

The logo for StartBright, featuring the word 'StartBright' in a white sans-serif font. The letter 'B' is stylized with a colorful geometric shape (a square with a triangle) inside it. The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of a garden with a wooden pergola, a gravel path, and a green lawn. A large blue graphic overlay is at the bottom, containing text and contact information.

StartBright

StartBright Deansrath Garden Redevelopment: Inclusion, Experience and Community Voice in Outdoor Learning

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Introduction: Inclusion, Experience and the Pedagogical Role of Outdoor Environments

Inclusive practice in early childhood education is grounded in the principle that all children have the right to participate meaningfully in environments that recognise and respond to their diverse needs, abilities, and identities. Outdoor environments provide a particularly powerful context for enacting inclusion, as they can be designed to offer multiple pathways for engagement, movement, communication, and interaction.

The work of Dewey offers a critical theoretical lens for understanding this. Dewey (1938) emphasised that education is rooted in lived experience, where learning emerges through active engagement with environments and through participation in social life. From this perspective, inclusive environments must be experiential, democratic, and responsive, enabling all children to participate as capable contributors. The outdoor environment, therefore, becomes a site where inclusion is not simply stated but actively practised.

This aligns with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, who highlights the importance of social interaction and context in learning (Vygotsky, 1978), and with the Reggio Emilia approach, where the environment acts as a “third teacher”, shaping possibilities for participation, belonging, and agency (Malaguzzi, 1998). Engagement with natural environments further supports inclusion by offering diverse, sensory-rich experiences that can be accessed in multiple ways, allowing children to engage according to their individual strengths and interests.



Background and Rationale: A Community-Informed and Inclusive Vision

The redevelopment of the garden at StartBright Deansrath was rooted in a commitment to inclusive practice and meaningful engagement with families and the wider community. In line with Dewey's emphasis on democratic participation, parents were actively involved in shaping the design of the space, ensuring that it reflected the lived realities and aspirations of the children who would use it.

Parental feedback highlighted the importance of accessibility, safety, and the provision of varied experiences. There was a clear desire for environments that would both challenge and support children:

"I would love to see more climbing frames or equipment for the children to take more risks... I know that the staff would be brilliant at teaching her to think about it"

This reflects Dewey's assertion that meaningful learning involves engagement with challenge and uncertainty, where children learn through doing and reflecting.

Parents also emphasised the importance of connecting children with natural processes:

"Wouldn't it be great to see the children growing things... understanding that it's not just instant from the shops."

This highlights the value of experiential learning, where knowledge is constructed through direct interaction with the environment.

Parents also identified the need for spaces that support different social and emotional needs:

"Quiet seating areas... would be nice... because my son sometimes likes to be on his own or play with just one friend."

Crucially, inclusion emerged as a central concern:

"I would love to see the garden designed in a way that ensures every child can access and enjoy it... including those who use mobility aids... and engage in safe, adventurous 'risky' play alongside peers"

This collective input shaped a vision of the garden as an inclusive, democratic space where all children could participate fully.

Designing for Inclusion: Access, Agency and Participation

The redesigned garden reflects a strong commitment to inclusive design, ensuring that all children can access, use, and enjoy the environment. Features such as ramps, wide pathways, raised planting beds, and varied seating areas support participation for children with diverse physical, sensory, and learning needs.

These design choices are not merely functional but pedagogical. By removing barriers to access, the environment enables all children to engage in shared experiences, supporting participation as a fundamental aspect of learning. The provision of varied spaces, including areas for active play and quieter engagement, allows children to make choices about how they interact with the environment, reinforcing agency and autonomy (Aistear, 2024).

Parents recognised and valued these inclusive features:

“I was very impressed... especially... a ramp... allowing safe access for everyone... The seating area and herb garden are a great educational addition”

“Every part of the space has been carefully designed to meet the needs of all children... nurturing imagination in a safe and caring environment”

This feedback illustrates the importance of environments that are both accessible and meaningful, supporting participation across a spectrum of needs and preferences.



Engagement in Green Spaces: Experience, Inquiry and Wellbeing

The redeveloped garden provides a rich context for experiential learning, where children engage in activities such as planting, digging, watering, and observing wildlife. These experiences align closely with a view of learning as an active, inquiry-based process, where knowledge emerges through interaction with the environment.

The variety of spaces within the garden allows children to engage in different ways, whether through physically active play or quiet, reflective interaction. This flexibility supports inclusion by accommodating diverse learning styles and preferences.

Engagement with green spaces also contributes to children's wellbeing, supporting emotional regulation, sustained attention, and a sense of connection with the natural world. For children who may find indoor environments challenging and overwhelming, the outdoor space offers alternative pathways for engagement and participation.



Risk, Challenge and Learning

The inclusion of opportunities for safe risk-taking reflects an understanding of the role of challenge in learning. While minor risks are present, they are carefully managed through appropriate design and supervision.

From a Deweyan perspective, such experiences are essential for learning, as they allow children to test ideas, solve problems, and develop resilience. Risk is not viewed as something to be eliminated, but as a necessary component of meaningful experience.

Impact on Children's Learning, Inclusion and Belonging

The improved accessibility and variety of experiences enable all children to participate fully, supporting inclusive practice.

Children will now be more confident in exploring the environment, making choices, and engaging in social interaction. The garden supports development across multiple domains, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive.

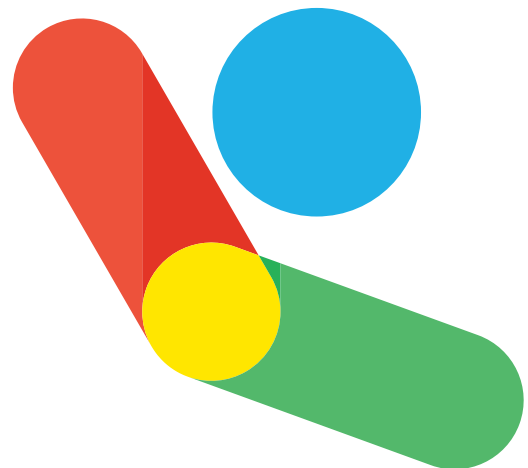
In line with Reggio emphasis on participation and autonomy, the environment enables children to experience themselves as active members of a learning community. This contributes to a strong sense of belonging, which is central to wellbeing and identity formation.

Impact on Families and Community Relationships

The redesigned garden has had a significant impact on children's engagement, participation, and sense of belonging (Aistear, 2024). The improved accessibility and variety of experiences enable all children to participate fully, supporting inclusive practice.

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Impact on Staff Practice and Professional Identity

The redevelopment of the garden generated a noticeable sense of enthusiasm and renewed energy among the team. Throughout the process, educators showed a genuine interest in the possibilities of the outdoor environment, becoming increasingly curious about how it could support children's learning, inclusion, and wellbeing. This growing interest extended beyond the immediate setting, with some team members actively seeking out ideas and inspiration, including visiting other outdoor early years environments in their own time.

This engagement reflects a deepening awareness of the possibilities in a pedagogy of outdoor learning and a willingness to expand on their own professional knowledge and practice.

This shift can be understood as a move towards a more experiential and reflective approach to practice, where educators position themselves as facilitators of learning rather than directors of activity. The outdoor environment has supported a more relational and responsive pedagogy, with educators and children engaging alongside one another in shared exploration and discovery.



Embedding Reggio-Inspired and Experiential Practice

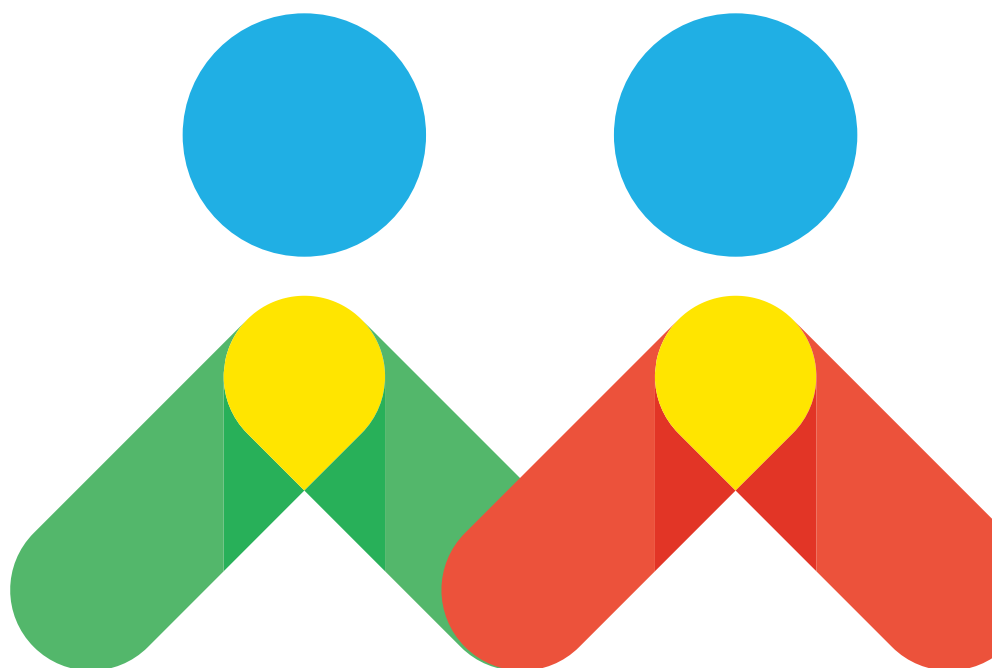
The StartBright Deansrath garden embodies key principles of Reggio-inspired practice, including child-led exploration, the centrality of the environment, and the importance of community involvement. The integration of parent voice extends the concept of co-construction beyond the classroom, reinforcing the environment as a shared, evolving space.

Through ongoing documentation, reflection, and engagement with children's ideas, the garden becomes a dynamic learning environment, supporting curiosity, creativity, and agency.

Conclusion

The redevelopment of the StartBright Deansrath garden represents a significant shift towards inclusive, experiential, and community-informed practice. By foregrounding participation, accessibility, and engagement, the setting has created an environment that supports all children to learn, explore, and belong.

Grounded in the principles of Aistear and evidence based practice, the garden functions as a democratic space where learning emerges through experience, interaction, and shared inquiry. It stands as a powerful example of how thoughtful design and community collaboration can transform not only physical spaces but also pedagogical practice.



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