



Wild about Wellbeing

April to November 2017

CONTENTS

SUMMARY.....	Page 3
INTRODUCTION.....	Page 4
BACKGROUND.....	Page 5
THE WILD ABOUT WELLBEING PROGRAMM.....	Page 6
AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME.....	Page 7
IMPACTS.....	Page 8
NEXT STEPS.....	Page 11
APPENDIX 1.....	Page 12
APPENDIX 2.....	Page 14

SUMMARY

Ten girls, with, or a risk of developing, mental health issues, attended weekly sessions in Galashiels Policies, during school hours and over the summer holidays. The aim of the programme was to increase their wellbeing, through supporting them to build confidence, resilience and to be better able to manage relationships.

The outcomes have been increase confidence, resilience and independence for all of the girls as well as improved attendance at school. An unforeseen consequence of the programme has been that the girls now spend less time on screens and more time outdoors. Given the mounting research showing a correlation between social media use and depression, this is a very positive outcome.



INTRODUCTION

Nature Unlimited runs intervention programmes, in woodland settings, for children and young people who are disengaged from, or who are not thriving in, mainstream education. Our staff members are all trained Forest School leaders and our programmes are based on the Forest School ethos to ensure that:

- Learner-centred activities build confidence and resilience and create a community for well-being by allowing participants to learn and develop at their own pace while pursuing their own interests and connecting with nature and each other.
- Participants are introduced to a variety of nature connection activities ranging from creating natural art, cooperative team games, pond dipping, using tools, cooking healthy meals on the campfire to chilling out in a hammock and everything in between.
- The choice of activities on offer is determined by the needs of individuals and the group.
- Our high staff to participant ratio allows us to give one-to-one support where necessary and to facilitate a range of skills and personal development.
- Through involving the group in our Plan, Do, Review cycle, participants gain a sense of control and responsibility and by encouraging reflective practice, which is routine in all our sessions, they learn to recognise and manage their emotions.
- Through collaborative and/or creative activities during repeated visits to the same wild place and interaction with the same team of people, they develop a sense of belonging, both within the therapeutic woodland environment and within the safe community that we nurture.



BACKGROUND

The Wild About Wellbeing project arose from our work with mixed secondary school groups, where we became aware of specific issues affecting particularly girls: self-harm, eating disorders, anxiety and depression. While these issues clearly do not affect girls exclusively, we felt that a programme aimed specifically at teenage girls, where they could form strong friendship bonds, and explore relationships and feelings in a safe environment with strong and nurturing female role models, would help address some of the issues they were facing.

We created a community for well-being, in a natural woodland setting, where the young people feel safe and where they engage in various activities, while building their social skills, their emotional intelligence and their physical skills. Our high leader to participant ratio enables one to one support, when necessary, to build confidence, self-esteem and to encourage discussion and reflection. We support the girls to become more resilient mentally, emotionally and physically, and enable them to transfer these skills to everyday life so that they can face adversity with a more positive and confident attitude.

The girls were identified by Galashiels Academy guidance staff as not thriving at school for various reasons including:

- Diagnosed mental health conditions – depression, anxiety
- Behavioural issues e.g. anger management difficulties
- Social isolation – bullying or being bullied
- Poor attendance at school
- Lack of confidence/low self-esteem
- Challenging home environments – e.g. young carers, parents with drug/alcohol dependency
- Screen/technology addiction



THE WILD ABOUT WELLBEING PROGRAMME

The girls have been coming to the woods every Wednesday morning for a 3 hour session since the beginning of the summer term 2017. We also ran 2 sessions during the summer holidays; a cook-out in the woods and an overnight camp near West Linton. A seven mile walk around Gala was planned but had to be cancelled due to staff illness. They are now continuing with their Wednesday morning sessions until the end of October, when our funding unfortunately runs out. 10 girls started the programme with one dropping out at the beginning of this term.

