

Fact Sheet

Plotting the future

Involving children, families and schools in allotments

Many allotment associations are actively encouraging families, schools and youth groups to take on plots. This factsheet provides advice for allotment associations wishing to get families or young people involved.

Working with schools and youth services

The secret to getting a local school involved is to identify a teacher or someone from the PTA (Parent and Teacher Association) who is enthusiastic about the idea of a school allotment plot. An allotment plot is ideal for schools that have limited school grounds and are within walking distance of the site.

Benefits to school and pupils

Explaining the benefits of an allotment plot, for both school and pupils, encourages schools to seriously consider the idea of an allotment plot. Awareness of where food comes from is at an all time low, with healthy eating and exercise missing from many children's lives. A school allotment plot provides an outside classroom in which subjects, including design, science, maths and language, can be brought alive. Activities in the classroom can also be linked to the allotment, e.g. growing seedlings in class as part of work on germination and life cycles.

The scope for linking allotment activities to the National Curriculum is extensive. The Growing Schools Programme is a government initiative offering a huge range of resources, aimed at supporting teachers to make use of the outdoor



classroom. Growing Schools is an initiative run by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and can offer funding advice for outdoor activities to schools (see *Resources*).

There is also huge scope for allotments to work with youth services, e.g. youth clubs, playschemes or youth offending teams. For details of national youth organisations see *Resources*. Agencies may find the ARI factsheet *Project Allotment* helpful.

Showing the school or youth service this factsheet may help persuade them to consider taking a plot.

Benefits to the allotment site

The benefits of involving children and young people on your site are far reaching. Introducing children to allotments helps to nurture the next generation of growers and gardeners - our allotments will, after all, be in their hands. Activities may also inspire parents to get involved on the site



Federation of
City Farms
& Community
Gardens



NATIONAL SOCIETY OF
ALLOTMENT AND
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Communities
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and raise the profile of your site within the community. Being able to demonstrate work with schools is also very positive when it comes to applying for funding.

Planning ahead for visits

Teachers and youth workers may feel out of their depth in an outdoor environment, so the more support and helpers you can provide the better. The school/agency should, however, provide adequate staff/helpers for their group, who are responsible for the group's overall behaviour, safety and welfare. Check with the school that staff and pupils are fully insured via their Local Education Authority for visits and activities on your site. Get confirmation of this in writing beforehand. See ARI *Health and Safety on Allotments* pack.

Plan ahead together for visits. Pay particular attention to shelter, toilets, fitting in with meal times, drinking water, health and safety. Consider where the children will assemble for 'head counts', eat pack lunches, mill around or listen to instructions.

It is good practice to ensure that there is minimal disruption to other plotholders on site. Make the boundaries around plot(s) clear so that children do not stray onto neighbouring plots. Teenagers can sometimes seem intimidating to plotholders, but this will change as they get used to each other. It may be interesting to invite a couple of other plotholders to talk to the group about different things they grow. This will help break down barriers.

Child protection policy

If you are working with under 16 year olds, you should produce a Child Protection Policy: a set of useful guidelines is available from the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG) (see *Resources*). Issues to consider include:

- Thorough 'vetting' of all adult helpers. Anybody working with children or vulnerable adults should obtain a Criminal Records Disclosure (see *Resources*).
- Guidelines for appropriate behaviour of adult helpers, including what to do in the case of inappropriate behaviour

from plotholders not involved with the children's project.

- What to do if you think a child is being abused or if a child tells you that they are being abused.
- Try to keep all activities with young people as 'public' as possible. To avoid lone adults working with children aim to have two or more adults in the group. Refer to the school's own policy about giving children lifts home.
- Obtain relevant medical information and emergency contact details for the children.
- If working with children under 8 years, you may need to register your group with Social Services.
- Be clear with parents/carers about what you can and can't offer in terms of safety and supervision. For example, if offering children's activities at an open day, insist that children are accompanied by an adult, unless you are confident that you have the insurance and suitable helpers to offer a crèche facility.
- Have a rule that parents/carers have to give written permission for their children to take part in the project and that children need to wear suitable clothing and footwear and may come home muddy – as well as happy!

