminished children's ability to exercise their right to play which impacts health and wellbeing. Restrictions have drastically curtailed play opportunities, including outdoor play and compensatory play opportunities within schools and childcare, with typical justifications for time spent outdoors being adult focused and led (*International Play Association, 2020*). The results of the 'Coronavirus and Me' survey, January 2021 (Children's Commissioner for Wales) reflects this, showing a 14% reduction in play opportunities for 7-11 year olds. While children aged 3-7 were not asked this question 32% of respondents said they were sad with a common response that they were missing their friends.

In childcare settings, children can be with peers, leading their own play experiences and getting active in a fun, child-led way. This enables them to re-engage socially and physically as well as supporting the sector to survive, working/training families and economic regeneration.

To support children's rights and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) registered childcare settings offer quality, safe, play-rich and child-led spaces facilitated by qualified Childcare Workers and Playworkers.

To outline some of the many benefits of attending a quality childcare provision; this newsletter includes some fantastic case studies, which have been provided by each of the national childcare organisations that make up the Cwlwm partnership. These, in addition to other interesting stories about childcare and playwork, can also be viewed by following the below hyperlink.



[NEWYDDLEN CWLWM NEWSLETTER \(TYMOR Y HAF 2021 | SUMMER 2021\): Astudiaeth achos | Additional case studies – CWLWM](#)



You can share this e-newsletter with parents along with information about your own setting, how you promote play and ideas for them to try at home.

[Ideas for play around your home | Playful Childhoods](#)



## 2 CASE STUDIES

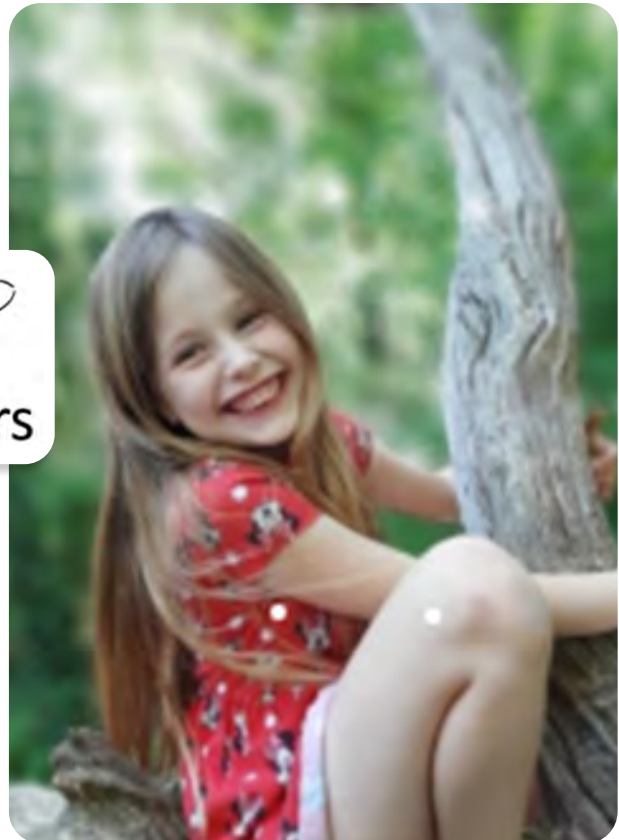
### From the perspective of child-care and playwork settings

# CLYBIAU PLANT CYMRU KIDS' CLUB



## Dexters Holiday Club

My name is Angharad, the owner and manager of Dexters Holiday Club- most of my friends, family, colleagues and clients know me as 'Sunny' though. I have owned Out of School Clubs in South Wales for the past ten years- this year by far has been our most challenging and stressful year of operation to date! No prizes for guessing what has been the catalyst for this stress... Covid-19.



Having said that - it has probably also been the most rewarding year to work in childcare and play. I feel that this year, we have been fully recognised for the service we provide - and when I say 'we' I mean anyone who works to provide, support and enable childcare and play services. The importance of

seeing friends, experiencing new things, playing games and escaping our four walls has never been so clear. Everyone I have spoken to about lockdown (and I am sick of that word, and sick of the conversations about it now!) whether they have children or not has said something along the lines of ‘Lockdown is hard for us all, but to an extent it’s alright for adults because at least we understand it (in part), it’s the children it is hardest on’. And yes, it has been a huge lifestyle shock for us all- the children I work with do understand the situation to an extent but understanding it doesn’t make it any easier.



As adults we have lots of ways of communicating, finding pleasure and enjoyment and occupying our minds- for children pretty much all of that is through play. Real play, self directed, uninterrupted, play without purpose - usually with other children. So, no matter how much of a super human you are - you won’t replicate the experience as a parent.... children need to be together (when it’s safe).

