

A guide to Forest Schools in Wales





Forest School:
A hands-on
approach to
learning

Forest School is an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults, regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands on learning experiences in a local woodland environment

Forest School does what it says on the label, it is a woodland-based learning environment that is complementary, not separate to learning in a traditional classroom or school ground environment.

Sessions are not timetable or workbook led but driven by the learners themselves, drawing on their interests and imagination. Through carefully structured sessions with supportive intervention by qualified leaders, Forest School can bring learning to life in a real and tangible context.



The 3 essential elements that make a 'Forest School' a Forest School

1. Use of a local woodland or 'wooded' setting

Learners visit the same local woodland (usually once a week) over a prolonged period of time, establishing a special relationship with the site, as they witness at first hand, the transformation through the seasons.

When asked what was the difference between the woodland classroom and the school classroom, one Year 2 boy from Ysgol Betws-y-Coed, Conwy answered:

'We learn here in the forest like we do in school but there are no walls or bells here and the floor isn't wet at school'.

In a time when news reports constantly inform us that learners are becoming estranged from the natural world, Forest School offers learners the opportunity to reconnect with nature in a magical and stimulating setting.

2. A qualified leader

Forest School is run by a qualified Level III (either BTEC or OCN) Forest School Leader who is CRB checked and First Aid qualified. Leaders come from a range of backgrounds including woodland owners, teachers, craftspeople, early years specialists and youth workers. To qualify, leaders go through a rigorous training course that equips them with both the practical and theoretical knowledge to run Forest School sessions.

Responsible for compiling ecological impact assessments and risk assessments of the Forest School site and activities, the Forest School leader

is also responsible for ensuring child protection and health and safety procedures are adhered to. If you are approached by anyone offering Forest School delivery they should be able to show you the relevant certificates of competence.

3. Regular visits

Regular weekly visits to the same woodland over an extended period of time (aiming for a minimum of ten weeks), allows learners the time and freedom to explore independently at their own pace. As they become familiar with the Forest School site a sense of ownership and ease in the woodland environment develops, learners become excited about revisiting 'their' woodland.

The grandmother of a nursery boy attending Forest School commented that he had asked her...

'How many sleeps are there until we go to Forest School?' Pentre Forest School Project, 2006.

Due to the recurring nature of the visits, tasks of increasing complexity and skill can be introduced week on week (e.g. shelter building and fire lighting) to facilitate participants learning whilst giving them the opportunity to revisit and continue with tasks commenced the week before. Repeated visits also enable leaders to build trusting relationships with the learners and they get to know each child's needs and interests.



A Forest School leader works closely with participants to saw wood for the fire

Forest School provides the opportunity to take risks

The learner's safety and welfare is a priority at Forest School. Rules are jointly set and agreed by the leaders and learners alike to manage and minimise risk. Routinely revisited during every session, learners learn to recognise risk, why the rules are necessary and learn how to be safe in the outdoor environment. In time, they begin subconsciously to risk assess their actions for themselves, enabling them to explore and discover independently whilst making informed decisions about how to deal with unfamiliar situations and challenges (e.g. tree climbing, using tools and splashing in puddles).

High adult to learner ratios ensure that learners can stretch the boundaries of their learning and enable them to take risks that would not be possible in school e.g. toasting a marshmallow on a woodland fire. Smaller group sizes also mean learners have the time and support to try and master more complicated tasks (e.g. knot tying and whistle making) with adults on standby to help and encourage if needs be. In such a setting there is less fear of failing as there is always time to have another go or refine.

Sessions are held in all weathers (except very extreme/windy weather). Over time this can lead to a greater physical and mental resilience to being outdoors in any weather.

'Our five year old daughter loves the outdoors and making the fire was the highlight for her. We've had step by step instructions from her when making our own bonfire at home – from how the rocks can explode to what it needs to burn and she's even insisted we have a bucket of water on standby!'

parental comment about a Year 1 pupil, Ysgol Betws y Coed, Conwy.