A child protection policy also serves to protect your adult helpers. You must have a system for dealing with allegations of abuse/mistreatment from the child or a parent/guardian. Otherwise the people who have given so much to the project risk having their careers and reputations ruined by a false allegation.

Any allegation, however unfounded, should be reported to Social Services and the accused helper/worker should stop working on the project until the matter has been resolved. Keep all details confidential and try to dissuade plotholders from discussing the case.

Health and safety

See ARI *Health and Safety on Allotments* pack for guidance regarding insurance, volunteers, ponds and risk assessments.



Growing seedlings in class provides plants for the allotment and can be linked with science work on germination and life cycles

Particular issues to consider in relation to younger gardeners include:

- Pre-school children often attempt to eat soil and vegetation. Prevent young children eating any plant, until they are old enough to differentiate between a vegetable and a non-edible plant.
- Teach children to wash their hands thoroughly after gardening. Watch out for thumbs in mouths and nail biters.
- Check tetanus injections are up to date.
- Remove any hazardous debris from the plot and fill in potholes. If an area of broken glass is found, cover the area with mulch until weeds are dead, making it easier to find and remove glass pieces. Keep children away from this area until it has been cleared. Watch out for brambles and nettles too.
- Top canes with old tennis balls, film canisters, wine corks or bike handles to prevent eye damage.
- Keep any chemicals, including fertiliser, labelled and locked away.
- Opt for polycarbonate greenhouses or polytunnels rather than glass.
- Ensure water barrels are covered and that children are supervised around ponds.
- Have spare wellies, waterproofs and sunhats on hand.

Child friendly tools

Provide younger children with small forks and trowels rather than full-size forks and spades, which can be

dangerous and disheartening to use. Tools designed for women are often smaller. Some garden centres and toy shops will have children's tools or materials. Beware of poor quality children's tools that can be easily bent or broken: there are lots on the market and they are very demotivating. Explain to the garden centre what the tools and other materials are for and they may well give you a discount. For further ideas to raise money for buying tools see ARI information pack *A guide to fundraising for allotment associations*.

Set ground rules in the first session with children about which tools they can touch and use. Err always on the side of caution. Supervise all tool use. Pay particular attention to:

- heavy or sharp tools (including secateurs)
- adult tools which are too large and unwieldy for children
- pointed tools, including rakes
- any electric tools such as hedge trimmers, lawn mowers, strimmers.

What to grow

Get children involved in planning and choosing what to grow. Try a class survey to find out favourite foods or a list of vegetables they have never seen or tried. Choose varieties which are:

- Fun to eat or can be eaten straight off the plants, e.g. blackcurrants and cherry tomatoes.
- Easy to grow or fast-growing, e.g. radishes, courgettes and squashes. Planting seedlings rather than seeds reduces the waiting time.
- Colourful or unusual, e.g. rainbow-coloured chard, yellow courgettes, stripy tomatoes, purple beans. Garden Organic's heritage seed catalogue features many unusual varieties and several seed companies produce children's ranges.
- Good in containers, e.g. tumbling tomatoes, chives, strawberries. This makes it possible to take home plants through the holidays.

- Flowers as well as fruit and vegetables. Sunflowers, love-in-a-mist, and poached egg plant are easy to grow. Growing the tallest sunflower is always popular.
- Edible flowers are fascinating to children. Nasturtiums, pot marigolds and borage are all suitable. It is important to teach children that not all flowers are edible, and to supervise them whilst picking and tasting. Avoid growing plants that are poisonous, especially in the area in which you will be picking flowers to eat. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) produces information about potentially harmful plants (see *Resources*).
- Treasure hunts – looking for a feather, yellow flower, round leaf etc.
- Seasons and the passing of time - keeping a diary.
- Plants and food are a great way of exploring different cultures. Try plotting out a world map and growing appropriate plants in each country and talking about food from different cultures. There are opportunities to teach about where food comes from, fairtrade, and food miles.
- Creating living willow structures is a great, fun, team activity and the end result of having a den or tunnel to walk through is loved by children. Structures also provide shady places for children to escape full sun. Willow can also be used to make supports for peas and climbers.

