



Hampshire &
Isle of Wight
Wildlife Trust

The impact of Forest School

Forest School training can be life changing and can radically alter the direction of teaching practice and school ethos to offer invaluable nature connection opportunities for the next generation.



Four Marks CE Primary's Forest School journey

In 2017, Year R teacher Esther Andrews embarked upon the start of her Forest School leadership training at Swanwick Lakes Nature Reserve. Esther's reflective account of her training journey demonstrated the impact the training had not only on her practice and the children at her school but also on herself.



Two years later, we met again to talk about what happened next, how her journey and the development of Forest School at Four Marks had inspired other colleagues. We also discussed how important it was to have a supportive senior management team and Headteacher with a clear vision and strategy in place to make the most of the opportunities the school grounds could offer to the children.

"You can't come away from Forest School training without wanting to make big changes and developing the potential of your grounds' Esther explained. 'There were and are still some challenges, working in a big school, for example it can take a whole year to rotate around all the classes for each child to experience a programme, and if you split a class to enable riskier activities to take place such as tool work and allocate a member of staff to supervise one half of the class back in the classroom, then that is one less member of staff available to assist at Forest School."



Esther explained that having a Headteacher who was well informed about the Forest School pedagogy enabled Esther to influence, explain and demonstrate the benefits of Forest School to her colleagues and the wider school community. Esther held team meetings around the campfire, introducing them to new activities and experiences and inspiring colleagues such as Year 3 and 4 teacher Katharine Jackson, and LSA Joanne Maxwell, to enrol onto the training themselves. Katharine and Esther both started seeing the positive impacts that the Forest School programmes in Year R were having back in their classrooms. There was a growth in consensus among colleagues of the need to timetable Forest School programmes. Parents were reporting that Forest School sessions were the 'highlight of the week' for many children and the wider school community support for Forest School also started to grow.

As busy teachers and Forest School leaders, the burden of ongoing maintenance of the site and kit is still a challenge. Esther explained how the initial



site set up took much of her weekend time with tasks such as shed building, moving log circles, cutting back nettles and bracken to be tackled - she even roped in some of her own family to help her at times! Although the ground staff at school are more aware and supportive of the site needs, the day-to-day site management sits with the Forest School leaders.

In 2019, Katharine began her training journey, and the Forest School responsibilities were shared. Katharine works with the Year 3 & 4 phase which started opening up opportunities for older children to engage with Forest School during extra-curricular time on Fridays. The EYFS has a strong outdoor learning and play ethos which compliments Forest School, and so bringing Forest School to the older phase groups had its own challenges to embed and bring colleagues onboard.

In 2020 Covid-19 brought many unexpected challenges to the school, with staffing shortages,

no more parent volunteers and needing to provide childcare and learning opportunities for children of key workers, so Esther and Katharine felt lucky to have the Forest School area as a therapeutic and Covid-secure site to bring the children to. Lots of free-flow play, time for art and creative activities, exploring and relaxing in the shade - just what the children needed in such a difficult time. The children found new friendships and built new communities having been shuffled into new groups during the crisis and Esther and Katharine commented that they felt Forest School accelerated the bonding process for this little community.

'Since starting Forest School, I can see that the children are much more inquisitive, they notice things more such as processes going on in nature and understanding the world around them. Their sense of interest in the world is noticeable!' Katharine explains, 'every LSA that comes out with me exclaim that the children are so different to how they see them in the classroom, it is like seeing a different part of them that shines outdoors.'

'Our Forest School programme is now bigger than just one Leader at the school, there is resilience in the provision, and it is now an embedded whole school offer.' In 2021 a third colleague will be starting their training and will add more trained and experienced hands to the Forest School team, to continue building resilience, overcoming challenges and sharing responsibility and fun times in the woods!





"The biggest change I saw through doing my Forest School training was the change in myself. I have always loved being outdoors, but now I feel like I have the confidence and knowledge to begin to explore more - and to know what I am talking about."

Esther Andrews
Forest School Trainee

Esther Andrews' Reflective Diary

I was initially apprehensive to attend my first week of Forest School training. I didn't know what to expect or what I would be learning.

The thing that I remember most from the first day was the activity where we were required to sit and be still for around 15 minutes. Being a teacher, I am used to filling every minute and being constantly busy.

That time to relax and recharge in a green space was my first taste of what to expect from Forest School- that it was a completely different approach. It made me feel excited for what was to come.

I took this photo on that day to remind me of how I felt when I gave myself time to be calm and relax in the woodland.

It was exciting to learn new skills in that first week. We learned how to tie a variety of useful knots, and put up tarpaulin shelters. This was new learning for me, and I didn't find it easy to begin with! I had to practice a lot at home.



We were given lots of opportunities to get confident with tools in that first week. We learned the four main operations: drilling, sawing, splitting and whittling. I was excited to have an opportunity to create some of my own woodland crafts. I had seen so many beautiful wooden resources available online at a premium cost- but I decided I could make my own!



These number counters took AGES - but it was worth the effort (and the palm blisters) because my children love to play with them during Forest School sessions now. I also whittled my own little family of gnomes for outdoor small world play.

I also copied some of the resources that were available in the cabin, such as these reflection discs. They have been very useful in framing reflections at the end of our Forest School sessions.

