

Painting a bird house – The Dementia Friendly Way

Painting is a lovely activity to carry out with a person who has dementia. Painting a birdhouse takes the activity outside and can open up lots of discussion around nature and wildlife. It's also a fail-safe activity as the birds are not so concerned about how perfect the paint job is.

Communication: Painting involves a lot of communication, which can start with the simple act of choosing a colour. You might discuss which is the person's favourite colour; would they like to use just one colour or add in contrast with another? Consider birds and wildlife, and how active the birds are in their garden – or indeed what are their memories of birds from when they were younger. Discuss a sense of home – what would make the birdhouse homely, and what makes us all feel at home?

Role: Consider how the person's role relates to the activity of painting. Were they someone who liked to paint throughout their life? What did they paint? Were they involved in DIY in the house – have they memories of decorating or painting over wood-chipped wallpaper to 'freshen up a room'? How did they make their home cosy and inviting like the birdhouse?

Senses: Consider what senses are being stimulated when they are painting – from prepping the birdhouse to the finished product.

Sight: Consider the colour of the paint, and any contrast that can be included in the activity. Consider how the sight of familiar tools such as a paintbrush can stimulate memories and conversations. If painting outside, consider the sights of the garden – the trees, shrubs and flowers; fencing or wall; birds, bees, butterflies flying by; clouds and sun in the sky or the breeze creating gentle movement throughout the garden.

Hearing: If painting outside, consider the reassuring sounds of the garden and how that can support a person with dementia. Birdsong, buzzing bees, distant lawnmowers and children laughing, dogs barking and the rustle of leaves on the trees. If painting indoors, consider what music could be added to create a relaxed place and stimulate further memories.

Smell: Painting outside can counteract the potentially negative smell associated with paint, or purchase a non-toxic paint and add a coat of varnish yourself later if the person with dementia is particularly sensitive to smell. Consider the natural smells in the garden as the perfect backdrop to painting.

Touch: Consider the different elements of touch and texture in this activity from sanding down the birdhouse, using a damp cloth to prepare it for paint, the bristles of the paint brush and the movement of the brush – a familiar activity that will resonate with many long-term memories.

Taste: Not inherent in this activity, but consider how you could stimulate it with an ice-cream in the garden after a job well done, or a fresh cooling drink.