

Forest School Programme and Session Framework

Philosophy and Aims

The primary aim of these sessions is to help children develop a positive connection and attachment to the natural world. Through regular experiences in nature, children are given opportunities to explore, play, take appropriate risks, build confidence, develop resilience, and form meaningful relationships with both the woodland environment and each other.

Sessions are designed to establish a safe and supportive community of learning where children feel valued, listened to, and respected. Opportunities are created for self-directed play, holistic development, reflection, and personal growth.

Forest School is a child-centred approach. The activities we plan and offer are based on the needs, interests, and developmental stages of the particular children we are working with. Planned activities act as invitations rather than requirements. Children may choose to engage with an activity, develop it in an unexpected direction, or not participate at all.

The role of the Forest School practitioners is to observe carefully, listen attentively, and remain adaptable. By responding to children's interests and needs as they emerge, we can support learning in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

Observation and evaluation are central to this process. What we observe during each session informs future planning, helping to ensure that activities and experiences continue to support the children's development and interests. While each session follows a familiar rhythm, flexibility remains essential. The structure provides security and consistency, while still allowing space for spontaneity, discovery, and child-led exploration.

Session Structure

The Rhythm of the Session

Having a clear rhythm gives shape to the day and helps children feel safe and secure. The structure creates opportunities for group connection and ensures children know what to expect, while still allowing flexibility to respond to the group's needs and interests.

Each session has a beginning, middle, and ending, supporting a smooth transition from the outside world into the woodland environment and back again.

Inspire

What did we do last week?

The session can begin by reflecting on previous experiences. This helps children reconnect with earlier learning, remember achievements, and continue ongoing projects.

This stage provides continuity and strengthens children's sense of belonging within the group.

Motivate

Here's what you asked me to bring this week...

Children's ideas and requests from previous sessions are acknowledged and acted upon wherever possible.

Following through on children's interests demonstrates that their contributions are valued and helps build trust, ownership, and engagement.

Opening Circle

After arriving and settling into the woods, our aim is to gather together in the fire circle to begin the session.

This may include:

- A story
- Discussion
- Observation
- Song
- Joke
- Seasonal theme
- Question for reflection

A talking stick may be passed around the circle, allowing each person an opportunity to speak and be listened to respectfully.

Opening circles provide a calm and inclusive start to the session and help establish a sense of community.

Show and Tell

Look what I found!

An interesting object, artefact, natural material, or seasonal item is introduced to stimulate curiosity and conversation.

Children are encouraged to:

- Observe closely
- Touch and handle appropriately
- Smell and investigate
- Share ideas and questions

This simple activity often acts as a springboard for further exploration and discussion.

Philosophical Questions

Thought-provoking questions may be introduced naturally throughout the session when appropriate.

These questions encourage:

- Curiosity
- Reflection
- Critical thinking
- Empathy
- Imagination

Examples might include:

- What makes something alive?
- What would happen if humans disappeared?
- What can you hear when nobody is talking?
- Are you more like a river or a rock?
- Would you rather be able to talk to animals or trees?

Such discussions encourage children to think beyond their own experiences and develop confidence in expressing ideas.

Self-Directed Play and Exploration

Freedom

This forms the main body of the session.

Children are free to explore, investigate, create, build, imagine, experiment, and play in ways that are meaningful to them.

Our role during this time is to:

- Observe
- Facilitate
- Support

- Encourage
- Extend learning where appropriate
- Hold the space for children's play

Resources, provocations, and ideas may be introduced throughout the session to inspire exploration while allowing children to remain in control of their own learning.

The Importance of Play

Play is recognised as a fundamental part of child development.

Forest School provides opportunities for many different forms of play, including:

- Communication Play
- Creative Play
- Deep Play
- Dramatic Play
- Exploratory Play
- Fantasy and Imaginary Play
- Locomotor Play
- Mastery Play
- Object Play
- Recapitulative Play
- Role Play
- Rough and Tumble Play
- Social Play
- Socio-Dramatic Play
- Symbolic Play

When children are deeply engaged in self-directed play, individually or with peers, adults should seek to protect and support that play rather than interrupt it unnecessarily.

Activities and Opportunities

Children may choose to participate in a range of experiences throughout the session.

Bushcraft Activities

- Preparing fire materials
- Fire lighting
- Campfire cooking
- Shelter building
- Tool making
- Whittling
- Safe tool use
- Knot tying

These activities encourage resilience, problem-solving, practical skills, responsibility, and confidence.

Physical Activities

- Wide games
- Chopping and sawing wood
- Tree climbing
- Rope swings
- Balancing activities
- Wood stacking
- Scavenger hunts
- Nature walks

Physical challenges help children develop coordination, strength, confidence, and risk assessment skills.

Sensory Exploration

- Water play
- Mud kitchens
- Digging and earth play
- Natural materials exploration

Sensory experiences encourage curiosity, creativity, and emotional regulation.

Exploring Smell

Smell has a powerful connection to memory, mood, and emotion.

Children are encouraged to explore both pleasant and unpleasant smells within the woodland environment, discussing:

- Preferences
- Memories
- Safety messages in nature
- Seasonal changes

Developing sensory awareness helps deepen children's connection to their environment.

Mindfulness in Nature

Opportunities for calm reflection may include:

- Hammocks
- Canopy watching
- Sit spots
- Stone balancing
- Wildlife observation
- Quiet exploration

These experiences encourage relaxation, attention, and emotional wellbeing.

