
Come Rain or Shine: a whole school approach to Forest School

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ABSTRACT This article begins by describing a typical Forest School session that takes place in every class every week at The Wroxham School in Potters Bar. It goes on to outline a brief history of Forest School from its inception, its aims and ethos, and how it has been adapted for the ethos and needs of the children at Wroxham. The article also looks at the impact that outdoor activities have had on the children and parents with quotes collected from various members of the school community. Finally, the article focuses on the next steps for Forest School and outdoor learning at Wroxham.

It's a miserable day. Truly awful. The rain is pouring down, I'm covered in mud and, as I look around the woodland, I see children covered head to toe in sticky mud and soaked to the skin. It's brilliant! It might be a grotty day but all I can hear are the whoops of delight and excitement as the children shelter in their dens to escape the worst of the weather. They have spent all morning outside making rain-proof dens while others decided to create tree spirits using mud and natural materials. They slap a handful of gooey, messy sludge on a tree trunk, find leaves for hair and sticks and berries to create faces. One boy has created a lion, using yellowing, fallen leaves as the mane. Another group of boys are building a wall using logs, bricks and their own home-made cement. Over on the other side of the woodland, a group of boys and girls are climbing trees under the watchful eye of another adult. This is Forest School and the children absolutely love it!

What is Forest School?

The idea of the Forest School is not a new initiative. The basic idea and ethos of the Forest School dates back to the mid-nineteenth century with the

founding of the Boys Brigade in 1883, which pioneered camping in the outdoors. Lord Baden-Powell, who was vice-president of the Boys Brigade, developed this alongside his own initiatives in schools to promote outdoor pursuits, and the modern-day Scouting movement was born.

The current incarnation of Forest Schools was taken from the Swedish Forest Schools of the 1950s. Thirty years later, in the 1980s, Denmark adopted the Forest Schools to fit in with their Early Years Education policy for pre-school children. Forest Schools came to the UK from Denmark when nursery nurses from Somerset visited in 1993. They were followed by other early years professionals who developed the idea for the UK at Bridgewater College in Somerset.

The work at Bridgewater College looked at the impact the Forest School ethos could have on young people. They found it benefited those lacking in confidence or with challenging behaviours; the increased responsibility and the freedom of the outdoors boosting confidence levels.

The main difference between the Forest School and general outdoor learning being that, in a Forest School setting, children are not taught but shown. They are shown skills that can be useful to them and then allowed to find out for themselves. It is up to the adult in charge to provide opportunities for the children to succeed and give the children the time to use those skills in any way they want. A Forest School session is child-centred and child-led by their own interests and are encouraged to take risks with their own learning.

Forest School at Wroxham

The ethos of Forest School complements the ethos of The Wroxham School, a one-form entry primary school in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire. The ethos of the school is summed up in the mission statement that was created by the children in mixed-age circle groups; 'Working Together, Aiming High'. Children are not labelled by ability in lessons and are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

I completed the Forest School Level 3 training and over the course of the past two years, I have worked with my classes at Forest School. We are lucky at Wroxham that we have our own woodland on the school site within easy walking distance to the school. I started Forest School as a six-week pilot study with a Year 1 class in April 2007. We began with simple activities such as the ever-popular den-building, which children never seem to tire of, whittling carrots, tree spirits, games in the woodland, woodland mobiles and Dream-catchers. It very quickly became very popular with the children and adults who helped out. Over the months, I became more confident and began being even more creative and adventurous with activities, such as making fires and toasting marshmallows. The skill of whittling a carrot led to children being able to whittle a stick so they could toast their marshmallow. Just recently, I've plucked up the courage to use real knives with my class after making sure that they are

using the potato peelers safely. Last summer, we made burgers in class and decided to BBQ them outside during Forest School.

Forest School has now become established at Wroxham to the point when other teachers are excited about the prospect of learning outdoors. Each teacher uses the outdoors in their own different ways whilst keeping the ethos of Wroxham and Forest School at the heart of it. Sometimes they use the time for the traditional Forest School activities and sometimes they link activities to their current topic. Our Year 5 class have been learning about Aztecs this term and this has linked very strongly to many Forest School activities. For example, in the autumn term, the children created Aztec head dresses using colourful leaves and other natural materials.

