What makes a Forest School?

Chapter objectives
• A discussion of what is it that makes an outdoor experience into Forest School.
• Four examples of different Forest Schools to test that definition.

Introduction

In this chapter I will start by discussing how to define what a Forest School is. I will then give four examples from Forest Schools that are already running. This will enable readers to develop an understanding of what makes a Forest School out of an outdoor experience. As you will see below, this is not straightforward, nor is there a complete consensus on the subject. Forest School practitioners are drawn from a wide range of interest groups, including traditional outdoor education, traditional indoor education, and different environmental disciplines. Add differing philosophical and psychological approaches to the power of nature, the nature of childhood, etc., and it is not surprising that there are different strongly held beliefs about what Forest School should be.

This is good. If we are to develop a shared national model for Forest School in the UK there must be robust discussion and debate. It may even be that there is more than one ‘right’ answer. We also need to consider whether the models developed are sustainable, by which I mean that they can continue operating once the initial excitement and funding has disappeared. From a practical point of view we need to create Forest Schools that will exist over time, not magical events that cannot do so.

In order to help readers through this minefield I have described a range of events currently called Forest School. The examples are real,
and they are currently running. By testing the ethos against the examples given, you will be able to decide what a Forest School is, and whether the models you are looking at are sustainable. All the examples in this chapter are with primary school children in reception classes, to facilitate comparisons.

A definition of Forest School

Debates rage between practitioners about how to express what we know Forest School to be. Each ‘knows’ at an emotional level what it is, and because it is so special we each feel very protective of it. It almost seems that to put it into words and try to describe it is to threaten the magic. But it must be done and to that end, I have developed my own description of Forest School, which would seem to me to be summed up by these key elements:

1 **The setting is not the usual one.** Whether it is actually in a wood, which is the ideal (there is something elemental and magical about a piece of woodland), or in another outdoor area, it is defined as Forest School because it is where Forest School rules apply, not those of the setting that the children have come from. That is not to say that it cannot be a part of the usual site. In the case studies, Nayland School’s wood is a part of the school grounds, but it is rarely accessed for any other purpose than Forest School, and was an under-used resource until Forest School was introduced.

2 **The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible, in order to facilitate children’s risk-taking.** This enables them to learn to respect the environment and move around comfortably within it while keeping themselves safe. In our litigious society this is the only way to create the freedom to explore and experiment that the children deserve. Forest School leaders are trained to risk-assess areas on acquisition, seasonally, and daily. They risk-assess the activities they have on offer, and if there are any children with particular needs they risk-assess the children’s likely response to the experience. Once all this has been done, and the paperwork stored as evidence, the sessions themselves can be open and free without fear of reprisal. But it is a ‘safe enough’ environment, not risk-free:

It is important that children learn to assess and take manageable risks … Children need challenge and excitement. If their play environment is made too safe and sanitised, the children will either slump into uninspired and repetitive play or they will find some way to spice up their play environment. (Lindon, 2003: 46)
3 **Forest School happens over time.** When training as practitioners, participants record blocks of six weeks, one half-day each week, but often the best play and the most significant changes are only just starting at this point. Most experienced Forest School leaders recommend blocks of ten weeks, particularly if this is going to be the children's only chance to experience Forest School. Children who are given longer opportunities to participate in Forest School sessions exhibit play that is progressively deeper and more meaningful, and the benefits can be felt when they are back in their usual environments. It is like creating a pathway across a field. The first walker only dents the grass. Only by subsequent feet treading the same path will the path become permanently established. Once it has been established, then even if it falls out of use, the faint trace of its existence will be visible to archaeologists hundreds of years in the future.

This is an analogy for the process of forming neural pathways in the brain and their subsequent myelinisation. The activity of participating in Forest School sessions forms or reinforces neural pathways in the brain. Ways of behaving, communicating and interacting, and the enjoyment of exercise and being in the environment are reinforced by enjoyable repetition. In the same way, the Forest School experience differs from other forms of outdoor education in that its principle goal is to permanently change the participants for the good, not just to impart a one-off set of information or experiences. To do this takes time.

