

Nursery World visits...

Daycare St Martin's, Solihull

Nicole Weinstein visits a Birmingham day nursery on the site of an independent school to see loose parts play in action

Stepping into the four-year-old room at Daycare St Martin's in Solihull, you would be forgiven for thinking you had entered a workshop. Children are purposely going about their day, selecting natural loose parts and transporting them back to tuff spots or the carpet to start working on their creations. One boy is weaving pieces of ribbon through metal hooks that have been drilled into an offcut of wood. Next to him, his friend is making patterns with elastic bands, stretching them around screws that have been drilled into a piece of wood. Another group of children are threading shoelaces through wooden disks with holes drilled into them. 'It's a snake,' one girl exclaims, holding up her creation and counting out 13 disks.

'We created these fine motor control boards out of a tree that was chopped down in the garden,' explains nursery manager Jess Dolan. 'Because the wooden pallets are small, the children have to concentrate and persevere, using their pincer grip, which is challenging. It's a good exercise to do before writing, as it helps warm up their muscles for fine motor work.'

'HOME FROM HOME'

The light, airy room contains low-level shelving units with baskets of natural loose parts. There are cotton reels; rattan balls; wooden numbers and letters; blocks; cylinders; corkscrews; shells; bottle tops and hollow

bamboo offcuts. Most of the resources are stored around the edges of the room, leaving plenty of space in the centre for large-scale exploration of loose parts, construction, imaginary play and threading and counting activities.

Four-year-old Amber is sat at a table with a practitioner, counting as she places one counter into a basket with the number 1 next to it, two counters into the basket with number 2, and continues to five – and then counts backwards.

'Children love to count, order and make patterns with the loose parts,' says Dolan. 'We have small wicker baskets and sorting trays for children to self-select and transport around the room and outdoors to the free-flow garden.'

A friendship tree with shimmering lights sits in the corner of the room. Brightly coloured leaves hang from it with messages from children about how their friends have shown kindness. 'We're a "home from home" nursery, focusing on nurturing children's curiosity through independent, child-led play,' explains Dolan, who has been working at the 110-place nursery, based in the grounds of the independent Solihull School, for eight years.

With a decade's worth of consecutive Outstanding Ofsted's under its belt, the standalone setting is jointly owned by the school and a private owner.

Dolan says that the mornings are quite structured in the pre-school class, because a lot of the children go on to sit assessments for the prep



At St Martin's, the focus is on natural, loose-parts resources, both indoors and outside

school. But she says that although there are short, focused sessions around shapes, letters, number recognition and dialogic reading, loose parts play is 'much more imaginative and maths and literacy can be incorporated into it.'

NATURAL MATERIALS

The focus on moveable objects and loose parts came about after the nursery completed its Seven Step Eco-school Green Flag programme. 'The value of this form of play fits in with our ethos. Not only is an enhancement to children's learning outcomes in line with the EYFS but it also sits well with our sustainability focus,' Dolan says.

'We use natural wooden resources or reusable items and we bring in lots of leaves, sticks, acorns and stones from the park to use in our play. Looking beyond what might look like a collection of junk on first sight, the learning potential is endless.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Day Care at Saint Martin's: www.daycarestmartins.co.uk
- 'Enabling Environments: Collections – On the loose' by Nicole Weinstein (*Nursery World*, May 2014)
- Seven Steps – Eco Schools, www.eco-schools.org.uk

Another non-mobile infant is rolling a see-through shaker containing buttons and beads.

Trainee manager Kaitlin Eve, who is sat next to a treasure basket containing scarves, shells, tin foil, wooden rollers, a shiny spoon and pine cones, says, 'Starting in the baby room, treasure baskets inspire curiosity and give children confidence and help develop their inquisitive nature. They love to explore different objects and test out cause and effect as they shake, rattle, push or roll objects to make movements or sounds. This often develops into transportation schemas as they move objects from one place to another or repeat actions such as emptying and filling containers.'

FREE FLOW

Outdoors in the pre-school garden, the loose parts are being used in free-flow play. A three-year-old strides past carrying a huge piece of plastic guttering. Another spins a small hoop around his forearm while riding a three-wheeler. Three boys are rolling tyres across the racecourse track, and a group of children are making obstacle

DAYCARE ST MARTIN'S BEST BUYS:

- **Best investment:** Sound installation in the toddler room from www.creating-classrooms.com
- **Best medium-priced resource:** The Wooden Mirrored Interactive Posting Table, £69.99, from TTS, <https://bit.ly/3uEf52R>, is great for creating a raised platform for activities for non-mobile infants; and the Wooden Stacking Pastel Pebbles 18pk, £77.99, from TTS, <https://bit.ly/3OXgvMD>
- **Best cheap buy:** Making fine motor activities by slicing a cut-down tree into disks, sanding them down and adding screws
- **Explore and create with:** TickiT Loose Parts Special Offer Bundle Pack, £122.39, from Hope Education, <https://bit.ly/42PKINH>; 0-20 Early Mastery Number Trays, £85, from Yellow Door, yellow-door.net; Set of Natural Disks, £13.95, from Early Excellence, <https://bit.ly/3P1F18D>; Obstacle Course Starter Pack, £199.99, from Cosy, <https://bit.ly/3Ta1sBN>; and its Recycled Construction Kit, £91.99, <https://bit.ly/3uJuM8T>

courses out of planks of wood and crates.

'It's important for them to learn how to manage their own risks through physical play,' explains Dolan. 'We're on hand to guide them and ask questions, but we have a huge focus on building children's stamina and gross motor development through active, outdoor play in the nursery gardens and at the local park that we back onto. We've also created grassy mounds for children to climb up and roll down and a sensory pathway with pebbles built into it and planks for balancing, which is a simple way to get them used to uneven terrain and building up their core strength.'

There is an outdoor canopy for circle times; raised beds for planting; a stage for performing and singing; and freestanding tipis for weaving and den-making activities.

The toddler room's garden has a storytelling tent, a wildflower sensory garden and a hollowed out tree trunk for those who have the containment schema, or children with special educational needs. 'This garden is quieter and you can hear the birds singing and watch the squirrels, which is great for mindfulness,' Dolan says. ■

