

The benefits of Forest school in Early Years

The Forest of Avon Trust

We are a local charity working in and around Bristol with community groups, businesses and schools to connect people to trees and woodlands through activities and tree planting. We work with schools to:

- Lead woodland activity and Forest School days for schools, pre-schools and other groups
- Provide OCN-accredited training for teachers, support staff and early years practitioners
- Run tailored Inset, development and taster days for schools, pre-schools and nurseries.

What is Forest School?



Forest School developed in the mid 90's to support Early Years education through providing activities in the natural world that promote learning and personal development.

"Forest School is an inspirational process, that offers ALL learners regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem, through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees."

Forest School Association and Forest Education Network.

Evaluating woodland sessions

The Forest of Avon Trust had worked with a number of pre-school settings in the wider Bristol area. Through working closely with staff and partners, such as B&NES early years team, we have evaluated our projects and found that the most significant areas of change for the children who took part were:

- Increased self esteem and self confidence
- Development of physical skills
- Demonstration of an improved relationship with and understanding of the outdoors
- Increased levels of creativity and imagination
- Increased levels of motivation and concentration
- Development of language and communication skills

The benefits of Forest School for Early Years

Forest School relates closely to the guiding principles of the government's statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012).

1. Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.



Forest school offers a safe and supportive environment in which children develop physically and emotionally through co-operative activities and play. Sessions take place all year round so children can experience seasonal change and learn to be resilient in cold and wet weather. Forest School is child-lead allowing children to build confidence by informing decisions and trying new things.

Observations and comments:

Children enjoy the unfamiliar terrain of the woods including dips and mounds and tree trunks to balance on. After several sessions children are generally more confident negotiating uneven ground with fewer falls.

B1 said: 'I don't want to walk' and 'I don't want to fall down' during session one. During session six he said he most enjoyed running in the woods.

B2 demonstrated significant increases in balance and physical ability following climbing on fallen trees constantly in session one. By week three staff noted 'he was the first to go up the slope using the rope and the first to abseil down' and 'he clearly excelled in this area of development and was a role model to other children as they watched and copied him'.

2. Children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships.



Games, practical tasks and sensory activities help children develop personally and socially. Self-confidence and communication skills increase as children work with and look out for others. Children often initiate ideas about how the woodland space can be transformed and invite others to join in. New opportunities for imaginative and creative play arise as the space changes with the weather and seasons e.g. logs are transformed into animals, buses and bridges. Children are aware of their independence, being responsible for carrying their lunch and feeding themselves at lunch time.

Observations and comments:

Approximately half way in, everyone settled, hush came over the group, children engrossed in activity. G1 began as the most timid girl, at the end playing with boys, humming, collecting things. (observation from week 1)

G1 during the third week seemed to really come alive when faced with the challenge of moving a log using a rope: 'One, two, three, pull' And she pulls, trying to encourage the other children to help.

3. Children learn and develop well in enabling environments



Being in the woods helps children to understand the world they live in, whether it's the natural world around them or their relationships with others. The woodland environment provides opportunities to be near others or be away from the group. There's room for energetic activity and quiet spaces. Eating lunch around the fire can have a relaxing and calming effect. Leaders act as role models to encourage positive behaviour.

Woodland activities can also provide a backdrop for informal learning e.g. collecting and counting things, making/describing shapes, building shelters, learning about wildlife. Children can explore their creativity using natural materials e.g. mud painting.

Observations and comments:

B5 came into conflict with B3 as he wanted to hurt a spider and B3 wanted to stop him. It was clear that initially B5's interest in minibeasts could be slightly destructive with the tendency towards wanting to squash bugs. By session three the same boy saw a vole in the woodland and was fascinated and really engaged and excited. His interest quickly developed into a more observational approach. A new respectful interest in insects has been observed beyond the life of the project by nursery staff.

4. Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates.



Forest School aims to create a positive environment where all participants feel valued. Leaders set tasks that can be achieved at a range of levels. This helps children to achieve whilst progressing at their own rate. Woodland sessions allow participants to explore and experience things on their own terms and to self-motivate.

Observations and comments:

The site presented many opportunities for the group to explore the slopes and over, along and under fallen trees. Within the group the children demonstrated a range of physical abilities. Those who were less confident and less capable had a greater potential for increasing their levels of physical ability over the six weeks.

Interested in exploring further?

- Get in touch with Jon Attwood at the Forest of Avon Trust to explore taking this further through accredited training, taster sessions and further support.

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