4 **There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.** The only time that it is unsafe to go into a wood is in high winds, when branches may break off and fall without warning. That is a time to find an open space, not to go back indoors. One of my best early sessions was a very windy day when we set up camp in a meadow. It was raining, and the grass in the meadow was nearly as tall as the children. One child came to tell me that she was getting wet. I agreed. When she realised that she was sanctioned to get wet, she rolled in the grass, having a new and deep experience of her environment. Similarly, in the spring of 2007 we experienced extreme cold, −5°C, for two sessions at Nayland School and we did need to intervene to show the children how to increase their activity in order to increase their heat-generation, but that in itself was a deep learning experience – this is what cold feels like, and this is how we deal with it.

5 **Trust is central.** The adults trust the children to follow the Forest School rules, and vice versa. If you are a leader, you do not go out until you are sure that all the children and adults have understood this. Where Forest School leaders are starting work with a new group they will spend at least one session in the children's setting, getting to know
them, and at least one session teaching them the Forest School way. For example, there is a game used in every UK Forest School I have ever seen called ‘1, 2, 3, where are you?’, which is taught to ensure that if any child goes out of sight they can be located, and if any child feels lost they can locate the adults. I will explain this further in Chapter 6. For those children to whom the environment they are entering is strange, or at least unknown, it is vital for them to trust the adults if the experience is to be a positive one. Similarly, the adults need to feel assured that the children will respond in predictable ways to certain stimuli. For example, most Forest Schools involve campfires at some point. It is impossible to do this safely if trust has not been gained.

The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. There are no time constraints, and risk-taking is facilitated. Forest School is about an internal process of holistic development, something that is difficult to achieve in a busy classroom, indoor or out. Isaacs described play as ‘Supremely the activity which brings him psychic equilibrium in the early years’ (Isaacs in Bennett et al., 1997: 3). She recognised the need for children to have time and space for making their own choices and expressing their creative spirit. Her focus on open-ended play is also the focus for Pat Broadhead: ‘Open-ended play promotes cooperative play, with its higher cognitive challenge for interacting peers’ (Broadhead, 2004: 82). This is at the heart of Forest School and its function, which I believe is to connect children – with themselves, with each other, and with their environment.

The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends. Because Forest School is such a powerful emotional experience the children need to be prepared for the block of sessions by the Forest School leader, and to have a significant final session. This may be a celebration with parents invited in, or a campfire with special food, or some other agreed event. Each session has its rituals at the beginning and end to signal the difference and the specialness of Forest School. This may be as simple as the chat during toileting and dressing at the beginning, and a song at the end, but it is a clear and repeated signal to all concerned that something special is about to happen, or has just happened.

The staff are trained. The sessions are run by a trained Forest School leader, that is, someone who has gone through one of the extensive Level 3 courses delivered by the providers listed in the Appendix. They are assisted by other suitably trained staff and others to ensure a ratio appropriate to the setting and the children.

During the time that I have been actively involved with leading Forest School sessions, or training and observing others doing so, my conviction that it is a powerful and useful tool has grown rather than diminished. I have seen so many children gain from the experience that it is
my deepest wish that we could find ways to offer it to as many children as possible. I have seen a seven-year-old with Down’s syndrome find a way to reconcile his need for imaginative play with his belief that he was too old for such things by becoming a Forest School helper. I have seen a nervous four-year-old afraid to try to balance on a log on Week One develop until by Week Ten she could confidently and spontaneously run along a log to reach another tree to climb. I have seen a child with a speech impediment find a voice to express her extraordinary storytelling skills in the wood. And I have seen many boys who find the constraints of the conventional classroom claustrophobic develop skills in concentration, perseverance, cooperation and motivation. Being in a Forest School with the support and nurture of committed adults creates an unrivalled learning opportunity. For Foundation Stage children it exactly addresses their developmental needs, fostering skills that then help them to succeed in our conventional learning environments (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2005: 26). It also supports the emotional needs of older children whom the system has failed, but that is another story (see Chapter 8).

