



## Durham County Council Family Learning Case Study Summer 2010



Quality time together. Experiencing nature together. Learning new skills together. Achieving the John Muir Award together.

Durham County Council Family Learning's six week nature courses for fathers and children mix exciting activities, wild places and the John Muir Award. The result is an unforgettable experience which changes how adults and young people engage with nature and with each other.

The John Muir Award is integrated into the programme to encourage families to work towards a common goal while participating in outdoor activities. The Award helps frame activities and enhances the focus of the Family Learning course. The John Muir Award also celebrates families' accomplishments. Participants take pride in their own development, joint achievements and each others' successes.



**“It has been an informed and valuable experience, and enhanced my knowledge of different habitats.”**

Through environmental games, structured activities and crafts, fathers and children learnt about food chains, native wildlife, biodiversity and even animal droppings. Participants commented that hands-on activities such as bark rubbing and creating birds' nests were “very enjoyable and very interesting.” At each site the families took personal responsibility for nature by planting trees and bulbs, constructing insect piles, participating in wildlife surveys, and making bird feeders and bat boxes. At Hardwick Park in Sedgfield the participants wove a living willow screen which is now both a permanent feature for wildlife watching and a habitat for a variety of species.

**“The Family Learning course has encouraged my family to go out more and explore the surrounding area where we live.”**

### What did we do?

In May 2010 twenty-five families achieved their John Muir Award. With the help of Countryside Rangers and Environmental Educators, each adult and child team worked together to meet its four challenges – discover a wild place; actively explore it; do something to conserve it; and share your experiences.

Four six week courses ran simultaneously at four different wild places across County Durham. Each was partnered with a primary school or nursery which advertised the project and supported participants meeting the Share Challenge. Wild places included country parks, nature reserves and, in one instance, a partner school's grounds.

At Newker Primary School in Chester-Le-Street the families created a deluxe hedgehog hotel. During the six week programme an intrepid hedgehog became the hotel's first resident. The School is thrilled with their new addition and are transforming their grounds into a wildlife-friendly learning area. Many of the participants also felt inspired by their experiences and have used their new skills to enhance gardens at home and to be more observant while visiting wild places.

Fathers and children shared their experiences at school assemblies and with members of their families. Participants from the four sites came together at Castle Eden Dene National Nature Reserve to present their achievements to each other and to members of the public at a family open day.

## Changing attitudes - towards nature and towards each other

Prior to their involvement the families rarely spent time outside together. One parent said he did not realise there were so many wild places on his doorstep which could be visited for free. As well as educating parents about activities to do and wild places to visit, the course has helped parents feel more comfortable in the outdoors. A participant reflected, "I have learnt new skills and gained more confidence." Fathers witnessed the positive effect nature has on children's behaviour firsthand. All these factors have motivated the families to spend more time outside.



The relationship between parent and child evolved throughout their John Muir Award experiences. Meeting the Award challenges together developed participants' teamwork skills and resulted in improved communication within families. Children gained a new respect for their parents as they observed them taking a more active role in the environment. The programme helped reinforce ideas many of the young people had that their dad is a hero. Through spending quality time with their children in wild places fathers were able to appreciate their children's abilities and interests. One father commented, "It has been a wonderful six weeks that my whole family has enjoyed."

**"The participants learn to identify trees as part of their John Muir Awards. One little boy was so intent on taking his time to capture every detail of an Oak in his Record Book that his father took him to visit the park in his free time so his son could finish his drawing."**

**Jeanna Osborne, Project Manager**

### What's next?

The Family Learning course has been beneficial to all involved and a repeat of the programme is already underway. The Durham County Council Family Learning team is running the John Muir Award in other parts of the County and have opened up the nature course to mothers and grandparents as well.



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