

Outdoor Learning: Forest School Case Studies from Surrey, England

Mary MacKenzie, ICS Senior Research Fellow

‘The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky’

Margaret McMillan, 1925

The Forest Schools approach is one in which children are regularly in a natural environment for the duration of the school day, though not every day. This learner-centric approach focuses on whole child development through hands-on learning opportunities. The following case studies outline site visits to various high-quality child care centers operating with a Forest School model in Surrey, England.

FRIENDS FOREST SCHOOL

Friends Forest Nursery, Shere, Surrey is a day nursery which participated in the Surrey Quality Improvement Award and received an Outstanding Ofsted inspection outcome. It is set in a picturesque “chocolate box” type village with amazing surroundings and excellent woodland walks. While the Area Manager, Sallianne Robinson was completing her dissertation for her teaching degree on Forest School education, she and Lesley Friend, the owner of the setting realised the potential for Forest School and secured the use of land and woodland on the Duke of Northumberland’s Estate in Albury. They became the pioneers of Forest Schools in the Early Years in Surrey

Lesley & Sallianne attended an intensive Forest School training course which covered the Forest School approach to learning, practical skills and woodland management and how to deliver their own programme. The activities included using campfires to cook snacks, creating woodland crafts, building natural shelters, using tools safely and making and following trails.

Although Lesley and Sallianne were passionate about their project, they had to convince the staff and parents; as this was a pilot project, they had to learn by experience as they went along. The parents were their first challenge and they started by sending the parents copies of an article in the Daily Telegraph (a UK broadsheet) which extolled the virtues of Forest schools. They were also sent details of the training they had completed and the benefits of Forest Schools and a SWOT (“Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat”)

analysis and asked the parents to approach this with open minds. They avoided a questionnaire as they felt this would immediately initiate the parents focusing on their fears rather than the bigger picture. To their surprise and delight the parents were very positive and the only two anxieties they had were: “Where will my child go to the toilet” and the second one was “What will happen when they go to school and have to sit at a desk?” They followed this up with a Parents evening and shared photos, risk assessments and safety aspects with the parents. They shared that if their setting wanted to be a trail blazer it was obliged to become a Forest School because of the incredible benefits; they persuaded the parents that they needed to demand it of their schools to ensure continuity. The parents took up the challenge and now 4 or 5 of the feeder schools in their area have adopted the Forest School approach!

Lesley & Sallianne then had to convince the practitioners who were naturally concerned at taking the children out of the safety and security of their environment into the “wilds” with all that could entail. They spent practical sessions out in the woodland making fires, using saws, and wrote their policies and procedures from practical experience. The two leaders who were on their training still had to observe two children on their “Learning Journey” and it was really obvious that both children had what Richard Louv refers to as a ‘Nature deficit’

The stamina of the children had to be built up as the site was a mile away and the sessions in the woodland were 2 – 3hrs. This was done gradually, and they started with the pre-school children first; as time went by the staff caring for the younger children wanted them to be involved too and now it is the children aged 2.5 – 4.5 years who all attend. They started by giving the children boundary bows (ropes to tie around trees denoting the area within which they should play). At first the children were very timid and would only venture a few yards with their ropes; as their confidence grew so the boundary got bigger until there was no need for a boundary bow at all. Initially, children would hang around saying they were bored asking where are the toys?! They were unsteady on their feet or generally fearful of new challenges. At first, the quieter children would sit around the fire observing and chatting like “old housewife’s” and then usually after 2-3 weeks they would venture to more challenging pursuits. Gradually, as their stamina increased, they could walk on uneven surfaces and pick themselves up if they fell over. Their confidence grew and they became engaged in the wonders of nature.

I was privileged to attend one of their sessions and to be absolutely honest was wondering what I would be doing for 3 hours in the woodland on a chilly February day when rain was forecast! Dressed for the occasion in waterproofs and wellies, I joined the group

Benefits:

- Journey to the woods is the bigger learning experience than the time spent in the woods. This includes preparing to go and putting on the correct clothing, road safety crossing the road and walking on the pavements. Community spirit of greeting people in the village, the postman, the gentleman working in his allotment. Looking out for hazards and dangers en route.
- Listening to nature, the birds, bees and observing just how busy nature is. Developing listening skills and learning to be silent.

