

Aromatherapy in the classroom

Anita James uses aromatherapy and massage with young children in schools and nurseries. She's convinced that it can help improve learning and behaviour and develop confidence and interpersonal skills



I trained as an aromatherapist with Shirley Price International College of Aromatherapy, graduating in 2001. This was the start of a whole new life for me because the previous year I had

been widowed just after the birth of our son, and when I went back to work following maternity leave I was made redundant after three months.

After I qualified I was keen to undertake work that incorporated aromatherapy into 'everyday' situations, allowing people to access aromatherapy who, possibly through financial restrictions, would not normally be able to afford such therapies. (I live in an ex-coalfield area which is in the top 20 per cent of the country's most deprived areas.)

I had a young son who enjoyed and benefited from aromatherapy and massage so it seemed a natural step to see if there were work possibilities in educational settings.

I carried out a lot of research into the use of aromatherapy and massage in schools and found that most of the projects seemed to be carried out in the 11–18 years age group (secondary schools) or with special needs children. Work with both these groups seemed to give very positive results.

But, I wondered, would a project using aromatherapy be even more effective if it was carried out with younger children? Would the use of holistic therapies help reduce or alleviate problems before they became too established? Which age group would benefit most – three- to four-year-olds (Nursery and Pre-school) or five- to eleven-year-olds (Primary School)?

At the time I was carrying out my research and musings, Derbyshire County Council was looking at ways of incorporating 'holistic and relaxing' strategies into classroom activities. I had my chance because a friend worked in an infant school where the headteacher was keen to try it out!

Thus began my journey of discovery and the birth of my alter ego 'Smell Woman'. The children in the school couldn't remember my name and, as I always had the box of aromatherapy oils and tissues, they started to call me 'Smell Woman'. I've heard many young whispers while shopping in the supermarket saying "Look Mum, that's 'Smell Woman'".

Over the past six years I have worked on several individual projects, of all sizes, in local nurseries. Every project is different and tailored to the aims set by the staff and to the needs of the children.

At the IFPA Cardiff conference I talked about the first two of these projects. The first in an infant school and the second, and most successful to date, in a local nursery school.

INFANT SCHOOL

This project began in January 2003 and finished due to financial restrictions in December 2008. It took place in an infant school with 90 pupils on roll and ten members of staff. The areas covered included three classrooms, the school hall and the office/ staff room area.

The headteacher wanted all the children to be able to access aromatherapy within the learning environment. Additionally, children whom the staff thought would

benefit from the use of holistic therapies would receive extra support in the form of personalised blends, hand massage and nutritional advice, as required.

As this was new to all of us we took a 'fluid' approach so as not to set too many restrictions. Permission was sought from all the parents about the use of essential oils in the classroom. I produced a set of guidelines, including safety data for the project. Then I began my research into essential oils that could be used safely on children but would also be effective in calming, relaxing, or invigorating.

I selected 18 oils and then began the task of formulating a blend for each year group. The oils were randomly split into six groups of three oils – A, B or C. The children smelled one group per day, selecting which one they preferred. At no point did I name any of the oils and, interestingly, nor did the children try to name them.