Taking part in a Forest School session will quickly convince any participant/observer that relationships are a key part of the experience; relationships between children and the environment certainly, but also between each other and between the adults in the wood with them. It is fascinating for me to watch the adults as well as the children, to see who takes to this mode of delivery. It is not for every adult; some of us have outgrown our love of mud and sticks, and it would be foolish not to admit it if it is not your thing – once you have tried it! But there are people who take to this way of working as naturally as the children. They are not all teachers. For example, out of a cohort of 20 trainees at the Green Light Trust in 2007–08, there were 12 teachers, four early years practitioners, one wildlife ranger, and three teaching assistants.

Testing the definition of Forest School

It is helpful to look at some examples of Forest Schools that are being run. By comparing them with the definition described above we can see that Forest School is a flexible approach allowing for differences, provided that the key elements remain in place. I have chosen examples of Forest Schools for children in school settings, so that I can compare like with like. I will use nursery examples in subsequent chapters. At the end of each case study you need to ask yourself whether you would call what is happening Forest School and why/why not. Additionally, you need to consider whether the model is sustainable. If, as I assert, Forest School is a powerful tool achieving great things for children in the early years, then the models of delivery that are developed need to be sustainable.
over time, and not be dependant upon the vagaries of one-off funds and a single person’s excitement.

Case study 2.1: a wood on site

Nayland School on the Suffolk–Essex border are fortunate enough to own a small wood that runs along one side of their site. It is separate from the children’s normal playing and working areas, but is only a short walk across the playing field from the Foundation Stage classrooms. They have been running Forest School sessions in the wood for six weeks of every term since 2003. Each child in the early years class and reception class attends. In the summer term of 2007 the Year 1 class was also included. The school council have requested that all the children in the school should be entitled to Forest School but before the school can organise this there will be site degradation issues to consider, and they may have to find an alternative site for the older children. Is it Forest School? I shall work through the key elements explained above, and see how Nayland supports them.

1 The setting is not the usual one. At Nayland the Foundation Stage classes share a lovely outdoor playground, fenced and safe, used as a part of their normal teaching area. This is not their Forest School. Attached to the school site is a small wood. Other than Forest School, it is only used for an annual Easter egg hunt, and some curriculum-based environmental work with older children. When the children go in there they know that different rules apply, and they do not appear to find it confusing to switch between the different regimes.

Figure 2.1  The wood at Nayland school can look wild and different although sited adjacent to the school playing field

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2 **The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible.** The Foundation Stage teachers carry out a thorough risk assessment termly, checking the state of the trees and shrubs. The main paths are kept clear by them, and the county maintenance staff carry out any arboriculture work necessary. Briars, nettles and fungi are left, and the children are shown how to keep themselves safe. At the start of each termly block of sessions the children and staff negotiate a ‘base camp’ area delineated by orange plastic tape tied onto twigs. In this area children are free to roam, but need to take an adult with them if they wish to go further. On the days of Forest School the teachers go into the wood at 8 a.m. and undertake a sweep for litter and alien objects.

3 **Forest School happens over time.** Nayland School offers Forest School for six weeks of every term in the Foundation Stage. This can be up to a year in the early years class, and a full year in the reception class. This means that, unless children join to the school later, each child will experience a minimum of six and a maximum of 36 weeks of Forest School.

4 **There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.** I am not aware of any week that has been missed since I launched the Nayland Forest School in 2003. Parents are given plenty of information about their children’s needs on Forest School, and the vast majority are enthusiastic supporters. One parent in one class did keep her child at home for two weeks when she felt it was too cold, despite the child’s protestations. The Foundation Stage classes have collected a good supply of extra clothing and wellies, so that any child who is ill-equipped can be helped to be comfortable.