What are the benefits of Forest School?

Much research has been carried out to ascertain what are the benefits of attending Forest School. Traditionally, research has found Forest School to be particularly beneficial to disaffected teenagers and learners that struggle in the formal classroom learning environment. Recently research has indicated that attending Forest School can have significant benefits for learners in mainstream education also.

During 2006, a 14-week Forest School programme was run by a Forestry Commission Wales Education Officer, involving two classes from Ysgol Pentre, a small village primary school in Pentre, near Chirk, North Wales. Using the model proposed by the New Economics Foundation (nef) / Forest Research, a storyboard exercise was undertaken to establish the propositions and underlying hypothesis for the Forest School:

These were:

- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- Improved social skills
- The development of language and communication skills
- Improved physical motor skills
- Improved motivation and concentration
- Increased knowledge and understanding of the environment
- New perspectives for the teachers, leaders, learners and parents involved in Forest School

To gather evidence, samples of learners from each class were observed during the Forest School sessions. To track whether or not the observed behaviour that was being displayed supported the propositions, the sample learners' conduct was tracked weekly by the leaders and teachers using data recording templates.

All the participating learners completed Forest School diaries and their parents were also asked to complete two evaluation forms during the course of the programme. Once the programme had come to a close, informal review workshops loosely based on the highs and lows section of the evaluation poster described in the nef report, were held with the learners, teachers and classroom assistants.

Having gathered and analysed the information from all involved, it was clear that substantive observed behavioural changes against each of the stated propositions had occurred.

Improve self-esteem and self-confidence

Characterised by the willingness to try something new and feeling pleased and showing pride with personal achievement. Noticeable increases in self-confidence were displayed in many learners during the programme. Pupils were observed tackling new tasks without assistance and talking to new visitors, particularly the pupils who were more timid and withdrawn in school.

Teacher writing about a Year 1 boy on a baseline assessment before Forest School:

'Tends to be either on a high or on a low. Sensitive little boy. Often appears to not be listening but really he is. Slowly growing in confidence.'

Teacher writing about the same pupil on a End of Programme Assessment:

'Still up and down but in school much much more confident in all areas. Concentration and self-belief lots better.'

Improve social skills

Characterised by an increased awareness of the consequences of actions on other people, the acquired ability to undertake activities with others either by sharing tools and tasks, or by taking part in co-operative play. Teachers and Leaders noticed strong teamwork developing and teachers commented that successful partnerships were formed in Forest School between pupils who had not previously been able to work successfully together in the classroom.

Some of the learners also noticed improvements in their own behaviour. The Forest School diaries included the question, *'Is there anything you are better at now you have been to Forest School?'*, a Year 2 pupil with ADHD wrote, *'working as a group'* (spelling adjusted) meanwhile a Year 1 pupil wrote, *'being sensible'*.

Contribute to the development of language and communication skills

Characterised by the development of more sophisticated uses of both written and spoken language that is prompted by the visual and other sensory experiences of a child taking part in Forest School. Many pupils were quiet and reserved with the unfamiliar adults during the early weeks. Gradually, as the programme progressed, these learners were observed willingly sharing ideas and explaining to visiting adults about the Forest School rules.

'When out walking with the family along the canal he often talks about what is safe and what is not', one parent commented.



Improve physical motor skills

Characterised by the development of physical stamina and the development of gross motor skills – the physical skills and co-ordination allowing the free and easy movement around the Forest School site, as well as the development of fine motor skills – the effective use of tools and the ability to make structures and objects (e.g. shelters, dens or creative art projects). There was a degree of improvement in many of the learners. After needing help during the first few weeks climbing steps and getting over the stile, they soon got used to the physical challenges that the Forest School site imposed and with encouragement, relished tackling these head on.

