

## Natural Learners project report 2018

Troopers Hill Nature Reserve is a fantastic public open space located in one of Bristol's more deprived areas. This site has huge potential as a resource for outdoor learning but has been little used for this purpose. In 2017, Friends of Troopers Hill trialled an outdoor education programme called Natural Learners. They successfully applied for a £5,380 grant from the Nineveh Charitable Trust in 2018 to continue and extend the programme. The project aims to encourage local residents to develop a connection with the natural world by providing inspiring educational experiences in this amazing green space. Sessions included nature-based arts and crafts, nature trails, wildlife activities linked to local ecology, games and play, and the sharing of healthy refreshments.

The funding from the Nineveh Trust has enabled us to keep activities affordable and accessible to all local families.

### Highlights of the 2018 programme:

- 14 Wild Play sessions delivered for pre-school children and their parents/carers; a total of 49 families took part in these sessions, with an average of 10 children attending each week.
- 8 drop-in family events delivered during school holidays/weekends; an average of 19 families, including 32 children, attended each event.
- 3 school sessions delivered with a local primary school; a total of 84 local school children walked to the hill to learn about plants in the local environment.
- Partnership established with local Children's Centre.
- Recruitment of 1 local outdoor-learning volunteer.

### Summary of activities:

#### **'Wild Play' (weekly pre-school sessions)**

Fourteen weekly Wild Play sessions were delivered, aimed at pre-school children. These were delivered during term time only; 7 before the summer holidays and 7 after the summer holiday.

Wild Play sessions had a weekly theme which linked to the nature or history of Troopers Hill, e.g Bees, Autumn, Nocturnal Animals, Wild Flowers, Trees etc. Each session included a nature hunt or scavenger hunt of some description, an exploratory/sensory activity, craft making and a story to conclude the session. Each week the group would break for a communal snack and drink and this would give the parents and children an informal space to socialise. All of the activities were optional and sometimes children would create their own activities and explore the natural surroundings with their parents supervising, but we found that most children enjoyed participating in the activities provided. We aimed to design activities that would improve the children's fine motor skills including crafts and sensory trays. We also allowed plenty of opportunities to be active and improve their gross motor skills and coordination for example, opportunities to climb trees, make dens and explore Troopers Hill whilst on treasure hunts.

Wild Play participants -

	Adults	Children	Total	Total number of participating families = 49
Weekly average	8.79	10.71	19.50	
Total attendances	123	150	273	

The sessions proved to be very popular, with lots of families returning regularly. There was a nice group dynamic and families got to know each other over the weeks. Several commented that they didn't want the sessions to end, that they had become part of their weekly routine that they really valued. One mum even started an informal meet-up at her home, with other families, following the final session on Troopers Hill.

Feedback from our evaluation form and comments book included:

*"This is a really lovely group with mixture of activities that are perfect for little ones."*

*"We have loved these sessions and look forward to them every week. They have a great balance of free play and inquiry. Thank you for your time and effort."*

*"I love this group. It's our favourite one we've been to in 2 years."*

*"I've had a wonderful time attending these sessions with my 21-month-old. Wonderful to be outside with a variety of activities suitable for all ages and a theme each week. We love coming and I find it something to really look forward to. I hope you can start again soon."*

*"Such a wonderful group!! It is so amazing to meet other parents and children in a beautiful natural setting and I love incorporating natural materials into play. Thank you!!"*

*"Brilliant play group in a great location. It is great for the children to be able to play in nature together and learn about wildlife."*

*"This group is amazing. Everyone should have the opportunity to connect with nature and be outside at least once a week! Kids & adults alike, it's good for the soul. Love to see this group run forever!"*

#### **'Natural Learners on Troopers Hill' (drop-in family events)**

We ran eight drop-in events for at families, with activities to suit a range of ages. The events were advertised as free to attend, but we welcomed voluntary donations from visitors. We encouraged families to bring a picnic and make a day of it. As well as the prepared activities we provided blankets to sit on, story books, and toys for free play.

As with the Wild Play sessions, activities at events were themed, e.g. trees, rainbows, mini-beasts, animals of Troopers Hill. Each event included activities that were facilitated at the event hub, activities that families could do independently at the hub, and activities that encouraged families to explore away from the hub. The exploration activities were varied to suit families with younger/older children, those with buggies etc. These activities included Eco-teering, scavenger hunt, tree bingo, nature trails, wildlife facts etc, and varied each time to take families on routes over the hill, through the woods, or around the field.

Other activities included nature-based craft and play activities, such as: making willow and wool dream-catchers, painting stones to look like insects, pine cone spiders, clay animals, printing with natural dyes etc.

