It may be a dirty job but this outdoor preschool on a sprawling site in Co Donegal is more than happy to do it, writes **SHEILA WAYMAN**

It’s a grey November morning and persistent drizzle is falling from a cloud-locked sky above the road out of Letterkenny towards Glenties, in Co Donegal. There’s enough rain to convince any primary school that pupils shouldn’t be going outside at break time. But it’s business as usual at the pioneering Glen Outdoor Early Learning Centre, in Barrack, where preschool children spend nearly 90 per cent of their time outdoors in all seasons.

A gang of children, ranging in age from two to five and dressed in brightly coloured, padded waterproof suits and wellies, hoods pulled over woollen hats, swarm around a variety of natural and manmade features laid out on a site of about 3,000sq m.

There’s a sand-pit as big as a room; a line of yellow and green painted tractor tyres set into the ground in order of ascending height, all ready to be climbed up and crawled through; swings and a slide; and a polytunnel housing fruit and vegetable plants. The biggest draw is a rock-encircled splash pool, through which a diverted stream flows.

This morning a team of chefs work at a bench on one bank, preparing “soup”, earnestly ladling water in and out of pots, saucepans and kettles.

Nearby, a few children have clambered on to a wooden ship, where one takes charge of the wheel and others commandeer the “guns” – until the teacher, Karen O’Donnell, reminds them they are, in fact, “binoculars”.

Meanwhile three boys have put on helmets and whizz pedal-free bikes down a muddy track, dragging them back up time and time again for a repeat of the thrill. Piles of gravel provide another challenge for them to navigate, while there are tricycles for the less co-ordinated.

When they tire of that, there’s a work bench behind with real hammers, nails, saws and bench vice to play with. None of your fake, plastic stuff here. There’s even a big rock and a large tree the small children are – shock! horror! – allowed to climb.

It’s all part of the ethos: grounding children in the natural environment and helping them to learn to make their own judgments on risk-taking, rather than wrapping them up in cotton wool and never asking them the question – never mind giving them a chance to answer it.

**Forest schools**

The Glen centre’s founder, Sally O’Donnell, was already running a conventional preschool in Letterkenny when she first heard of the “forest schools” in Scandinavia. Their philosophy is that being outdoors is key to children’s development; it is an ideal place to learn to crawl, jump, balance and climb and their natural curiosity is stimulated by what they touch, see, hear and smell around them.

“I just thought, wow – for me that is what childhood is all about,” says O’Donnell, who grew up in nearby Churchill and has five children of her own, ranging in age from 10 to 31. She visited a forest school in Norway and an outdoor nature kindergarten in Scotland before opening the Glen school in a converted house and surrounding land, in 2008.

Initially the children’s time was split equally between indoors and outdoors. With nothing else like it in Ireland, parents took a bit of convincing. But a woman at the Scottish nature kindergarten advised O’Donnell not to compromise her ideals but instead declare it an outdoor school and let parents sign up to it, or not, as the case might be.

Now in its third year, there are 18 children attending – two-thirds come from 9am until noon on the free preschool year scheme. O’Donnell says she would happily cater for 30. The parents who bring their children here have nothing but praise for the school’s innovative approach.

The Health Service Executive has been supportive, too, says O’Donnell. A risk-benefit analysis was done for every area of the centre.

And while health and safety regulations normally demand, for instance, that all ponds be covered, the Glen’s splash pool, “a manmade structure for a learning outcome”, is exempt.

At first sight some of the school’s features and equipment might look dangerous, but O’Donnell explains that “children know their own limits and we never push them”. They’re taught how to use things safely and progress at their own pace.

Parents need to be educated to see their children as competent in the outdoors and able to make choices, she says.

“If we were to lift them up on to the tree we would be responsible for them. But if they can get up themselves, we must support and encourage them to get down – but not lift them down or they will be learning nothing.”

O’Donnell, along with her two staff, Karen O’Donnell (no relation) and Ursula McKenna, keep a careful eye on the children as they roam where the fancy takes them. They are encouraged to talk about what they’re doing, learning from the different activities.

The calmness and the children’s co-operative interaction is striking. Loud voices and pent-up energy float away over the undulating landscape, a palette of autumnal colours.

In four hours I see no tears or rows – bar a silent tug-of-war between one girl and boy over a soup ladle, which ends as the girl recognises the futility of the tussle when there are plenty of other utensils lying around.

There are much more likely to be fights and small accidents at indoor childcare centres where children are in confined spaces, says O’Donnell.

**Hail, rain or shine**

Although the children are free to go indoors, they opt to stay out much of the time. Even their table-top work, like drawing, is done outside when it’s dry.

Generally rain, snow and frost don’t stop play, but high wind is the one element that is likely to force them inside because of the risk of things being blown around.

