

DENS OF EQUALITY

- THE RIGHT TO PLAY

‘Every child has the right to play—but it’s a right denied to too many children with disabilities.’ That’s the basis for the advent of ‘Dens of Equality’. Its mission is to make play opportunities and facilities totally inclusive and totally accessible. This briefing looks at the background and development of this network of autonomous ‘dens’ which are making a difference to how and where the children play in Birmingham.

Somewhere to play—for every child.

Laura Watts has been working with after school clubs and plays schemes since the ‘90s, at one time she was the Inclusion Development officer with the Early Year’s Partnership in Birmingham. She came across children, parents, and grandparents who were desperate because nothing was being done to include children with disabilities in any play. There was nowhere for them to go, and it seemed no one wanted to know. She believes that ‘Play is the most important thing in the world’.

There were plenty of excuses, ‘lack of facilities, lack of trained people, lack of money’, but Laura said the it was the state of families which drove her on. “They were utterly exhausted, deprived of sleep, with nowhere to turn, no understanding and no hope”.

She started in 2002. Knowing that out of school play care wasn’t used in the holidays she found funding and ran pilot projects in Easter and Summer Holidays to provide play opportunities that were completely accessible. To get ‘children involved who had never been allowed into them’ before, “no one at all was to be excluded’. At first the work was ‘random’ and ‘reactive’ but it was so successful, that it needed a focus, so ‘Dens of Equality’ was born.

Dens of Equality

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What is a den?

- An inclusion cell
- For anyone who needs it
- Independent
- Autonomous.
- It raises its own funds
- It has its own aims
- It has a ‘development agreement’

‘Dens of Equality’

The ‘Dens of Equality’ umbrella organisation offers advice, training, support, facilitators and trained staff where needed.

It acts as a central hub, or an umbrella for individual, independent, autonomous ‘dens’. Each separate den is described by Laura as “an inclusion cell”. They can have different aims from each other. Each one simply works to provide what the parents and carers involved in that den need for their children, their area, their circumstances. They are individually constituted, commit to a ‘development agreement’ and then act on it.

The parents who collaborate in a den frequently have nothing but a disabled child in common – and in turn each child may have very different disabilities. Discussion, compromise and agreement are essential, ultimately they have to agree on an action plan in order to get something, anything, done.

Developing Dens

After the first two pilot projects in 2002, Laura obtained a grant of £25,000 and parents who’d accessed the pilot projects volunteered to work on the next stage — the development of individual dens.

Funding comes through the Birmingham Early Years and Childcare team, as well as smaller strands, and income has doubled each year since 2002. With a comparatively low level of central funding, each den has to be responsible for its own fundraising and organisation—Laura believes that this is what makes it sustainable, and that this model will help the network expand.

Currently there are ten fully committed dens, several more in the initial stages. The goal is a den, in each of the 40 wards of the city within six years.

Philosophy

- “Play is the most important thing in the world”
- The creativity of all children is unsurpassed – so, for example, meaningful experiences can be created without toys, just with ‘rubbish’.

Dens of Equality

Aims

1. To promote social inclusion through play
2. To develop sustainable access to leisure, learning and play provision
3. To run projects in partnership with and for children, families, play practitioners and community groups
4. To collaborate with all appropriate organisations
5. To encourage and support the autonomy of all participants

Birmingham Early Years and Childcare Team

The early years and childcare team provide support and development for early years and childcare provision for children of Birmingham, up to the age of 14 years (16 for children with disabilities and or additional needs).

The team is part of Birmingham City Council and can be contacted on

Tel: 0121 303 2605
eydcp@birmingham.gov.uk

Early Years and Childcare
Birmingham City Council
The Reaside Education Centre
Mowbray Street
Birmingham
B5 7DD

- All children have rights.
- Dens are not product led, but process led. There is only a 'model' in the very basic sense, individual dens develop as they need to.
- Dens are about children's rights to access, not about respite care.
- All children can play together – the only 'rule' is that any rules shouldn't be divisive.

Case History of one den: Billesley BOATS (Better Open Access to Spaces)

Billesley Boats was set up in March 2003 by a group of parents struggling to get access to services outside of school for their children . Their simple aim is to 'Create opportunities for local children to learn and develop through play'. They work in partnership with existing service providers, and help them find ways towards compliance with the new disability legislation. A role that could become even more important as organisations get to grips with the Disability Equality Duty.

Since it was set up, BOATS has raised over £100,000 to support better access for local children to leisure services, and is working to become a charitable company.

It's involved in a wide variety of projects, from organising day trips, parties and meetings for local families and children, to helping the local leisure centre develop inclusive play schemes.

Working with Activities Manager, Sonia Williams, at Cocks Moors Woods Leisure Centre, BOATS has funded key workers, extra staff, training and resources. Members are involved in regular consultation and evaluation, and the centre now offers **one third** of its seventy five places to children with specific needs.

Sally Shepherd has no doubt what the benefits are. Her son has additional behavioural needs and she found it difficult to find anywhere for him to play unaccompanied. "I found at Cox Moor they weren't interested in whether he'd got an inclusion worker or not—they just wanted him to play. It was lovely to know that no matter what was going to happen, I could still have my time to myself, and they'd cope with him."

Billesley Boats (Better Open Access To Spaces)

For more information or to get involved contact:

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Disability Equality Duty

Since 4 December 2006, public authorities have had to publish a 'Disability Equality Scheme'. (The date for primary schools in England is December 2007 and all schools in Wales April 2007.)

The scheme must include:

A statement of how disabled people have been involved in developing the scheme.

An action plan that includes practical ways in which improvements will be made.

The arrangements in place for gathering information about how the public sector organisation has done in meeting its targets on disability equality

For more information visit:
<http://www.direct.gov.uk/>
and enter DED in the search box.

Louise Lawler, one of the founder members of Billesley BOATS is very positive about the way the den works.

“It gives you a great sense of achievement I feel so much better in myself as a parent not because I’m doing things for my children necessarily but because I’m helping all children... we try to help bring all children together so that all children haven’t got a problem with difference. “

Just some of the plans for the future include, ‘The Den Building Handbook’, portable play spaces for parks, and input into the ‘Play Strategy’ being developed for Birmingham as part of the Government’s ‘Every Child Matters’ initiative.

Laura believes that the dens work because they’re all about people doing it for themselves— and they know what’s needed. She says the whole experience of developing ‘Dens of Equality’ has been like ‘throwing stones in ponds... the ripples of effectiveness keep travelling outward.’

She believes “Dens are effective because they pull people together around a specific project, and the investment of time and any money can be rewarded quite quickly.” Dens of Equality will always help with training and support for individual groups, but it’s about creating local democracy, not dependency.

Cocks Moors Woods Leisure Centre

Alcester Road South,
Kings Heath,
Birmingham,
B14 6ER
Tel No: (0121) 464 1996

For details of facilities,
courses and activities go to:

www.leisure.birmingham.gov.uk/sites/cmwlc/cocksm.htm

Every Child Matters:

Change for Children is a new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19.

The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

For more information go to www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/



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