One 7-Year-old pupil, due to her build, struggled at first with the distance to be walked and was constantly falling over in the slippery conditions. She noticeably gained in stamina and physical skills as the sessions progressed. With a helping hand she had practised balancing along the fallen tree and a log bench during the later weeks. She was extremely pleased with herself when, on the last day, she walked along both trunks unaided, with an adult close by for reassurance.

Improve motivation and concentration

Characterised by keenness to participate in exploratory, learning and play activities, as well as an ability to focus on specific tasks and to concentrate for extended periods of time. A number of the learners were already highly motivated at the beginning of the project, eager to participate in everything and very responsive to questions. From the perspective of concentration, great improvements were observed. Learners who had been described as having low concentration levels were observed focussing for long periods of time, making elder jewellery and looking for minibeasts. The less formal, more practical situation suited them.

A nursery pupil who had a concentration problem in class, tended to wander off and do what she wanted rather than keeping on task during the first few weeks. Leader evaluations often commented that she was in a world of her own during those early sessions and staff had to keep a careful eye on her.

Her teacher commented in her reflective diary after session one in the woods:

'The only one who went out of the boundaries.'

However, slowly, she began to mix a little better and her concentration levels grew.

'So pleased with her this week! Participated with tasks (for short periods) with enthusiasm (and support), liked minibeast hunt. When not supported by an adult, did wander around on her own but happy!'

Teacher's comment, session 3.

'Approached Ffion today to ask if she could help her make her musical instrument. A big improvement, shows a willingness to join in for the first time ever!'

Teacher's comment, session 5.

Contribute to learners's knowledge and understanding of the environment

Characterised by a respect for the environment and an interest in their natural surroundings; making observations and insights into natural phenomena such as seasonal change and the ability to identify different species of flora and fauna. A major area of improvement with leaders, teachers and parents frequently commenting on the increased level of environmental awareness and interest in wildlife. As the weeks progressed, learners could be heard chatting amongst each other about how nice the smell of the wild garlic was and discussing how the sun had dried up the puddles because it was summertime.

'She has learnt the names of some plants and points them out to me on walks. She also talks about animals that live in the woods,' parental comment.



New perspectives for teachers, leaders, parents and learners

Characterised by a different relationship developing between learners and teachers as they see one another in a different setting, coping with shared challenges, and increased parental interest in and positive attitude towards Forest School. As the teachers were in a support role rather than actually delivering the programme, it gave them a valuable opportunity to observe the learners going about their activities. Parental comments indicate that many of the learners were sufficiently enthused about their Forest School experience that they took it back into their home lives, taking their parents on the weekends to see what they had been doing that week at Forest School.

'I really enjoyed seeing the learners in a different environment. I saw another side of them – fantastic!'

teacher commenting after session 1.

A copy of the Pentre Forest School Evaluation project is available for download from our website. Please visit: www.forestry.gov.uk/wales and follow the link to the Woodlands for Learning pages – the document can be found under the Forest School section.

These findings were backed up during a further study from September 2009 to July 2010 when Year 3 children from Ysgol Llanfair, near Ruthin in Denbighshire attended a Forest School in a local FC owned woodland called Rhyd –y-Gaseg. An added dimension to this study was that the majority of sessions were delivered through the medium of Welsh with the aim of improving the overall use of the language both at Forest School and back in the classroom. Findings from this report were launched at the 10 Years of Forest School in Wales celebration conference in October 2010 and more information can be found on our website www.forestry.gov.uk/wales by following the links to the Woodlands for Learning pages and Forest School section.