- Children learn how to listen; they can hear but when they stop and ‘tune in’ to the sounds around them they truly hear the most intricate of sounds such as bees buzzing, breeze through the trees and leaves crunching.
- Girls showed as much leadership and strength as boys for lifting branches or sawing branches or making fires.
- Children became more empathetic and would help each other up slopes or when they fell over. They have a VIP on each trip to the Forest whose responsibility it is to check for hazards, lead the group, and help with fire preparation.
- Toddlers and babies also enjoy the forest every day. The toddlers do everything except work with the tools and engage in fires which are for the older children, When they started it was the pre-school children only but there is now a holistic approach with all children involved.
- Children’s learning is stimulated with staff standing back and observing not interfering, giving children freedom to explore, ‘be’ and create independently. They are taught the principles of Vygotsky’s theory of when to ‘scaffold’ their learning, when to intervene by either being invited by the child or where they can see an opportunity to support their learning from one stage to the next by more knowledgeable other. On the day I went I vividly remember we were all playing on a fallen tree trunk which they chose naturally to become a pirate ship and all that entailed and when Sallianne announced that was available when they were ready, I remember thinking she must be wrong it couldn’t possibly be that time already and yet in fact it was even later than anticipated. Those children needing a rest can sleep comfortably under the trees.
- Staff’s anxieties have been alleviated – the “Mug huggers” have become “Mud lovers” and the anxiety over going to the toilet is now no longer an anxiety. Antiseptic hand gel is used and if a child has an accident spare clothes are brought along, and the child is changed privately.
- At first staff took a long time getting ready to go out (just delaying the inevitable) and sometimes did not have the correct clothes. There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing. The setting provides full kit of coats and fleeces and the staff provide their own wellies and water proofs.
- Story telling without books has become a great feature. At first the children wondered where the books were whereas now they actually initiate or add to the stories themselves
- Planning is a laborious paper heavy task which is the bug bear of most practitioners – the staff did their planning outside and analysed what could be done without recording and what activities could be done outside and they discovered that really everything could. Child initiated learning is at the heart of Forest School sessions. Some adult directed sessions e.g. learning about Geese migrating for the winter and making elderflower cordial in summer are essential lessons to scaffolding their learning and executed with a whole heap of fun, children love it!
- Parents are invited to spend a day or two out with the group and experience it for themselves. This is so beneficial, most become quite emotional with one mums’ comment being ‘I knew it was good but not this good’.

- Attitudes have changed with well trained staff and well trained children who are responsible and independent and take the lead
- Assumptions of fear of dangers and hazards has been addressed
- Staff are very humbled by the trust parents put in them and the setting as they bring tiny babies to the setting who will soon be experiencing the huge benefits the outdoors brings and knowing the plethora of practical life skills learnt along the way.
- Children learn about the dangers of fire; pack the safety bag and the fire blanket and learn how to deal with fire if needed
- Forest Schools make children resilient and safe in the world, children have a strong sense of self and a can do attitude with flexibility and adaptability.

If Maria Montessori were around today, she would be delighted at the awe and wonder Forest School brings to children's learning in a very natural and practical way.

THE ROYAL SCHOOL

One overcast Friday morning, The Royal School took six 3-year-olds, eight 2-year-olds, four staff, and a visitor (myself) out into the woods for their outdoor learning session. Although rain was forecast it was very overcast but actually didn't rain during the morning. The staff helped the children into their waterproofs - the older children had on tops and trousers and wellies and the younger children had all in one waterproofs and wellies – and we set off at 9.15am.

Amanda, the head teacher, had a wheeled cart full of resources which included cups and water and the First Aid kit and snacks and wet wipes, creative resources, spades, toys, and a phone and camera. We all set off across the playing field and into the woods – it was dark and inviting and we stopped to peer in before entering the woods. There were ribbons on the trees in a large circumference and the children were told they must always be able to see a ribbon as they played.

The woods are magnificent and have laurels, rhododendrons, holly bushes, oak and plane trees and other ground covering – there are wonderful places for climbing trees and parts which are covered over which make great dens. There is a port also which is used by the children accompanied by a staff member.

