

The benefits of a forest school experience for children in their early years



What are the benefits of working outside the traditional classroom? **Sam Massey** reports on the forest school initiative, which originated in Scandinavia and has been rapidly developing in England and Wales in recent years. She argues that outside learning stimulates the imagination and brings subjects to life in a real context so that children's senses are stimulated and firm foundations for further learning are built.

In recent years, early years settings have been bombarded with new initiatives designed to raise standards. With the emergence of the 'foundation stage', the most current document sent out to early years settings is the *Foundation Guidance* (DfEE, 2000) (see also DfEE, 1997 and DfEE, 1999). Since the 1960s there has been a call for better quality in the foundation stage, with a number of major reports such as the Rumbold Report (Rumbold Report, 1990), the 'Start Right' Report (Ball, 1994), and that of the House of Commons Select Committee (HoC, 1994). All have influenced the way we perceive early years education today and the positive attention it is now receiving. Alongside this is a growing amount of research that suggests the importance of a high-quality early years education. Andersson (1994) highlights its significance and its long-term effects on children's learning, leading to gains in educational achievement, better social behaviour and a more productive citizenship.

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England and Wales over the past four years. One of the reasons for this enthusiasm is that forest schools have the same basic underlying principles adopted from the Scandinavian model. A qualified forest

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school leader devises a programme of learning that is based on the children's interests and allows the children to build on skills from week to week, at their own pace. A safe, woodland environment is provided for the children to explore, embedded in routine that is established early within the programme.

What makes the forest school unique is its emphasis on learning outside of the traditional classroom, and having the freedom to explore the ever-changing environment, to take risks and 'assess risk for themselves' (Lindon, 1999, p. 11). Weaver (1998) suggests: 'The children learn informally about nature through being out in the woods' (p. 14). For some, like parents in Denmark (cited by Weaver) being outside seems more natural than the classroom and 'touches something deep' within the children. Gooding argues that all aspects of the curriculum can be taught outside, stimulating the imagination and bringing subjects to life in a real context – indeed, in such a way as to stimulate all their senses and building firm foundations for further learning.

It would seem that a fundamental difference between a forest school approach and many traditional outdoor education approaches would be their starting-point. Outdoor education often starts with an issue, agenda or problem for the children to investigate. Forest school is led by the child's

interests, within a loose skills framework with supportive intervention by qualified leaders. This view is expressed further by Grenier (1999, p. 12): 'we follow what the children point out first, and set challenges.'

The forest school initiative in Worcestershire has been established for four years and, as part of its continuous evaluation and development, this small-scale longitudinal research project was devised to discover any possible benefits of a forest school programme. The study spans an academic year and follows a small group of eight children, aged three to four, who attend an independent day nursery.

The aims of the study were:

- to ascertain the views of the children, parents and practitioners regarding what they feel about the forest school experience and what they are gaining from their participation
- to ascertain if forest school provides skills and confidence for a child's lifelong learning
- to provide an insight into the types of learning experiences being offered and whether these underpin the early years principles laid out in the foundation stage guidance
- generate ideas regarding dilemmas and tensions that may arise from the research that will inform the forest school coordinator and the LEA for its future development.

The methodology

The focus of the research was to gather views from those people directly concerned with the forest school experience. It was therefore necessary to identify a sample from that population. When devising a sample, Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggested researchers consider four key factors, including the sample size, the representativeness and parameters of the sample, access to the sample and the strategy to be used. The size of the sample, though small, was chosen because it was easily accessible, had no previous forest school experience and represented the immediate population affected in the study. It was an important consideration for the study that the children were experiencing visiting forest school for the first time in order to capture some of the elements of a forest school experience through their

eyes. It was felt that this sample gave a true representation of views and reflected the qualitative data collected. In such a 'qualitative naturalistic' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 23) approach, the views of the participants need to be taken into account. The data for this longitudinal study was collected regularly by the researcher and in collaboration with the forest school leader and nursery staff over nine months in order to represent a true picture of possible benefits. The study took the form of a participatory case study, with the methodology reflecting the ethnographic nature of the research.