A typical Forest School programme

- A typical programme involves the Level 3 qualified Forest School Leader initially talking to the learners, teachers, parents and guardians. The Leader will explain what Forest School is and will discuss what sort of activities the participants will be doing and what the learners' needs are.
- An appropriate local woodland site is found and an Environmental Impact Assessment completed to ensure that the site will not be irreparably damaged by the running of sessions. If suitable, the landowner's permission to use the site is gained and insurance issues sorted.
- Before sessions begin, a site risk assessment is compiled by the qualified leader to ensure the site is safe for the learners and adults to visit.
- Prior to taking them out to the woodland, the Forest School leader will get to know the participants and gain their confidence by leading activities at their educational setting for one or two sessions.
- Under the supervision of the qualified leader, the group (typically up to 15) visit the same local woodland site on a regular basis (once a week) ideally throughout the year but not less than a minimum of ten weeks, except in extreme conditions. The qualified leader will risk assess the planned activities for each session and will check the woodland site before the learners arrive, for any change which may have occurred since the last session.
- Each session is learner-centred, based on the skills and needs of that group.
- Games are played and small achievable tasks are set, such as hide and seek, building shelters and woodland art activities. Free



playtime is factored into sessions and as participants get used to the Forest School routine, the leaders' trust in them grows. Tool use, fire lighting and cooking are gradually introduced alongside strict safety procedures. Over time as the learners become more familiar and confident, not only do they learn how to use tools appropriately and safely but such activities can also promote trust and raise self-confidence and self-esteem.

- Using natural materials the participants develop both practical and intellectual skills, which can be linked with the National Curriculum and the Foundation Phase.
- To mark participants' journey of development and to celebrate their achievements, the final Forest School session is usually marked with a celebratory event which parents and other individuals involved in the programme are invited to attend.

How to become a Forest School Leader

To become involved in Forest School delivery it is important to undertake the necessary training.

In Wales, to be able to lead and deliver Forest School sessions an individual must have:

- An Agored Cymru Level 3 qualification Level III Forest School Leader Award or BTEC Forest School leader qualification.
- A current First Aid at Work or First Aid in the Outdoors ITC certificate
- An enhanced CRB disclosure

The Forest School leader qualification is designed for people in Wales with a background in education, youth work or similar that wish to qualify to run Forest School programmes for their client group.

In Wales, level III courses are currently based around the Agored Cymru Forest School Units developed by the Agored Cymru Forest School Training Network. The units are:

- Learning and Development at Forest School
- Forest School Practical Skills and Woodland Management
- Establishment and Delivery of a Forest School Programme

Each unit is worth six credits. The course involves approximately 70 taught hours and an average of 110 hours of independent work involving coursework, which includes the planning and running of a six session Forest School programme with a group of designated learners.

To gain the Forest School leader award, trainees will need to achieve the current Forest School Units and pass an observation assessment leading a Forest School session.



Please note – the Level III course is demanding and time consuming and should not be undertaken without serious deliberation.

Before confirming names on courses, Forestry Commission Wales often run Forest School training twilight sessions to give interested individuals an opportunity to discuss what the course involves and have a look at an example of the coursework involved. Forestry Commission Wales would recommend that anyone wishing to enlist on a course take part in a twilight session and visit a Forest School setting before committing to doing the training.

Not everyone will want to lead Forest School sessions. Some individuals may be interested in assisting a qualified Forest School leader or may just want an introduction to Forest School. Other levels of training are available however these do not qualify participants to lead Forest School sessions:

Level 2 – Forest School Assistant

The training is shorter, and designed for people with less previous experience of working with learners and young people, or those who only want to work as Forest School assistants – it does not qualify participants to lead Forest School sessions.

Level 1 – Introduction to Learning and Development Forest School

Training is available as an introduction to Forest School – it does not qualify participants to lead or assist Forest School sessions.

For further information about Forest School training please contact:

Carol Travers Forestry Commission Wales,
Cantref Court, Brecon Road, Abergavenny, NP7 7AX
Telephone Number: 0300 068 0300
Email: carol.travers@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

What is the history of Forest School in Wales?

Forest School originated in Europe in the early 20th century as a way of teaching about the natural world. By the 1980s, Forest School had become an integral part of the Danish early years programme.

In 1995 a group of Nursery Nurse students from Bridgwater College, Somerset visited Denmark and witnessed the benefits of Forest School for themselves. Once back in the UK the lecturers that accompanied the students considered how they could apply what they had seen to the childcare provision in their own Early Years Excellence Centre and set about establishing a Forest School site within the College's grounds. In 2000 the college received the Queens Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further education in recognition of its pioneering work.

