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Engaging the senses

Lynsey Robinson explains how school visits can inspire, connect and educate pupils with SEN

Getting out and about and interacting with different environments is hugely beneficial to all people.

For many children and young people with SEN, though, this can be a particularly important way of learning about the world, and about themselves. Visitor attractions, from museums to farms, and outdoor activity centres to themed destinations, can be sensory-rich environments, offering a wealth of experiences to engage and stimulate individuals, no matter what their ability.

For pupils with SEN, well-organised school visits can have a positive impact on how they feel, both mentally and physically, giving them greater confidence to access the world outside school and a better understanding of the links between different environments and their everyday lives.

Interacting with new environments can be hugely stimulating for many with SEN and can aid concentration and help improve communication skills. Outdoor attractions with peaceful spaces and quiet opportunities to engage with nature, in particular, can also be effective at encouraging a calm and relaxed state, which is especially important for those with conditions such as autism, who can be prone to anxiety.

A sensory feast

Some of the most obvious benefits of school visits are the opportunities for multi-sensory stimulation and learning that they offer.

We experience everything through our senses. We may process information

using our intellect, memories and prejudices, but we get the raw materials from looking, touching, smelling and many other senses.

Depending on who you talk to, there are between nine and 21 recognised senses. Apart from the big five, we also have the senses of balance, of heat and cold, of pain, of proprioception (awareness of our own body in space) and many others.

We are sight dominated creatures. Sight is how most of us get our raw information about our world, but we shouldn't discount other senses. Senses like smell have routes into other parts of our brains and trigger different responses. Smell is widely recognised

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to be a memory stimulant: memories can be triggered by a smell even before our cognitive processes have recognised what that smell is.

A multi-sensory learning experience with combinations of visual, auditory and other sensory functions exploits the natural connectivity of the brain. As each sense holds a proprietary memory location within the brain, the effective orchestration of multiple sensory inputs ensures a wider degree of neural stimulation (Wolfe, 2001). This creates stronger memories by virtue of its



David enjoys using his magnifying glass.

collaborative effect, thereby enhancing the learning experience.

It is therefore likely that a multi-sensory approach to learning will succeed not only in transferring new skills and knowledge, but also in creating and strengthening emotional connections, which will in turn have a positive effect on motivation and the desire to maintain these connections. Only sensory learning can engage people emotionally and foster a sense of connectedness. School visits provide the perfect opportunity to offer just such an experience, especially if they help people access sensory opportunities.

Down on the farm

Milestone School, a community special school for children with a wide range of SEN, made a series of visits to Billow Farm in Devon in 2011.

Teacher Joe Page led the visits of children aged 11 to 14 years old, many of whom live in inner-city Gloucester and had not previously had the opportunity to visit a farm. Simon Pain, who runs the Farm, had not previously had the opportunity to work with a special school and he was particularly pleased to be able to test the project resources and develop new activities to ensure that the young people were getting a truly multi-sensory experience.

Critical to the success of a visit is the in-depth communication that goes on prior to the day. In this case, Simon and Joe were able to discuss the specific needs and wants of the group to ensure that the visit was going to be successful, enjoyable and educational. When planning any visit, there are always practical issues that need to be considered, such as the mobility of a group, the pupils' communication abilities, and any specific issues, such as the timing of medication or food. However, the planning needs to go deeper to ensure that everyone has a good understanding of the activities

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for the day and what their aims and key features will be. By talking through the possibilities and issues, Joe and Simon were both confident before the start of the first visit that they could offer something that could be enjoyed by the children.

As well as visiting a variety of areas of the Farm, children were given relevant objects to pass around, providing extra sensory stimulation and an introduction to different tasks and parts of the site. Discovering herbs in the sensory herb garden was particularly popular, as was meeting and interacting with the Farm's many animals.

The children were also able to enjoy a really hands-on experience. Simon had set up a range of textures in the barn for the children to play with, as they tried to guess what they were, where they came from and what they might be used for. One child, who could be very excitable, went into the old stables where there were a lot of clean shavings that are used for bedding. He was able to throw them all over the place, getting covered in them and seeing how high they could go. As well as being a lot of

fun, this was a great release of energy for him and when he left the barn he was calmer and more able to engage with the other activities.

These trips were organised as private visits, where the children were the only visitors there at the time. This helped the group to relax and feel more at ease. However, successful visits can take place in more public settings, such as museums or city farms, where particular parts of the facility can be reserved for the school group's use, if required.

Flexibility can also be important. If children are responding particularly well to one aspect of the visit, it can be good to relax and extend that experience, without feeling pressure to move on. This can be all the more important for children with SEN, who may take longer to engage with particular things and whose responses to stimuli can be less predictable.

School visits have the power to really engage young people and are of particular benefit for many of those who can be difficult to reach in more conventional ways. They can really help develop children's confidence and their interest in and understanding of the world around them. Of course, they often also provide some of the most memorable and enjoyable experiences of children's time at school. **SEN**



Yaz takes a miniature horse for a walk.

Further information

Lynsey Robinson is Inclusive Designer at the Sensory Trust, which runs the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project in partnership with Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) supported by the Big Lottery offering farm and wildlife visits for those with disabilities and SEN:

www.sensorytrust.org.uk

www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org