A typical session includes the following:

- Welcome circle where everyone expresses how they are feeling and what they would like to do in the session. Loose ends from the previous week are also covered.
- Team work – carrying the kit into the woods, erecting a shelter (if weather is bad), collecting fuel for the fire and helping to prepare snacks/meal cooked on the fire.
- Choice of activities – these may be chosen by individuals or the group or leaders may decide to offer a particular activity based on observations from previous sessions e.g. X enjoyed using a saw so we plan an activity which extends the use of saws and might introduce new tools or put X in charge of supporting others to do tool work. (NB choice includes not having to participate in any of the activities on offer).
- Sharing a hot drink and a snack together around the campfire, with opportunities for trying new tastes, storytelling or discussing things as a group.
- Closing circle where participants review and reflect on the lows and highs of the session and plan for the next week.



AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME

To support wellbeing by:

- Building resilience - opportunities to learn new skills, broken down into achievable steps, with time and space to fail, try again and succeed. This could be using tools, erecting a shelter or cooking on the fire, for example.
- Increasing confidence - opportunities for risk taking in a “safe enough” environment. This might be a physical challenge such as climbing a tree or an emotional challenge such as speaking out in the group.
- Promoting emotional intelligence – opportunities for discussion and reflection both one-to-one and in a nurturing group. Participants are supported to recognise that all feelings are okay; it’s how we manage our emotions that is important.
- Encouraging active, healthy lifestyles – by introducing participants to the benefits of being outdoors, away from technology and spending time with friends in the real world.
- Fostering independent learning, through planning activities that are engaging and tailored to individual needs.
- Promoting responsible citizenship through conservation activities.



IMPACTS

Participants, their parents/carers and teachers have completed evaluations mid-way through the programme. Teachers also completed a baseline assessment before the programme started. Leaders have recorded their observations throughout the programme.

Teacher Evaluations

The following tables summarises the development of the girls in targeted skills, (as scored by their teachers) since starting the programme. Baseline data was only received for 7 of the participants and we have not received the mid-term evaluation for EJ.

	AL	JS	KR	KD	RA	TB	EJ	Total
Confidence	+2	+2	-1	+2	NC	-1		+4
Engagement in Learning	+1	+4	-1	+1	+1	+2		+8
Social Skills	+1	+1	+1	+2	+1	+2		+8
Behaviour	-4	-1	-2	+1	NC	+1		-5
Communication skills one-to-one	-2	+3	NC	+1	+2	+1		+5
Communication skills in a group	+2	+2	+1	+3	NC	+1		+9
Emotional Intelligence	+3	+4	+1	+4	NC	+2		+14
Total individual change	+3	+15	NC	+14	+4	+8		+44

NC = No Change

For the group as a whole, there has been a marked improvement in emotional intelligence, communication and social skills and engagement in learning, although behaviour has worsened slightly. We are pleased to note that the dramatic progress that we have observed in JS and KD, has also transferred to the school setting. Teachers have commented that they have seen increased resilience, confidence and ability to manage relationships in most of the group. See sample teacher evaluations Appendix 1.



Leader Evaluations

The following short case studies summarise our observations of two of the girls, one of whom does not appear on the table above, as we have no baseline data for her.

Case study KD

K presented as a popular girl who was influential in the group dynamics. Unfortunately, this influence often had a negative impact on some members, who were excluded from cliques that formed around K. She would frequently pick on certain girls, making fun of them and making veiled threats. The group were encouraged to express their feelings about this behaviour and K herself was supported to become aware of the effect of her actions. Over the weeks, as K found her strengths within the programme, (she excels at cooking, practical tasks and singing), she became much more settled in herself and started to show kind and caring behaviour towards all members of the group. While she still occasionally wants/needs to control the dynamic in terms of friendship groups, her peers have the confidence to deal with this and the leaders are able to divert her attention towards more positive behaviour. It appears that K is much more secure in her sense of self-worth and that this has led to her establishing more positive relationships, which, in turn, increases her self-esteem and lessens her need to control others.