It was felt that a questionnaire for parents would ascertain their views regarding the possible benefits for their children, as well as an opportunity to establish the previous outdoor experience of the children, 'testing the waters' to see if there were any tensions and dilemmas before the study began. The questionnaire was structured with open and closed questions in an attempt to encourage the parents to express themselves on a range of issues.



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The interviews were used in conjunction with other research methods, and as the study is essentially 'real life research' (Robson, 1996, p. 2), the interviews were informal during the children's weekly visits to forest school, often without a script, and intended to put participants at their ease. This study utilised unstructured interviews that allowed more flexible, open-ended questions to 'go further' by introducing a theme and allowing the respondents to develop their own ideas. Scott and

Usher (1999) remind us of the complex relationship between researcher and interviewee, emphasising that the points of self-presentation and personal involvement need to be addressed before the interview for it to be successful. This was a big consideration throughout the study to ensure the views of everyone concerned were reflected appropriately.

As well as video and photographic data, observations were also collected in an anecdotal log during and after the researchers' visit; these included comments from the children and staff and general observations made of the children regarding their overall development. Such observations are referred to by Bryman (2001) as 'non-participant, unstructured observations' (p. 163) and by Denscombe (1998) as 'participation by observation' (p. 150), as it was essential to maintain the naturalness for the children and to record in as much detail as possible the value of their experiences. Through recording field notes in an anecdotal log the research attempts to validate the qualitative data collected and cross check information from other strategies presented in the analysis. Observations were also made using the 'involvement' model presented in the 'Effective Early Learning Project' (Pascal and Bertrum, 1997) to highlight possible areas of strength and those to be developed.

The anecdotal log with the interviews attempts to see and record the phenomena with those involved. Denscombe (1998) and Gilbert (1993, p. 156) have argued that reliability is 'open to doubt' (p. 156 and p. 164), as the researcher is dependent on field notes

for data, collected after observations and based on recollections. However, Denscombe (1998) has argued that much research undertaken this way is not meant to be representative and it is therefore inappropriate to apply any criteria for reliability. Though it is important to reflect on the limitations of this method, it was felt that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Insights had been gained into the possible benefits for children's development and the views of everyone were equally represented.

I had a unique opportunity to observe the children's developing love of the woodland and to watch as their confidence grows, though many ethical concerns can be anticipated when collecting data through photos, video footage and observations. Burgess (1989) highlights potential problems, such as the difficulty of anonymity, in this kind of study. Participants may feel uneasy, as in such a small study key individuals may be identified to the wider audience outside of the study, and since the majority of participants in this study were children, we need to consider their rights. Indeed Hornsby-Smith, cited in Gilbert (1993), highlights the problems of 'differential power' (p. 62), where the most vulnerable and weak groups in society without the means to defend themselves are open to exploitation by researchers. He argues that individual researchers must take responsibility for the strategies used and ensure ethical guidelines of anonymity and confidentiality are followed, quoting the Statement of Ethical Practice (1991) (Gilbert, 1993): 'as far as possible sociological research should be based on the freely given informed

Table 1 Methodologies used during the research

Method	Participants	Sample size
Questionnaires at the beginning and end of the research time	Parents	8 (6 to completion)
Informal interviews and anecdotal log	Practitioners	2
	Parents	8 (6 to completion)
	Forest school leader	1
	Children	8 (6 to completion)
Camcorder recorded observations	Children	8 (6 to completion)
Involvement in timed observations	Children	8 (6 to completion)
Photographs	Taken by children	8 (6 to completion)
	Taken by staff	2
	Taken by forest school coordinator	1

consent of those studied' (p. 63). For this research, the children's and their parents' consent was given at the outset and anonymity has been respected. I felt that the children's views were essential for the study, though not to the detriment of their fundamental rights.

Table 1 summarises the different methodologies used.

Exploring the benefits of a forest school experience

Personal and social development

All the children were observed as having confidence and independence with the activities in the woodland and in the care of the natural environment, providing them with a sense of success and raised self-esteem. The children were seen to develop relationships with others and to form new friendships with peers and adults. This has ensured that towards the end of their programme the children had begun to work as a group, considering the needs of others, as well as individually. Practitioners reflected that the children, while in the woodland, had gained in confidence in adapting to new situations and in trying new experiences. This also impacted on their ability to choose activities independently, and their confidence in self-initiating tasks was seen to develop dramatically.