Children will appreciate having produce to take home to their parents, have a good supply of bags on hand. Plan to grow enough of each vegetable for everyone, large vegetables such as pumpkins or cabbages can be cut into pieces. You may be able to cook produce on site, e.g. using a barbecue to roast sweetcorn, or the children can take the produce back to school to cook there. Having a Harvest Festival involves the whole school (and parents) in the success of the allotment.

If you have surplus produce you may want to sell it to raise funds, or link up with a centre for the elderly/special needs.

Keeping everyone occupied and interested

Children of all ages enjoy harvesting, watering, weeding or digging – making sure there is a choice of different activities will help keep them interested. Turning tasks like digging and weeding into a competition such as who can dig up the longest root or the most weeds can help if enthusiasm is waning. Plan activities to break up 'work', for example:

- 'Mini beast' surveys - maybe even removing pests.
- How to make compost.
- Pond dipping.
- Craft activities - decorating plant pots, making scarecrows out of old clothes, using old CDs to make bird scarers and making labels with details of each crop and how to care for it..
- Making scale plans of the allotment.

Contact Growing Schools, The Wildlife Trusts, British Trusts for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) or FCFCG for further ideas (see *Resources*).

Summer holidays

Summer holidays create a problem, as this is when most crops mature! Choose early varieties (by looking at a range of seed packets) or plan the project around summer playschemes. Having a rota of volunteers to carry out tasks of watering, weeding and harvesting is very helpful. Neighbouring plotholders may also agree to keep an eye on the plot, or to pick and freeze crops to be used in a school harvest festival in the autumn.

To maintain interest throughout the summer holidays, pot up some herbs during the last visit to the plot before the summer holidays and get the children to take them home. Award a prize for the best plant (or the one still alive!) when they return.

Welcoming families to allotments

Play areas

Some allotment sites have turned a disused plot into a children's play area, with slides, sand pit and even fruit bushes

The right-sized tools are not only safer but easier and more fun to use



Working with schools: case studies

Grove Road Infant School in Essex has received fantastic support from the parents there. The school has organised a few 'digging' days, which were great successes. Weekends were much better attended than mid-week sessions, but that does mean a teacher giving up valuable time too. The children love watering the plants. They purchased a large water butt, which has provided the children with an easy way to water the allotment with no adult help. The school has found parents willing to help with fundraising and has had success in the form of £100 worth of products from a local garden centre. But above all, they say you must invest in good soil, it is vital for success!

Hasland Junior School in Derbyshire is always receiving tips from other plotheolders who have enjoyed seeing the children involved. The teachers received good support from the association. They were invited to meetings and the children became involved in their open day and plant sale. They have also been given responsibility for an unused corner of the allotments, which they are going to develop into a wildlife area, painting a mural, making habitat boxes, planting insect-attracting flowers and creating a picnic area. The teachers always try and involve the children in decision making - they really enjoy it. Surplus produce was taken back to school to sell. The children designed posters to put up around school and they held a little stall outside the hall. The money made was put back into the project.

School visits to **Armley Ridge Road Allotments**, Leeds, came about after a plotheolder mentioned at his daughter's school that he had an allotment. The school contacted the committee to ask if they could bring a class to visit. Five or six volunteers from the site now regularly lead tours for local schools. Last year they showed over two hundred pupils what was growing on the allotment. Members of the committee also took produce to a school assembly

and talked to the whole school about growing food and healthy eating.

The HELP plot on **Uplands Allotments**, Birmingham, is used by many pupils from local schools, with gardening skills being developed alongside curriculum based activities. School projects on the plot include exploring the taste and history of foods from the Caribbean and other parts of the world. Pupils have developed their interview, photography and video skills recording activities on the plot.