Games Around the Fire

The campfire provides opportunities for social connection through games such as:

- Chess
- Card games
- Dice games
- Word games
- Strategy games
- Memory games
- Drama games
- Magic tricks

Games help develop communication, cooperation, concentration, and social confidence.

Community and Belonging

Creating opportunities for positive shared experiences is a key part of Forest School.

Community experiences may include:

- Group games
- Campfire cooking
- Shared meals
- Woodland projects
- Circle discussions
- Celebrations and seasonal traditions
- Picnics in other areas of the woods

These experiences help children develop relationships, empathy, belonging, and teamwork.

Crafts and Creative Expression

Children have opportunities to create seasonal and sustainable woodland crafts.

Activities are regularly refreshed and may include:

- Natural weaving
- Clay work
- Craft items
- Woodland decorations
- Cordage making
- Nature art
- Seasonal celebrations

The emphasis is placed on process rather than product, allowing children freedom to express themselves creatively.

Nature Connection

Nature connection sits at the heart of Forest School practice.

Most children arrive with some curiosity about the woodland environment. Through sustained and repeated experiences, this curiosity can develop into a deeper connection and appreciation.

Children are encouraged to explore and discover through activities such as:

- Sit spots
- Bird watching
- Animal tracking
- Scavenger hunts
- Wildlife observation
- Seasonal walks
- Habitat exploration

Regular exploration allows children to notice changes over time, including:

- Seasonal transitions
- Animal signs and tracks
- Plant growth
- Weather patterns
- Changes in light and temperature

A designated "wonder cabinet" or collection area allows children to display interesting discoveries, encouraging further exploration and discussion.

As children develop a sense of value and care for the woodland, they begin to ask deeper questions about how ecosystems function and their own place within the natural world.

Reflection and Closing

Closing Circle

At the end of each session we gather together once again.

Reflection may include:

- Gratitude
- Highlights of the day
- Challenges overcome
- New discoveries
- Ideas for future sessions
- Wishes and aspirations

Children are invited to share:

- How they are feeling now
- What they enjoyed
- What they would like to do next time
- Suggestions for campfire food

The session concludes with a short game, song, or farewell ritual before allowing sufficient time for everyone to gather their belongings and return safely to the collection point.

Resources and Equipment

A broad range of equipment is provided to support child-led learning and play, including:

- Hammocks
- Swings
- Rope walkways
- Shelter-building materials
- Pulleys
- Paracord
- Knot-tying equipment
- Fire-lighting resources
- Magnifying glasses
- Wildlife containers
- Binoculars
- Nature identification guides
- Games
- Musical instruments
- Woodland tools

Additional resources may be brought to support specific activities and interests identified through observation and planning.

Practical Procedures

Weather Assessment

Weather conditions are monitored in the days leading up to each session and reviewed immediately beforehand.

Sessions will proceed in most weather conditions. However, sessions may be cancelled, postponed, or adapted if conditions create an unacceptable level of risk.

As a guide, sessions will not proceed when wind speeds are forecast to gust at 40 mph or above.

Parents and carers will be advised regarding appropriate clothing and footwear for prevailing conditions.

Site Checks

A site inspection is carried out before each session.

Checks include:

Access and Boundaries

- Safe access routes
- Boundary integrity
- Appropriate signage where required

Ground Layer

- Trip hazards
- Fallen branches
- Hidden obstacles
- Unsafe debris

Shrub and Canopy Layers

- Hanging branches
- Storm damage
- Deadwood presenting unacceptable risk

Structures and Equipment

- Rope swings
- Climbing features
- Shelters
- Play apparatus

Appropriate action will be taken to remove, repair, isolate, or otherwise manage any significant hazards identified.

Staffing

Adult-to-child ratios are maintained at a maximum of 1:4.

Prior to each session consideration is given to:

- Staff experience
- Qualifications
- Individual strengths
- Planned activities

Responsibilities are allocated accordingly to ensure effective support for both children's learning and safety.

Resources Check

Prior to each session all equipment is checked to ensure it is:

- Safe
- Functional
- Suitable for purpose

This includes:

- Water supplies
- Tools
- Craft materials
- Kitchen equipment
- Food ingredients
- Refreshments
- Specialist activity resources

Dietary requirements and allergies are considered when preparing food-related activities.

Welfare Facilities

Prior to each session ensure:

- Handwashing stations are operational
- Water containers are full
- Soap is available
- Paper towels are stocked
- Toilet facilities are appropriately maintained

Health and Safety

Risk-Benefit Assessment

Forest School recognises the developmental value of managed risk.

Risk-Benefit Assessments (RBAs) are completed for activities and experiences offered within each session.

RBAs consider:

- Potential hazards
- Potential benefits
- Existing control measures
- Participant needs
- Environmental conditions

The aim is not to eliminate all risk, but to manage risk appropriately while preserving meaningful opportunities for challenge, learning, growth, and adventure.

Evaluation and Future Planning

Evaluation is an ongoing process.

Following each session, observations and reflections are recorded to inform future planning.

Evaluation considers:

- Children's interests
- Levels of engagement
- Emerging skills
- Group dynamics
- Individual needs
- Nature connection outcomes

This reflective process ensures that future sessions remain responsive, relevant, and child-centred while supporting long-term development and meaningful relationships with the natural world.