Child S enjoyed making shelters and would often enlist the aid of one of the other children by saying 'Oh! This one is heavy, can you help me?' The other children keen to help would all hold on to the large log and help to move it into position. They had

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acquired more skill in making and keeping friends, the art of consideration

and compromise, e.g. saying 'Can I help you?' instead of 'that's mine'. Though these changes may be maturational, their experiences gave them 'real' opportunities for practising these elementary life-skills. 'Low self-confidence or self-esteem is one of the most critical controlling elements of a child's

ability to learn and behave appropriately and thus to achieve his/her potential' (Margerison, 1996, p. 176).

It would seem that by taking the time to allow children to develop good self-esteem and develop a good self-image, in a climate of small achievable steps, forest school can contribute to and enrich the quality of the children's overall educational experiences.

Communication and language development

By starting with and incorporating children's interests, forest school provides different starting-points and appropriate content for individual children. Through interacting with peers regarding special interests the children became motivated to use real language in real contexts, ensuring that language was meaningful.

The children's questions changed over time, becoming more specific. In term 1, child A would repeat 'look at this!' In term 2, his questions were more specific: 'Where do they live? What do they eat?' In term 3, he was beginning to transfer information and relate it to new experiences: 'Are they like badgers?', correctly inferring that foxes hunt at night. Dowling (2000) suggests that 'in order for children to make true progress in learning they need to make sense of new information by using what they know already and modifying, updating and rethinking their ideas in the light of new knowledge' (p. 80).

Opportunities were observed where the children spontaneously worked alone, in pairs and as part of a larger group in collaborative projects. These opportunities enabled them to use familiar language regularly, to revisit new concepts and to extend vocabulary beyond the classroom in a real context. This context did not include the traditional teaching of reading and writing, though some of the children often used large sticks to make marks in the mud and soil. Rather it provided 'relevance' for the children, a reason for language and one that they took back with them to inspire them in their own setting.

Lifelong learning

Through a balance of supported and self-initiated activities the children were encouraged to stretch

beyond the usual boundaries set by the classroom and eventually to take risks safely by learning to assess the risks of activities independently. This was seen to aid their decision processes and their problem-solving abilities. This freedom without a fixed agenda ensured that the six key thinking and learning skills of enquiry, hypothesis, information processing, decision making, communication and vocabulary, and review and evaluation (Worcestershire LEA, 2002) were experienced regularly.

The children were observed splashing in the mud on a rainy day. Such a seemingly simple and enjoyable experience led to conversations about where the puddle had come from and where it goes. The puddle became a firm favourite with children, building on their knowledge each week as it changed. Their confidence in attempting splashes grew alongside this, particularly for Child B who did not enjoy the muddiness of the puddle initially. In time she began to enjoy it, being seen to sit and roll in it enthusiastically, and experiencing for the first time the freedom of getting dirty. This opened up further opportunities for her as she became more confident to touch and experience more and more of the woodland.

Risk-taking at forest school

Risk-taking in a forest school environment can be defined as pushing the boundaries of your learning, trying something new and moving out of your comfort zone. In fact it would seem to be an environment that encourages the confidence to make a mistake or to fail, in the knowledge that you have the time to try again, as well as the time to reflect and make changes or improve your original attempt.

During term 2, the children were introduced to ropes, which they delighted in tying to stumps they had driven into the ground. They found tying knots very difficult, but they persevered often for long periods in an attempt to get the effect they wished.

Providing a safe risk-taking environment

Forest school leaders tackle the issue of safety by carefully explaining how to avoid accidents, teaching the children and adults how to use tools correctly and by giving the children lots of

opportunities to practise activities safely, to have the confidence to 'have a go' and ask for help when it's needed.

The forest school programme is individual to each child and each setting, as it offers a relevant curriculum that begins with and builds on children's own interests and previous experience. It could be argued that quality teaching and learning in the classroom also address these fundamental considerations. However, Lindon (1999, p. 10) takes the view that: 'a well-intentioned focus on keeping children as safe as possible has shifted towards looking for anything and everything that can go wrong.'