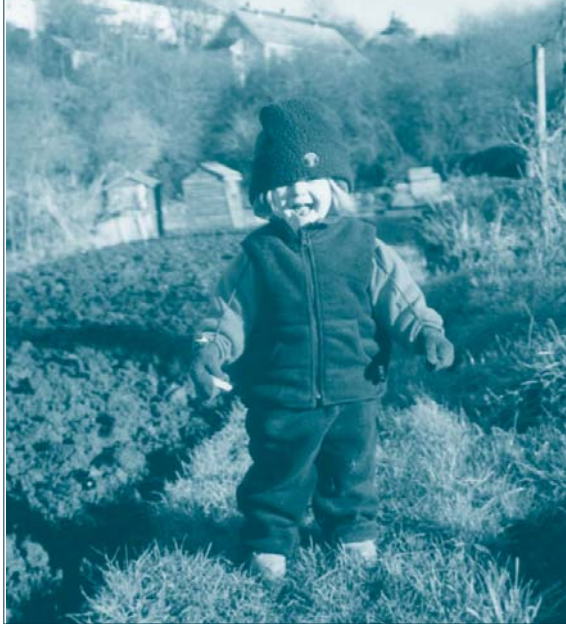
North Tyneside Council run sessions on their community allotment for the local summer playscheme. Activities such as treasure hunts, tasting fruit and vegetables, collecting and planting seeds, and potting up strawberries to take home, make it one of the most popular choices for children at the playscheme.

An allotment area at **Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project**, Brighton, provides opportunities for pupils who have been excluded from school to shine through practical work rather than in a classroom. Mixing with a wide range of people and acquiring new skills has helped turn around some of the most disruptive pupils into willing, responsible and co-operative participants.

Contact ARI for details of projects listed.



Harvesting sprouts at Hasland Junior School allotment (with help from grandad!) Some of the crop was later sold to raise funds for the project



Suitable outdoor wear is a must!

to 'graze' on. Ponds, wildlife areas and butterfly gardens are other ideas to make allotments more interesting for children. It should be made clear to parents that they are responsible for their children's supervision whilst using this area.

You could allocate several adjacent plots on your site as 'family plots', maybe with a play area nearby. This would allow plottolders with children to garden without worrying about disturbing other plottolders and be able to keep an eye on their own and each other's children.

Tips for families taking on a plot

"We took on an allotment when our children were 2 and 6. In the first few months I hardly visited the allotment alone and half our visits were inspired by the 6 year old," says Tim Love from Cambridge of allotment gardening with a young family. The following tips are based on his positive experience.

- Parents will need to spend some time on the plot on their own in the beginning to get it ship-shape for the children to visit. Then they will need to be able to work the plot enough to keep it going (both to maintain children's interest and to satisfy the requirements of their tenancy agreement).
- Make the visits short, and be prepared to keep switching tasks. If you want to stay for more than an hour make sure you have breaks from gardening, perhaps have a picnic. It helps to be

within short walking distance of the plot with an on-site shed or lock-up box for tools. Make it very clear to the children that they can't go on other plots and other out of bound areas.

- Having a separate area for each child helps give them a sense of independence. Make sure they have a prime spot (sunny with good soil) as they will not try twice if their crops fail to grow. You might like to do some secret weeding so that they think the crops were all their own work. It is a good idea to give each child their own tools, to stop them squabbling, although the tools the parents are using are always the most popular.
- Involve your children in the planning of crops to grow, though you may end up with varieties according to their name rather than other qualities. Planting seeds is a fun but fiddly job for little fingers, especially if the seeds are small and light. Mixing light seeds with sand before sowing makes it easier.
- Find out what tasks the children like doing. Don't raise your hopes - even if they like digging, they'll probably only enjoy digging holes. If you're lucky they may do the watering. They may prefer working alone, as far from you as possible. Letting them weed unsupervised isn't a good idea though!
- Let them get dirty - it's all part of the fun. Even if they're not doing anything useful, as long as they're not doing damage, visits can be considered a success, so praise their hard work even if it's not very productive.

Helping families to stay – and to give up gracefully

Even with the best will in the world, it is difficult to keep on top of an allotment when faced with all the other tasks and responsibilities of caring for a family.

Consider offering families starter plots to begin with. If a family does find it all too much and has to give up their plot, consider operating a reserve waiting list system. Keep the family permanently on the waiting list, then if the family wishes to have another try at a later date, they

Families on allotments: case studies

Mums and tots sessions at **Innisfree Allotments**, North Tyneside, give young mums the opportunity to spend time with other parents and toddlers. Favourite activities for toddlers include picking and tasting peas and carrots, digging for potatoes and worms and planting big seeds such as sunflowers.

Pilkington Allotments, St Helens, hold a Dad's Dig every Saturday. Working together on a shared plot is a great way for dads to meet other dads and their children to get to know each other. 'The Dads', who are mostly new to allotments, also get involved in helping plotheolders and in turn pick up lots of growing knowledge.