5 **Trust is central.** When I started the first Forest School sessions at Nayland I spent two or three weeks teaching the staff and children the safety games and procedures. At the end of six weeks it was safe to light a campfire. Since then there has always been an overlap of children between one block of sessions and the next, so they have helped the staff to establish the norms of behaviour, etc. That is, until the summer term of 2007, when the early years class were completely new. The teacher reported that it had felt strange returning to the basics, but that she had copied what I had done and it had worked. Certainly, by the time I visited in Week Five the atmosphere was the usual warm and supportive one.

6 **The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led.** There are few time constraints, and risk-taking is facilitated. The teachers do plan the sessions, in that they have targets of skills to facilitate through their engagement in the play, and they have activities to suggest if any stimulation is required. But generally the children have agenda of their own to follow, with the adults offering support and ideas as required – through the sensitivity of the
staff interventions. The time constraints are minimal. There is a break for a snack, which is taken together and is sometimes used as a review, and there is an end to the session, warnings being given ten minutes before that time is reached. The risk-taking opportunities are not as great as they would be in a wilder wood, but there are poisonous plants to be aware of, and undergrowth that can sting or scratch, as well as logs to balance on and move around.

7 **The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends.** The blocks are well prepared for via discussions with the children and their parents. There is a strong use of photographs, both digitally stored and (for past blocks) made into books to share. Block preparation discussions centre around previous block books. Session plenaries and preparation may involve looking at the photographs taken of that block projected onto the whiteboard. Additional discussions occur as children prepare to go out, and often involve adding verses to their Forest School song to sum up the day’s work on their return.

8 **The staff are trained.** The leading staff are senior teachers with many years, experience and a reputation for quality. However, the Forest Education Initiative website (www.foresteducation.org) states that:

> In order to run recognised Forest School sessions it is important to undertake the necessary training. Forest School leaders should have a Level 3 qualification. (FEI website, accessed 2007)

This emphasis on the need for training runs throughout the UK Forest School movement, and will undoubtedly be a part of the Quality Assurance schemes proposed by the Institute for Outdoor Learning and by the Forestry Commission. There are three members of the Nayland Staff with a Level 1 Forest-School Skills award, which is a familiarisation course lasting two days. It covers the ethos of Forest-School, risk assessment, and enough practical skills to carry out Forest-School-type activities in teachers’ own settings. The assessment involves keeping a logbook of the exercises carried out during the course. The Forest Education Initiative website states that the Level 1 award is suitable for ‘people who only want to work on existing school/nursery/playwork sites’.

There is also the issue of recognising intuitive Forest School talent. There are particular individuals who respond to the style of play and the environment of the wood in a way that supports and inspires children, without formal training. The staff at Nayland have the intuitive skills to enhance their practice, as well as their formal qualifications. But however talented, even the intuitive Forest School practitioner needs to be aware of health and safety in our society today.

Is Nayland School running Forest School? Is it a sustainable model?
Case study 2.2: a wood within walking distance

All Saints Primary School, Lawshall, is deep in rural Suffolk. The schoolchildren can walk out of the back of their playing field, along two field boundaries, and arrive within ten minutes at an ancient hazel wood designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSI). Luckily, the owners are happy for the children to use the wood for their Forest School sessions, and the school have a storage shed there in which to keep the essentials. They first experienced Forest School with me in the summer of 2004, and again with Green Light Trust colleagues in 2005 and 2006, but due to staff changes at the school a regular pattern did not emerge until 2007. Now the head teacher is a qualified Level 3 practitioner and uses the cover she provides for each member of staff to take every child in the school into the wood for Forest School sessions, supported by teaching assistants and parent volunteers. Is it Forest School? Again I shall work through the key elements explained above.

1. **The setting is not the usual one.** Frithy Wood is an area of woodland that is privately owned. Local people can walk or ride horses although few do so as it is away from any roads. The school have the landowners’ permission to use this special space free of charge.

![Figure 2.2](image-url) Frithy wood near Lawshall school with the coppiced stools so useful for materials and for imaginative play.
for their Forest School. It is an SSI because the hazel trees are part
of the ancient woodland that once covered much of England, and
they were regularly coppiced by the local villagers until the early
part of the twentieth century. Since then it has been preserved and
cared for. It is not the children’s usual setting.

