

Small Steps Explorers



I was inspired to create a new ECCE Class for children who were entering into their second year of preschool in my service. The transition year of secondary school was the catalyst for my inspiration for a new look second ECCE year for my returning preschool class. The reason for this was a lot of the children who were going into their second year in September 2017 would turn five from January 2018 onwards. I felt the gap in age was quite big and I wanted to ensure that these children were still excited about coming to school every day and that the curriculum was innovative in meeting their interests and needs. In my opinion, exploring the locality and the wider community in which they live offers valuable learning and developmental benefits to our children.

When I got this thought my mind went into overdrive. I decided to have a meeting with all the parents of the children who would be our first ever Explorers.

All parents came one evening. I presented my idea and my reason behind it. I pitched it like a transition year for our Explorers. I explained that their children had thrived in the current year and I felt they had the capabilities to manage much more in this, their 2nd year in ECCE. We set out the type of curriculum and outings the children would experience. Parents were also invited on our outings. We needed to ensure we had parental involvement and support as we planned on going on lots of outings throughout the year. We also felt this

was a great way to get to know parents better and a chance for children and parents to share some of these new experiences.

After the meeting all parents were on board. We were all super excited. Staff, parents and children.

Next step was the planning and implementation of Small Steps Explorers Class.

Once again, this involved consultation with staff, children and parents.

There were many things to consider. First, we needed a new classroom and we had to decide exactly what we all wanted from this experience. We wanted to ensure that we met all required regulation and the curriculum we used was beneficial to all, providing wide ranging experiences for our Explorers.

I spoke with the manager from our community centre who agreed to let us use a new room. This is a small room so we needed to ensure we used the space really well to provide a bright and inviting room. One of the new Explorer's parents is a fantastic artist so she painted the whole room in relaxing colours adding some sensitive and artistic drawings.

As we planned to use outside as much as possible, we needed to ensure we all had good weather proof clothes. We got samples of weather proof jackets and asked parents and children their opinions. We all decided on our lovely red Explorers jackets.

In September 2017 we opened our Explorers class. All children arrived in their beautiful red coats and staff too. We were all super excited.

The children loved the class and our outside area. Our first outdoor exploration involved building a vegetable patch in our outdoor area. We bought gardening gloves, wellies and gardening tools for staff and all our Explorers. We built three beds, two for vegetables and one for flowers for all the moms for Mother's Day.

Now it was time to explore.

We started off tending to our vegetable patch and asked the children "What should we grow". It was decided we would sew rocket, lettuce, radishes and spring onions. For the Mom's we all decided on daffodils and tulips.

The children solely looked after the garden themselves. They planted the seeds, they watched them grow and ensured the seeds were given lots of food and water so they would grow healthy and strong.

Next we wandered around our local community where we found lots of hidden surprises. So much nature on our doorstep and beautiful gardens to explore.

We did nature scavenger hunts where the children had a sheet and had to collect everything on the sheet. We kept all of these and placed them in the children's memory books.

Our goal was for our Explorers to see things grow from their source and to know every step involved in making something or growing something. It was simple things like making bread or cupcakes. Anything we did, we did from the start. If we were baking, we all went to the Supermarket together with our list and looked for the items we needed together. The children got the items from the shelves and scanned them at the checkout themselves. It was a fantastic way of learning. Like I say, not all learning needs to happen in the classroom. I watched our Explorers grow so much in their independence and confidence. We were a small group of 10 so we found it easy to get into the great outdoors and see where it took us.

That was just the start. We then went deeper in our wider community. Next, we needed a bus. We have regular contact with our local primary school. One day we had the principal in talking to the children about junior infants. When we were finished, I asked him what company they got their mini bus from as I was finding it hard to get a cost effective mini bus. He put me in contact with the owner who gave me a fantastic rate,

This is where we all met our new friend Mick. Our own personal bus driver. He is a fantastic guy so good with children. He became our friend and enjoyed his outings with us so much his wife bought lovely boxes of sweets for our Explorers at Christmas.

Now we had our bus it was time to get out on the open road. Our first trip was to St Catherine's Park. We had the best time. First, we explored the whole park, we sat on top of hay bales, saw wild rabbits, had a play in the beautiful playground and finished off eating our lunch at the picnic tables.

The children were so well behaved that we decided to go further afield next time when we went to County Meath to visit Trim Castle. We were so lucky when

we arrived that day Sir Laughalot the Knight was there (he arrives there on random days as he volunteers his time). We explored the Castle Ruins, learned all about when the Castle was built and who lived there. Then we climbed the biggest hill any of us had ever climbed. Some of the children thought they might not be able for it but we knew they would. When we reached the top of that hill, the sense of accomplishment felt was fantastic. The children were so proud of themselves. This is when I knew this was working. My concept for the Explorers class was well and truly forming the way we all wanted it too. After a picnic we headed back to base singing all the way.

I could write all day as we had so many positive experiences. Our main aim was to ensure the children were involved in all of the decisions regarding outings, activities and overall planning. We ensured that they were active partners in their learning by doing and exploring.

