



Mellor Forest School: The Importance of the Forest School Experience

Forest School is a unique approach to learning which offers participants the opportunity to access National Curriculum areas in an alternative outdoor learning environment. It is a process in which learning is enhanced through hands on, experiential learning with participants freely exploring using multiple senses and learning styles and through regular access to a woodland setting over a period of months.

Whilst focusing on learning, much of the process is child initiated with the Forest School leader acting as a facilitator. In this way, the children are engaged and motivated to learn and research has shown that participation in Forest School programmes can increase young people's confidence and self-esteem. Learning can be enhanced, providing an alternative to learning within a classroom environment. Group sizes are small and there is a high ratio of adults to children.

Extensive research has demonstrated that forest provision powerfully supports young people's abilities to be creative and think critically, drawing upon all their senses to support effective learning as they play and explore the outdoor space and a wide range of natural materials. This supports their problem-solving abilities; their innovative ideas in response to new challenges in learning; and impacts on their confidence and self-esteem, as they see themselves as limitless learners.

Additionally, children who have access to outdoor learning opportunities increase their level and depth of concentration. Their ability to persevere and persist at tasks and activities grows, even when children experience setbacks and frustrations, which is an important part of resilience in life. Their control and precision in use of tools and other media increases. The power of the outdoor learning environment, particularly for those not excelling in mainstream education, impacts on their motivation to learn

and succeed, and this in turn impacts on their behaviour and positive attitudes to learning in the indoor classroom.

There are six main values consistent within the ethos of Forest School. These are as follows:

- **Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment.**

Frequent sessions on a regular basis over a period of months help young people to become more confident and comfortable in the woodland environment and with the routines and safety aspects of their surroundings and the activities taking place there. Boundaries are set and embedded for behavior and the physical landscape and children feel safe in their surroundings. Regular visits to a natural setting allows the Forest School practitioner to observe and review sessions to provide learning opportunities tailored to the needs and development of the group.

- **Forest School takes place in a woodland or outdoor setting to enable children to understand, appreciate and care for the natural environment.**

The woodland is ideally suited to match the needs of the programme and the children, providing them with the space and environment in which to explore and discover. Natural resources are used for inspiration and to enable ideas. There may be some children to whom the outside world is a strange and unfamiliar place, they may be reticent to climb, get muddy, learn about natural flora and fauna; however, over time they will begin to learn what they are able to do and greatly increase their confidence in the outdoors.

Mellor Primary School is set in beautiful established woodland and children take part in planting and caring for its contents. In this way the children take ownership for the natural environment and develop appreciation and respect for it. They learn how to look after and conserve their natural environment and the eco-systems which survive in it, which will hopefully develop long-term, environmentally sustainable attitudes and practices in staff, learners and the wider community.

Our Forest School has a sustainable site management plan and we constantly monitor the ecological impact that the children have upon the site.

- **Forest School promotes the holistic development of all participants, establishing confident, independent, resilient and creative learners.**

Holistic learning centers on the participants physical, mental, academic, emotional and social development. The outdoor learning environment of Forest school is well equipped to deal with this type of learning as all physical, mental, academic, emotional and social needs are stimulated through regular sessions in the woodland environment. Learning can be linked wherever possible to National Curriculum planning in the classroom, which further cements knowledge and understanding through the use of practical tasks during Forest School sessions, which can then be utilised back in the regular classroom setting.

Due to the nature of activities, Forest School takes place within small groups with a high ratio of adults to children. This allows the groups to develop positive relationships with their peers and Forest School leader. Less confident children can flourish in smaller groups as their confidence grows. Forest School allows for the same groups of children to work together each week with regular routines, sessions and boundaries established and adhered to, throughout the programme. This helps to improve self-esteem as participants know what to expect and when.

In conjunction with this, Forest School planning is always based upon setting small achievable tasks, these allow participants to succeed at Forest School and develops self-esteem. Tasks such as lighting a spark with a fire steel may take lots of perseverance, however it is a small task that everyone can achieve eventually and really gives a sense of achievement once accomplished. Children are given responsibility for tasks which promote the health and well-being of the group, such as cooking, ensuring they all stay safe whilst using tools and keeping the fire stocked with enough fuel to keep it lit. Carrying out these responsibilities improves self-worth as children are able to 'prove' themselves to the rest of their peers.

- **Forest School provides a safe environment in which learners have opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.**

Forest School encourages all children to explore the outdoor environment and discover new experiences. This freedom impacts upon independence and gives the confidence to children to take risks whilst exploring. Forest School involves physical activities that children are encouraged to take part in which can provide new risks to the child through the physical environment. Forests provide many potential risks, bushes, trees and plants to scratch, sting, slip over or potentially poison us; Cold weather, hot weather, wet, muddy conditions provide lots of opportunity for slips, trips and falls. Forest School also involves the use of tools to create crafts and the lighting of fires for warmth and cookery. All of these risks are potentially dangerous or harmful, however, where Forest School differs from many educational settings involving children, the risks are assessed and managed rather than avoided altogether, following the completion of risk assessments. Any Forest School experience follows a rigorous risk–benefit process managed jointly by the practitioner and learner that is tailored to the developmental stage of the learner.

This appropriate risk taking then impacts upon the learning and development of the child. Learning to take risks in a Forest School environment can encourage children to take responsibility for themselves and others and begin to take appropriate risks whilst in the classroom environment and indeed as adults in later life.

Peter Cornall from ROSPA stated *“We need to ask ourselves whether it is better for a child to break a wrist falling out of a tree, or to get a repetitive strain wrist injury at a young age from using a computer or video games console. Parents and children must not be frightened about venturing outside.” “When children spend time in the great outdoors, getting muddy, getting wet, getting stung by nettles, they learn important lessons - what hurts, what is slippery, what you can trip over or fall from.”*

- **Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.**

Forest School is led by a qualified practitioner who holds an accredited Level 3 Forest School qualification and outdoor first aid qualification. Good practice is enhanced through regular updating and sharing of skills with other practitioners. The Forest School practitioner reflects on their own practice in order to do this, to understand where and how improvements are necessary. Forest School is backed by relevant working documents, which contain all the policies and procedures required for running Forest School and which establish the roles and responsibilities of staff.

- **Forest School promotes learner-centered and child-initiated learning.**

The leader gives the children lots of time to explore the forest so that they can observe what the children are interested in and facilitate learning on these topics. Leaders take a step back and take on a facilitator/peer questioning role. This will enable participants to explore freely and in effect, teach themselves. Motivation to learn and enjoyment of sessions is stimulated as child-initiated learning takes place. The leader ensures participant's success by planning simple tasks to start with and will then pull back and let the participants take over. The leader can also then see what the learners are most stimulated by and use this information to inform planning for other sessions.