

Buckfastleigh - May 2007 to May 2008

The Buckfastleigh Play Ranger project in Victoria Park started in May 2007 and came to an end on Thursday 29th of May 2008, after one year and 54 sessions of free, open-access play sessions for local children and their families. This project was funded by the Big Lottery as one of the play projects that make up the Teignbridge District Councils' play portfolio.

Speaking as one of the Rangers, it has been a challenging but ultimately very rewarding year. Altogether we have had 808 children attend our play sessions, with ages ranging from just a few months up to 14 and 15 years old.

On average we have had 15 children per session, with marked seasonal variation which I shall mention later. We advertised that any children under 8 must be accompanied by a responsible adult, but that children 8 and over were able to come unaccompanied providing they told their parents or carers where they were.

Our first session was on the 24th of May 2007, and followed much publicity in the local media. Our efforts were rewarded when 45 children came down to the park to see what all the fuss was about. Sports proved instantly popular, as did arts and crafts activities, with children making dream-catchers from willow, as well as creating their own dens and hiding places using cardboard, tarpaulins and bamboo canes.

Over the following weeks, the number of children attending sessions levelled off around the 25 mark, helped by the warm weather and the school summer holidays.

Slowly but surely the number of parents coming along to the park rose too, as word of mouth spread as to what we were doing.

Indeed, over the course of a year we have noticed a steady turnout of parents coming down to the park to support their children at play, and altogether we have seen 276 parents visit the park during our sessions. This means that on average, 5 parents have been coming to each session that we have run in the park. This has been a particularly encouraging aspect of the project, and we now hope that parents will continue to bring their children down to the park despite the Play Rangers no longer being there.

We have received a lot of positive feedback from parents within the community regarding the success of Play Rangers. The project has helped to bring parents together in an informal setting and many have commented that it has been nice to meet new people and make new friends.

During the summer holidays we were supported in our sessions by the ABC Childrens Centre, who joined us for 2 of the 3 hours that we were in the park.

They came to the park with 3 members of staff and provided activities for children under the age of 5. Again parents found this very useful, as it meant that there were activities to keep children of all ages occupied, and it didn't cost them anything to attend.

Both Play Rangers and Sure-Start benefited from the publicity that this new arrangement generated, and it was rewarding to see whole families enjoying themselves and making the most of their local park.

This working arrangement is set to continue during August this year, when Sure-Start will be funding 4 additional sessions of Play Rangers, again on Thursdays from 2 until 5pm.

Besides Sure-Start, there have been many other agencies and shops within the local community who have helped to support the Play Ranger project; a few examples are as follows:

The team at Buckfastleigh Swimming Pool, run by Teignbridge District Council Leisure Department, offered the children a free swim on the last day of the season before they closed for the winter.

The local Electrical and Furniture stores both provided us with a steady supply of cardboard boxes throughout the year, which the children used to make all sorts of wonderful creations, from dens to cars to masks.

A local Carpentry factory allowed us to take off-cuts of wood, which we used over winter as fire-wood for the many fires we built with the children in the park.

Buckfastleigh Town Council were also very generous in donating £250 towards the cost of resources for use during our Play Ranger sessions.

As summer turned to autumn and the nights started drawing in, we were faced with a new challenge – how to keep running sessions in the dark. We were lucky that Victoria Park has a street-light fairly centrally located within the park, but once outside the circle of light it really became quite dark.

However the children were happy to keep coming to the park, and we helped to facilitate with fire-lighting and lantern-making, which in turn led to story-telling sessions and hide-and-seek games in the dark.

It was not only the dark but also rain which had an effect on the numbers of children visiting the park during the autumn and winter months.

Consequently, trying to keep dry also became a challenge, but the Rangers and the children became adept at rigging up tarpaulins to create a variety of shelters.

As the winter gave way to spring, children and parent numbers gradually started to rise once more.

Some of the parents were surprised that we had been running sessions throughout the winter months, this despite the various school assemblies and press releases that we had done to advertise that this was the case.

In recent weeks we faced some difficulties with anti-social behaviour, but by maintaining a fair and consistent approach we did our best to work with a disruptive minority. We were also grateful to the on-going support of the local police force and PCSO, who used to call in on our sessions from time to time.

Unfortunately the local Community Safety Wardens were not so forthcoming.

Overall we feel that the project has been a big success in Buckfastleigh, and that the local community have welcomed the presence of Play Rangers in the Park.

Children have told us that they feel a lot safer coming to the park when the Rangers are there, and we hope that they continue to do so now that the Rangers are gone.

It has been rewarding to see children make friendships with others that they wouldn't necessarily get the chance to do through school.

More children use the park now than they did before the project started, and that has to be a very good thing.

Monitoring of the park over the week after the end of the project revealed that at 4pm there were 40 children playing a football game organised by the new head teacher of the primary school, 5 children on bikes on the skate park, 2 adults and one child and one dog around perimeter of park and 6 adults and 13 children in the playpark.

We will continue to monitor the park over the next few weeks.