Case study KA

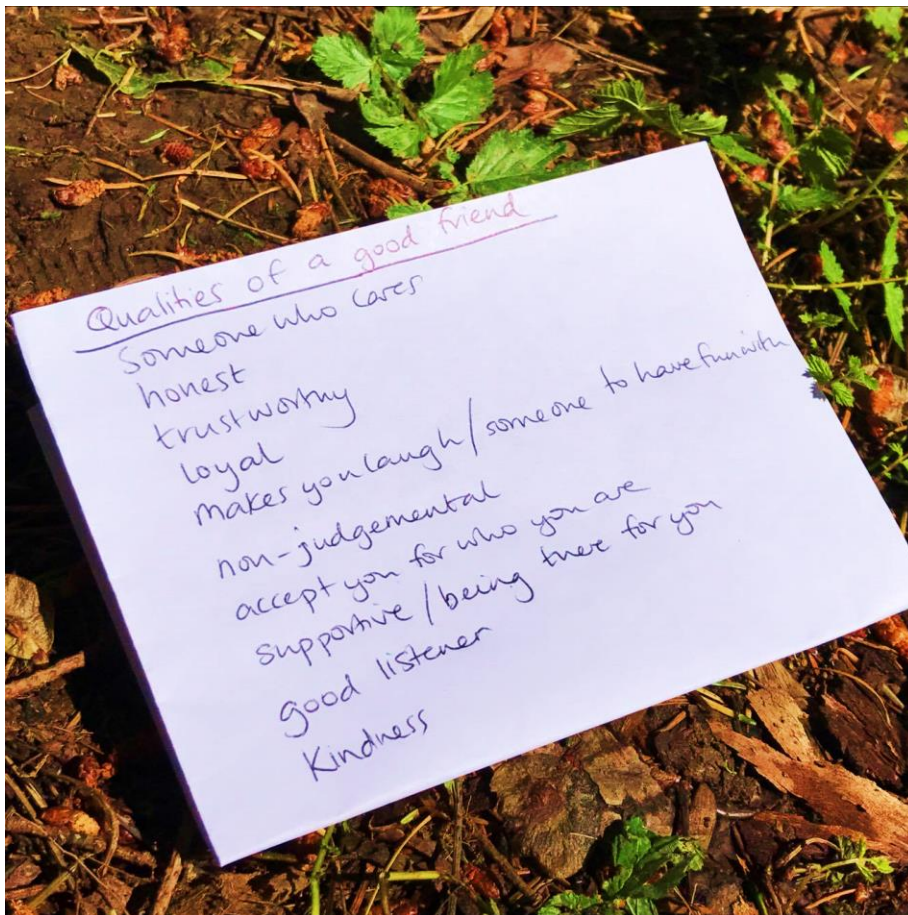
K chose to isolate herself from the group for several weeks from the start of the programme. She would often have her nose in a book or wear headphones and listen to music. Although we have a no technology rule, she would defy all attempts to get her to take off her headphones, often withdrawing and sitting at a distance from the rest of the group. Despite this, the other girls, for the most part, tried to include her in the group activities.

From the very first session she asked to be called Jupiter (her online anime name) and when asked to express her feelings, in the opening circle, would always talk about characters from the online world or from television programmes. She was unable to reflect on her low and high points in the closing circle. In one-to-one conversations with leaders, she expressed that the only feeling she ever had was sadness and therefore did not wish to talk about feelings.

Jupiter/K had invisible friends with whom she would have long, in-depth, animated conversations, especially when she felt under stress. She also spoke about "dementors" who were following her and pointed them out in the woods. As she liked to write, we encouraged her to keep a journal of happy moments (we were careful to point them out, when she was with us) as a way of keeping the dementors at bay.

As the weeks progressed, K began to take part in some activities, as long as teamwork was not involved. The breakthrough came when we went camping. The group agreed that there would be a no technology rule and K was given the choice to agree to this rule or not attend the camp. She negotiated being allowed to have her phone at night so that she could listen to music to get to sleep but otherwise, was able to adhere to the no phone rule. Camping inevitably involved teamwork, as the girls had to pitch their own tents and K had no choice but to be part of the team. It was a struggle to get her involved and several of the girls expressed her lack of contribution as their low points. By the end of the weekend, K was able to work in a pair to dismantle one of the tents and also helped to tidy up the campsite.