I feel that a forest school experience can go further than the experiences offered in a classroom, as it fills the gap made in our society by an ever-increasing 'safety first' culture. Many children today do not play outside and are no longer encouraged to do this or take risks, as in previous generations, because of the fear of abduction, blame and legal action. Could this result in a generation of children never having had the experience of playing outside independently, exploring safely and problem-solving without an adult's supervision or intervention? Lindon (1999, p. 10) warns that by becoming too preoccupied with safety we could also 'risk losing sight of what children need to learn through their early years'.

While watching their children explore the woodland, the parents expressed their wonder at the level of independence and confidence their children were showing. All of them felt it would change the nature of their trips out with them in the future: they would encourage more freedom, perhaps out of sight in a secure environment, leave the busy paths and let their children lead the way, allowing them to follow their interests.

A forest school experience manages the positive elements needed for risk-taking:

- [supportive adults who don't intervene too early](#)
- [encouraging children to make choices](#)
- [practitioners making risks apparent to children](#)
- [opportunities to keep themselves and others safe within acceptable boundaries](#)
- [encouraging children to assess their own risks](#)

- encouraging parents to participate in activities
- providing small achievable tasks
- understanding and matching the appropriate skills to the child's ability.

Transferring skills and knowledge

When considering the benefits to children's learning, for these experiences to be seen as valuable to educators, we must also consider the extent to which forest school experiences have been integrated into children's school-based learning and development. Through the photographs, children's comments and those made by parents and practitioners these experiences provide the children

Forest school values the development of children's independence, self-confidence, and the growth of self-esteem

with a broad range of transferable experiences, with high involvement that successfully underpin the principles for early years education stated in the curriculum guidance for the foundation stage.

Through these positive comments it would seem that they have valued the experience for the insights into the children's strengths, learning styles and overall development that would usually be impossible for them to obtain in the classroom.

Child T was seen to have far more confidence at forest school than in the classroom setting. The staff observed his developing relationships with the children and his developing confidence to speak. They also observed that with time and by providing opportunities within the classroom setting this confidence was transferred.

It would seem that their experiences have prompted conversations at another level, helping to give staff confidence, to see different approaches to teaching and supporting activities that can be transferred to the classroom, as well as the staff's determination to continue forest school, benefiting more children in the future.

It could be argued that a forest school approach allows learning to become creative, active and

personal to the child, and by ensuring the activities interest and involve them, the children will be disposed to learn. Indeed, Fisher (1996) argues that children have a 'readiness' to learn from birth if the environment and learning is adapted to meet their intellectual needs: 'A child is ready to learn when his or her cognitive disposition and what is being taught are matched' (p. 5).

Smart (2001) explains that these regular weekly visits by the children enhance their innate motivation and positive attitude to learning. Forest school values the development of children's independence, self-confidence, and the growth of self-esteem. These values are encouraged throughout the activities. Smart describes it as 'mastery of small achievable tasks'. Smart (2001, p. 11) concludes that: 'The concept of forest school is an extension of what every good early years setting tries to do through outdoor play.'

Transition to a forest school environment

It became apparent while editing video footage collected over the year in order to reflect forest school through the children's eyes that a process was emerging similar to that explained by Van Gennep's (1996) conceptual model as a rite-of-passage. At the beginning of the process, there is the 'preparation or separation' of the child from their familiar settings and environment and introducing them to the new staff, to waterproof clothing, the minibus and simple games they will play in the woodland. This stage could take a few weeks, until the staff feel the children are confident to go into the woodland.

Once they attended forest school, a 'transition' stage emerged. The children lacked confidence at the beginning to move away from the adults, but once they had done so, they began to ask lots of questions and explored 'feverishly', moving quickly from one new find to another, and excitedly telling adults of their finds: 'Look what I have found! It's a hole for a mole!' (Child L, autumn term). It is at this time that simple rules and routines are followed for the children's safety, e.g. dragging a stick behind you and 'listening time' around the camp-fire each week. It is important that the adults get to know the children and find out as much as

they can about their learning styles and children's interests as this will form the basis for future work with the children. This stage was seen to vary with the child: it may take weeks or months for the children to feel comfortable with their new environment.

