

A unique experience

The Trust's Forest School programme continues to grow as the benefits of this innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning becomes more popular. Helen Martin, Headteacher at Lavington Park Federation of Graffham Infant and Duncton CE Junior Schools in West Sussex explains how she has been inspired to make the Forest School experience part of her school's curriculum.

I didn't realise that a week at Forest School Leader training would completely change my view of primary education. After working with Sussex Wildlife Trust trainers, Mike Murphy and Katie Riley, I have begun to plan changes to my schools that will fundamentally change the experiences and opportunities of every child in my care. As headteacher of two small rural schools, positioned next to the South Downs near Petworth, West Sussex, the locality is vital to our curriculum and our learning.

Forest Schooling has taken this further – a bringing together of our stunning rural location and the most important elements of education – motivation, risk-taking, curiosity, self-esteem, collaboration and independence. The training took ten educators on a journey through these areas too. We were soon to discover how much we could learn from each other and how every member of the group could bring something important to the learning experience. We were learning brand new things to many of us – lighting a fire with a fire steel; cooking over the fire; making charcoal and whittling an elder pencil. Each new experience was carefully taught and risks explained. It was then, working at the pace of the learner, that we all experimented and discovered skills we never knew we had. Conversation littered the forest: learning happened fast, friendships grew. This precious and unique time was over far too quickly – now the real work had to begin.

Developing my own Forest School was an exciting challenge. As a Headteacher, the most important part of my job is spending time with children. Finding a beautiful piece of woodland, owned by Leconfield Estates, only a mile from my Junior School offered a stimulating outdoor classroom.

Forest Schooling should take place outside of the ordinary learning environment – in a place that can become special to all learners. The first time I took a group of 15 seven and eight year olds into the forest, I was incredibly nervous. I had worked hard to make this a well planned experience for all: talked to all of the staff; spent a weekend learning Wilderness First Aid and gathered the correct equipment to support us all in our learning.



We sat, on wooden stumps, in a circle around the fire that we had gathered wood and lit together, drinking hot chocolate. Conversation flowed gently around the circle, the children discussed the things that they had found, homes for animals that they had built, trout that they had seen. The rush that happens in school had slowed to a calm pace, but a pace where the learning was immediate and enticing and memorable. Six sessions later, we were all in love with the forest. Children explored on their own, understanding the boundaries that they had been given but not scared to step out of sight of an adult. They remembered the knowledge that they had been given – they knew not to run their hands down the bracken stems for fear of being cut; they knew the sound of the chiffchaff in the dense canopy above us. Rain or sunshine made no difference to this experience; children learnt the clothing that was best for the outdoors and where the best shelter was to be found.

The children changed before our eyes. Their parents came to us afterwards and told us stories of improved confidence, conversation and experimentation outside. Learning in the classroom at school became enhanced, particularly their speaking and listening skills and resilience for any task.

The next stage of the challenge is how every one of the 102 children from my Infant and Junior Schools can gain this experience. The plan ahead includes my Assistant Headteacher also being trained by Mike and Katie, so many more children can learn in this truly inspirational, unique way. All staff have now shared a training day in the forest, as it is vital that they experience the forest on their own, just like I did! Imagine then, once everyone has been to the forest for one set of six sessions, how much faster they will learn when they return for another session the next year. Every time I talk to the children about it – they can't wait – and neither can I!

Using the school grounds as a resource to deliver the National Curriculum and beyond



- Discover different habitats found within your school grounds
- Explore how these habitats can be used to enhance learning in all curriculum areas
- Consider how specific techniques e.g. identification, investigations and environmental games can be integrated into individual practice
- Inspire and develop teachers own expertise, confidence and enthusiasm in delivering environmental education
- Start the process of developing a whole school approach to using the outdoors in many areas of the curriculum

The day will be planned to meet the individual schools needs, with an emphasis on interactive learning. It can be delivered either at Woods Mill Nature Reserve or within your schools own grounds.

"..... everyone felt the day had been totally worthwhile and brilliantly organised. We all went home fired up to do more fieldwork, greater skills than we had previously had and a zest for the outdoors....."
staff at Balcombe Primary School

"Today has been a truly inspirational day and has filled me with excitement to get outside with the children and 'do'"
Teacher from the Royal Spa Nursery

Cost: Full day £750 Half day £450

For further information please telephone Lynda Woods on 01273 497565 or email schoolsleaders@sussexwt.org.uk

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