Attendance at events -

	Adults	Children	Total
<b>Total attendances over 8 events</b>	187	256	443
<b>Event average</b>	23.38	32.00	55.38

Participating families -

	Participating families
<b>Total number of families recorded at events</b>	135
<b>Average number per event</b>	19.29
<b>% of families who had not done something like this before</b>	41.29%

Events were very well received with lots of families returning, as well as families from Wild Play coming along. Some comments from event participants -

*“This has been a fantastic morning of building collective knowledge of ‘place’ with almost and interspecies-ness between plant, animal and child-life. Would love to participate in more of these.”*

*“I enjoyed this day and I would definitely recommend to all my friends and family to come here again.”*  
(girl, aged 9)

*“Loved how the community has come together and exploring nature at its best.”*

*“Brilliant, inventive activities for kids, my boys loved it. We come to the hill a lot but the activities make it that bit more special. Thank you.”*

*“It’s such a lovely day of activities and so good to get the little ones exploring Troopers Hill. We have enjoyed the family days so much – really hoping it continues.”*

### **Trial school sessions**

Three trial sessions were delivered with Year 3 at Summerhill Academy. Three classes enjoyed a session about plants on Troopers Hill. Children walked to the hill and stayed for 1.5 hours. A total of 84 children took part in the sessions, accompanied by 21 adults.

All three class teachers agreed that the sessions definitely met the agreed learning objectives, and that the sessions were suitable for all of the learners in their groups.

Teachers also gave the following comments on their feedback forms -

<b>What did your pupils enjoy the most?</b>	<i>“Finding all the different species of plants.”</i> <i>“Exploring and finding items from the sheet.”</i> <i>“Being out in the fresh air, exploring nature and learning at the same time.”</i>
<b>Please leave any further comments here</b>	<i>“The session was well structured with lots of opportunities for the children to discover and explore.”</i> <i>“The session engaged all learners and was structured so that no one got left behind.”</i> <i>“Every time we’ve had a session with the Friends of Troopers Hill the experience has been fabulous. Thank you.”</i>

### **Partnerships**

To engage with a wider audience - including families that were unfamiliar with Troopers Hill, families on low incomes, and families that would not normally take part in outdoor learning activities - Natural Learners partnered with the Speedwell Children’s Centre (less than 1 mile away from Troopers Hill).

The Children’s Centre promoted all Natural Learners events and activities to families visiting the centre, and signposted families to Wild Play sessions. Two members of staff shadowed Wild Play sessions and one also came to help at a drop-in event. In return, Natural Learners told families about the Children’s Centre, and passed their details on to the Centre for further engagement (with permission from families).

## Volunteers

Natural Learners didn't advertise for volunteers but in hindsight we believe this was a missed opportunity. During the project we were contacted by a local young person who was keen to get involved in the project. Luke has extensive experience in supporting and delivering outdoor education sessions and has grown up on the doorstep of Troopers Hill. We believed that he would be an asset to the project and so recruited him. Luke assisted with 3 Wild Play sessions, 3 school sessions and 1 drop-in event. He had great ideas and a calm and relaxed rapport around participants. As a result, we are very keen to factor in more opportunities for volunteering in any future projects we run.

## Publicity

At events families were asked how they had heard about the event. The following publicity methods were listed:

Method	% of families attending events who heard via this method
Facebook	50.00%
Word of mouth	26.52%
Nextdoor	1.52%
Poster	6.06%
Mailing list	6.82%
Hoop	2.27%
Passing by	3.79%
Last event	2.27%
TH website	0.76%

Facebook publicity included creating events and uploading posters on the Natural Learners Facebook page, which were all shared on the Friends of Troopers Hill Facebook page also. Information was then shared in relevant local groups (such as parenting groups, and 'things to do with kids' groups).

In addition to the methods noted above, details of activities were sent to four local primary schools for inclusion in their print and digital newsletters.

Reporting against the project goals:

*1. Every family who wants to take part is able to, irrespective of income*

This was managed in two ways. Firstly, Wild Play sessions were managed on a 'pay what you can afford' basis', with a suggested voluntary donation of £3 per child. Secondly, our drop-in family events were advertised as free, but welcomed voluntary donations.

**Wild Play:** Families were asked, 'Is price a factor when deciding what activities to do with your child/children?'. 88% of respondents said 'yes'. They were also asked, 'Would you be able to come if there was a fixed price for the sessions?'. 94% said 'yes', but several noted that it depends on the price. £3 was suggested by some parents as an affordable fixed price to pay for the sessions, however this would not cover the cost of running a session.