Child A became very interested in mini-beasts, and the adults built upon his interests and included them in the programme, giving him limitless time each week to explore and find new ones. He naturally extended this to include classification, so that as he found more he could compare. This lasted for several weeks and the staff followed him when his interest changed to badgers!

Once the children were confident to move through the woodland and it became more familiar to them, their questions, the rate of questioning and observations changed. They became calmer and more careful, though still excited and motivated. They began to notice changes and ask specific rather than general questions about their environment. This could be seen as the 'incorporation or consolidation' stage as the children began to use their new skills independently:

We followed a trail down to forest school today. We had to go a different way because the badgers are having babies. Sue made some arrows out of sticks for us to follow. There are some new swings and a rope ladder. On the way back we made some arrows for Sue to follow.

(children's weekly log, 28 February 2003)

The role of the practitioner and other adults

Bruce (1987) has argued that play is one of the most important settings for the encouragement of potential learning. Play involves children directing and initiating situations themselves, with a varying degree of intervention or support from adults as 'sensitive coordinators' (p. 48). Depending on the context, the adults' role can increase child involvement levels and positively affect potential development. Through their comments practitioners saw their role as very varied, including ensuring a safe environment, allowing the children choice of equipment such as ropes, trowels and buckets, and observing and valuing their self-initiated learning.

They felt that by questioning, suggesting and providing props they could extend children's self-initiated play.

Dowling describes self-initiated play as spontaneous, where the practitioner can choose to be involved by playing alongside and offering a reassuring presence. Such an important aspect needs to be adopted by all adults who work with the children at the forest school site if it is to be a successful element for children's potential learning. With an appropriate induction programme for parents and carers, a consistent approach can be adopted where play is accepted as sometimes purely imaginative and where attempts to 'teach concepts' may be seen by the children as intrusive and counter-productive: 'The adult needs to be aware of the potential for learning in children's play, but this is a different matter from predetermining the play' (Dowling, 1992, p. 63).

A summary of potential benefits of forest school

- The forest school programme evolves from the needs of the child and includes the child's interests.
- Children develop good self-esteem in a climate of small achievable steps.
- The programme provides a real context for language.
- The programme provides the practitioner with an alternative view of the child and further insights into a child's particular development.
- The programme is beneficial to a child's all-round development, particularly in the areas of personal, social and emotional development, and language and communication.
- The programme underpins the principles laid down in the foundation stage guidelines.
- The experience has been very well received by all those involved in it.
- The programme provides opportunities for the children to take risks, solve problems and employ thinking skills.
- The forest school experience complements learning in the classroom and can be transferred.

Implications for settings establishing a forest school

- The children adapt to their new environment in distinct stages.
- The adult's role changes as the children become more confident.
- Parents would like support in maintaining the ethos at home.
- Perhaps there is a need to look further at the induction process, making it longer to ensure all staff and parents are involved and the needs of the children are met.

Conclusion

The study has generated a range of information for the children, practitioners, governors and the LEA regarding children's overall development and learning through a forest school experience. This may contribute towards the long-term aim in Worcestershire that by 2013 all children in primary education will have access to a forest school provision (Dowling, 2000; Forest School, 2003; Bridgwater College, 2001).

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Related websites

www.foresteducation.org/forest_schools.php

The Forest Education Initiative provides learning resources about trees, forests and forest products. The section on forest schools explains what they are, and what happens at them. A history of forest schools is given. Guidance is given on how to set up a school and how to become a school leader.

www.bridgwater.ac.uk/forestschool

Bridgwater College has been running a forest school since 1994, the first of its kind in the UK. There is information on using the school with pupils in the early years, with special needs pupils, and with community groups. Details are given on training as a forest school leader.

www.bishopswoodcentre.org.uk

Bishops Wood Centre have recently come to the end of a pilot year where 320 foundation stage children have experienced a forest school. They are continuing to offer forest school sessions to foundation stage children at Bishops Wood as well as offering 'taster days' to all ages.

www.northmoortrust.co.uk/home/learning/education/forest_schools

The Northmoor Trust in South Oxfordshire manages an estate, a conservation farm and new woodland dedicated to forestry research. The website explains the work that the Trust in partnership with the Oxfordshire Education Service is carrying out in three school-based pilot projects.