

## An A to Z of learning

# G is for...glorious garden

The team at **Rachel Keeling Nursery School** reveal how their children make the most of the setting's garden area, which provides both activity and tranquillity

### JEWEL IN THE CROWN

'The jewel in the crown at Rachel Keeling' is how our garden has been described. It certainly is the focal point for much of our teaching.

Rather than providing you with a list of experiences that we have engaged in, we thought we would share how we use and organise our garden to ensure it offers our children day in, day out access to high-quality provision that impacts their learning.

### TALKING TO FAMILIES

Many of our children live in high-rise housing. Although locally we have access to outdoor spaces in the form of wonderful parks and canal towpaths, we have found some families don't access these spaces as much as they could.

Beginning with our home visits and welcome meetings, we explain that children will be outside every day, whatever the weather (only lightning brings us inside!). We talk to parents and carers about the value of outdoor play and the awe and wonder of nature.

We back that up by ensuring the garden is open to children from the moment they arrive in school – no waiting on carpets, no queueing up: just straight outside; and parents are encouraged to come and play before they say goodbye.

### GETTING HANDS-ON

Children take on much responsibility for our garden: they sweep and tidy, compost and water – they are hands-on gardeners.

We feel the rain on our faces, we splash in puddles, we lie on the hill and look at clouds, we chip ice with ice picks, we listen to the wind in the trees: following the rhythm of the seasons is so important and provides a beautiful basis for an early years curriculum. We do not teach topics, rather we follow children's interests, alongside celebrating particular



festivals and exploring the seasons of the year.

Food is at the heart of what we do to promote the well-being of children at Rachel Keeling: we plant, tend, harvest and share produce with the children.

Whether it's mint picked for afternoon tea, potatoes to boil for a salad, carrots to chop to dip in our home-made hummus or nasturtium to decorate a salad. We also use produce such as beetroot as dyes for fabrics when sewing.

### MOTOR SKILLS AND IMAGINATIVE PLAY

We also see the garden as a space for gross motor development: we encourage cycling on our balance bikes and two-wheelers, running and climbing trees.

Our huge fallen oak sand pit offers wonderful opportunities for imaginative play with friends. Our

**The children are hands-on in the garden, from planting vegetables to harvesting them**

firepit is perfect for building real fires to enjoy, as well as imaginary ones when it is not in use.

### ACCESS AND PLANTING

We've considered the accessibility of each aspect of the garden. For example, we have ensured our pond is step-free and raised, so all children can see inside to spot our illusive frogs. We also give a lot of thought to our planting, so we have a range of plants that, together, provide sensory experiences, a variety of textures, movement in the wind and homes to minibeasts and birds.

### TRANQUILLITY AND ACTIVITY

Our garden is so many things to us at Rachel Keeling: it's healing when times feel tough, it's tranquil when children are having lunch, and it's a hive of activity for our Summer Fête and International Evening, when we come together to celebrate the diversity within our school and community.

Above all at the moment, we are grateful to have it to spend time outdoors in the fresh air as we return to school. Maybe our garden will take on a new dimension this term. ■

*Rachel Keeling Nursery School is an Outstanding setting in Bethnal Green, east London*



**The 'fallen oak' sand pit provides varied play opportunities**