Parents have been under huge pressure this year, the list of responsibilities and roles has grown, and the increased time and resources, support and training hasn’t necessarily followed. I am so glad as a Club, we have been able to offer some respite for the children as well as the parents. The response we have had from families who have used us throughout the pandemic has been gratitude on a deeper level than ever before, and a heightened awareness of the benefits of play opportunities.

Dexters only operates during school holidays- we are a small Setting with a close-knit team, all of whom are passionate about children and play. Being closed for nearly three months before the February session meant that we all felt anxious when the February break rolled around. Our service has been reviewed; risk assessed, adapted and redesigned more times than I care to think about in the past 12 months. Constant regulation changes, guidance amendments, advice updates and restrictions have meant a real headache in the background of our Club- but that isn’t exclusive to childcare and play!



One thing that has remained a constant for Dexters and the team of Playworkers, is the desire to provide fun, engaging, exciting sessions for children. As always, we met (virtually) to discuss plans for games and activities during the February half term. Resources, ingredients and materials were purchased (along with truck loads of sanitiser and antibac!) and as the staff opened up on the first day back they had plenty planned to occupy the children.... The truth is- we didn't need to do a lot. The Playworkers had to busy themselves with cleaning and tidying at times because the children were content with soaking up the company of other children.

Of course, throughout the week games were played, cakes were baked and treasures were crafted - all with the support of the Playworkers - but this felt like a bonus on top of just spending time chatting and playing – play as it should be - uninterrupted play for play's sake.

Just because you may not 'need' childcare at the moment, it doesn't mean that your child can't benefit from attending a setting like ours. I would urge you to take a look at what is on offer in your local area and book a session or two- if nothing else, your children will get the opportunity to make up for some of the play time they have lost over the past year.

To all parents who have made use of an Out of School Club, especially to the families who use Dexters, Thank you for sticking with us through this trying past year and continuing to recognise the value in quality childcare and play experiences, we can't wait to see you at future holidays!



# EARLY YEARS WALES



## KIN Nature Kindergarten

KIN Nature Kindergarten is Monmouthshire's first completely outdoor nursery setting. Situated in 7 acres of organic farm and woodland, children spend 5 hours a day outside – whatever the weather.

At KIN we are passionate about promoting and protecting what we refer to as 'The Nature of Childhood' – that is, all the things that children naturally do – running, jumping, climbing, exploring, discovering, taking risks etc. We believe that children should have unhurried, unstructured time to explore and connect to the world around them free from adult agenda – we believe in the power of play.



Oftentimes, play is viewed by adults as something separate to work. Something to do in the child's free time or as a reward for completing work. At our setting, play is an inherent part of our culture and approach. We do not view it as a separate activity to be used as a relief from work. Play is the work of young children. It is how they acquire and master skills, develop their physical capabilities, learn about themselves and the world around them.



Important features of play are that it is freely chosen by the child and that it is intrinsically motivated. Our approach is very much, child led and play based. We do not pre plan themes or activities ahead of time. Preferring to respond to children and their interests in real time enables us to act as co – players, learning and discovering



alongside the children rather than as teachers dictating the direction of learning and imparting knowledge.

As a Nature Kindergarten, the outdoor environment plays a crucial role in the experience of the children. We believe that being in nature amplifies the power of play, it provides the location, context and resources for learning and offers many opportunities and benefits that don't exist within an indoor context. Our environment is dynamic and changes from one moment to the next depending upon the season and weather conditions. The children's play responds to the ever - changing conditions making for authentic, child led experiences.



As a setting we share with our families the well evidenced health benefits of outdoor play.

In the Early Years, children learn through whole body, sensorial experiences. Outdoors, children are free to move their bodies and use their voices in a much bigger way than indoors. Children as young as 2 build stamina, strength and resilience by walking long distances, negotiating steep (often slippery) slopes and playing in a range of landscapes and weathers.

Studies have shown that playing in the mud exposes children to beneficial bacteria which can help reduce the incidence of childhood allergies and boost their natural immunity. The friendly bacteria in the mud are also known to activate the production of serotonin in the brain resulting in feelings of well - being.

Outdoor play can also help to support children's vision. When children play outside, they are exposed to wide spectrum natural light. This natural





daylight helps to promote the healthy growth of the eye and reduces the chances of the child becoming short sighted.

It's not only health benefits that children experience from outdoor play. The outdoor environment promotes exploration, adventure, challenge and discovery. Children are faced with opportunities to challenge themselves both physically and mentally through adventurous or risky play, learning to recognise and overcome uncomfortable feelings of fear.

Through exposure to and connection with the natural world, they become curious about it. They begin to understand it and value it. Once they have learnt to love it, they become advocates for protecting it.

Now, more than ever we believe that children should experience a play based, outdoor childhood. The Covid 19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns highlighted to many just how vital our connection to the natural world is both for our physical and mental well - being. Our children have had a lot of upheaval over the last year and now need time to recalibrate and return to a state in which they can thrive. Play is how children process their experiences and make sense of the world around them and we, as their caregivers have a responsibility to prioritise this.