Each class in the school goes outside specifically to take part in Forest School activities once a week. The children come dressed in old clothes and a pair of wellies and parents are very supportive and understand that their children may well be returning home filthy that night! The children go home from Forest School full of enthusiasm for what they have done and the feedback from parents has been entirely positive. Each class has their own blog attached to the school website so after every session the teacher will upload the photographs so that they can share their experiences with their parents.

We recently sent out a questionnaire as we were interested in the impact Forest School has had, not just on the children in school but, outside as well. When asked 'How do you know your child enjoys Forest School?', some parents wrote:

(From) the amount of dens that are built in our house!! From helping out I can observe the enjoyment from the whole class.

They look forward to it, they remind me when it is and I have been involved. (Year 2 parent)

She will mention things she has done when she gets home.
(Year 1 parent)

We were also interested to find out what the parents feel the children learn through this type of activity.

It builds on physical activity in a fun way as well as creatively.
(Year 2 parent)

The children learn to work as a team, which helps strengthen friendships amongst their classmates. (Year 1 parent)

The most important feedback we get is from the children themselves. You can see from the looks on their faces, and from how engaged they are in the activities, that they enjoy the time they spend outside. When asking them about their learning in the past term, many expressed how much they enjoy being outdoors.

I like Forest School because we get to do lots of fun things like making tree spirits, having a BBQ and making dens.
(William, Year 2)

I like Forest School because I build dens and climb trees.
(Cael, Year 2)

I like climbing trees and art outside. I really enjoy making things and being active. (Billy, Year 6)

It's really good cos you're getting lots of exercise. (William, Year 6)

Through grant applications, budgeting and the hard work of parents and the Friends Association we have built a log cabin so that even more creative sessions can happen. It's more than just a log cabin really. It's the Rolls-Royce of log cabins with water, internet access, heating, and will soon have a projector and SMARTBoard. It was used to great effect during the last half term. As Forest School has proved so popular with the children of Wroxham, I decided to put on a day of Forest School activities that families could sign up for and come along to. It was very popular with children and parents from many local primary schools attending. The feedback that I got was very positive and I am planning other sessions for the Easter holidays and a week of Forest School during the summer.

Many thanks for such a wonderful morning at Forest School. It was nice to do something really different with the kids during the school holidays. Hope that it runs again during the next school holiday!

All four boys thoroughly enjoyed themselves, as did I. They enjoyed making a den in the woods and collecting lots of natural materials that they could make into paint. They especially enjoyed making mud pies and the tree spirits as they had the opportunity to get muddy and be very creative!!! We all enjoyed getting out and getting dirty! The boys have all asked if they can come again...so hope it's a success and we get the opportunity to attend again...

What Next?

Forest School has now become firmly embedded in the curriculum at Wroxham. From starting off as a small project, it is incredible how it has engulfed the imaginations of all children and adults. Children in Nursery take part in sessions, all the way up to Year 6. This momentum has come from the everyone; children, parents and teachers. However, we still have lots of plans to go further. We now have the log cabin on our huge school field which is fantastic as a base for activities. There is another woodland area within the grounds that

could be developed to incorporate a fire-pit area so we can use that too, giving our current woodland setting a much-needed break. We are looking into developing another section of the field into a meadow area, and developing an orienteering course within the grounds. It's an exciting time for Forest School at Wroxham.

Ultimately, we do it because the children gain a great deal from the freedom they have in the outdoors, combined with the activities that are planned in a warm, friendly and inspiring environment which strives to celebrate the achievements of all the children involved.

You can see photos of all the activities we do by going online at www.wroxham.herts.sch.uk and clicking on the Year 2 class blog.

References

www.forestschools.com

Dillon, J., Rickinson, M., Teamey, K., Morris, M., Young Choi, M., Sanders D. & Benefield, P (2006) The Value of Outdoor Learning: evidence from research in the UK and elsewhere, *School Science Review*, 87(320), 107.

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