2 The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible.
The head teacher carries out a thorough risk assessment each
term, checking the state of the trees in the area used as a base
camp. On her Forest School day she carries out a daily check.
The local community woodland volunteers carry out any arbori-
culture work necessary. No other work is deemed necessary or
prudent in an SSI, and due to the remoteness of the site litter is
rarely an issue. The school governors have undertaken working
parties to keep the footpaths between the school and the wood
as accessible as possible. As the site has public access, the chil-
dren and staff negotiate and establish a ticker-tape boundary to
remind public and children of the working area for Forest School.

3 Forest School happens over time. Each class goes into the wood
for five weeks of every term, for two hours. This happens every term
and every year, so the effects are cumulative. It is a first school, and
the children move schools at the end of Year 4, which means that
every child joining the school in the reception year could experience
approximately 60 Forest School sessions. At the beginning of
each term the children are encouraged to think and plan what they
would like to do that term. The final session includes a campfire,
and children can invite a grown-up to come and share the session.

4 There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. As
before, parents are given plenty of information about their chil-
dren’s needs when on Forest School, and the vast majority are
enthusiastic supporters. The greatest issue to deal with has been
in the summer months. In 2004 the summer was lovely, and on
warm days the children were initially sent in short sleeves and
shorts or skirts. The dense leaf canopy meant that the wood was
several degrees colder than the surrounding fields, and children
complained of feeling cold. Additionally, they were exposed to
scratches, grazes and ticks in a way that would not have hap-
pened had they been covered up. We learned from that experi-
ence, and the range of collected spare clothing has expanded,
as has the brief to parents. As Forest School day is Wednesday
this has become a non-uniform day for the whole school, which
helps remind parents and children.

5 Trust is central. The Level 3 training has equipped the head
teacher with the necessary safety games to prepare children for
the wood. They all know her well in her other persona as their

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head teacher, who also takes them for art and PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) sessions, and as someone with an open-door policy for children and staff. Her children have been pupils at the school, so some children know her as a mum as well. There has been no need to build up the other layers of trust that would be needed were she to be a leader unknown to the children. As the Forest School movement expands, hopefully more staff from different settings will follow this model, and train and provide Forest School for their children, either with colleagues from their setting or in partnership with agencies who can offer complementary expertise. This will help the normalisation of the Forest School experience.

6 The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. The shed contains discovery boxes equipped with the resources needed for particular activities. They have picture labels as well as text, and are designed for self-service. A discovery rug has an activity on it for those children who are not ready to self-start that day. If it is a new activity it will become a box for the following week. A ‘Guardian totem stick’ is given to two children each week to be ‘guardians of the forest’. Their job is complementary to that of the system of ‘positive play leaders’ in the school setting. They help to monitor play, and to ensure that resources end up back in the boxes they came from. This system has to be introduced to new children, so the youngest children are guided into the ways of the Forest School, with the adults facilitating rather than teaching. The older children are encouraged to keep a reflective diary of their Forest School sessions, and to participate in planning the best use of the sessions in advance. The school uses the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme, a government initiative providing resources to schools for monitoring and developing children’s well-being, and Forest School sessions include hanging weatherproof faces on the shed door to denote how children are feeling when they arrive. This helps the adults to know where support may be needed that week.

7 The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends. Although the sessions are child-led and play-based, planning for each term is encouraged, so that children use their time wisely. At the end of each term there is a celebratory campfire to which adults may be invited by the children, but that is the children’s choice – inviting the adults to share their world for a while.

8 The staff are trained. The head teacher who leads the sessions has a Level 3 Forest School award. She is assisted by her higher-level teaching assistant, who has a Forest School Level 1 award, and by parents and others who have not had any training in Forest School,
but rely on her leadership. Only the head teacher has the outdoor first aid qualification. The village includes the headquarters of the Green Light Trust, and other Forest School practitioners drop in occasionally, as friends of the school.

Is All Saints School providing Forest School? Is it sustainable over time?