The level of the children's engagement was high whether we explored on our doorstep or further afield. Our unplanned trip to Alice's house was one simple walk that became a particular highlight. On one of our walks we had an important job to do. We had to post the cheque for Rudolph the Musical we were going to last Christmas. On the walk we were all chatting, and Alice said I have my Halloween decorations up. We all asked what are they like? What do you have? Alice was explaining and said they were so scary. I know where Alice lives and it's not too far from the post box so I asked Alice would she like to walk past her house and show her friends the decorations on her house. Her face lit up and she said YES. So off we went.

We made our way down the road and Alice was so excited. She kept saying wait till you see them. Alice parents both work so normally there is nobody there during the day. We arrived, and the children were admiring the scary decorations and were having a great conversation. Next thing the front door opened, and we were greeted by a very surprised Mom. Alice's mom was having a coffee with her friend. She was very happy to see us and she got a chance to introduce her friend to all Alice's friends and teachers. Alice was beside herself with pride and joy.

This is one of the reasons why I love the Explorer concept so much. We went with the flow. If we saw an opportunity to build on something we took that chance and went for it. No day was the same.

We continued our Exploring throughout the whole year. We watched our garden grow and we watched the children grow. We went on many outings, repeat visits were at the children's request. Some of which were:

Dublin Zoo (3 times)

Imagnosity (twice)

The Phoenix Park (3 times)

Rudolph the musical in the Helix

Dinosaurs around the World (City Centre)

Kids Cook

Go Kids Go

Millennium Park

On one of our trips, I met one of the children who was in my first pre-school class in 2013, her brother was now in this first Explorer Group. She asked me where we were going and I told her. She answered with "It's not fair, I only get to go on one school tour each year and my brother gets to go every second week.

I feel very proud to have given our Explorers a fantastic year. We have watched them grow so much. Their conversations, ideas, and wellbeing was a joy to listen to and observe. I have to say that they were so ready for Junior Infants.

I feel that giving them

the opportunity to plan with us

the independence to oversee their garden

the experience of visiting so many fantastic places

the insight that with their rights comes responsibilities

they were supported to learn and develop in a fun and engaging way. They gained such confidence and independence we felt we could have brought them anywhere.

It was also such a positive experience for our partnership with parents. We all got to know each other so well and I know for sure the parents loved the outings as much as the children.

So far this year our new group of Explorers have been very busy. They have sorted the garden for the winter, they make delicious treats every Friday, have been on numerous trips and most importantly they all love coming to school.

Our Explorers class is fully booked until 2020. I think we will probably run two Explorer classes next year to meet demand and also to provide children with a wonderful learning experience.

Parents Feedback

My experience of Small Steps Explorers was a very positive one. I felt the programme really stimulated Alice as it opened new ways of learning to her outside of a traditional classroom environment. It still held her concentration while also making learning more fun and interactive, which in her case was of real benefit.

I am comfortable that she is ready for primary school and did not miss out on any of the key curriculum I would have expected from her second pre-school year. I would recommend the Explorers programme as I think it offers a well rounded experience.

*Keep up the good work,
Rachel*

My Daughter Cora was so lucky to be in the first group of explorer's in Small Steps. There is no place like it. Hayley has shown us that learning does not end in the classroom. Cora was provided with opportunities and experiences. They went exploring, went on adventures, experiment in their environment and learn about the natural environment. This has given Cora the chance to learn so many important life skills. Cora has become more confident in learning, she is trying out new things without being guided. All this is a great foundation for future development in all areas. Hayley has kept their little minds so active. Cora loved coming to Small Steps every morning as everyday was a new adventure that needed to be explored.

William has had an amazing year in Explorers, I couldn't praise you highly enough for how far you all have brought him on. He is going to miss all the adventures he has been on with you and all the friends he has made... Thank you so much.

Conor and Sinead Murray

My son Callum attended Small Steps Explorers.

This was an amazing new class that the kids absolutely loved! They got to experience a whole new way of learning. It was great having a class that was involved more around the community and outings. Getting to go to educational outings has been a big plus in my child's life and he has loved every second. Giving the name "explorers" to the kids has really made them feel special. Very sad that he is finished in Small Steps.

My little boy was lucky enough to experience the first year of the Explorers in Phibbles town community centre this year. It really was amazing to see how much my son enjoyed his time there. Every day was different, and they spent lots of time outside exploring nature. They even went on trips to various educational and fun venues throughout the year. The room that the children spent time in had murals painted on them to make the environment fun and colourful. I really feel privileged to have had the chance to send my son there, it was such a unique experience for him. I only wish schools could take a leaf out of Hayley's book and take learning outdoors.

Fran Halpin

Both my husband and I were delighted with how quickly Odhran settled into the explorer room. I was happy as it is a small class and Odhran's teachers were very friendly and attentive to the children. I noticed a huge difference, quite quickly in Odhran, socially he became much more confident and outgoing. I found he learned so much as his day was full of so many activities and games. I was delighted as the children are encouraged to be independent which is so important to prepare him for 'big school'. Odhran absolutely loved the trips which were both great fun and educational.

Our daughter is ready to start in the explorer room in two weeks and she is so excited.

Kind regards,

Maria McElroy.