# Mudiad Meithrin



## Cylch Meithrin Nelson

Cylch Meithrin Nelson is a Welsh-medium childcare setting in the village of Nelson. We are located at the back of the local fruit and vegetable shop off the main road. We have access through gates at the rear, which leads to our outdoor area. Our indoor areas are across two floors, as our building is a converted house. We offer places for fee-paying children, Flying Start, Early Years (Rising 3's) and also offer care under the 30-hour Childcare Offer. We employ five permanent and one bank staff. We are a registered charity and have Charitable Incorporated Organisation status and are managed by a Voluntary Management Committee consisting of four trustees.

**The pandemic has been a very difficult time for children, what difference has attending a cylch meithrin during the last year had on the physical and mental health and well-being of children?**

We feel that as a result of the first lockdown in March 2020, we have seen a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of children, particularly the children who left at that time and did not return to the Cylch as they went to school in September. They had settled



into the Cylch Meithrin and this ended abruptly. These children missed the opportunity for a smooth transition to school and some parents have informed us that their children have found this move difficult. We reopened the Cylch in September 2020 and saw an impact on the children's social skills more than any other area of development. However, since September we have seen a positive development in the children's social skills since they have been at the Cylch, as well as other areas such as their Welsh language development. We have noticed that children have taken longer to settle into the Cylch, those who returned and new beginners.



We feel that this is due to the children having spent much of their time with only their parents throughout the pandemic. Parents have also expressed their concerns about their children's social skills and were happy to see the Cylch back open. We have worked closely with all parents and children to help with settling in and we feel that the children enjoy their time at the Cylch and parents are happy to see their children back and socialising happily.

**Since the cylch meithrin has been able to re-open, what difference do you think attending a cylch meithrin has had on parents / guardians?**

Parents had some concerns about sending their children back to the Cylch Meithrin, but overall a sense of relief. Parents seem happy to have some sort of normality back for their children as some have expressed concerns that their children have not socialised or seen their friends, particularly those who will



be leaving to go to school this year. Many of the parents have continued to work throughout the pandemic and have been very keen for us to reopen and provide the childcare they need.

### **What activities did you do with the children?**

We have a closed Facebook group for parents / carers of children currently attending the Cylch. This was our main point of contact with parents and children throughout the pandemic. We really used the group by posting things regularly such as stories and songs our staff recorded, activities and pictures. We also sent the children work packages and activities that parents could do with their children when time allowed. We sent recipes home to the parents and children to do together which was particularly popular, and we have received many pictures showing the children enjoying these. It has been very lovely to be able to keep in touch with the children even though the Cylch was closed for a long time.



### **As cylchoedd meithrin re-opened, did this have an impact on your staff, and if so, what?**

Staff were concerned if we could reopen and what it would mean for our jobs in the long term if this was not possible. There was also some concern about returning, mainly because we had been closed for a long time, but we were all clear that we would be happy to be back at work once the Cylch was able to reopen. Things felt a bit strange for a while, e.g it was strange to be around each other again but we have a great team of staff and we have communicated openly with each other before and after returning to



work. We have used the templates provided by Mudiad Meithrin, such as the staff questionnaire, so that staff could raise any concerns in advance. After re-opening, it took us all a while to settle back in. We were all concerned about things, like being too close to someone or if someone sneezed, but we soon settled to be back around each other safely. The biggest impact for us as staff, is settling into a new regime to allow things like safe distancing and all the extra cleaning. The need for more cleaning has affected staff hours and we have had to extend staff hours before and after the session to allow time for this. Despite these changes, we work well as a team to ensure a safe environment for the children.



## What were the challenges as you re-opened your cylch meithrin? How did you overcome these?

There were several challenges as we re-opened, such as:

- Carrying out more detailed risk assessments
- Keeping up to date with all information and ongoing changes
- Information coming from several different sources
- Having to change systems at the Cylch to ensure that we follow the guidelines
- Working in smaller groups which means that all staff need to work within ratios at all times – this has had a major impact on time for administration / paperwork, which remains a challenge
- Ensuring parents are happy and at ease to send their children to the Cylch - we have had to adapt procedures as we welcome new children
- Additional cleaning – we have used Mudiad's template since we reopened and continue to do so every day. It is easy to follow and thorough
- Very low numbers - it took a long time for our numbers to build back up. This caused financial concerns (we are grateful for the furlough scheme).





# NDNA Cymru



## Big Ben's Adventure Club

Big Ben's Adventure Club is an Out of School and Holiday Club that runs as part of Tiny Tots Nursery in Prestatyn. The manager, Ben Williams, has developed a stimulating adventure experience that allows children to build their physical skills, develop new skills and explore risk.

