



The *Primary Science* interview



Lynne Bianchi *talks with
Emma Vanstone about
Science Sparks*

Science Sparks

Emma Vanstone is a self-confessed science enthusiast whom I came across because of her regular tweets of great science ideas on *Twitter* @ScienceSparks. We met and chatted about her background and her ambition 'to make science spark' for children, their parents, families and schools.

Who is the brain behind *Science Sparks*?

I'm Emma Vanstone and I'm a mum of three, who is passionate about science education. Having three children in less than four years made it difficult to return to my career as a computer programmer so I took the big decision to take a break for a few years. I started a blog as a way to document the activities we were doing together at home and it slowly evolved into *Science Sparks*.

What is *Science Sparks*?

Science Sparks is a website full of creative, fun and exciting science activity ideas for children of primary-school age. It started with the aim of inspiring more parents to do science at home with their children, but over the years has adapted to complement the National Curriculum more and more.

How did you get interested in science for early-years learners?

I have been very lucky this year and had the opportunity to take my activity ideas into my youngest daughter's reception class in Tavistock Infant School. I worked with the early-years teaching staff to develop ideas that fitted their half-termly themes and supported the early learning goals. For example, we made pirate boats from kitchen

sponges, paper, egg boxes and lolly sticks and then tested them to see whether they floated before racing them down pipes with different inclines. The children were incredibly enthusiastic about everything I took into class, and I was amazed at how much knowledge they retained over the year. Their questions and ideas gave me so much inspiration that I developed a whole range of early-years activities in just a few months. I am really keen now for other teachers to access these and give feedback as to their usefulness. To do this I have developed a *Facebook* page and *Twitter* feed so that we can discuss and share ideas.

From your experience what would you say are the features of a good early-years science experience?

Initially it needs to look visually appealing to draw the children in. The concept needs to be simple enough for the children to understand easily, with observable changes and the more hands-on the better. I also found the children enjoyed making and testing predictions, which seemed to help knowledge retention.

One of the best examples I have is ice fishing (Figure 1). I froze plastic fish into ice cubes with string hanging out and then tied the string to sticks so the frozen fish were attached to a fishing rod. Working in groups of four, three children held a fishing rod with their frozen fish cubes hanging in water of different temperatures and the fourth timed how long each took to melt.

How have you achieved success so far?

It's funny isn't it? Things always seem to look effortlessly successful when they finally come to people's attention, but it has been a lot of work and a very slow process. I

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Figure 1 Ice fishing is a great place for children to start in early years!



have never had any childcare so worked a lot of evenings and weekends. It was only last September when my youngest daughter started school that I had more time to devote to *Science Sparks* and I have seen a real growth spurt

in the last year. I have been very lucky to have great support from like-minded people who have inspired me and not let me give up when it all threatened to become too much.

What are your aspirations now?

I would love to write a book of creative science activity ideas, but mostly I would feel that I had achieved a great deal if lots of schools were using (and enjoying) the ideas and making them work for their children and the parents too.

What would you like to say directly to the readers of ASE's *Primary Science*?

I would love readers to take a look at *Science Sparks* and give me some feedback about what they like or don't like and anything I could do to make it more useful to teachers. I would also encourage those who work in education who might be a bit unsure about doing the more practical side to just give it a go. It is really rewarding; you don't have to be an Einstein to experiment and the children love it whatever the outcome.

What is your favourite science joke?

What do clouds wear in their hair?

☺ Rainbows

Access *Science Sparks* at: www.science-sparks.com

Share ideas on: www.facebook.com/sciencesparks

and www.twitter.com/sciencesparks

Find Emma on: www.science-sparks.com/author/sciencesparks

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