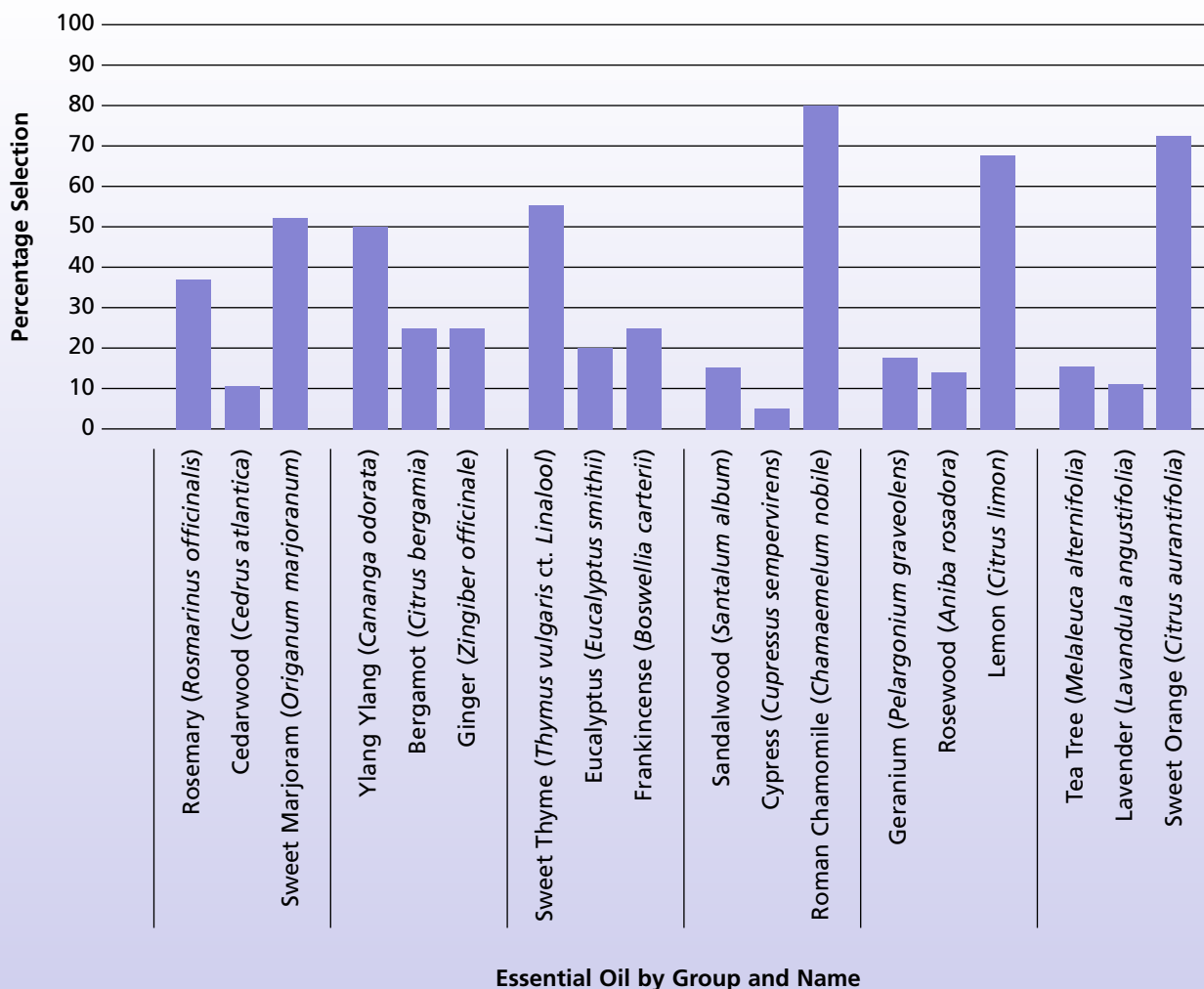
I then graphed the results as shown in Table 1, selecting and blending the top three or four favourites to form the blend. All the blends turned out to be different with the reception children choosing a fairly calming blend, year 1 a balancing blend, and year 2 a stimulating blend.

Aromastreams were sited in each classroom and one to two drops of the essential oil blend were placed on the pad at the start of each session (two to four drops per day). This amount of oil was detectable in the air but not over powering.

The aromastream in the school hall was run with just lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and in the staffroom it tended to be an uplifting blend which I varied according to the season. During times of the year when colds and other 'bugs' were being passed around we changed to a mix which helped to keep the bacteria down.

I then observed sessions in the school. This took the form of two children being selected in each year group for study. The first pupil was one who generally performed well, mixed well and was not disruptive (control). The other child was one who did not settle well or had trouble staying on-task. Over the next few weeks I and members of staff watched and observed for any changes – initially there did not seem to be much difference but after about three to four weeks staff began to comment that the children seemed more settled, were not as noisy and settled better at the start of the session. ➤

ESSENTIAL OIL SELECTION BY PERCENTAGE (ALL OILS) Reception – All





Caption to go here....

After about two months I adjusted one of the blends to make it more balanced. We did not tell the year group that I had changed the blend and they soon began complaining that the smell was 'not their smell' so I had to change it back again!

After three months I began working with individual children whom the staff thought would benefit from a 'holistic' approach. These were mostly children who did not settle well or had difficulty staying on-task. Parental permission was sought and I gathered information, through observation and discussion, about the child's general health, the family setting and behaviour.

I used food diaries with some children where I suspected that poor diet might be causing some of the problems, giving advice on improving diet (I am a qualified nutritional advisor), modelling hand massage for relaxation, and formulating essential oil blends to be used within the classroom and at home. The essential oils are given on a tissue to older children or applied to the clothing for younger children. The child was then monitored and changes (good or bad!) were documented. Follow-up meetings would take place as required with the parents.

Over the duration of the project we had some very positive results in helping children to become more focused on their work, calming them before SATs tests and helping them integrate better with their peers. Parents reported that aromatherapy helped some of the children sleep better.

NURSERY SCHOOL

This project began in 2005 and is on-going. The nursery school has 101 pupils and 15 members of staff and it is open-plan with defined learning objectives in each area. There is also a separate wrap-around-care room (where children can have extra paid care at the start or the end of the nursery session) and a sensory room.

An aromastream is used in each of the learning areas with a blend of essential oils to help stimulate the child's learning and creativity in line with the set learning objectives of the area. Children whom the staff feel would benefit from a holistic approach are targeted in the same way as in the infant school project.

The sensory room plays a role in:

- Encouraging positive play
- Allowing children space to work on issues with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) on a one-to-one basis
- Enabling calming strategies to be used
- Allowing children to express emotions in a safe environment

Within the Nursery project there is much more emphasis on the inclusion of the parents when working with their children. Working with the SENCO we have devised sleep routines using sleep logs, aromatherapy and massage. Nutritional advice, including food dairies, information on dealing with constipation, and healthy eating leaflets, are given out. During term-time the children take part in growing vegetables and fruit in the Nursery garden and these are given as part of snack-time.