Ben likes to make the most of the large, extensive grounds at the Nursery and children attending the Club fill their days with assault courses, team sports and caring for a menagerie of animals. A new allotment has just been completed with the help of the children, where they can grow their own food. 'Wild

Cooking' outdoors on an open fire allows the children to learn about where their food comes from and how to cook as well as managing risk and how to stay safe and is particularly popular with the children.

All staff at the Club are qualified to at least a Level 2 in Childcare or Playwork and Ben is qualified to Level 5. The Club is registered with CIW under Tiny Tots Nursery and Ben works closely with the nursery management team to ensure that all legal requirements are met as well as making sure all risk assessment,







policies and procedures are fit for purpose. He really values the support of the Nursery because the paperwork is essential in ensuring a well-run, safe and professional service.

The Club also benefits from membership of the NDNA Cymru and Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Clubs who also offer support with the running of the club. More importantly these organisations provide a great opportunity to network and share ideas as well as accessing advice and training. In particular, Ben has been a part of recent training and publications from NDNA Cymru on outdoor and risky play and has been able to put this to use at the Club.

Alongside the nursery, the club has put in place necessary safety measures over the last 12 months to keep the children safe during the pandemic. This has included enhanced cleaning of the setting and resources, social distancing where necessary and strict procedures for parents to follow when dropping off and picking up the children.

The impact the Club has on the children who attend is clear. As well as having fun and new learning experiences, their confidence increases and they develop independence. Team working and collaborative play builds social skills and friendships. Feedback from parents and children is overwhelmingly positive. Ben's expertise and enthusiasm and the skills of the qualified staff at the Club have resulted in a safe but exciting learning experience that allows children to explore activities they are not usually able to access at home or school.

# PACEY Cymru

pacey | CYMRU

## **Ian Henderson, registered childminder**

Ian has been a CIW registered childminder since 2014. As a childminder he works from home, in the beautiful Gwydir Forest near Betws-Y-Coed. In 2020 his setting achieved the 'Rich Play Award' in partnership with his local authority. This means his setting is dedicated to upholding children's Right to Play. He recognises that "play is important, and play is every child's right. He promises to do everything he can to help ALL our children to have rich play experiences in his setting". PACEY Cymru spoke to Ian to discuss play, learning and development during the pandemic.



## **What difference did attending your setting have on children's physical, mental health, and wellbeing?**

'I have recognised that some children were less active over the lockdowns and along with less social interactions their physical and mental health and wellbeing were affected. Some children became shy and introverted, and their self-confidence diminished due to long periods of not attending. It took about three to four weeks before some children re-settled, and I noticed children having difficulty making eye contact. I felt some children had missed out on opportunities to play and the benefits it brings due either to parent's lack of understanding of the importance of play or, due to parents not having had as much time to play whilst working from home with the children being expected to be quieter and keep themselves occupied- missing out on valuable opportunities to play and develop that they would have experienced if in childcare. The changes were more evident to me in those that stayed away longer or those who came back on reduced hours.

When they were back at my setting, they were able to play more widely again and play naturally means they are being active which improves their physical

health. As children are playing, they are interacting with others, making decisions, and solving problems which builds their confidence. Play is an important way to keep their minds and bodies active to improve their health and mental wellbeing.

I have noticed that the loss of routine and constant changes due to restrictions and lockdowns has left children 'on edge'. I have witnessed more arguing over toys as lack of play and interaction has left children less socially aware and able to deal with peers. Teamwork at my setting has helped children to interact and negotiate and has made a big difference in building their confidence through play and giving them a sense of achievement.

I generally look after pre-school age children or children who attend the local Cylch Meithrin rather than school-aged children though do have a mix of ages. Parents have chosen to send their child to me when school was closed due to their own work commitments and so their child would still have the opportunity to play, interact and learn so I have provided a beneficial service.

I have seen the effects of lockdown on a child who has only ever really known a life under lockdown. A sibling was born to one of the older children I look



after just before lockdown. Prior to lockdown they would smile at me when I was dropping off their older sibling however after lockdown, they would not even look at me. They started in my setting in recent weeks and so I put plans in place to support attachment and sent videos of myself playing with the toys in the setting. This helped familiarise the child with me and the setting and aided

transition. However, the child is still wary of my other family members in the setting as their social skills have not developed in the same way as they would have done prior to lockdown.'



**What difference did your setting make for local parents and carers?**

'My setting being open enabled parents to continue to work and gave parents an opportunity to focus on other areas of their life. Which has been important for their mental health and wellbeing as well as their child's. Parents continued to access the Childcare Offer at my setting. Although I did not specifically provide support with schoolwork, I continued to provide ample opportunities for learning through play. We set up a shop with the toys in the setting and through role play they learnt about money and acted out paying and giving change which helped their numeracy skills. We also used loose parts such as cones in maths games by adding and subtracting with them- there is a real benefit to learning through play.'

