

Forest School: a marvellous opportunity to learn

In the past five years Forest School has become increasingly popular with a number of Local Education Authorities and a wide range of teachers. Through the involvement of the Forest Education Initiative it has also become more widespread. Forest School has been defined in Britain as 'an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence through hands-on learning in a woodland environment.' The approach is in line with the 'Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto' produced by the Government in 2006 to encourage pupils to experience the world outside of the classroom. Owing to this increased interest, the Forestry Commission decided to gain a better understanding of the impacts of Forest School on young people by funding research in this area. Participatory action research was undertaken by the New Economics Foundation and Forest Research in a two-phase approach. Phase 1 started in Wales in 2003 and developed a methodology for capturing the link between Forest School activities and their impact on children. Phase 2 was undertaken in England and tracked a small number of children over an eight-month period as they participated in Forest School; this work was completed in late 2005.



"This experience has been incredibly valuable to our children. We have been lucky enough to experience a full year at Forest School and the benefits have been striking. These children now are independent and confident."

Teacher, Lognor, Shropshire

Background

The development of Forest School in Britain began in the mid-1990s; it is based on a Scandinavian idea that considers children's contact with nature to be extremely important. There are an increasing number of Forest Schools in Britain; approximately 100 in England and 20 each in Wales and Scotland in 2006. Some Forest Schools are privately run but most are supported by Local Education Authorities that may employ Forest School co-ordinators or train existing staff to include Forest School in their remit. This study focused on the use of Forest School within education, but the potential of this approach reaches beyond primary and secondary education, with projects that focus on young adults and people with learning disabilities.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- develop a participatory methodology to explore the impacts of Forest School on the children who attend
- use the methodology developed to explore the impacts on specific children over a period of time

- report on the results and how the methodology was developed
- demonstrate how the approach can be used in practical terms by Forest School practitioners

Methods

The methodology developed in Wales and used in England involved a three-stage process.

- 1) Storyboard – a participative exercise for stakeholders to develop indicators of the impacts of Forest School on the children.
- 2) On-site data collection and analysis – using templates to record and track observations of children in the field.
- 3) Reflection poster – a participative exercise with stakeholders to review the changes that have taken place and learn from the experience to improve practice.

Findings

The methodology outlined above was developed in Phase 1 of the work in Wales. In Phase 2 in England, 24 children in three case study areas were tracked over eight months. The data was analysed by exploring the changes highlighted in the children each week. Eight themes were identified, six relating to the impact on the children and two concerning the wider impacts. The themes relating to the children included:

- **Confidence** – this was developed by the children having the freedom, time and space to learn and demonstrate independence.
- **Social skills** – children gained increased awareness of the consequences of their actions on peers through team activities such as sharing tools and participating in play.
- **Communication** – language development was prompted by the children's sensory experiences.

- **Motivation and concentration** – the woodland tended to fascinate the children and they developed a keenness to participate and the ability to concentrate over longer periods of time.
- **Physical skills** – these improvements were characterised by the development of physical stamina and gross and fine motor skills.
- **Knowledge and understanding** – the children developed an interest in the natural surroundings and respect for the environment.

The two themes concerning wider impacts were:

- **New perspectives** – Forest School gave teachers a new understanding of the children as they observed them in a different setting.
- **Ripple effects** – children took their experiences home and talked about them to friends and family, which sometimes led to families visiting woodlands more frequently.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on both phases of the evaluation and provide potential ways in which the benefits of Forest School could be more widely disseminated. The recommendations include:

- Using participatory evaluation with stakeholders as a useful way to learn from each other about the benefits and problems of running and evaluating Forest School.
- Making Forest School more widely available by giving a greater number of schools the opportunity to make this part of children's overall education.
- Continuing evaluation and self-appraisal to track children over a longer period of time to see whether any improvements last in the long term after the child has stopped attending.
- Promoting Forest School to educationalists, environmentalists and parents to give them a better understanding of what Forest School is about, the impact it can have and how learning takes place.
- Considering school access in the creation of new woodland, exploring distance from and accessibility to local schools.

Partners

Liz O'Brien, Forest Research; Richard Murray, New Economics Foundation; Forestry Commission; FEI (Forest Education Initiative) co-ordinators in Wales and England; Bishops Wood Centre; Oxfordshire and Shropshire Local Education Authorities

Funding / Support

Forestry Commission

Further information: liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Reports and publications

O'Brien, L and Murray, R. (2007). Forest School and its impact on young children: case studies in Britain. *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, 6, 249-265.

O'Brien, L and Murray, R. (2006). *A marvellous opportunity for children to learn: a participatory evaluation of Forest School in England and Wales*. Forest Research, Farnham. 52 pp. Downloadable from <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5Z3JVZ>

Murray, R and O'Brien, E. (2005). *Such enthusiasm – a joy to see: an evaluation of Forest School in England*. 83 pp. Report for the Forestry Commission.

Murray, R. (2003). *Forest School evaluation project: A study in Wales*. New Economics Foundation. 64 pp. Report for the Forestry Commission.