There were two large green sails suspended from trees under which the fire circle was located which comprised of upturned logs with a fire pit (not lit) in the middle. The children played the whistle game which meant they went to hide with the staff and when there were three blasts of the whistle they came running back. Everyone then sat in a circle whilst a staff member read a story “Wow said the owl” and then sang songs.

A member of staff then went round with a bowl of water and soap and paper towels and the children washed and dried their hands and were then each given a gingerbread man and a mug of water for their snack.

The staff had prepared the environment prior to the outing and it included four specific areas:

- The digging area – this comprised of a large mound of sand which had been dug up from a nearby copse. There were long handled spades and forks for the children

- The Mud Kitchen – this is wonderful and was made by staff and parents and comprises a table made of Hazelwood sticks bound together with twine and has all sorts of saucepans and pots and pans hanging from it and whisks and spoons etc. There is also a tripod again made from hazel sticks with a kettle hanging over “the fire”
- There was a sticking activity where the children were making owls from fir cones and sticking cotton wool feathers and eyes onto the cone to make an owl.
- The final activity was the climbing trees area and playing in dens. A member of staff was based there and helped children to climb the trees and hug them as they wished going as high as appropriate.

The digging area was interesting to observe, I observed two girls digging in the sand and standing on the fork to press it into the soil – one little one rubbed her back and said, “oh my back aches” a little later another child exclaimed “oh I’m exhausted this is such hard work”. One of the girls got a bit worked up whilst digging and just took herself off to the den to have a time out herself – self-regulation in action.

The mud kitchen was in full flight as the children transferred the sand and stones from the digging area into the pots and pans and added water from a kettle and then added leaves and sticks and made “soup” and “stew” – a large Winnie the Pooh bear had accompanied us to the woods and Winnie was then fed by the children in various ways from gentle spooning to a pot of soup poured over Winnie by one of the boys – a well sated filthy Winnie was brought back to the school at the end of the morning.

The morning flew and suddenly it was tidy up time and time to wash hands before getting ready to return to the setting. The children all sat with the teacher who asked them who had enjoyed what activity; tired but happy, we all made our way back to the setting across the playing fields.

We set off at 9:15AM and it was about 11:30AM when we got back to the setting. During this period, I did not hear one child cry or complain and when they fell over they picked themselves up and brushed themselves off. They ran around most of the time, climbed trees, hid in dens or else were engrossed in digging and in the mud kitchen – not a plastic toy was evident, and the imaginative play was a marvel to behold as they went hunting for a Gruffalo or made magic potions in the mud kitchen. No one said they were hungry, thirsty or tired and all were fully engaged for the whole period with spontaneous singing erupting from children and staff at intervals. A very calm and peaceful atmosphere prevailed and there were a lot of birds in the wood that day and we spent time listening to their different calls and then a robin came to visit us and the children were very still as he hopped onto one of the children’s spades. The last photo shows the children pushing the cart back with Amanda pulling it assisted by a child and the look of contentment on all our faces (I had the honour of carrying the rubbish back and toilet bucket) was tangible – a really wonderful experience.

TILFORD MEADOW FOREST SCHOOL

Tilford Meadow Forest School is an idyllic setting in Surrey, England owned by a dynamic early years expert called Carolyn Stidston and run by Zoe Napier who is a fully qualified Forest School practitioner who is an inspirational exponent of nature and all that can bring to the children in the setting.

It was a beautiful sunny day with a cool breeze blowing. There were eight 3-year-old children with two members of staff and two visitors. Zoe led the excursion. All the children had their lunch boxes and were wearing sensible shoes and hats having had sunscreen applied before leaving the school.

We left the playground and walked through woods and up a fairly steep hill. Just before the top of the hill there was a branch sticking out on a tree which resembled a crocodile with an open mouth and it even had an eye – the children all asked, “Please Mr Crocodile may we come into the wood”. At the top of the hill it opened into a lovely campsite owned by Waverley Borough Council and called Tilford Nature Reserve. The whole area which the Forest School has access to is 8 hectares. It is comprised of an open plateau type area which is grassed and has a few large trees on it and then the slopes of the plateau which go down to the river.

There were two circles with log stumps as seats one had a camp fire in the middle and the other was smaller. The children and staff all sat around for listening time – it was so still and peaceful and all you could hear were the birds. Zoe asked each child what they heard “A duck”, “birds singing” “a crocodile!”, “helicopter, a pigeon, a monkey, trees waving.”

