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Transition camps, a Learning Away case study. The Outdoor Learning Blog...by
Natural Connections .

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This case study of transition camps comes from the experiences and evaluation of the Learning Away Initiative, a Paul Hamlyn Foundation project. It has been prepared for the Natural Connections blog by Chris Loynes, a Learning Away advisor.

Working with pupils to design their own transition camp

I bet you can't guess what came out top when we asked all the pupils what activity would be the most helpful in preparing them for transition to secondary? Telling scary stories to each other in the tent at night! They said 'if I can listen to them and not get scared I'll cope with anything!' Year 6 teacher.

The response of the staff planning the residentials was to hire in a storyteller with a brief to teach the pupils scary stories in small groups, then every child had a story to tell later on in the tent to their friends.

Co-constructing the design of the camps

Co-construction sessions were held with selected pupils from each school attending. They were taught how to run a residential design workshop to support them in their transition to the secondary school that autumn. The workshop first asked them what might be scary about going to the big school. They were then asked what aspects of a camping trip might give them the capacity to cope with these challenges. Lastly, they were asked to rank the activities that they thought would most likely provide these kinds of outcomes from their camp. Each question was coupled with a practical activity to support the groups of children debate and then decide their answers collaboratively. Mixed in with these discussions were short activities to stimulate their teamwork and ideas. As a result of this whole process, six key transition skills were identified: confidence, communication, bravery, respect, responsibility and joining in.

Then each group returned to their school and ran the workshop with their peers in year six. One teacher remarked how scary it was to watch the children reproduce her leadership of the workshop right down to tone of voice and body language! Year eight maths students from the secondary school then collected the results from each school, analyzed them and reported back their findings, the top activities for their residential. That's when, amongst the practical camping skills and outdoor challenges telling scary stories emerged as the frontrunner.

What happens during a typical transition camp?

The transition camp takes place in the grounds of Ormsgill Primary School, over four 24-hour cycles in the summer term. This enables the programme to be sustainable and cost effective. Camping equipment is shared on the secure site and staff got to know the place and its surroundings well. Teachers and teaching assistants have developed through the camps over the years from a day visit to taking on the camp coordination for the week. Read more about this here: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/becoming-a-learning-away-coordinator-cpd-and-career/>

It also helps work towards the shared goal of improving community cohesion, as members of the community can see what is happening in the school grounds.

Groups of 50 pupils are staggered throughout the week – the first group arrives at 11am on the first day, and leaves next day after lunch. The departing group strikes camp and then has lunch. The arriving group has lunch and pitches their camp afterwards. Each group is arranged so that pupils are from mixed schools, but are all starting at the same secondary school together next year. Year 10 students attend to act as mentors. The pupils take part in a cycle of four activities including a session of free time. Activities usually include rock climbing, orienteering and problem solving and are designed to build self-esteem, confidence and teamwork skills, having been designed collaboratively by the staff and pupils. During free time, pupils choose different things to do, such as football, trampolining or chatting in their tents. This important time gives them a chance to get to know each other and discover shared interests.

Pupils stay in their friendship groups whilst sleeping, but are grouped with different children during activities in order to ‘take them out of their comfort zone’ and to demonstrate how they can work together as a team – to each other and to their secondary teachers. Another important aspect is learning basic life skills; they make fires, clear up the camp, make packed lunches, prepare and serve meals on a limited budget. For some this is the first time they have slept away from home or have sat down together to eat at a table. Find out more here: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/camp-junior-2-senior-walneys-co-constructed-transition/>

Co-constructed evaluation

The co-construction process with the pupils has also developed a novel way of recognition and reward when transition skills had been achieved – beads on bracelets. A different bead represents each skill and both pupils and staff can award them if they show clear evidence of behaviours and actions to back up their recommendations. At one camp, when a teacher was thought by the children to be awarding beads too freely they objected and emphasised the importance of evidence in awarding beads; they didn’t want the skills or the award system to be devalued! The children continued to wear the bracelets in Year 7 as a sign to each other of their shared experiences and friendships.

“I’m going to wear my transition beads at my new school in September. Memories of being brave, joining in and having a go will help me feel more confident.” Year 6 pupil, Walney partnership primary school

Read more here: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/recording-the-skills-developed-during-walneys-transition-camps/>

The impact on year 7

A follow up study with students and teachers towards the middle of the first

term found few problems. Another cluster of schools organizing transition residentials with their feeder primary schools commented that, since the start of the camps, they have not had to exclude one student in the first year of secondary school. At Walney School students reported settling in well making friends easily, settling in class quickly and experiencing little bullying in the breaks. They also found that they liked and got on with the teachers who had visited the camp if only for an afternoon.

“This will help me feel confident at my new school ... memories of being brave, joining in, having a go...” Year 6 pupil, Walney partnership

The staff were even more enthusiastic. They found that students settled quickly in class and engaged with them and the subject. It was generally felt that study plans were well ahead of previous years, even as much as half a term by Christmas.

The key outcomes

Increased engagement: the co-construction approach actively involved pupils in setting priorities and planning their learning, which they enjoy. The impact on their transition was significant supporting positive social and their learning experiences.

Enhanced life skills relevant to transition: teachers and pupils have both reported improved self-esteem, confidence, sociability, communication, respect, responsibility and joining in.

Opportunities for student leadership / mentoring: a number of clusters made good use of secondary school students as assistant leaders on the primary school camps. This had the double benefit of leadership development and building good relations between younger and older students. There are a number of case studies on this them on the Learning away website. Try this for a start: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/bulwells-progressive-residential-model-primary-children-secondary-student/>

Opportunities for staff development: alongside the new skills of leading and organising camps the experience of co-construction has developed more collaborative relationships between pupils and staff in the classroom and staff working on camp has increased pedagogic skills that have then been applied in the classroom.

Improved community cohesions: a community of schools working in close partnership, with pupils across a locality having shared experiences and expectations has led to other primary schools joining the programme and to other collaborative projects.

How the programme is run

Year 6 pupils and staff from the primary schools camp overnight, over a five-day period, in one of the school's grounds. The aims and implementation are planned by a steering group of staff and the programme of activities is

designed using a co-construction model; pupils and staff work together to create opportunities that will improve learners' confidence, social skills and lay a strong foundation for a positive smooth transition.

Walney's Learning Away partnership is made up of five primary schools and one secondary school in Barrow-in-Furness, and has a central focus on improving primary to secondary transition. Learn more here:
<http://learningaway.org.uk/school-partnerships/walney/>

Find these and many more case studies, resources and information at:
<http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies>