



Meeting the challenge of COVID-19

Learning and practice



How the Ghillie Dhu Crew in North Ayrshire have kept spirits up during COVID-19

What was the challenge faced?

The Ghillie Dhu Crew is a group set up in 2017 for children permanently fostered care in North Ayrshire, to provide an alternative to organisations such as Brownies or Scouts which can sometimes feel challenging to young people with care experienced. The Ghillie Dhu Crew is a safe space for children aged 5-9 and 10-14 to attend a club once a week where their needs are understood. When Scotland went into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who run the Ghillie Dhu Crew were seriously concerned that the connections and relationships made through the group could be lost during lockdown and this would be detrimental to some of the children.

What change in practice took place?

Within a week of the lockdown being announced, the Ghillie Dhu Crew moved online by using an app to connect both adults and the children they care for. A programme of themes was established, chosen by the facilitators and based on suggestions from the children. Every day the Chief Ghillie Dhu, Katie (one of the young people who has been volunteering with the group since pre-lockdown), provides a short video of herself setting different challenges and arts and crafts projects for the children to do at home. The challenges use everyday household objects so no shopping is required. This way of working has been so popular that adopted parents and children in the area, who heard about the group through word of mouth, have also been invited to take part.

One of the challenges set by the facilitators and presented by the Chief Ghillie Dhu, was to something to lift spirits in the local community. The children were given a card that they wrote a personal message on and produced Hug Bugs - a small wooden heart with "hug" on it that could be hung up - and together with a poem and a handwritten note, these were distributed to elderly or isolating and shielding people in North Ayrshire. To date 94 Hug Bugs have cheered up local residents, while the children had great fun focusing on the task and talking about what lockdown meant for other people.

What difference did this change make?

This has helped to engage, entertain and distract children during lockdown, with them learning, connecting and taking on new challenges. The children look forward to the daily challenges along with regular video summaries and updates on the week's activities, which go online on Saturday mornings – and if this is ever late, the children start to message asking where the next instalment is! Parents and carers also enjoy spending time on these projects with the children, and they have created a separate online group where they can share achievements, worries and concerns during these unprecedented times. The Hug Bugs project has also helped the children to connect with others in the community and many recipients wrote back to the children - "Just to let you know, I received my card with message – sending you a hug, from a little bug – I was quite impressed. When you stay by yourself (especially during lockdown) you do feel lonely at times, but knowing that someone or ones are thinking of you, makes a big difference. So thank you, keep up the good work."

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