Zoe then ran through the safety talk about “If we see a dog what do we do” – the children answered “stand still”, “If we see poo what do we do – don’t touch it or pick it up” “If we see rubbish what do we do – don’t pick it up” She also went through the “1, 2, 3 where are you fun” game, which was similar to hide and seek. She explained there were different activities the children could do – which were carrot whittling and making potions. There was a tap on the site and they had brought up large black plastic buckets which the children could put water in and then collect sticks and sand and leaves to make wonderful potions.

Zoe demonstrated the carrot whittling and had a heavy glove on and a tool box full of implements. She demonstrated with a potato peeler and asked what the children needed to do – “if you hold a knife and pull it towards you what could happen” “You could cut your hand off” responded a keen little lad with relish!! The children put on child sized heavy gloves on one hand and held a carrot and then used a proper child sized peeler to whittle. They could eat the carrots as they wished once they had finished their activity.

A member of staff told me an interesting story about a 4-year-old girl who thought she was an adult and did not respond to anything in the setting and would not interact with the staff or her peers. Once she was in the Forest School and outside she was transformed and spent time making potions and mud chocolate cakes and interacted with staff and peers animatedly – once she returned to the setting she reverted to her non-engaged behaviour.

Zoe explained the different activities they could do as there is a pig farm nearby that they can walk to view the piglets or go down to the river to make boats and play pooh sticks or to the farm to see the lambs. She also said that in the spring they build a huge bird’s nest using branches and sticks and then go through the whole life cycle of the bird from the egg to adult bird. The use proper saws to saw up the wood.

We then all went on a walk around the site with a bucket and secateurs to collect leaves, flowers and ferns to make hapozomes. These are made (see example) by putting leaves or flowers or anything succulent between

two pieces of sheet and hammering it with a camping mallet. I was so impressed by the care shown to the environment as the children would not destroy small trees and would only pick one or two flowers from each plant. At one stage everyone lay on the ground and looked up into the trees where a squirrel dray was visible way up on high; when we all stood up we made a crocodile and each one brushed off the sand and leaves off the back of the person in front. It was fascinating to see that each boy found a stick and spent the whole walk playing with it whereas the girls were more interested in collecting leaves and flowers. “We are like Dora the Explorer,” said one little girl. We came to an amazing tree which was hollow and was a woodpecker haven – the tree had died, and the nature warden had cut it to a height of about 20 feet – it was used extensively by the woodpeckers.

A child needed the toilet and a portable potty was brought out which the child could sit on and wee – the boys were all encouraged to do “tree wees”. There were wipes for the children to use once they had completed their toilet routines. There was a First Aid kit which was hanging in a tree. Whilst making the hapozome one little girl hammered her thumb – she was quite sanguine about it and although she cried a cold wipe was applied and she soon recovered and got on with the exciting job of hammering her hapozome.

Zoe told more stories about a child who was always sent in in pretty dresses – she just loved the mud and was up to her elbows in mud when Mum came to collect her – mother was horrified and said she would need to be put in the bath immediately when she got home. However, the following day she came in in old clothes and the child just revelled in the mud kitchen.

They also made dream catchers out of honeysuckle which helped a child who had trouble sleeping so much as he told his mother the dream catcher caught all the baddies.

As usual the time had flown, and it was time to have lunch which the children had from their lunchboxes sitting around the campsite tables along with the staff who joined them for a very relaxed and interactive meal.

I left the setting inspired and feeling physically tired but mentally so stimulated. Thank you Tilford Meadow for letting me spend an enchanting morning in your amazing Forest School and for bringing back such happy memories of my childhood.

BIOGRAPHY

Mary MacKenzie is an Early Years Professional committed to the improvement of quality of experience and equality of opportunity for all young children. She was born and educated in South Africa. She qualified as a Nursery Teacher (Early Childhood) there and practiced for a number of years before moving to England. She has taught in early years schools in England and lectured in child-care at a number of colleges. She is now Quality Improvement Advisor for the Early Years and Childcare Service of Surrey County Council in England and has been an integral part of the team which has developed and delivered the quality improvement processes. She is a Senior Fellow of the Institute for Child Success in Greenville, South Carolina.