



Alfred the Mouse goes to School

A TRANSITION RESOURCE

“We have found Alfred and the website valuable in supporting us, the children and parents in supporting school transition. We have found the children have enjoyed being able to share their school, sharing their experiences, finding Alfred mouse on the website, and exploring similarities and differences between our nursery and their school which has enabled them to feel they know their school before they go and share the fun they have had.” Nursery Manager

PROJECT EVALUATION JAN 2017

Taunton Cluster 1 & 2 in partnership with Take Art

Caroline Barnes on behalf of the Taunton Early Years Cluster



Summary

Alfred the Mouse, and his online resource, has proved to be a helpful and accessible tool in supporting children through transition from preschool, nursery and child-minder settings to reception. The project has been available to 300 preschool and 31 reception classes throughout the Taunton area of Somerset.

Alfred – a toy mouse, has been able to contextualize a challenging phase for very small children, acting as a familiar friend to share feelings, expectations and journeys with.

Staff have explored new ways of using language, numeracy, stories, role play, painting and drawing to find connections and empathy between a child's personal experience and that of Alfred. A creative User Manual and Teaching Pack has directly linked suggested activities to the EYFS Early learning goals which staff in some settings have developed and extended further.

The website resource, featuring photographs and audio material of the majority of primary schools in the area, has received over 6000 web page visits by over 650 individual parents and staff. Children have been able to see and hear their new school through a series of images and familiar songs and sounds to comfort and intrigue them.

These highly visual resources have enabled children to feel less anxious about some of the very practical areas of transition e.g. What will my new school look like? What toys or activities will there be? All supporting increased confidence and awareness around their move to Primary School. We have also seen outcomes around improved support for literacy, PHSE, language and communication and numeracy as a result of utilising Alfred in day to day learning and play.

The project has been a key opportunity for staff at both Primary and preschool or nursery to work positively together by exploring a cluster initiative, adding to increased communication and dialogue across the EYFS and the children they both work with. The cluster now has a great asset that can continue to build and support children and the staff that work with them.

“Alfred the Mouse Goes to School” is one of the first creative, interactive, transitional tools linking child-centred learning and setting locality. It has the potential to be rolled out across the county but also to become an example of good practice in EYFS delivery at a National level.

The project has been funded by Somerset County Council.

The project

“Alfred the Mouse goes to school” combines a real toy mouse with a high quality website and online platform following the journey of an avatar/mouse to a new school. Having piloted the project with children at Stoke St Gregory Primary School and the Willow Set Preschool, a series of photographs and sound recordings were then commissioned to illustrate Alfred in various locations around the 30 primary schools and reception classes that children would be moving to.

A website was then commissioned enabling parents/carers, children and staff to flick through and explore the school settings with Alfred www.alfredthemouse.co.uk specifically designed to work on PCs, Macs and smartphones.

Parallel to the website each preschool setting and reception class in the cluster were offered an actual toy mouse and instructions were distributed to every preschool in the cluster. Practitioners also had access to an online resource pack full of creative ideas around using Alfred in their setting.

Staff at both Early years settings and primary schools were briefed during Cluster meetings where there was an opportunity to discuss the development of the resource.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

We hoped the project would support the improvement of children’s outcomes with regard to attainment at the end of EYFS by:

- Raising self-esteem and confidence, making transition easier and learning less interrupted
- Encouraging independence in individuals personal care
- Creating a desire to learn through a curiosity of the world around them
- Strengthening social skills
- Focusing on areas requiring support or improvement e.g.: communication, language, writing and number work
- Strengthening collaboration between schools and preschools, building partnership and communication

FINDINGS:

Self Esteem and Confidence

Preschool staff recognize that a change of setting, changes to routine and new friends are some of the key challenges facing children moving to reception. Several settings utilize role-play, stories and small world toys to explore these areas and quickly absorbed Alfred into their strategies: Alfred has been used as a continuity link “A familiar toy in setting and in school, a friend from setting to school”

- 100% of survey respondents felt that the project had supported increased confidence in children at their setting:

“The best outcome would have been when a really reluctant boy took Alfred on a school settling in visit as reassurance, it worked for him” EY practitioner



Reception children from Holway Park Community School visually and audibly (this page features a recording of child singing twinkle, twinkle little star) introducing activities at their school.

