



On behalf of Hillbank ECC I would like to share with you how much Dean Castle Country Park has meant to us over the years.

As an Early Years establishment we have been fortunate to visit Dean Castle Country Park on a very regular basis. The park has offered an abundance of learning opportunities across all areas of the curriculum in all seasons of the year. We have learned about the importance preserving the Bluebell patches in spring, had sports day and mini Olympics in Summer, watched as the leaves on the trees changed from green to beautiful shades of brown, yellow and red in Autumn. We have made dens for animals in Winter as we learned together about hibernation and even performed our Nativity at Christmas with Christine the Ranger playing the very important role of Angel Gabriel!

Throughout the years we have had a fantastic partnership with the Park Ranger Service who have given us lots of advice on where is safe and suitable to set up base camps. We have been provided with logs for the children to sit on and participated in Ranger Led sessions by Christine (Park Ranger) who has experienced our journey since our very first visit to the Dean Park in 2010. Christine is very much part of our team!

The list of learning opportunities within the park itself is exhaustive from visiting the stables, pond dipping, seeing and learning about different animals and their habitats, experiencing changing landscapes through the seasons, developing an understanding of how to stay safe near rivers and ponds, animals and traffic. These visits have helped develop an understanding of nature and how to look after it in a responsible way. The children supported by the staff risk assess their base camp each week and place ticks and crosses to indicate where they think is safe to play and where is not. They love when they find fungus and are always keen to let others know it's there so nobody touches it.

While learning about being responsible for our environment we have had a big focus on the impact of litter, fly tipping and dog fouling. We have learned about our rights such as to be able to play and learn in a safe environment and have regularly carried out litter picks within the park. We have on several occasions informed the Ranger Service about things we see that concern us e.g when we felt really sad that there was an indication of a previous fire at the willow den area, trees that have fallen in areas of concern or trolleys dumped in the river.



As part of our walk to the park each week we were really disappointed at the amount of evidence of dog fouling and staff and children developed partnership with East Ayrshire Environmental Team and the children helped put up notices to deter dog fouling along our route to the park. We have also offered dog walkers we have seen in the park bags to encourage the safe removal of their dogs waste from the ground. The Environmental camera van was brought to the park and the children were able to experience what you see in through the cameras. This was a fantastic experience. Following this the Environmental Officer involved us as a group to award the very first award (tickets to a KFC football game) to a dog walker we came across in the park who had picked up their dogs waste. She was delighted!

Because the children spend the whole day in the park, we set up our own toilet, hand washing station with running water and have snack and lunch. Tomato soup has been a firm favourite for the children and staff at lunch time since 2010! The children are encouraged to be as independent as possible and take on duties such as collecting in empty lunch boxes, cups etc a food. The children have learned about food waste and often recycle apples by placing them on branches of trees for the birds.

As children play freely in the woodland they extend imagination and creative skills. Fallen trees become aeroplanes, buses, dragons etc. The children have been involved in den building which incorporates lots of STEM/ problem solving scenarios to challenge their thinking. These dens become McDonalds, houses for the 3 bears, witches houses etc and the children love when they arrive at the park and the den is still there from the week before! The fun is endless, wooden bridges become troll bridges and often when moving through the woodland and experiencing muddy areas, puddles and long grass etc it sparks opportunities to recite favourite stories such as We're Going on a Bear Hunt. Being involved in learning in such a natural active fun way supports children holistically without the pressures of having to stay still. It has also been evident for some of the children who are a bit quieter in general or who don't like too much focus on themselves within a group scenario. In the woodland some of these children tend to appear more relaxed and are heard more. They also become leaders which is amazing to see. There are many areas in the park which provide opportunity for developing physical skills and resilience and the children have climbed hills with ropes, roly pollied down the hills, climbed trees, splashed in puddles and slid on mudslides! The uneven ground has been fabulous for balance and coordination and a favourite thing to do has been throwing stones in the river.



They have also experienced rope swings, helped make hot chocolate with the Kelly kettle and learned about fire safety and responsibility. Without Christine and the others in the fantastic Ranger service and the Corporate Enforcement Officer the children's learning would never have been so valuable. Dean Castle Country Park is just fabulous!