Case study 2.3: a wood that’s a short minibus ride away

Braintree is a growing town, and John Bunyan Infant School is located on an estate originally of council housing, now with a mixture of social housing and privately owned homes. Since 2006 the school has been working with the Daws Hall Centre, an Essex County Council Outdoor Centre, to offer Forest School to their younger children. The site they use, Parkhall Wood, is over four miles from the school, the last mile being on private road and track across farmland. They secured funding from a Woodland Improvement Grant to train staff, and to provide sets of waterproofs for the children. Does this model conform to the Forest School ethos? I will describe what I have seen.

1 The setting is not the usual one. Parkhall Wood is privately owned, like Frithy Wood above. The wood is managed, with staff cutting timber and clearing undergrowth. The landowners have given permission to the Daws Hall staff to use the wood with local schools, although only one school at a time! It is not the children’s usual setting, and parents have been excited by the opportunity offered for their children to have a truly rural experience. As stated, the journey is four miles each way. At the moment this is accomplished by hiring the community minibus, a cost that the school has to bear.

2 The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible. The Daws Hall team carry out a daily check. They work with the landowners to ensure the suitability of the sections of wood used at any time. The team have worked with the children to teach them the ‘1, 2, 3 where are you?’ game that all Forest Schools seem to use to prevent children from getting lost (see Chapter 6 for an explanation of the game). At the beginning of each term children are reminded of the safety rules before they leave the school for the first time that term. On the walk from the minibus to the base camp they have ‘waiting trees’, where the front runners wait for the slow coaches to catch up. Sticks can be played with, provided they are ‘no longer than your arm’.

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3 Forest School happens over time. In 2006–07 one of the two reception classes went every other week for the whole year. In 2007–08 both have gone for the whole year. The head teacher would like to extend this to Year 1 as she has seen significant changes – the Foundation Stage profile went up from 26 per cent to 58 per cent of children achieving 78 points or more after their first year of Forest School, attributable in part to that Forest School experience (there were other factors as well). The class that went in 2006–07 have bonded as a team, an effect that has carried through into Key Stage 1, and they are distinguishable from the class that didn’t go in this respect. The parents whose children have been are more engaged with the school family, having something to talk to staff about and something they feel they can contribute to.

4 There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. The head was concerned that her catchment area was so diverse that there might be issues with clothing, which is why she bid for funding for waterproofs. These did not arrive in time, but the parents were so convinced of the benefits of Forest School that every child was equipped with suitable clothing on the day. The classes have amassed a stock of boots and warm layers, however, to supplement when children forget a layer. Parents are supportive of the ‘there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing’ slogan.

5 Trust is central. Three members of staff from the school go with the children, so they are with familiar faces. The Daws Hall staff come to the school for a session with the children in their space before they lead them into the woods. Parents are aware of who is caring for their children.

6 The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. I was not able to observe a session, but I am assured that this is the case. Staff are training in a way that encourages this dimension of the ethos.

7 The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends. As previously stated, the Daws Hall staff have a session at the beginning of each year, and the staff refresh the children’s memories at the beginning of each term. The individual sessions are prepared for and discussed in class time, giving opportunities for reflection and discussion.

8 The staff are trained. The Daws Hall leaders are all trained to Level 3, with support staff trained to Level 1. In the school, one teacher trained in 2007–08 to Level 3, and as of writing another is due to start her Level 3 in 2008–09. This gives a secure understanding of the principles and practice in the team.

Is John Bunyan Infant School attending Forest School? Is it sustainable over time?
Case study 2.4: a special place to go

Norfolk County Council is providing Forest School opportunities for Foundation and Key Stage 1 practitioners, both for the PVI (private, voluntary and independent) and the maintained sector. Sue Falch-Lovesey, the Head of Environmental and Outdoor Learning, is driving forward a scheme to train as many early years practitioners as possible at Level 1, so that they can support a Level 3 practitioner offsite, or can develop Forest-School-type activities in their own setting. Much of the training takes place at Houghton Hall Education Centre in partnership with Norfolk County Council, where settings can also come to take part in Forest School sessions. I will focus on Houghton Hall as one example of a setting that Forest School practitioners can use for Forest School sessions. This is not the only place in Norfolk where Forest School is happening, but it is one example, and is interesting in that Houghton Hall is a privately owned stately home where the landowner, Lord Cholmondley, has given local schools and early years settings use of his woodland and a section of the stable block as a base for storage, indoor teaching and display.