*2. 75% of beneficiaries will be from within 2 miles of Troopers Hill*

**Wild Play:** 81.63% of families that took part in Wild Play sessions live within 2 miles of Troopers Hill.

**Events:** 93.29% of people that came to our events live within 2 miles of Troopers Hill.

**School:** Summerhill Academy is a 0.5 mile walk from Troopers Hill. We worked with 84 children and 21 adults from this school.

*3. 75% of beneficiaries will report that they use Troopers Hill more as a result of taking part in sessions*

**Wild Play:** Families were asked 'Do you now visit Troopers Hill more than you did before taking part in Wild Play?' 58.82% of respondents said 'yes', however it was only possible to collect feedback data from 17 of the 49 families that took part.

**Events:** 92.47% of families that attended our events said they came to Troopers Hill especially for the event, indicating a visit to the site that they would not have made otherwise. Several families coming to the events commented that they live locally but had never been to Troopers Hill before. This is not data that was captured, but would be a useful question to ask families during future activities.

**School:** Two visiting school children from Summerhill Academy commented that they had never been to Troopers Hill before, despite their school being only half a mile away from the site.

*4. 75% of beneficiaries will report something new they have learnt about their local environment*

**Wild Play:** 94.12% of respondents gave examples of things they and their children had learnt through taking part in Wild Play sessions. Examples given included -

*'We've learnt a lot about how to incorporate learning about nature into play and how to have fun outdoors.'*

*'The enjoyment of using natural materials in play'*

**Events:** It proved difficult to quantify the number of people who self-reported learning about the local environment at the family events. A feedback method called a 'Learning Tree' was used, whereby attendees were invited to write on a tag something they/their children had learnt that day, and to hang

it in a tree. Not all visitors accepted the invitation, and several wrote about the things they had enjoyed rather than things they had learnt. A total of 32 responses were collected over 8 events. Some examples of responses -

*"I learned how to catch bugs and find out what they are."*

*"Today we learned how to make beautiful head garlands!"*

*"I learned that caterpillars have 12 eyes."*

*"I learned that there are lots of types of tree on TH."*

*"I loved learning that ladybirds can eat 5000 insects in their life, and that bees beat their wings 190 times per minute."*

**School:** Three visiting class teachers were asked about what they and their pupils had learnt, and they gave the following answers -

Question	Response
<p>Did you and your pupils learn anything new about the local environment today?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Yes, a lot</li> <li>● Yes, a little</li> <li>● No</li> <li>● Not sure</li> </ul> <p>E.g....</p>	<p>3 out of 3 class teachers responded 'Yes, a lot'</p> <p>E.g.</p> <p><i>"The range of different species and plants."</i></p> <p><i>"Types of plants which can be found."</i></p> <p><i>"The names of previously unknown plants and trees."</i></p>

Recommendations for future Natural Learners activity on Troopers Hill:

1. Investigate options for accessible and secure equipment storage close to the site, to ease preparation and pack-down of sessions.
2. Approach council about having small raised fires at agreed areas of the site, to enable the delivery of sessions in colder months. Incorporate winter sessions into future funding bids, as there appears to be a appetite from local families for sessions all year round.
3. Future projects should account for the cost of volunteer recruitment/management time, and associated expenses (e.g. volunteers' DBS checks) so that the project can engage with, and benefit from, local volunteers.
4. Record and acknowledge the cost of on-going project development (e.g. meetings between the project managers, with key stakeholders and with existing/potential partners), and look for ways to fund this work.

5. When appropriate to use printed publicity material, increase budget for printing leaflets and posters, based on the costs recorded from this project.
6. Continue to look for ways to subsidise activities on Troopers Hill for our target families - £3 continues to be the limit of what families can afford but does not cover the costs of running sessions.
7. Record data regarding families that visit the Hill for the first time as a result of our activities.
8. Capture information about the ages of children attending our sessions and events, to help us understand who we are appealing to, and to shape what we offer going forward.

Summary:

The Natural Learners project 2018 built on the success of the 2017 trial of outdoor learning activities on Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve. The focus was on engaging local children, particularly with their families, in accessing and enjoying their local green space. Fourteen sessions were run for families with pre-school aged children, and eight drop-in events were run for families with children of all ages. In addition we ran 3 trial sessions with a local primary school. All activities were well-received by families and we demonstrated that there is a real appetite amongst local families and school groups for making use of this wonderful green space for play, exploration, learning about the natural environment, and making friends. In addition we have forged a partnership with the Speedwell Children's Centre, and recruited one local person as an outdoor-learning volunteer.

We have met the four main project goals outlined in our bid to the Nineveh Charitable Trust, and have put forward eight recommendations for consideration in planning future Natural Learners projects on Troopers Hill.