**What play activities did you do with the children that stand out during this period?**

'The most popular activity, enjoyed by all who attend the setting, was a 'scavenger hunt'. I would ask children to find something beginning with a letter, or of a particular colour or shade or we would hunt for bugs, or safari animal figures that I had hid in the forest in the grounds of my setting. The children made binoculars out of recycled resources and used them on their hunts. Through this activity I supported children's learning of letters, numbers, maths, and the world around them. Through play you can teach children anything. The benefits from learning this way are that it is fun, and they are learning without them even realising it. There weren't any concerns about infection, prevention and control with this activity and it was simple to set up. I do recall the difficulties in the early days of the pandemic before formal guidance was released, trying to ensure that children were socially distancing. I am glad that things swiftly changed, and guidance and support measures were put in place.

I know the children in my care well and adapt activities based on their development and abilities, providing assistance when required. Older children help the younger ones which is also great for their development. A huge benefit of play is problem-solving, and I saw this in the way the children interacted.

We spend as much time outside as we can. I know the children well and boundaries are set so children know what is expected of them. When considering infection, prevention and control I adapted some activities. Play dough was replaced with salt dough. It was used and then binned or baked.



This still gave children the opportunities for creative play whilst strengthening their motor skills but in a safer, controlled manner. I made the decision to reduce soft furnishings. I removed the sofa and replaced it with cushions that were rotated and quarantined between groups. I sterilised plastic toys between use. As play is the important thing what the children play with, is to a large extent irrelevant, which enabled me to continue to let the children play whilst taking into account infection prevention and control measures.'

**Did working in the setting have an impact on any staff or others who work from the setting? If relevant and if yes, what was the impact?**

'It did have an impact. Childminding can be lonely anyway with only children for company but during the pandemic there is less interaction with parents at drop off and collection which has isolated me further and interaction with other adults was also reduced by the restrictions. I recall being bombarded with information and rules and regulations and not having anyone I could talk to about it, such as other childminders I would usually meet with. I used information from PACEY Cymru to get my head around the rules and regulations as I knew this would be childminder specific and relevant to me.'

**Did operating a childcare service in the pandemic have an impact on family members living with you?**

'Yes, my wife became my assistant due to business needs. I opted to have my wife on board as she was already in a bubble with me, rather than increase the infection risk by having someone new join me. Working as a childminder affected my own children's home-schooling. My daughter struggled having to do schoolwork whilst watching other children play and my son struggled because he wanted to get the work done and out the way so he could play but it was not set early enough by the school.'

### 3 CASE STUDIES – From the perspective of a parent / carer

## CLYBIAU PLANT CYMRU KIDS' CLUB



### Naomi Evans

#### What Out of School Childcare means to my family

I think whatever your circumstances, you will have found the past year challenging. Yes of course there have also been those moments of light and 'silver linings'; the re-assessing of life's priorities, increased time with children, being forced to slow down and reflect on what really matters. But there is no getting away from the fact that we have been through, and are continuing to live through, a collective trauma: all weathering the storm that is Covid-19, albeit in our "different boats". And children, have very much been experiencing their own challenges, confusion, loneliness, worry and 'missing out': from the babies who have missed out on early socialisation at baby groups, to children missing their school friends, to teenagers missing out on major life events (exams, proms) and independence.

As a mother of two children, aged 6 and 4, I have frequently reflected on (and worried about) the impact of the changes and restrictions that we have faced over the last year on my daughter and son. Working from home, whilst I feel lucky to have retained my job and income, has not been without its challenges, as many other parents will know. Not only have there been the standard half-naked-child-appearing-during-video-call moments, but I feel like my work has become much more of a palpable thing for them. When they were in school or childcare, they knew 'mummy was working' but it wasn't quite so in their face as it has been when I've been sat upstairs with them in the house.



‘Mum Guilt’ is a commonly used term and I think I have never used it quite as much, or felt it quite as strongly, as I have in the past year. I have had the general worries in terms of education, particularly around whether other parents would be doing more/better homeschooling and whether my children would suffer as a result. But I have also worried about how much they have missed in terms of play: going to parks, indoor attractions, new places and most importantly spending time with their friends, who they have fiercely missed.

Like many other people, we have hit a bit of a wall in terms of coping and positivity since Christmas and this sense of ‘missing’ (friends, extended family, special places) has grown tremendously during this time, for me as well as them. Between my work and school work, I began feeling like I was only interacting with my children when I was trying to get them to do a homeschool task.

Since my daughter turned 4 I have used a Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) registered Holiday Club based on a small farm in Pencoed, called Dexters. As well as being excellently managed in line with regulations, the unique location of the Club and its child-centred play ethos has meant that Dexters has provided everything that a parent (and child) could want, and more.

