

How does Forest School support physical, intellectual, social and emotional development and well-being?

Physical health

It is recommended that children should accumulate at least sixty minutes of moderate and vigorous physical activity every day in order to maintain and promote good health (Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). Forest School provides opportunities for a range of such activities without the children necessarily being aware of the fact, whether it was simply dragging sticks to build shelters, sawing wood, climbing trees, group warm-up games or even just the walk out to (and return from) our Forest School site, with all the children wanting to pull the trolley and toolbox. Furthermore, by embracing the outdoors and whatever weather is thrown at us means that the weather was seldom a barrier to physical activity.

Moreover, it is noticeable that even the most reluctant PE lesson participant is every bit as active as all the other Forest School children. Of course, this goes beyond Forest School, and helping children recognise that there are alternatives to team sports in order to keep fit can only be a good thing for their future physical health.

Fine and gross motor skills

Fine motor skills involve small muscles working with the brain to control movements in areas such as the hands, fingers and eyes. Gross motor skills are the skills that children develop using their whole body. Forest School provides ample opportunity for developing both, from the fine, controlled actions of tying knots, using a fire striker or whittling wood to the bigger actions of climbing trees, moving sticks and tarpaulins around the site to construct shelters are activities such as sawing wood. It's notable how these often differ significantly from other activities employed within school which develop these skills - using a saw uses muscles in a very different way from games and sports played in PE.

Well-being

In simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good (Diener et al., 1997). Well-being includes the presence of positive emotions (for example, contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (such as depression, anxiety). It therefore has strong links with self-esteem, confidence, emotional intelligence and resilience, which are discussed in more detail subsequently.

There is considerable research into the well-being benefits of being outdoors for all ages and woodland spaces have been shown to have particularly strong effects. Maybe it is simply because the relaxed rhythm of a tree's life is so different from our own, technological world, encouraging you take your time and reflect.

Encouraging play and choice is also central to our sessions, and this contributes to feelings of well-being, although the wonderful thing about play is that you can never predict what direction it may take. We do, however, aim to cater for different interests, such as physical, creative, problem-solving and curiosity-led activities.

Self-esteem and confidence

There is a lot of overlap between self-esteem and confidence although they are different concepts. Self-esteem is how a person feels about their own worth. The self-esteem of most children will fluctuate as they face different stages or challenges in life, and there are many different pressures that may have an impact on them, such as peer pressure, exams, bullying, family problems and abuse. Confidence is about believing in yourself and your abilities and ideas. It's also about accepting yourself for who you are. It's also worth noting that it doesn't mean outgoing, confident people can still appear quiet and shy.

Children and young people with low self-esteem and confidence often have a negative image of themselves, tend to avoid new things and find change hard, can't deal well with failure and tend to put themselves down and might say things like "I can't do that" (Young Minds, 2023). Forest School could therefore be perceived to be a challenging situation for them - it is different from their typical learning experience and potentially full of problem-solving situations. However, the informal woodland environment allows children to explore these experiences in an unpressured situation, where they don't feel they are being observed. Setting children challenging but realistically attainable goals will promote a feeling of satisfaction and achievement that can drive the child to challenge themselves more. The activities are also different - children who are not confident about team sports can thrive whilst exploring a physical activity in Forest School. Forest school sessions also support the development of self-esteem by giving children ownership and control of sessions.

A key element of Forest School that engenders increased self-esteem is the use of tools and trust that entails. The children seem surprised that they are allowed to use tools like saws and secateurs, and they respond positively to you being able to say "Because I trust you to use it safely". Similarly, you can see the children's delight in creating a shelter that offers them some protection from the wind and rain. It seems to be that innate sense that, if they can create a shelter, maybe they could survive in the wild.

Resilience

Resilient children are not afraid to make mistakes. They view mistakes as an opportunity to learn and accept that failing may lead to success. It's recognising that rather than believing that success requires talent it can be achieved through the effort of developing knowledge and skills (Collet, 2017). In contrast, children lacking in resilience will avoid tasks in order to protect themselves from the disappointment of failure. With this in mind, it is possible to provide learning experiences that build resilience and provide children with opportunities to encounter and correct mistakes. To be able to develop this skill, children need to be able to fail, and Forest School provides a safe environment for them to explore those feelings.

In the forest school, the propensity for skill-based activities provides children the opportunity to foster their resilience as they try new skills and don't always achieve the required result initially. Setting short-term goals is another avenue for increasing resilience and demonstrates that success is incremental. Mastering a selection of knots through practice leads to children using them to solve other challenges such as constructing shelters and other rope structures.

