Learning Experience: Dinosaurs

Setting: Happy Days Childcare Centre, Ballyporeen, Co Tipperary

Setting type: Full and part-time daycare

Age group: Young children

Theme: Communicating

Aim 2: Children will use language.

Learning goal 3: In partnership with the adult, children will use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning.

This learning experience is an example of how one service supports one of the learning goals in Aistear’s theme of Communicating.

One Monday morning one of the children rushed in to tell us he had been to the Natural History Museum in London with his mum. During the course of the morning he told us all about his adventure and as many of the children were really interested in hearing about this visit we decided to invite his mum to come in to tell us more. Mum and James came in a couple of days later laden down with posters, photos, dinosaur skeletons and books. They told us about their visit and the children asked lots of questions. We quickly realised James was the expert where palaeontology (the study of dinosaurs) was concerned as he was the one answering all the questions!

Most children knew the Tyrannosaurus Rex but not Pterodactyl! Neither were they familiar with terms like carnivore and herbivore. Proudly displaying his expertise, James explained that the two-legged dinosaurs were plant-eaters and were called herbivores and the four-legged ones were carnivores which meant they ate meat.
During that morning and in the days that followed, the children’s play concentrated on dinosaurs—building caves, making volcanoes and so on. One morning when I passed by the sand play area as they excavated dinosaur skeletons, I heard James comment, *a palaeontologist has to be very careful not to damage the fossils when he finds dinosaur bones.* I thought I was in a museum and not a pre-school!

James explained that dinosaurs were extinct and when another child asked, *what does extinct mean?* James replied, *they don’t exist in real-life anymore!* Discussion time went on for a lot longer than usual that day and the children were enthralled.
Ideas to extend the children’s learning

- Create a dinosaur world by providing materials to make caves and volcanoes including rocks, plants, branches.
- Add books on dinosaurs to all play areas as well as pens and notebooks for drawing and planning.
- Put photo displays of the dinosaur play on the walls with explanations of some of the key terms so that parents can become familiar with them too and perhaps use them at home.

This experience also links to
Well-being, Aim 1, Learning goal 4
Identity and Belonging, Aim 1 Learning goal 5 and Aim 4, Learning goal 2
The play leader’s reflections

The depth of James’ knowledge was a revelation to us and if we hadn’t focused on the topic of dinosaurs we would never have seen the level of sophisticated vocabulary he had acquired. It was a key insight for us into children’s competencies.

Monday mornings are often a good time to find out about children’s interests as they will tell us where they have been over the week-end. This provides us with information to plan learning experiences that will be of interest to them.

Being the teacher was really a confidence boosting experience for James. He is now our resident dinosaur expert!