

What really fascinated the children was the discovery that they could use natural remedies to treat their minor ailments and take care of themselves

Jane Hughes on lessons in the healing power of herbs

At the age of ten, Lily Mae Prausnitz made cough lozenges from liquorice and slippery elm, cured her verruca with a herbal paste she had mixed herself, and cleared her eczema with a calendula ointment. Saturday mornings bubbled with activity as she and her friends weighed out ingredients, mixed pastes and potions and filled jars and bottles with brightly coloured remedies.

It might sound like the sort of thing that Harry Potter and his pals would get up to. In fact, says Fiona Burns, who runs the herbal potions classes, the magic for Lily Mae and the other children was that their concoctions worked. "They loved making cosmetics, like fizzy bath bombs and body sprays," says Fiona, a qualified medical herbalist. "But what really fascinated them was the discovery that they could use natural remedies to treat minor ailments and take care of themselves."

Certainly for Lily Mae, who attended two of Fiona's courses at the Islington Ecology Centre in London, this was exciting stuff. "I'd had a verruca on the sole of my foot for months but the cream from the chemist's hadn't

worked," she says. "I had to wear a rubber sock when I went swimming, so I asked Fiona if she could do anything about it." The whole class went into action to produce a remedy.

"We mixed slippery elm powder with a calendula tea infusion and aloe vera jelly that we got out of the plant leaf," says Lily Mae. "The paste was really mushy but I put it on my foot every day under a plaster and in two weeks the verruca had gone. I was surprised but really pleased. Everyone in the class was proud when they saw my foot." According to Fiona, calendula has anti-viral and healing properties, while slippery elm is soothing and healing both to skin and internal membranes. The children used it again with liquorice – an anti-inflammatory – to make lozenges by cutting shapes from a paste they had rolled out.

"We dried the lozenges overnight and then kept them in the fridge," says Lily Mae. "When my brother had a cough, I gave him some because they are really good for the throat. We mixed some liquorice cough syrup, too, and it helped my asthma." In one session, the children made a calendula sun infusion by steeping the flowers in

olive oil and leaving it next to the window. Two weeks later, it was ready to use. "I had eczema on my arm," says Lily Mae, "so we mixed the calendula oil with beeswax and cocoa butter to make an ointment. I put it on my skin and the eczema went away in a few days, which made me very happy."

Another useful herb for treating eczema, as well as sprains, explains Fiona, is comfrey. The plant's stalks contain the active healing ingredients, mucilage and allantoin, which are soothing and help with tissue regrowth. One nine-year-old boy was delighted when he made a comfrey cream that helped to keep his eczema at bay. He took it to school and his teacher was so amazed that Fiona was invited to do a project on plants with the whole class. Having already worked with two London schools – within the non-statutory personal health and social education part of the national curriculum – Fiona is convinced that learning how nature can support the

body is empowering.

"Many children have never thought about plants having medicinal properties, so it's great when they begin to identify things like dandelions, nettles and elderberries as they walk down the street," she says. "Even more so when they start thinking about how these plants can help the body – for example, nettle tips are anti-allergic and good for cleansing the blood, while elderberries are high in vitamin C and help stop viruses from

entering cell membranes."

In one class, Fiona chopped comfrey stalks and mashed them into a paste that the children formed into poultices. "You can freeze them and strap them on to the skin to reduce inflammation," she says. "The mothers think they are great. They are always coming back and saying they have run out."

Lily Mae's friend, Heloise Gaskin, remembers learning about the digestive system and trying out different herbal teas to see how they worked. "We tried to think about where we could feel the



Lily Mae Prausnitz, with the herbal potions she learnt to make in class

PHOBIA OF THE WEEK: **VESTIPHOBIA**
The fear of clothing Feeling a bit cold, then?

tea going inside and talked about what it might be good for. I could feel the lemon balm tea warming my tummy because it is good for nausea and stomach ache," she says. Heloise also came to the aid of her brother, who had sore, chapped lips, with lip balm she had made from cocoa butter, beeswax, calendula and comfrey, flavoured with tangerine essential oil.

"The classes have really helped Heloise's understanding of how the body works," says her mother, Caroline. "She had a bit of a mental block about science at school but it has a lot more meaning for her now that she can see the practical applications."

These days, Heloise pipes up with her own suggestions for making people feel better. "I think it's good if people use more herbs," she says. "Some of them, like slippery elm, sound really weird but usually they taste quite nice, and medicines taste gross." ●

For details on herbal potions workshops and courses, call 020-8883 9773; fiona@totallyhealthy.org. National Institute of Medical Herbalists: 01392 426022; www.nimh.org.uk

REGIMEN

**Mark Foster, 32,
Olympic swimmer**

BEN DUFFY/SPX.COM



**Weight: 14st
Height: 6ft 6in**

What sort of training makes a 50m freestyle world record holder?

I do two hours in the gym and an hour in the pool three times a week, and two-and-a-half hours in the pool and half an hour on the track twice a week. I take Saturdays off and swim an hour on Sundays.

That doesn't sound too taxing.

You can't put your body through a nine-to-five training schedule. My race only lasts 22 seconds, so there's no point in swimming up

and down for three hours every day.

Are there parallels with athletics?

Yes, I train like an athlete. There is crossover between sprinters and swimmers, though you are four times slower in the pool.

So where does Colin Jackson, the former champion hurdler, fit in?

After the Commonwealth Games I had a long chat with Colin and now he's writing my training programme. He's taught me a staggered distance and time routine in the pool based on sprinting, and in the gym a four-fold weights routine:

bench press, pull-ups, squats and tricep dips.

Are you disciplined about your weight and diet?

I go on a diet eight weeks before a competition; always plenty of protein and carbs, but not in the evening. I haven't found an ideal weight yet, but it's definitely not more than 14st.

Australian swimmer Ian "Thorpedo" Thorpe has been shattering world records recently. Is he a threat to yours?

He couldn't beat me, not at 50m freestyle. It's like a 400m champion runner beating a 100m champ. It couldn't happen. I train

as a sprinter and he trains for mid-distance. Besides, I'm faster.

What makes you so fast and unbeatable?

My height means that I'm nearer the end almost as soon as I've started. It's something called fast-twitch fibres. You are either born with them or you're not. I was. What they are I haven't the foggiest.

Ultimately, what's all the training for?

I want to win Olympic Gold. But if I don't I'm happy with what I've done and do anyway. ●

Nick Wyke

The FINA Swimming World Cup legs will be held in Paris today, Stockholm on Tuesday and Wednesday and Berlin next weekend

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MINUTE FIX**

To relax a stiff neck, move it very slowly as if you were indicating yes, no and maybe, repeating each four times