I split the log in the right picture during training, but wasn't sure what to do with it. I ended up taking it home and using a pyrograph to make a sign which now hangs proudly in our Forest School area.



I enjoyed making deadwood shelters with the other members of my group. It was a challenge to act as though we were children and think about what we would do as Forest School leaders rather than learners ourselves.

Cooking over the fire was something I felt very nervous about. It was an entirely new experience for me, but luckily I had a brilliant group who regularly cook over an open fire - so I was in safe hands!

My group made a Shakshuka – a tomato dish with pepper and eggs. It was delicious- and so satisfying cooking it for the team over a fire that we had laid and maintained ourselves. The more chances I had to practice these skills the more confident I was feeling - and excited to bring it back to my setting!

I was in charge of laying, lighting and maintaining the campfire. This was my first time doing so without direct support, and I felt very anxious as I knew I was being assessed.

However, it turned out to be an incredibly enjoyable experience! I just felt so much better about doing it with children back at school after having the chance to do it for myself in the training. It was brilliant!



What an absolute privilege it was to train at Swanwick- such a gorgeous setting, and with all these wonderful people. We still keep in touch and meet up when we can- it's amazing to hear what they are all doing for children in their different settings, and I hope to go out and visit some soon!



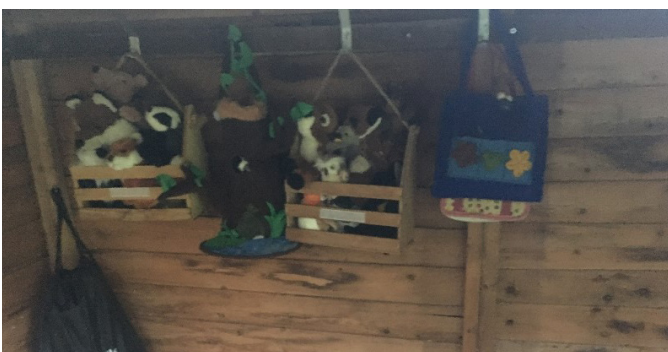
I had loved my training, and came back to school absolutely filled with enthusiasm to share all I had learned.

We are lucky enough to have a large area which is pretty much laid to woodland. It was very overgrown and in some areas totally inaccessible. Whilst creating my Part One Forest School Handbook I had to study hard and talk to local experts in order to know how best to manage the woodland- ensuring that we were making a useable space but also protecting the species of trees, plants and animals that live there.



The picture above shows the wonderful team of volunteers who spent a Saturday morning chopping down trees, loading them onto a trailer and getting them up to form our fire circle.

I also came at the weekend to move a small shed up to the site, and finally had a place to store the woodland cuddly toys I had been collecting from charity shops! We also were lucky enough to secure some funding from Tesco, which we used to purchase tools, campfire cooking equipment, first aid backpacks, a ghillie kettle- and lots more!



My head teacher offered me a staff meeting to introduce the rest of our team to Forest School, and show them what I had created up at the site. I was apprehensive about fire lighting with so many people watching me- so I had my mum and boyfriend Johnny up the evening before for a practice run. Luckily it was a success!

It was brilliant to have the support of my school leadership team- and everyone said it was far more enjoyable than our usual staff meetings! One member of staff was so motivated that she asked the head teacher if she could undertake the training herself- and is now where I was a year ago.

We took the ethos of Forest School into other areas of our Early Years practice as well:

Our garden before



Our garden after



Staff also became more confident to allow children more autonomy to take risks in the play space. Previously the children never even climbed the trees!

Our new garden was such a success we even made the front cover of the local magazine! I worked with the designer to create a garden that

encouraged imagination and creative play in a wild and free space.

I created a Forest School display board in the corridor so that visitors to our school could see how integral it was to our Early Years provision- and hopefully in the future- throughout our whole school.



I began to bring the Forest School ethos into my classroom- allowing children more opportunity to explore nature and teaching them technical vocabulary. The Forest School ethos became more woven into everything we were doing in the day to day.

An illustration from 'Wild' by Emily Hughes- a book I was keen to do in class because the children were able to empathise with the key character

so much more after their experiences at Forest School. The children would often talk about Forest School using words like, "Free".

The children were developing more extensive vocabulary in terms of animal names and facts. When we looked at Percy the Park Keeper the children enjoyed using their knowledge of the different creatures in the park- all information they had gained at Forest School!



Eager to use my Forest School skills, I set up a woodland crafts stall at the summer fair! It was a roaring success- over £150 made for Forest School equipment- and the children loved the chance to use the tools.



The biggest change I saw through doing my Forest School training was the change in myself. I have always loved being outdoors, but now I feel like I have the confidence and knowledge to begin to explore more- and to know what I am talking about!

My general fitness has improved, and I have developed greater respect for the world around me.

These pictures show me having hiked to the top of Cheddar Gorge (a preservation area for a number of endangered species of plants). Even when walking with my nephew in the woods I feel more confident and able to talk to him knowledgeably about the world around us, encouraging imagination and creative play in a wild and free space.



I end my day with a picture that sums up why I have done this course and what it's all been for. It's been incredibly hard work at times, and I haven't always been able to meet deadlines whilst dealing with difficult personal problems, and huge challenges at work.

But here they are- my brand new reception class out having a wonderful time at Forest school. It was definitely all worth it :)



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Wildlife Trust**



Bringing wildlife back

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

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