

## **What is Forest School**

### **1. Sessions are delivered on a long-term basis**

Forest School sessions are supposed to be regular and over a long enough period of time – not just a few one-off workshops. As a minimum, the FSA suggests **at least** 24 weeks, over **at least** two terms, **at least** two seasons and a minimum of two hours per session. However, many groups continue for years. This length of time is required to allow for the establishment of boundaries to feel safe and secure, the development of trust, and the deeply-rooted process of observation and self-reflection that is critical to all forest school sessions, for both practitioner and learner.

### **2. Sessions should be risk-aware, not risk-averse**

Forest School has an emphasis on learning through play, where children have the freedom to try things out. Practitioners suggest playful, meaningful activities which nurture the instinctive human ability to learn through overcoming a risk, challenge or problem. Children may also be taught how to safely use tools like knives and axes for whittling or chopping wood, and how to light and safely be around campfires. However, risk in the context of Forest School is about more than just physical danger of using sharp tools or campfires – it also includes social and emotional risk; for example, through embracing something new or confronting the fear of looking silly.

### **3. Forest School is invested in holistic development of the participants**

Holistic means ‘whole’ – and Forest School is about practitioners enabling the development of the whole person. This includes:

- **Emotional development.** Periods of reflection are important parts of all forest school sessions and help children to expand their emotional vocabulary and understand how they feel (emotional intelligence).
- **Spiritual development.** This is not necessarily religious, but refers to having a sense of belonging to the wider world, being part of something bigger than yourself, and your connection to nature.
- **Intellectual development.** Knowledge is provided in context with situations as they arise and creates a thirst for learning.
- **Social development.** Consistent meetings with the same group of children means that social connection is gained through shared experiences and goals. Children are able to choose whether to work together or separately.
- **Physical development.** Both fine motor skills and gross motor skills are developed in the outdoor environment, as well as stamina and positive experiences in ‘bad’ weather.

- **Communication and language development.** Working together encourages communication and develops skilful expression of thoughts and ideas, as well as the ability to listen to others. Reflection activities increase a child's ability to understand and describe their internal state, wants and needs.

Forest School practitioners aim to develop these aspects in a low-intervention manner rather than instructing the children to think or act in a certain way. The development is encouraged instead by measures such as raising interesting questions, being a role-model for behaviour, and allowing children to self-discover and self-regulate.

#### **4. Forest School should take place in a natural wooded environment where possible**

Embedded within Forest School is awareness and appreciation of the natural world. Sessions are intended to take place in a natural environment, ideally with trees, enabling use and interaction with natural materials in activities. The outdoor environment is key to providing a different situation for children, where the space is contained but not constrained.

#### **5. Forest School should be run by qualified Forest School practitioners**

Facilitating the complex learning opportunities of Forest School and providing supported risk in the outdoor environment to a group of children is a difficult thing to do. Therefore, Forest School sessions need to be run by an appropriately trained individual.

The FSA states that practitioners should hold a properly endorsed Level 3 Forest School qualification, which equips them with the skills required to provide good quality sessions. These include practical skills, first-aid, teaching skills, risk-benefit analysis, how to perform site checks and environmental impact awareness. It also trains leaders in the fine art of balancing guidance and structured activities with the self-learning ethos of Forest School.

Practitioners are also required to be very reflective themselves, to continually adapt and change with their group and learn from experience.

#### **6. Forest School is learner-centred with learner-based outcomes**

There is no curriculum in Forest School. Rather, learning is intended to be a co-operative process between the practitioner and the participants through a system of observation, reflection and communication. This system enables the discovery and development of unique outcomes which are specific to each learner and may cover any part of the holistic development. One key message is that **progress in Forest School is process-based, not goal-based.**

Source: High Speed Training - [Xenia Spencer-Milnes](#): January 8, 2021