1 The setting is not the usual one. Most children do not have access to their own stately home! At Houghton, groups usually have the place to themselves, practitioners even report that the children think they own it. Being so special enhances the deep sense of place experienced by all who attend. The children regard the park and woods as a neutral ground, where different rules apply. It is also a big enough area for each group to have their own space. This model offers an interesting partnership model for other groups to consider, seeking out privately owned land of this nature where other sites may be scarce.

2 The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible. The estate cares for the woodland, undertaking any arboriculture necessary. Each Forest School session with the children, and each training session with practitioners, is run by trained staff who check the area to be used before the children arrive. This has recently resulted in moving the base camp areas to a younger patch of woodland, as some of the older trees were safe enough to walk through but not to spend time under. The estate are happy for trained practitioners to light campfires, however in dry or slightly windier conditions the teams use Kelly Kettles or a bucket grill, which contain fire within the equipment.

3 Forest School happens over time. The Forest School sessions run on this site are organised by schools and nurseries where there is a Level 3 practitioner. Sue is hoping to have at least one Level 3 practitioner in each cluster group of schools and early years settings.
years providers, supported by a number of Level 1 practitioners. The training is planned through the INSET (in-service training) opportunities programme and in consultation with the early years team. The settings will plan the sessions. As of writing, these seem to work as a core of six weeks on the Houghton Hall site wrapped around by introductory and concluding sessions at the children's usual settings.

4 There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. Houghton Hall is equipped with multiple sets of waterproof clothing and wellies in a range of sizes, usable by Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 children using the education centre. There is a drying room there, ensuring that clothing is ready to use and easy to pack away efficiently.

5 Trust is central. Following the Norfolk model, the leader of the setting is always there, either as a Level 3 leader or as a Level 1 support. Sue encourages the involvement of parents as volunteers, and suggests inviting them to introductory and celebratory sessions. This helps the children to feel that they are supported, even though the setting is very different to their usual one. This helps home: setting relationships and the transference of skills between Forest School, settings and homes.

6 The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. Sue provides the Norfolk Forest Schools with a considerable amount of documentation linking activities to the national curricular (www.norfolk.gov.uk/outdoorlearning). She recognises that not all children can self-motivate at all times, and that some staff feel the need for planned sessions, so planning sheets can fulfil both these needs. Staff will also model how to use equipment such as pooters and magnifiers, but it is up to the children what they do with them then. The Level 3 practitioners are all aware of the importance of the play-based, child-led approach, and as confidence grows practitioners step back more, observe and are able to use this information to develop a more personalised learning approach to children's needs.

7 The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends. As the sessions are organised by individual settings, the exact nature of the starts and finishes is up to them. They are expected to make Week 1 at Houghton an acclimatisation Week, and generally aim to cook on their last week at least. Parents are generally encouraged to participate where possible in these two sessions, but most are also keen to support every week.

8 The staff are trained. As stated, this is the Norfolk policy. There are borrow-boxes available via the children's centres, cluster training and a monthly newsletter that keeps Forest School practitioners in touch with developments (including further
training and skills development). Strategic links with the early years advisory team exist and the programme features in the Children and Young People’s Plan as a strategic aim.

Is Houghton Hall Education Centre providing Forest School? Is it sustainable over time?

Discussion points

In this chapter I have asked you to think about what defines a Forest School, and to consider whether there is one or that there are several legitimate modes of delivery. This is something you can discuss with colleagues. The following questions might help:

- What are the strengths of each model?
- What are the weaknesses of each model?
- Are you aware of any other models?
- Do the case studies in Chapter 1 conform to the definition of Forest School that I have used?
- Is that definition sufficient?

Further reading