Prior to the Half Term Week, the Owner of the Club emailed parents with the usual fun packed itinerary along with reassurances and information about the infection control measures that had been put in place. There was a small part of me that felt a little anxious in the morning dropping the children off, as they were both a bit quiet and out of the habit of being out of the house, but I needn’t have worried.

I am trying to find the words to sufficiently express the difference that attending the Club had on my children... I knew that they would have a good time, as they always do, but I don’t think I had fully appreciated how bored they had gotten with day to day life in our house, and how much they had missed seeing other children their own age, until I saw the difference in both of them when I picked them up at the end of the day.

I arrived to find two fresh faced, very muddy, bright eyed, rosy cheeked grinning children. The first thing that my 4 year old son announced, very proudly, was *“Mum, I made a new friend!!!”* and they both spent the whole journey home, along with most of the evening, laughing about slipping in a giant muddy puddle, talking about making pancakes, and explaining the rules of some of the games they had played in the field. It was like they had had their energy, excitement and passion for play restored and in turn I felt like my heart was going to burst with happiness to see them both so full of joy.

I work within an organisation where the importance and benefits of Play are regularly discussed, particularly with respect to the advantages offered to children within quality play environments in Out of School Childcare Clubs like Dexters. I think this moment in February Half Term though was the most strongly I have ever felt this, and witnessed it first hand and so close to home. Yes, education is important. And yes, I am very glad that the schools have opened again. But this past year hasn't just been about a loss of in-school education; children have missed out on countless hours of all consuming, social, explorative, child-led and exhilarating play. Clubs, run by qualified Playworkers who truly understand play and the Playwork Principles, provide children with those much needed quality play experiences, where they challenge themselves, learn about the world, mentally work through things and reflect, take risks, learn to manage conflict, make friends and practice countless other skills.

Yes, childcare provides me as a working mum with the hours I need to do my job without the gnawing mum guilt of knowing that my kids are bored or arguing or having way too much screen time; and so I can focus more on playing with them when I am not working. But knowing (and seeing) just how much my children get out of being there, is worth so much more than the needs it fulfills for me as a working mum. Dexters made such a positive difference for my children's mental health and wellbeing this February, and they are already counting down to when they can go again!

# EARLY YEARS WALES



When choosing an Early Years setting there are many considerations that parents make. These include, availability, convenience, affordability etc. However, many times it is the experiences that the settings offer that make the case for the settings themselves. These experiences are the very reason two parents have shared their choices using KIN Nature Kindergarten in Monmouthshire. In particular, the prioritising of play-based and nature-based experiences that the setting offers were particularly important in the decisions both parents made.

*‘Finding a setting for my son where he had the freedom to play outside, to explore the natural environment with other children, was really important to me. As a family, we try to spend as much time as possible in the great outdoors, so why does this need to be different in a childcare setting?’*



The evidence for play is clear. In Wales it forms part of the Rights of the Child, and within the early years and early education experience, play and experiential, child-led learning is embedded. And, while as practitioners we appreciate this, it is pleasing to hear our parents recognise and appreciate the values and ethos we promote in our setting.

*‘What Sal and the team do at KIN is provide a stimulating, safe, yet challenging environment, where my child can develop his independence doing the thing he loves the most (playing outside!). I love the way that everything at KIN is something to explore and play with - the stream, the mud kitchen or even a little stone on the ground. My son is learning how to appreciate nature and beginning to understand that education is so much more than a ‘traditional’ classroom - something that I hope he keeps with him as he continues his educational journey.’*



Through authentic child-led play, our childcare and learning are meeting the needs of every child in the setting. We understand that children develop at different rates and that the development of individual skills, knowledge and social and emotional control is best approached through capitalising on the opportunities to support the individual’s progress at the right time. Our parents’ value this, *‘I believe that in offering my son the opportunity to attend KIN, I’m offering him life skills such as safety, confidence and sense in new environments, respect for his environment and planet - and the other people and creatures he shares it with, space to explore and play at his own pace - leading him to learn in a way which is both engaging for him, and relevant to his life, and a sense of teamwork and community with his fellow KIN.’* However, we are not just embedding play out of some sense of having new-age, outdoor, environmental values. We have seen the difference this has made to our children, and our parents recognise the same thing.

*'In the months that he has been there I already see all of these things happening, and as a parent who also works in education I am always keenly watching out for his milestones and development. At KIN his language is excelling, he is counting, he is engaging with other children, reciting songs and identifying plants and animals. On top of this he is incredibly physically confident and capable, he is kind and caring to animals and especially insects, and will always choose the garden over the television whatever the weather. I've never seen him happier.'*

For both parents who gave information above, the choice of a setting where play and time outdoors are a priority has been a conscious decision to support their child's development and early years experiences. One parent travels an hour to bring her child to the setting because these are the experiences that she wants her son to have. There are, however, many different approaches and contexts that settings operate from, but we can all embed the play culture and share the importance of play with our parents. Play isn't something children can do after the 'more important' things. Play can be the vehicle to drive development, learning and the intrinsic enthusiasm for life that children in the early years have. This is best summed up by the parents' chats with their own children about their day, when they've experienced play, outdoors and interaction with children directed by children themselves.