There’s a wooden chalet where parents sign their children in and out; each child has at least one change of clothes in a cubby-hole and lunch-boxes are stored in cool bags. Children start the day here by drawing something they plan to play with and they finish the morning session by swapping their waterproofs for dry clothes for going home and reviewing their plan.

Leticia had planned to play in the pile of stones – and she did, she tells her teacher, “digging them”. Ava had drawn a big red boat and she acts out how she was driving it. “Need to find treasure,” she says, but, asked if she did, she shakes her head.

With most of the children collected soon after midday, the remainder go into the house for a hot lunch. Later, one boy who is there for the day, will tuck himself under a blanket on a mattress for an hour’s sleep, to recharge the batteries for another afternoon’s adventure in the outdoors, when older children arrive for the afterschool service four days a week.

Sceptics might wonder why would you want to have preschoolers outdoors in all weathers, but spend a few hours in the inspiring setting of the Glen Outdoor Early Learning Centre and the question is: why wouldn’t you?

Great outdoors Play-based education foryoung children in Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) organises study trips to the Glen Outdoor Early Learning Centre twice a year to help other preschool providers see the value of outdoor education.

While few are likely to go as far as Sally O’Donnell, it gives them ideas for how they might at least extend their outdoor programmes.

HSE inspectors are usually there, too, says Rita Melia of ECI, “to show the providers that you can comply with regulations and provide a wonderful, rich, environment in the outdoors for children”.

Jo Flinn, who runs Free Range Kids in Croom, Co Limerick, needs no convincing of the benefit of the outdoors for children, and tries to have her preschoolers out for at least an hour a day.

“But it is hard work with that age group to be totally outdoors,” she says. “And it is also a matter of getting parents onboard.”

Lots of parents don’t like their children getting dirty, she says. “It is very sad.”

However, she has seen a definite increase in interest in outdoor, play-based education for young children in Ireland.

“I opened five years ago with four children and I have 40 on my books this year. They don’t all come every day. People travel a long way to come here now, which is a message in itself.”

Flinn, who has seven children of her own, ranging in age from 14 to 31, also invites infant classes from primary schools in Limerick city to come and do an outdoor day with her.

Her whole emphasis is on trying to make it an experience for children that they wouldn’t have otherwise and one that they will always remember. That includes, for instance, nature walks and seeing the pet Jersey cow being milked – and then using that milk to make bread in the kitchen.

She believes the biggest obstacle to more outdoor education in Ireland is the providers’ concern about the risks, because of our suing culture.

‘It’s hands-on, under the sky and they can hear the birds singing’

Louisa Harley had sent her oldest boy, Taylor, to the Glen Outdoor Early Learning Centre, but she was a bit worried about sending his brother there, too. Three-year-old Jayden is a bit “accident prone”, she says and he doesn’t really like being outdoors. But she has seen a huge improvement in him since he started in September.

“He loves being here. He is much more confident outside now and can climb hills and trees without tumbling over.”

Some people, says Harley, give you a funny look when you explain your children are outdoors most of the time at preschool: “They say, ‘That’s a bit cruel isn’t it? But you’re only as warm as the clothes you are wearing,” she says.

“It makes sense them being outdoors, and he is always ready for bed at 7pm – there’s no complaints.”

She was a little concerned that Taylor might find it hard to adjust when he moved up the road to the indoor classrooms of Glenswilly National School. “But he settled in really well,” says Harley, who has no worries now for Jayden or their one-year-old sibling, who will also go here. “It’s a great start.”

Sinead Gallagher goes out of her way to bring five-year-old William (above) here for his free preschool year. She had him booked in elsewhere, in Letterkenny, where they live, when she heard about the Glen. “It just seems natural.”

While sometimes children are reluctant to go into a preschool for the first few weeks, it was the opposite with William: “He didn’t want to come home! He loves it.” Do friends think she is mad sending him to an outdoor preschool? “No, they are jealous.”

It is the nearest pre-school for John McCloskey’s four-year-old daughter, Ruby Anne, and he is delighted with the outdoor nature of the place.

“The children have so much energy, they need to burn it off. And there are so many different things to do.

“The beauty is that the weather doesn’t affect them,” he adds. “They are well wrapped.”

John Lafferty, who has brought his four-year-old daughter, Ava, from their home in Churchill, reckons being outdoors must make their immune systems better. “She suffers no colds.”

The family moved over from London a year ago, and when they heard about the Glen they came and had a look. Once you see it, he says, you see how it works.

His comments are echoed by Margaret McGeehan who has come to collect her three-year-old granddaughter, Danielle Lynch.

“I had heard about it and wondered how it worked and it works really well,” she says. “The children have the freedom to do what they want and experience everything – even something simple like splashing in the water. It’s hands-on, under the sky and they can hear the birds singing.”

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