Upon returning to the woods this term, K, for the first time, is answering to her own name, although she reverts to Jupiter when there are strangers present. She is now able to express lows and many highs in the closing circle and is sometimes able to say how she feels at the start. Last week, she joined in a group activity, a team game, for the first time. She now interacts with her peers, taking a leadership role and supporting others. She tells us that she now goes outside to meet friends instead of sitting in her room playing online games. K is also able to take instruction and no longer wears her headphones or uses her phone. She no longer speaks to her invisible friend and there has been no mention of dementors for quite some time. Unfortunately, so far, her progress does not appear to have transferred to the school setting, although she has stated that she hangs out with a friend during break times, which is new.



Parent/carer and Participant Evaluations

At the time of writing, we haven't received evaluations from all the parents but have included scores from those we have, as well as feed back from the girls, themselves. We are pleased to note that the group as a whole are spending more time outdoors, away from screens and that relationships at home have improved. Jen McHale, Pupil Support, Galashiels Academy has reported improved attendance for the girls and that she has to spend far less time dealing with issues at school, both with the girls and their parents. She also noted a vast improvement in confidence, resilience and ability to work in a team for all the girls.

See Appendix 2

NEXT STEPS

This quote from one of the girls, who has experienced many interventions for mental health problems, including counselling and a placement with Stable Life sums it up, “The trouble with these things is that they always stop and you’re left with nothing.” For us, it’s an issue of funding. We aim for all our programmes to be as long term as possible, because, over the years, we’ve had the same young people return to us again and again. We plan to build the sustainability of our social enterprise so that our support for the people with whom we work, isn’t limited by whether we have funding or not.

We want to establish better links with schools, families and other agencies so that we can have an even more positive impact on young people’s lives. We do the best we can, with the resources we have, because we passionately believe in the value (and social impact return) of our interventions. We are hopeful that, given the positive impact of this programme, statutory bodies, such as NHS or SBC will commission us to provide more programmes like this.



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Appendix 1 Sample of teacher evaluation form



Mid-programme evaluation form

We are midway through the Forest School Wellbeing programme we have been running with some of the current S2 girls. In order to support us to apply for continuation funding we would be grateful if you could provide us with some feedback on whether the programme seems to have had any effect on each pupil. Please complete as fully as possible. Any information will be used anonymously.

Name of pupil [REDACTED] KD

Please rate the pupil for the following characteristics:

Confidence

Poor Excellent
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Engagement in learning

Poor Excellent
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Social skills

Poor Excellent
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Behaviour

Poor Excellent
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

cont'd/

Communication skills one-to-one

Poor 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

Communication skills in a group

Poor 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

Emotional intelligence

Poor 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

Please list any benefits that this pupil gained from this programme. We would also be interested in any general changes observed or anything else you would like to note. (please answer as fully as possible, use an additional sheet if needed)

K has benefited greatly from attending Forest schools and this has been reflected in school. K is able to relate to others and their feelings and can identify what impact her actions could have on others. She has developed a mature level of responsibility and is able to support others in the group, particularly J.

The following are comments from the remaining teacher evaluation forms

C is very articulate and comes across as quite confident. She tends to be too critical of her own abilities. Her attitude presents some barriers to engagement with learning. She likes tasks where she can see real-life application and purpose. She has been very enthusiastic about the programme and worked conscientiously on the video, taking a lead in the group. It has been good to see her recognise the worth in following through with a project, seeing her recognise her own commitment to doing a job well.

J is very happy to be part of the programme and certainly seems to value the opportunity. There seem to be less 'fall outs' in her peer group that I observe in class. I think she also seems a little less nervous approaching new tasks or situations.

