Developing a Forest School in Early Years Provision

A practical handbook on how to develop a Forest School in any early years setting

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Contents

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Chapter 1: What is Forest School?

Forest School – two words that over the last fifteen years seem to have captured the imagination of early years practitioners and other educators all over the United Kingdom (UK). Much has been written about Forest School in various guises, but why has this form of learning become one of the fastest growing movements in education – probably more than any other initiative in recent times? And why not driven from government but from grass roots: the practitioners? Questions frequently asked are: "What is 'Forest School'? Do I need a woodland?". Before questions like these can be answered, we need to explore why and where this form of learning originated.

Forest School in the UK can be traced back to 1930s when educators from the Woodcraft Folk, Quakers and the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry started promoting the 'Woodcraft Way', a movement started in the early 1990s in America by Ernest Thompson Seton. The influence for this movement came from the beliefs and lifestyle of Native Americans and how they lived with and close to nature. In 1948 residential camps began with the aspiration to pass on the ways and values of these native people through living outdoors and essentially community participation. It was the practical, hands on, positive and creative experiences that were felt necessary to appreciate nature that became the philosophy of the camps. Living 'in tune' with nature was seen to kindle an inner feeling of well-being and contentment. At camp, children are taught to care for themselves, each other and the environment: a sentiment reiterated in the recently published 'Sustainable Schools' framework (DCSF 2008). The society that became Forest School Camps still arrange weekend and holiday camps for young people.

More recently, what is now in education and environmental circles commonly known as Forest School, has been adapted from the Scandinavian approach to early years provision. In Scandinavian countries, just as in the UK, there is a variety of

CASE STUDY: FINLAND

The nursery is situated on the edge of an office and light industrial estate. The indoor space is a converted office containing a sleep room, kitchen and dining space, a small baby room, various open-plan spaces with lots of books and natural materials. Outside is a veranda with coat pegs for outdoor clothing and boots. The outdoor space is not attached to the building but across the road and this is where the parents drop the children off in the morning.

There is a picket fence with pegs where children hang their rucksacks. Each child brings a rucksack to nursery including; a flask containing a warm drink, a snack and a folding 'sit upon'. The pedagogues greet the children in the garden and the children are free to play immediately. The area has no grass or tarmac but is simply compacted soil. There are two fire pits with seating circles, a wooden shelter where the babies sleep during the day, a wooden shed containing a first aid kit, skis (for winter) and simple equipment such as ropes and tools.

On this day, at 9am the key workers gather their children around the fire circles and discuss the day. The youngest children remain in the garden area. The older group, five/six-year-olds, stay near the nursery, but outside of the garden, to have a creative day. This is still outside in the public grassed area, which includes a large pond. The three- and four-year-olds head to the equivalent of Forest School. They collect their rucksacks and head off along a public footpath. The children are allowed to run ahead and have various landmark points where they wait for everyone else.

On reaching 'Forest School', the children choose which area they go to. There are three areas, all public spaces. They choose 'the rocky place'. There are quite steep slopes and rocks for them to climb but they all mange remarkably well. The children again are free to roam and explore. There are no physical boundaries but the children know their limits. They come together for snack and hot drink, which is provided by their parents. They all manage their own flask and pour their own drink. This is a social time with lots of conversation between friends. Another class of students, this time teenagers, arrive and sit close by for their snack. Neither group takes any notice of the other. The teenagers are quiet and respectful.

After a few minutes they move off and nursery children put away their flasks and continue with their play. The pedagogue has a rucksack with basic equipment that the children can ask for if they wish to use it. After a while, two girls ask for paper and pencils to draw some flowers they have found. Another two ask for knives to do some whittling. They know exactly how to sit and use the knives.

The children come together again later with flasks and bowls and sit on their mats. This time they take 'dinner gloves' out of their rucksacks. (The weather is often too cold for the children to remove gloves for hand washing or eating and therefore by having clean gloves they remain warm, comfortable and reasonably hygienic.) The children help themselves to a bowl and serve themselves pasta and vegetable stew from the wide-neck flasks. The cook from the setting has produced the meal and brings it in a handcart to a designated area to be collected by the group. This happens every day.

After lunch, the lead pedagogue takes a small lantern from his rucksack and lights a tee light. He builds up the anticipation of a story by inviting an imaginary fairy to join the children.

After listening to today's story, everyone collects up their belongings, plates and flasks and heads back down to the path and the awaiting cart. Again the children are allowed to run on ahead, waiting at the usual landmarks. On returning to the nursery the children take off their outdoor clothing, go to the bathroom and strip to their thermal underwear. They climb into giant multi-person bunk beds where they have an afternoon rest.

Chapter 3: First steps to Forest School

Organising Forest School sessions

Developing a Forest School programme is an evolutionary process, often becoming more established as the practitioners and children develop their skills and knowledge. When developing a Forest School, it is important to look not only at where the child is at, but also assess the skills and knowledge of families and the setting itself.

Forest School provision will differ from setting to setting, and will be as unique as the staff, children and family who form it. There is, however, a general ethos that Forest School practitioners should follow (see Chapter 1). What works in one setting may not work in another. The most important thing is that children and adults are enjoying and benefiting from their time in the natural world.

How often sessions take place and for how long, will depend on a number of factors. Finding a Forest School site that offers suitable challenge and is accessible for children with mobility issues, may be problematic. Class sizes and staffing costs associated with maintaining the 1:4 ratio, as well as training and transport, also need consideration. Bentsen et al. (2010) note that these 'economic' and 'cultural barriers' also affect udeskole in Denmark (Bentsen et al. 2010, p.6).

Recently, educational settings in the UK have been supported by government in taking learning outdoors and off-site. DEFRA (2011) notes that the government's White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', will:

> '*…free teachers from unnecessary statutory duties creating more opportunities for different routes to learning, including learning outside the classroom*' (DEFRA, 2011, p.47).