

Away days

Staying overnight away from their parents is a risk that can benefit young children, as *Dr Cath Arnold* knows

This year was the 15th in succession that workers from the Pen Green nursery had taken a group of children aged three and four years, without their parents, to Dodford Farm near Birmingham. They went for three days and two nights during the May Bank Holiday week.

We had heard about the farm during the early 1990s from a group of Birmingham teachers, who regularly took their five-year-olds for a week. The farm, which was conceived and funded by the Cadbury family to give city children experiences of the country, is run exclusively for children's visits. It is close to Birmingham but 70 miles from Corby, where we are situated.

CASE STUDY 1

Hallie's family had not been involved with other children in the nursery but when they received the letter about the trip, her mother, Carrie, asked her if she wanted to go. Carrie knew her daughter would be fine during the day but was worried about her settling at night as she had only stayed at her Nan's before.

Other parents told her the nursery had been visiting the farm for years, so she knew Hallie would be safe. Also Hallie's own family worker, Flavia, was going and the family had seen a video about the farm.

When Hallie got on the minibus, she showed no anxiety.

Had she been upset, Carrie would not have let her go and nursery staff had told her Hallie could pull out, even at the last minute.

Carrie phoned both nights that Hallie was away. When Hallie came back, Carrie said, 'It was lovely – she ran over and gave me a cuddle.' Hallie was also protective of her baby brother. Carrie noticed that Hallie was more grown-up. 'She doesn't want her beaker of milk before bed and she goes up to bed rather than falling asleep on the couch – I think it's done her good.' Hallie talked about the animals but was most interested in the park at the farm.

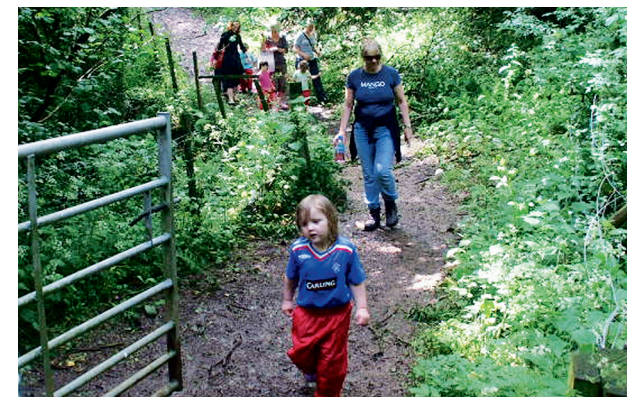
After two days, children seemed to grow a head taller, and friendships flourished

Children enjoy new experiences on the farm such as riding a pony and walking in the woods

The farm is in the country. It has a detached house with several bedrooms, a large communal dining room and a living room with toys, books and TV. The outside area, which is enclosed by a fence, has swings, climbing equipment, a barn converted into a soft play area and a large fenced paddling pool. There are rabbits, guinea pigs, hens and pigs to talk to and learn about.

There is a shed in the garden, containing toy tractors and other child-sized vehicles for children to play on. The house is on a hill, so riding vehicles both up and down the slope provides an exciting challenge relished by most of the children who go there. Children can enjoy a degree of freedom at the farm that they often can't have at home.

We take the whole group on long walks, through the woods and across fields, and bring a picnic with us. Walking through the woods in spring with the ground completely covered in bluebells is magical. Whenever the weather has been warm enough, everyone goes into the paddling pool.



PHOTOS BY PEN GREEN NURSERY STAFF

READY TO SEPARATE

Most adults who have been on the trip value the experience both for themselves and for the children. A great deal of effort goes into preparation. We begin by discussing with the parents of the older children in the nursery whether they, and we, think their child is ready to go.

Places are limited, so sometimes we have to pick names out of a hat for a final decision. Parents think carefully about whether their child is ready to separate from them overnight and whether they are ready to let them go.

CASE STUDY 2

ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Sometimes children with additional needs go on the trip. Being included and having so much freedom and space can be of great benefit to them.

Lewis has to have a one-to-one worker, as he is on the autistic spectrum, has severe asthma and has an attachment disorder, which causes him to check constantly that his mum is there. He only sleeps three hours a night. His mother thought that going to the farm might help him to 'switch off' from the constant checking, but wasn't sure he would go.

Lewis was excited to be included in what he saw as a special trip. Head of nursery, Angela, already had a close relationship with Lewis, but in preparation for the trip, she visited his house and invited him for tea at her house, and to stay till bedtime. They left for the farm a couple of days later. Angela had details of the nearest hospital to the farm, and his mother had a car.

Angela, along with her eight-year-old daughter, Ellie, drove Lewis to the farm. The farewell to his mother was kept brief, as they knew Lewis might struggle with the moment of separation.

At the farm, Angela, Ellie and Lewis shared a flat, which provided space for him away from the other children if necessary. He slept more than eight hours each night for the first time in his life.

Angela phoned home each day and on the last day Lewis spoke to his mother. All he said was 'Mummy' – he could not speak. He was not distressed, just could not believe it was her. When he came back he spent a couple of hours at home checking that everything was where it should be.

At nursery, Lewis recalled his experiences in many shared conversations. All of the children had been surprised to see a sheep jump over a fence into the garden and they all continued reflecting on this when they got back to nursery.

We have only once, in all of those years, had to bring home a little boy who was distressed and could not be comforted. It was in the days before mobile phones and the family did not have a phone at home, so two workers turned up on the doorstep at dawn with him grinning widely. We always take enough staff to make this possible.

Children and parents can watch a video of previous trips to get an idea of what happens at the farm. Most parents talk to their children in advance about:

- sleeping over, the greatest challenge for most families
- who else is going, their friends or their own key worker
- the animals and all of the exciting things they will do.

The parents of children who are going attend a meeting with the workers who are going, to share information about their child's individual needs, sleep patterns and any medication, and to talk about making any preparations for the trip. Often families have had an older child go to the farm and these children talk to

their younger siblings about going to the 'Sleeping Farm'.

SUCCESS STORY

The success of our trips to the farms seems to be due to:

- the shared understanding that learning is about taking risks, physically and emotionally for children, parents and workers
- close relationships built up over time through home visits, daily chats, discussing the well-being of children
- an ethos of acceptance of individual needs, diversity and feelings. ■

Dr Cath Arnold is a consultant at the Pen Green Research Base, Corby, Northamptonshire



LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **UC 1.3** Keeping Safe
- **PR 2.2** Parents as Partners
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration
- **L&D 4.2** Active Learning