K is animated when talking about the programme and it has been nice to see her out in the project clearly enjoying the experience. She has disclosed some things that have bothered her personally, outside of the programme, perhaps feeling more confident to express her feelings or more listened to. My feeling is that it has been good to give her a bit of space amongst what can be very busy school life.

A is a little more assertive lately. She seems surer of what she wants to do and how she wants to do it. In class she seems to fall out less with friends although she does still like to keep to herself at times.

K seems to be more focused and less distracted by peer issues. She is more engaged in her learning and seems to be keen to do her best. She does need a bit more support and encouragement than others, but seems more prepared to try than previously.

R was regularly having fall-outs with her peer group and there were a number of allegations made about being bullied or being the bully. This has improved significantly and these incidents are a lot fewer.

T has developed her relationships with her peers as well as her resilience. T would seek out adult support regularly as a result of friendship issues and this has improved greatly.

Appendix 2 Parent/carer and Participant Evaluations

Written feedback from the girls

Thank you so much for the grate ~~ful~~ fun I love coming to forest school. I have met lots of new friends, learned how to do a fire and super popcorn. I loved the teachers because they are very kind.

I get out more with my dogs and don't sit on my bed on my phone much anymore. I go for walks in the woods or to the shops more than I used to. I've started to care for nature ~~etc~~ etc. I never used to do gardening but I've started to like/enjoy it so I've started going to my Gran's to do things in the garden with her. I used to never talk to my friends or family but now I've started to go out ~~and~~ on my bike or just walk up to see them. Forest school have helped me understand that it's not healthy to always be inside, so that is why I go out.

coming to forest schools has helped me build more confidence and helped me be a nicer kinder person than I was before. I have had so much fun coming to forest schools I wish for it to continue. I feel more confident @ forest school because I was quite shy before.

Now I go out more with my friends more because I feel less shy.

I liked making food like toast
in playing w/ Ashley, learning to light fire.

I love the woods and was sad at the broken glass.

Before I would just sit at my computer and never go outside, now I do where used to be scared to go outside.

Forest Schools has been fun
I learned new things feel like I have a connection with the ladies

The following is a sample of the evaluation form that we sent to parents/carers. Six have been returned and the responses collated on this sample. Only one parent wrote a comment.



Mid-programme evaluation form

We are midway through the Forest School Wellbeing programme your child has taken part in. Over this time we have enjoyed seeing the girls develop their skills and form new friendships. We are hoping to extend the project if we are successful in obtaining more funding. It would be greatly appreciated if you could take some time to let us know if you think the Forest School sessions have helped your child. Any information will be used anonymously.

Name of child _____

Please compare how your child is now compared with before the project started: Please tick the relevant word, adding in any comments at the end if appropriate.

How happy is she (in general)?

Less happy _____ The same ____1__ Happier ____5__

How often does she see friends?

Less _____ The same amount ____2__ More often ____4__

How often does she miss school?

Less ____3__ The same ____3__ More _____

How much time does she spend on a mobile phone/other gadget?

Less ____4__ The same ____1__ More ____1__

How much does she join in with family activities?

Less _____ The same ____1__ More ____5__

How much time does she spend in the outdoors?

Less _____ The same _____ More _6_____

How physically fit is she?

Less _____ The same ___6___ More _____

How confident is she?

Less _____ The same ___2___ More ___4___

How willing is she to try new things?

Less _____ The same ___3___ More ___3___

How good is she at communication and listening?

Worse _____ The same ___1___ Better ___5___

How helpful is she around the house, e.g. cooking or other tasks?

Worse _____ The same ___2___ Better ___4___

How well does she sleep?

Worse _____ The same ___3___ Better ___3___

Please list any benefits that your child has gained from this programme. We would also be interested in any general changes observed or anything else you would like to note. (please answer as fully as possible, use an additional sheet if needed)

For here work she did with you's D [redacted]
 is more aktiv she dose more thing's on her self.
 Also helps at home focuste what she is doing.
 Thank you M [redacted]

Thank you for your help in completing this form.

Contact Ruth on 07711 210431 or the office on 01835 870606