

Childminding on the Isles of Scilly

Mel Parks hears from two childminders who make the most of island life on the Isles of Scilly.



Nicola at a parent and toddler group

The Isles of Scilly are 29 miles south west off the coast of Cornwall and are made up of five inhabited islands and more than 200 uninhabited islands. There are few roads, miles of sandy beaches, castles, wetlands, subtropical gardens and woody areas.

The NCMA Isles of Scilly Childminding Network was started in May 2010, and currently has two members: Nicola Christopher and Helen Glenn, with a further four almost ready for approval.

Kerrie Harvey, the network coordinator, is one of four staff managing the Cornwall Community Childminding Network. She says, "the children on the Isles of Scilly grow up in

a landscape rich in many opportunities. It's interesting to see how their play differs from that on the mainland. For them, it's all about building boats and heliports."

Travel by helicopter

Kerrie enjoys flying by helicopter to the Isles of Scilly every 12 weeks to visit the childminders and hold meetings. "It is exciting arriving by helicopter and then getting a tractor and trailer to Nicola's house on Tresco", says Kerrie. "I'm enjoying supporting these childminders who are working in a unique setting with the backing of the Isles of Scilly Children's Services who are phenomenal and work hard to pull in the training and services that the childminders need."

Fall in love

Registered childminders, Nicola and Helen, both arrived on the Isles of Scilly for gap year summer jobs and ended up falling in love, not only with the islands and the way of life but with their future husbands.

Holiday childcare

Nicola now lives on the unique Tresco, which is privately owned. All the people that live there permanently are employed by the owner, including Nicola's husband, although Nicola is self-employed. Residents' accommodation comes with the job, so no one owns their homes. The island is one mile by one and a half miles with one pub and one shop.



Helen in the garden with her minded children

There are no cars; people travel about on foot or by bicycle and to the islands by boat. There are 150 permanent residents and this number swells during summer months when the island is open to holidaymakers. Nicola makes the most of this opportunity by offering her childminding service to holidaymakers, too.

Confidential support

Helen has been childminding on the main island of St Mary's since 1997 and appreciates the support she gets from the new NCMA childminding network. She says, "I feel professional, part of the organisation, and that my opinions are valued. When the coordinator comes to see us, it feels really worthwhile. She provides confidential support which makes a really positive difference to me in my work, particularly as I could feel isolated here."

So much to do

The childminders make the most of island life by getting out and about. Nicola says, "There is so much to do here. We go beachcombing a lot and rock pooling. We have a lake here that is fed by the sea and we go bird watching during the migration season. There is a children's centre on the main island of St Mary's and with the parents' permission, I'll take the children there on the boat or we'll travel as families to a special event."

Nicola runs a parent and toddler group with a couple of the other parents on the island. They meet twice

a week and invite holidaymakers along, too, to join the usual five or so children. "This gives the children opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds and places, which they wouldn't otherwise have," explains Nicola. The opportunities they do have, however, are unique: "My son starts pre-school in September and will go to St Mary's by jet boat with a friend. He's so excited. There is a primary school on Tresco with 18 children, but once he reaches 11, he'll go back to St Mary's and board from Monday to Friday."

Helen appreciates the freedom that children have on the islands to explore. She says, "I take them low-level rock climbing, paddling, swimming, and on nature walks. The island landscape is so varied. Out of my window, I can see beach, heather moorland, wetlands, woodland, and the mainland. On the island, there are garden areas, rocky outcrops and headlands, a lighthouse, castle, and beaches with little islands that you can walk to at low tide."

Forward planning

There are worries that come with exploring the outdoors. Nicola explains, "I worry about jellyfish when we're beachcombing and other natural dangers such as when we're picking blackberries, I worry that the children will try to put something more dangerous into their mouths."

Also, living on a small island gives new meaning to forward planning, as network meetings, the children's centre, chemists, doctors and other services are all on St Mary's, so Nicola would need to take a boat there, which is dependent on the weather and boat schedules. "We have to plan a long time ahead," says Nicola. "We can order special jet boats if there are a few of us, and children's services will fund these



for special events. If my husband is available, we can take our boat. Food shopping takes more planning, too. I will do a bulk order of about ten crates with an online supermarket and then pay for freight from the mainland which ends up costing about £40 a time."

A close-knit community

Both childminders appreciate the close-knit community they live in. Helen says, "It takes a while to get used to somewhere so small; you can walk around the island in a day and everyone knows everyone else, but it is a fantastic community to live in. I feel safe here. The shopkeeper knows all the children's names."

Nicola says, "I love it in the winter, too. We get out and about and enjoy the muddy puddles and the weather, and the community becomes even closer. The pub exchanges chairs and tables for sofas and they run regular social nights. It's brilliant!" ●

How to make the most of your natural environment

Here are five top tips from the childminders on getting as much as you can out of your natural environment:

- Get out and about without the children first and see what's around
- Plan your activities to make the most of what's available to you
- Check local wildlife associations and children's centres for events
- Get organised with risk assessments, parents' permissions, relevant first-aid training, and suitable clothing for the weather and there isn't much you can't do
- Enjoy your natural environment; the children love to get out and explore the outdoors.

For more about the Isles of Scilly, visit www.simplyscilly.co.uk