As children have control over what they might explore in subsequent sessions, Forest School also allows them to return to a problem without necessarily focussing on the perfect solution - would you really want to spend a winter's night in that shelter? Instead, it prompts thoughts such as "what can I do differently next time?", be it refining the previous solution or taking an entirely different tack.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a set of skills associated with understanding and managing one's own emotions, recognising others' emotions, and the subsequent ability to use emotions to guide one's thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer 1990). Children with higher emotional intelligence are more focussed and engaged in school, as well as having more positive relationships and being more empathetic (Tominey et al., 2017).

Five skills have been identified to increase emotional intelligence: recognizing emotions in oneself and others; understanding the causes and consequences of emotions; labelling emotions accurately; expressing emotions in ways that are appropriate for the time, place, and culture; and regulating emotions (Tominey et al., 2017). Forest School provides opportunities help promote these in several ways, in particular through reflection time.

Reflection time provides children time to consider their feelings during the session but, more importantly, also helps them understand what happened that led to feel that way. Feelings of calmness may simply originate from being in the woodland surroundings and recognition of the natural world being their happy place. However, stronger feelings such as pride may have followed a period of negative feelings like frustration: understanding

that perseverance or seeking help led to that positive feeling helps children understand how to regulate their emotions in the future.

It is also a valuable opportunity for all participants to label and express their emotions. Forest School leaders can promote this through modelling. For example, I talked about my own feelings about the first time I tried to light a fire, enabling the children to see that they are not the first to experience these problems but also putting labels to those feelings. In one reflection circle, my assistant expressed her nervousness about the children climbing trees but also how she relaxed when she saw that the children were ensuring their own and others safety and that she now felt more confident. Sharing our feelings in this way encourages children to consider their own emotions and how they can guide them.

Moral and spiritual development

Moral and spiritual development encourages children's deeper understanding of themselves and others and helps children gain an appreciation of the wider impact their behaviour and actions have upon themselves, other people and the world around them (Tang, 2022). In Forest School, such development occurs as the children create their own games with rules that they work out for themselves that are fair and just and as they are able to express their own points of view in reflection time. Taking responsibility for their own and others safety also contributes to their spiritual growth.

However, it is in promoting care and respect for nature and living things where Forest School's greatest strength lies. The children learn how to care and protect the woodland, as well as consider the long-term impact for future generations. In our Forest School that has been most apparent in their enthusiasm for adding the wildlife they have spotted to 'Our Wildlife' board, which in many cases involved the children having to first identify unfamiliar bird and invertebrate species. They've also been intrigued by the signs of badger activity, having been unaware of these animals roaming our grounds since the school field sees little use outside of the summer term and early autumn.

Throughout our sessions, the children have shown a concern for protecting their Forest School and a burgeoning respect for native wildlife, whether it is spontaneously building bug hotels or using tarpaulins to construct a bird hide. Hopefully, this appreciation for the natural world will stay with them.

Creativity

Creativity, the use of imagination or original ideas to create or invent something, in Forest School is not just developed through art or woodcraft-based activities. Being free to choose and explore the ways in which they approach challenges and activities

encourages children to interreact and think creatively using the open-ended environment of logs, sticks, leaves, soil, stones, rope and any other materials they find there. One pair of children in our Forest School were keen to observe the birds and so adapted ideas in order to construct a shelter with an entirely different purpose to what we had talked about: a bird hide. The children can also create their own games, using the natural materials around them.

Independent thinking

An independent thinker can work on their own free from the influence of others, making decisions and judgements for themselves, and this is encouraged by Forest School's learner-centred approach of choice and play. Over time, it is apparent that the participants become increasingly confident in making significant decisions about their activities and the direction they take them in, with the children needing to check with an adult less and less. They also take increased responsibility for ensuring their own safety.

Collet, V.S. (2017). "I Can Do That!" Creating Classrooms That Foster Resilience', *YC Young Children*, 72(1), pp. 23-32.

Diener, E., Suh, E., and Oishi, S. (1997) 'Recent findings on subjective well-being', *Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 24, pp. 25-41.

Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *Physical Activity Guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' Report*. London: DHSC. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report>

Salovey, P. and Mayer, J.D. (1990) 'Emotional Intelligence', *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 9(3), pp. 185-211.

Tang, F. (2022) 'Nurturing children's spiritual development in early childhood context', *Foundation Stage Forum*
Available at: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/self-esteem/>

Tominey, S.L., O'Bryon, E.C., Rivers, S.E., and Shapses, S. (2017). 'Teaching Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood', *YC Young Children*, 72(1), pp. 6-14.

Young Minds (2023) *Self-esteem and mental health - guide for parents*. Available at:
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/self-esteem/>