“Alfred physically being at Nursery provides another link between Nursery and School and through him we can explore a variety of emotions and behaviors. We can play out the emotions etc. that we think they may be having/going through and also have a positive spin i.e.: Alfred is a little bit worried about what happens at lunch time but sooooo excited about meeting lots of new children and making new friends”

“The children who were aware of him were excited to see him in the classroom. It was almost like a familiar face. Some children didn’t know who he was.” Reception Teacher



Children with Alfred at Bishops Hull Primary School

Independence in personal care

Alfred is an adaptable character and one setting told us how they devised an activity where Alfred was found with a puddle on the floor next to him, where he had done a wee. Through this activity the children learnt about using the toilet and not waiting until they have an accident “this was particularly helpful for a targeted group of children” EY practitioner

“Staff took Alfred on visits to places to familiarize the children with the idea that he goes and comes back with stories” EY practitioner

Staff have used Alfred as the vehicle to explore other areas of independence in personal care including:

- Getting dressed, getting changed
- Encouraging dry beds
- Eating at a table, mealtimes
- Nighttime routines



Alfred exploring outside the classroom at Bishop’s Hull Primary

Curiosity

The project included the development of a User Manual and Teaching pack - encouraging staff to link creative activities to the EYFS Early learning Goals.

Settings used Alfred as part of wall displays, familiarizing children with the character, often using a small doorway or home that Alfred would go through as part of his journey to and from primary school. "This was visually interesting in the room, which created a starting point to talk about Alfred" EY practitioner

"Children were interested to see where Alfred had gone, they noticed when he had left his castle" EY practitioner

"Looking on the website for hidden Alfred and Alfred moved in nursery too! Triggered excitement if Alfred was at their school and wanted to go and find him! Finding Alfred on the website triggered talk about the activities" EY practitioner



Alfred enjoying outdoor play at Creech St Michael C of E Primary School

Social Skills

For some children Alfred has been a character that they can strongly relate to and settings have included him in daily activities from welcome songs to numeracy work. For children attending more than one setting he has supported transition between providers.

Children have taken Alfred on overnight stays, with Alfred writing Thank You letters to each child: "I enjoyed playing the game with you but most of all liked sleeping in your bedroom and my tea, please thank your Mummy for my tea"

Children also enjoyed exploring the website, spotting siblings and friends in pictures at school, all helping to familiarize and associate primary school with a safe and friendly environment.

For children who have moved up to reception, but still attend settings for afterschool care, Alfred has again proved to be a positive continuum in their world.

“We have used the pictures from the website to download and make little photo books of each school which the children have looked at intently and shared with each other.” EY practitioner

Communication, language and numeracy

Alfred was utilized to support a number of EYFS Early Learning Goals, particularly around Communication and Language 87% of survey respondents felt the resource had supported this area of the curriculum with examples including:

- Children enjoying listening to what he got up to
- Encouraging speaking and attention skills
- Comparing and finding similarities about the settings
- Asking questions about his adventures
- Creating character traits
- Role playing his voice and conversations
- Finding ways of describing actions and activities
- Exploring new words and vocabulary
- Creating books with captions
- Helping to understand and articulate concepts and ideas



Alfred at Creech St Michaels C of E Primary School exploring letters

“Children loved the magic behind Alfred and became chatty and positive about school” EY practitioner

“Alfred brings a toy from school to nursery for children to familiarize themselves with the toys the same as nursery and school such as a pencil, a small bit of play dough, Duplo like nursery. Impact was all positive and encouraged talking about school visits with parents/carers and staff.” EY practitioner

Below: Alfred being used by children to support counting, Alfred’s nose is being pushed through each hole of the Numicon as the child sounds out the number. This activity was then continued by the child during independent learning.



Collaboration

Some settings commented, that due to parent’s work commitment, it wasn’t always possible to attend the transition sessions provided by the school and if the reception class teacher did not take up the offer of visiting the setting “there is very little opportunity for the child to be confident when they start”.