The deputy headteacher has devised a 10-week programme known as the 'Love Heart' project aimed at children who:

- Are on the 'at risk' register
- Are having a difficult time at home
- Have difficulty in expressing emotions

During all the sessions the children wear a pink heart necklace impregnated with rose otto (*Rosa damascena*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*) essential oils. One of the sessions is aromatherapy based. I introduce the children to four essential oils, including plants, fruit or flowers, for them to touch. They then describe the smell using pictures and simple words – happy, fun, fruity, green, or floral. At the end of the session they make a 'happy smell' bottle (a 10ml bottle stuffed with cotton wool) to take home and use when they feel sad or unhappy.

Over the past year I have developed 'massage stories' to be used at story time. The first one involved 'making a pizza'. The massage is carried out in a circle working on the child in front of you. During the session I use a 'herby' smell. The massage movements follow a sequence of making a pizza – making the dough, kneading the dough, rolling out the dough and chopping the ingredients. The aim of the session is:

- To increase awareness of how food is made
- Increase awareness of healthy eating
- Show that you can communicate without words

- Illustrate how your own actions can affect someone else (performing a massage is a kind thing to do)
- Show the effects of positive behaviour and sharing experiences

These sessions have been very successful and I am currently developing more of these stories.

RECOGNISED SUCCESS

Work on these projects has shown how positive touch and behaviour can help improve children's confidence, encouraging them to build friendships and to share experiences. Positive touch can also help to improve behaviour, both at school and at home, while negative touch can cause a child to become withdrawn and insular and can lead to instances of bullying.

To illustrate this point at conferences I sometimes ask people to turn to the person on their left and give them a pinch (negative touch), then to hug the person on their right (positive touch). It's a good way of demonstrating the strength of emotions – for good or ill – evoked by very simple actions.

These projects have shown that aromatherapy (and aromatherapy with massage) can be highly beneficial for young children. It can:

- Promote positive behaviour through touching and sharing
- Provide a familiar smell that children can recognise
- Define learning situations or experiences
- Create a calming and safe environment in which to learn
- Provide focus and stimulation to a child where required

The value of the work with young children in the Nursery school was recognised by Ofsted inspectors in their report. They said: "The school has led the way in developing services, including an aromatherapy and massage project and use of the sensory room, to help children remain calm and develop understanding of their own feelings." And inspectors from the National Association for Able Children in Education (NAACE) commented that: "It is the best aromatherapy project within a school that we have seen."

FURTHER PROJECTS

Other projects I have been involved with include:

- Creating a 'writing blend' which is used during literacy hour at another infant school. This school is also in the ex-coalfields area and it was observed that the boys did not perform well in literacy. It was thought that either they did not have male role models whom they saw writing and reading regularly at home or they lived in a household with no adult males. The school already had aromastreams using lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*). I devised a writing blend that was stimulating and helped define the time as 'literacy hour'.
- A one-day workshop on the use of aromatherapy and massage within the early years settings that I provided for Early Years Special Needs Co-ordinators covering the Derbyshire area. Workshops like this give SENCOs a

better understanding of the benefits that can be gained from aromatherapy and massage being incorporated into children's Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) or the statements of special needs children

- Working on a one-to-one basis with several special needs children to provide blends and massage routines to aid relaxation and reduce rigidity/stress in the body
- Devised a blended learning programme (as part of my Certificate of Education course) for a group of local childminders who wanted to incorporate 'sensory' awareness into their provision. This was done by teaching massage routines that could be incorporated into games and stories, alongside some aromatherapy oils to set the scene in stories
- A small project within an infant school where I am working alongside the SENCO to provide two essential oil blends for use with children who receive targeted learning time. The first blend is to improve concentration and alertness while the second is used in the sensory room to calm and relax children. This project is showing excellent results
- A new project within a Nursery school which has children aged from six months to five years. The school is open-plan so we are using the aroma to define learning areas and activities. Members of staff have received one training session in 'massage stories' and are eager to develop more stories for use with the children. It is also planned that we will start to work with individual children during the coming spring and summer terms
- A project in another Nursery with an intake of 90 children over two sessions (morning and afternoon). This project is starting shortly and will aim to improve pupils' sensory awareness. It will use essential oil blends, massage stories, and activities using essential oils, to create imaginative discussion and thoughtful time

I look forward to having many more aromatic adventures in my guise as 'Smell Woman'!

Anita James SPdipA, MIFPA, Cert Ed, holistic therapist and educator, has been a practising aromatherapist since 2001. She has a special interest in using aromatherapy with children. Six years ago she began teaching on a freelance basis for various organisations, alongside private work through her own company. She was IFPA CPD chair for four years until October 2009.

In addition to her work on school projects Anita runs a clinic for private clients as well as providing workshops and training sessions to qualified therapists and to people interested in holistic therapies. In her spare time she grows vegetables, herbs and medicinal plants on her allotment and keeps bees. You can find out more about Anita at: www.essentiallyholistic.co.uk, read her blog on www.essentiallyholistic.wordpress.com or follow her on Twitter at [ess_holistic](https://twitter.com/ess_holistic)