*'My 2 year old attends KIN Nature Kindergarten in conjunction with a more traditional nursery setting. Since beginning at KIN, my son comes home exploding with new words, and trying to communicate his experiences of the day with me. Through his limited vocabulary he eagerly tells me not only about his activities and friends, but about colours, smells and sounds and sensations - "lots of green! lots of leaf, trees green!" "Emmy splash water - cold!" before swiftly dropping off into the sort of undisturbed sleep only a day of fresh air can give you.'*

# Mudiad Meithrin



## Carly's story

**Background:** Carly (not her real name) is a single mother who has a 3 year old child with social and behavioural needs. The child attends Cylch Meithrin for 5 sessions a week.

### **The pandemic has been a difficult time for children, what difference did it make to your child being able to attend the Cylch Meithrin?**

Fabulous difference, it was fantastic that I could physically take him somewhere, knowing that he was getting an education and not being left behind. It made such a difference to his well-being and mental health. He is also showing signs of having ADHD and therefore likes a routine and familiarity, when I said we were going to Cylch Meithrin he was so happy. As he gets tired after Cylch, this also helped his daily routine.

### **Since the Cylch Meithrin re-opened again what difference has this made to you?**

A massive help, not only time to recharge my batteries but to also know that he is having a nice time in a safe setting. We've both had support from the Leader. As I take medication for anxiety, I don't know what I would have been like if I didn't have my interactions with the Leader.

It gives me a reason to get out of the house and to have a reason to travel. I know he is safe and learning. I have brief chats with the Leader, and this face to face contact is so important to me. If I said that we didn't have a 'good' weekend or evening she will give me a ring after the Cylch Meithrin or during her lunch hour to chat further. Her support has been incredible. She got in touch with the Health Visitor for me get us the help we needed, that face to face contact is invaluable.



Taking my son to Cylch has saved my mental health on many occasions and the support from the Leader is tremendous. She goes over and above her role and has helped us as a family more than I can expect.

The Leader has rung me in her break to ask how my GP appointment went - she's like an extended part of our family-the best move I did was chose to send my child to the Cylch Meithrin. The care and attention my child receives at the Cylch Meithrin is so caring.

I can't stress the support we have been given, the Leader even ensured that there was enough food in the house through the Food Bank, and distributed it to the family.

#### **Additional Information:**

With the support of the 'Cynllun Cyfeirio' Coordinator (Referral Scheme) the child was referred to the Speech and Language service which ensured that a language programme was in place for the Cylch Meithrin staff to deliver. The scheme also ensured that the Health Visitor, Speech and Language Officer were both aware of the family's situation and that there was a close contact between the home and the services.

# NDNA Cymru



## Sara Paulus

Sara Paulus' son Jack is six years old and loves attending Big Bens Adventure Club. Sara found out about the Club through word of mouth from other parents and was immediately drawn to the outdoor adventure aspect of the club. "We can't recommend the place enough."

Jack attends the club three times a week after school and during the holidays. The fact the Club is open until 6pm in the evenings and even on Saturday mornings is an extra advantage that means Sara is able to work while knowing that her son is in a secure and safe environment and, most importantly, is having fun. Jack constantly talks about his time at the club. He enjoys looking

after the animals, especially the guinea pigs and building things with wood. But his particular love is for the campfires and wild cooking. As Sara points out, these are all activities that you are unlikely to do at home.

It is very important to Sara that the Club is well organised and regulated. Knowing that the Club is registered with CIW through Tiny Tots Nursery's registration and that Ben and his staff are fully conversant with all the rules and guidelines involved in running a childcare facility reassures parents. This has been particularly important during the rapidly changing situation of the Covid 19 crisis.

The fact that staff are knowledgeable about child development and the importance of play in that development is also hugely important to Sara. Jack has some additional needs and Ben and his team are able to adjust to this and support Jack with his adventures. Ben, especially has really been able to engage with Jack and Sara points out that "he wouldn't go if he was not happy!" Sara also feels that it is refreshing to have a male leader in a childcare facility and Jack really warms to this.

Sara has noticed a difference in Jack since attending the club. He is more settled and Ben's approach has made it easier for him to socialise with other children. The necessity of having to use out of school and holiday clubs in order to continue working has been turned into a huge benefit for Jack because of the professionalism, skills and enthusiasm of Ben and his team.



National Day Nurseries Association

\*Brighter thinking  
for early years



# PACEY Cymru



Nicky has a 3-and-a-half-year-old that goes to Ian's childminding setting. PACEY Cymru spoke to Nicky to hear her views on using a childminder with a focus on play during the pandemic. Nicky's family love the outdoors and chose Ian because of the focus on outdoor play in his setting.