37% of respondents, from our online survey, felt that the project had improved communication between setting and school. This figure may be due to existing relationships being already positive or a continuation of challenges.

50% of respondents, from our online survey, did feel that relationships between setting and parents/carers had been improved.

“Giving parents the Alfred leaflet on school transitions, encouraged some parents to look at the different schools at home and we suggested lots of positive discussion.” EY practitioner

Parents who used the site commented to setting staff on it being a successful way for their child to be excited at moving on to school.

“The teacher said she would use it (Alfred) to support a child who was upset when he first went to school visits, we had no further feedback but we used Alfred here in the setting with the children.” EY practitioner

Staff were able to share the resource through, school readiness evenings, newsletter and their websites.

- The web based resource has seen 651 users accessing the pages, through nearly 6000 actual page hits
- 24% of visitors to the site returned for a second visit
- The peak activity on the site occurred during May, June , July and August 2016
- The top 6 schools visited for by users were Northtown, Bishop Henderson, Holy Trinity, Blackbrook, Wellspring and Parkfield Primary.

CHALLENGES

Consistent engagement has been a real challenge the cluster lead feels that approximately 100 preschools have actively engaged in the project with over 200 Mice being distributed across the cluster despite continuous promotion.

- Not all settings had access to the internet, in some cases staff printed off some of the pictures instead
- The number of feeder schools (one setting had 12) without one main school meant staff had to adapt or find generic routes to using the visual aids on the website
- Where a child was awaiting an offer or appealing a place this meant staff were less likely to use the school photographs
- “We found it hard that schools didn’t come to the setting to see us this year. Communication has been through quick phone calls, which we have prompted. There was one school who was uninformed about Alfred the mouse.”
- Difficulties and or lack of communication between Reception teachers and preschool staff has meant the project has not yet become fully embedded across all settings

Not all reception staff have taken up the activity, some have suggested that this is due to the wide number of feeder settings they deal with and it not being possible to visit or connect with their intake prior to September.

“Unfortunately Alfred the mouse was not a resource used by all of our feeder schools such as Lydeard St. Lawrence, or Cotford St. Luke. But nevertheless we used Alfred the mouse with all of our school leavers and as a tool to speak about school and transition generally so that all of the children benefitted.”

MOVING FORWARD

The project is still at an early stage, with staff at both school and preschool settings getting to grips with it. We have seen highly successful outcomes where staff have embraced and run with the resource taking Alfred and his world in hundreds of directions.

In an environment when parents and staff are stretched for time or face barriers to engagement, Alfred is already proving to be a great continuum between settings. The resources, expertise and take up invested in “Alfred the Mouse Goes to School” are the beginnings of a sustainable and useful aid for teachers, parents/carers and children facing transition. With the infrastructure and learning in place “Alfred the Mouse has the potential to run as a model of good practice long into the future.

To maximize the impact further the resource needs to develop in the following areas:

- The community of practitioners and teachers in the cluster need to **share examples** of good practice via the Facebook page, helping to support and sustain each other
- Practical strategies of how Alfred is being used and mirrored in school and preschool settings need to be **shared between teachers and practitioners**
- The website needs to secure hosting for the next 3 years
- Where appropriate, images on the website need to be **refreshed** and updated e.g. year 3-4
- A wider roll out across the county would be possible, given additional resources, with an aim to increase visibility, coverage and a consistency between settings.
- As practitioners join the workforce a programme of **CPD workshops** needs to be developed using Alfred ensuring the next generation of practitioners is familiar with the resource.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluator attended cluster meetings as the resource was being developed and noted any concerns or apprehension around using the tool.

A pre resource questionnaire was sent to a sample of six settings to explore how transition was currently supported, this was followed up by a post project questionnaire focusing on how the resource was used in the setting.

The cluster lead was interviewed, allowing both personal and cluster wide feedback.

Data from Google Analytics has enabled us to identify how the online resource was utilized including times, number of visits and popularity of pages.

Data from an online survey to preschool and nursery settings via Survey Monkey.

Photographs by Richard Tomlinson and staff at the Willow Set Preschool.