Preston Lane Allotments, Cleveland, are pioneering The Allotments Education Project which aims to get new plotheolders, particularly families, interested in allotments. A pond, butterfly garden and wildlife area, together with toilet and shelter are part of the plans to encourage gardeners with children. A 10 week basic course in growing gives people confidence to tackle a plot of their own. Publicity produced for the project features young couples and children.

Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation are encouraging children to accompany their parents to the allotment by providing an area for them to grow their own vegetables. Prizes are given for the best kept area.

Contact ARI for details of projects listed.

will not be at the bottom of the waiting list. This might encourage those finding the going tough, to give up gracefully, sooner rather than later when a plot has become very overgrown.



And when those young gardeners become teenagers ...

The best way to find out what types of activities teenage gardeners want to do is by asking them! Involving teenagers wherever possible in decision making about the plot helps create a sense of ownership. It is quite usual to find initially that there are objections to handling 'dirt', a spot of rain, or getting trainers muddy.

When allowed to have their own plot though, teenagers will often thrive on the sense of 'ownership', independence, privacy and practical skills building that an allotment can offer. Many allotment associations have successfully rented a plot to an individual teenager. The tenancy agreement should be in the name of their parent/guardian who needs to agree take on responsibility to oversee the plot and act as a go-between. Teenagers can sign a tenancy agreement once they are aged 18.

Resources

Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

Supports and develops allotments regeneration and the creation of brand new allotment sites in the UK.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari
ari@farmgarden.org.uk
Tel. (0117) 963 1551

Growing Schools Programme

Publish 'Get your hands dirty' resource to help teachers who want support and advice on growing plants or animal care.

growing.schools@dfes.gsi.gov.uk
www.teachernet.gov.uk/growingschools

Our vision is to
increase allotment
uptake by individuals
and groups

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BTCV

Tel. (01491) 821600
information@btcv.org.uk
www.btcv.org

Garden Organic

Organic schools project.
Tel. (0247) 630 3517
enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Royal Horticultural Society

Schools resources and list of
potentially harmful plants.

Tel. (020) 7834 4333
info@rhs.org.uk
www.rhs.org.uk

For details of groups or projects in your area working with young people:

Local Education Authority

May also have a Play Officer or Youth
Worker, usually based in
leisure/culture services (see Phone
Directory).

Wildlife Watch

Wildlife Watch is the junior branch of
the Wildlife Trusts across the UK
enabling children to get involved with
environmental action.

Tel. (01636) 677 711
watch@wildlifetrusts.org
www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

UK Youth

National youth work charity supporting
over 750,000 young people.

Tel. (01425) 672 347
info@ukyouth.org
www.ukyouth.org

National Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Network of over 160 national
voluntary youth organisations and
regional and local youth networks.

Tel. (020) 7278 1041
mail@ncvys.org.uk
www.ncvys.org.uk

National Youth Agency

Working to extend the range and
effectiveness of youth work.

Tel. (0116) 242 7350
nya@nya.org.uk
www.nya.org.uk

Girlguiding UK

Tel. (020) 7834 6242
www.girlguiding.org.uk

Scout Association

Tel. (0845) 300 1818
info.centre@scout.org.uk
www.scouts.org.uk

Woodcraft Folk

Environmental education with young
people.

Tel. (020) 7703 4173
info@woodcraft.org.uk
www.woodcraft.org.uk

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

Advice on making a garden safe for
children.

Tel. (0121) 248 2000
help@rospa.co.uk
www.rospa.co.uk

Youth Offender Teams (YOT)

Contact via your local Probation
Service.

www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk

For your local contact in England and
Wales go to website and look in
section: about us/local probation
areas.

The Criminal Records Bureau

Anybody working with children or
vulnerable adults should obtain a
Criminal Records Disclosure.

Tel. (0870) 909 0811
www.crb.gov.uk

Independent Safeguarding Authority

The Independent Safeguarding
Authority (ISA) works in partnership
with the Criminal Records Bureau to
help prevent unsuitable people from
working with children and vulnerable
adults. See website for detailed
information on how to register and
what ISA registration means for
employees and volunteers.

www.isa.gov.org.uk