## **What difference did attending the childminding setting have for your child's physical and mental health and wellbeing?**

'It has had a massive difference on my oldest child's physical and mental health and wellbeing. It has given him the opportunity to play with peers, crafts that they might not do at home and access to the forest for bug hunts which my child particularly enjoys. Interacting with others has had a positive impact on his mental health. I have recognised the short term impact on my youngest child's social development due to being born just before the lockdown at Christmas. This lack of social interaction had her wary of meeting even close family, although the effects seem to be short-lived thankfully. My son is always bursting to tell me what he has done at Ian's; sharing art, and stories of bug hunts, and tales of who he has played with. He loves going to Ian's and asks on a Sunday if he is going to Ian's tomorrow because he cannot wait to go back. The activities Ian provides have had a positive impact on my child's mental health and wellbeing and being outdoors compliments physical activities that we already provide as a family at home. Play is so important in children's development.'

## **What difference did access to a childminding setting make to you as a parent/carer?**

'It made a massive difference to me and my family. I was pregnant and still working when my son first went back to Ian after the first national lockdown. Knowing he was happy and mixing with others meant I could take time out for

herself to relax and continue to work. I was also able to access the Childcare Offer. Thankfully, my son was not massively affected by the first lockdown and did not question why he was not going to Ian's anymore. I think this was in part due to the extra time that we were able to spend as a family which was a novelty for us. It has made me realise even more how valuable exploring the forest is for all the children in Ian's care.'

**What play activities did your childminder do that stand out during this period?**

'Ian always goes the extra mile and thinks of all the skills children need to develop. He introduces numbers, letters, and language through play activities. He provides activities for counting using loose parts and an activity where her child must look for the letters of his name. I am grateful that Ian uses both English and Welsh in his setting. My son has done baking and Ian encourages him to make healthy food choices through activities and play. My son's particular favourite activity is bug hunts, and he loves lifting stones to look for bugs. Ian has taught him to be able to identify the different bugs and the different tree species in the forest which I find very impressive. Ian has also introduced him to pond dipping. I appreciate all the play opportunities Ian supplies outdoors but that is not all Ian does. There is also the opportunity for play and quiet time indoors. Ian has a wide range of toys and resources and my son particularly likes building things using construction toys. All the activities provided massively support my son's development and social skills.'

## 4 Marketing Your Setting

We urge settings to promote the benefits of play and childcare to headteachers, parents and the wider community. As current lockdown restrictions ease and families plan childcare arrangements for the coming months, now may be the right time to call for their support in terms of bookings or letting them know that they risk losing the affordable, local childcare that your setting provides permanently. Contact your national childcare organisations for guidance and resources on effectively marketing your settings in the community.



- [Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs](#)  
– [information about marketing resources](#)
- [Early Years Wales](#)
- [Mudiad Meithrin](#)
- [NDNA Cymru](#)
- [PACEY Cymru](#)





## 5 A Note to Parents / Carers

And finally on behalf of the Early Years, Childcare and Playwork sector, we in Cwlwm would like to remind all parents and carers of the benefits of childcare and play:

- It's fun
- It's safe
- It supports children's mental and physical health and wellbeing
- It promotes learning and development work
- It's an opportunity to make new friends
- It's a way of providing structure and routine
- You'll get support and time to yourself



So, with all of this in mind, please ensure you support your local childcare and play settings, and our message to you is:

**USE IT OR LOSE IT!**



[www.cwlwm.org.uk](http://www.cwlwm.org.uk)

The Cwlwm partnership consists of the following organisations:



**CLYBIAU PLANT CYMRU KIDS' CLUBS**

Bridge House, Station Road, Llanishen, Cardiff CF14 5UW

Tel: 029 2074 1000 E-mail: [info@clybiauplantcymru.org](mailto:info@clybiauplantcymru.org)



**EARLY YEARS WALES**

Unit 1, Coopers Yard, Curran Road, Cardiff, CF10 5NB

Tel: 029 2045 1242 E-mail: [info@earlyyears.wales](mailto:info@earlyyears.wales)



**MUDIAD MEITHRIN**

Y Ganolfan Integredig, Boulevard de Saint-Brieuc, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 1PD

Tel: 01970 639639 E-mail: [post@meithrin.cymru](mailto:post@meithrin.cymru)



**NDNA CYMRU**

NDNA Cymru, Office 3, Crown House, 11 Well Street, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 1AE

Tel: 01824 707823 E-mail: [wales@ndna.org.uk](mailto:wales@ndna.org.uk)



**PACEY CYMRU**

Room G16, The Maltings, East Tyndall Street, Cardiff CF24 5EZ

Tel: 02920 351407 E-mail: [paceycymru@pacey.org.uk](mailto:paceycymru@pacey.org.uk)