Since then the concept has been spreading throughout Britain. The first Forest School Leader training course to be held in Wales was run in South Wales during 2000, with participants going on to develop Forest School within their local area.

Having bought in expertise from Bridgwater College to run courses for the first year, in 2002 members of the Forestry Commission Wales and Welsh College Lecturers set about writing training modules specific to Wales. In 2003 OCN Wales ratified these Level 3 modules and further courses were run with OCN Level 1 and 2 Courses being introduced in 2004.

2004 proved to be an important year from the perspective of research into Forest School.



Following on from research carried out at Forest Schools in Newport and Flintshire, 2004 witnessed the publication of the new economics foundation's report into the impact of forest school. The report also developed a model for Forest School leaders to evaluate their sessions, which continues to be used by leaders today.

With more and more Forest School training courses being run in Wales by different providers, during 2006 the OCN Wales Forest School Training Network was established to ensure a common standard of training in Wales. Bringing together all the existing Forest School trainers in Wales the network enables trainers to work together to improve the quality and consistency of training.

In a bid to support training, in 2007 Forestry Commission Wales produced a 'Forest School in Wales' DVD which showcased ten very different Forest Schools and celebrated current good practice. Also during this year, the Commission successfully secured funding from the Welsh Assembly Government to run a Forest School Leader Trainer project. With the aim of increasing Forest School training capacity in Wales, during 2008 the project trained four Foundation Phase Forest School leaders to become Forest School leader trainers in South Wales.

The start of a year long Forest School in North Wales in September 2009 saw a further study and refinement of the evaluation tools and a reconfirmation of the original nef findings. A second year long study begun in September 2010 in conjunction with University of Wales Institute, Cardiff will further explore various research propositions. Further training courses will continue to be run with training being constantly reviewed and refined by the Wales Training Network in conjunction with our GB colleagues, resulting in a steady increase in the number of practising Forest School Leaders. And the "10 Years of Forest School in Wales conference run on 27th and 28th October 2010 gives practitioners the opportunity to celebrate what has gone before and influence the direction in which Wales takes Forest School in the next 10 years.



Forestry Commission Wales and Forest School

Forestry Commission Wales run a limited number of Forest School programmes each year. Each Forestry Commission Wales Education Officer is a qualified Forest School Leader or are in the process of training. A member of the Agored Cymru Forest School Training Network, Forestry Commission Wales run a small number of Forest School Leader training courses each year, and work in partnership with the private sector to maximise training capacity within Wales.

All of the photos that appear in this report are from Forest School sessions that have been run in Wales.

Useful websites

For further information about Forest School visit:

Forestry Commission Wales

The Welsh Assembly Governments department for forestry. www.forestry.gov.uk/wales – follow the links to the Woodlands for Learning pages.

Forest Education Initiative

The Forest Education Initiative provides learning resources about trees, forests and forest products. A GB network, the website contains further information about Forest School training. www.foresteducation.org



Forest School Research

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Pavey, B. 2005 'The Forest School and Inclusion: a project evaluation' www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/161165.do

Swarbrick, N., Eastwood, G. and Tutton, K. 2004 'Self-esteem and successful interaction as part of the forest school project', Support for Learning 19(3): 142-146 <http://direct.bl.uk/bld/PlaceOrder.do?UIN=154203094&ETOC=RN&from=searchengine>

The one below is an experimental study of the benefits to children's physical and motor skills from playing in a forest environment

Fjørtoft, I. 2001 'The Natural Environment as a Playground for Children: The Impact of Outdoor Play Activities in Pre-Primary School Children', Early Childhood Education Journal 29(2): 111-117. <http://gis.esri.com/library/userconf/proc00/professional/papers/PAP462/p462.htm>



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Forestry Commission Wales

Tel: 03000 680300 Fax: 03000 680301

Email: fcwenquiries@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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