



The Magic of quiet moments and muddy Wellies

'I need spare socks. I think I've got the wrong wellies on, Miss. What do you mean you haven't got a coat – you know it's a Forest School day!'

Hats, gloves, coats, wellies, donned against the elements, forest school goes ahead rain, hail or shine or in the case of the day I visited, snow. It would be untrue to say I saw any of the activities shown in the photos below on the day I visited although these *are* images taken at Fauldhouse Forest School. Frankly, the weather during the weeks in the run up to my visit had been solid rain and gales. I was certain it would be so muddy underfoot that I would have to postpone my visit. But the morning was cold and clear, so forest school went ahead as planned.

Although everyone did plough on, it was a *really* cold mid-January day and by the time the children had made several brave attempts to warm up, playing games, gathering wood and lighting a fire, eating lunch and doing a nest building exercise, enough of us were so chilled that staff did decide to call it a day and go back to the school an hour early. Actually, it warmed up, snowed and suddenly, everyone wanted to stay, but the decision had been made and we went back and worked with wildlife cards in the classroom.

The thing is that despite the unavoidable mud, cold and snow, I saw exactly what everyone talks about with respect to forest schools. The kind of stuff you read in reports. Happy children, excited to be out of the classroom, confident to chat during the half hour walk to the wood, full of stories about what they'd done at forest school in the last year and about how they'd taken mum and dad to see their dens and base camp. Mum didn't like their muddy clothes, the walk to base camp was a bit long although it gave them the chance to blather, and it was a bit boring collecting sticks for the fire, but they loved getting outside, making kazoos and using the tools.

During the games they played that morning, there were 25 kids all pulling together. Nest building gave them a chance to demonstrate that great team building stuff we all refer to in our presentations, and half an hour after they'd been told about how to spot the difference between various lichens they passed the test which showed it hadn't just gone in one ear and out the other.



Successful Learners

Skeptics might ask whether kids learn a lot in Forest Schools. My own curiosity prompted me to 'test' the girls on their knowledge of lichens just to see whether they'd been listening well enough to pick it up. The answer is children do learn a lot, but the lessons are in understanding each other better, realising that you don't have to be academically bright to be a winner and in all the other things the kids don't know are happening to them. Lessons in confidence, relating differently to the environment, health, freedom, using all your senses, letting off steam and finding calm.

Although we all agree on paper that it's all about growing as an individual, (teambuilding, confidence and self esteem) adults often can't resist the urge to add academic justification to a day out of the school classroom. We find ourselves going on about links to the curriculum. How collecting sticks makes use of maths, building fires is good for science and learning about trees and plants is a part of zoology. And as if numeracy and

literacy weren't enough, we continue to list the benefits *ad finitum* on the less academic front: improved gross and fine motor skills, greater concentration, more sophisticated use of language.

Long-standing advocates of outdoor education must have sighed with relief when The Curriculum for Excellence turned up. Knowing that the 'real life' stuff has always worked as a whole and in different ways for different children, doesn't stop you feeling hassled by achievement targets and reading programmes. At least now our outdoor education pioneers can tick the Curriculum for Excellence boxes and know they've been ahead of the game all along.

Elaine Clark, Teacher to P7 at Falla Hill Primary has a background which includes a lot of outdoor education work: *'I don't worry that I haven't got my maths done that day because as far as I'm concerned, what they are learning, their powers of observation, looking at the seasons, out in the elements, being outside, not being stuck in front of a computer inside 4 walls and the health aspect is far more beneficial than doing a page of mathematics'*

For the record, Elaine asked P7 to tell her what they'd learnt at Forest School. This is what they came up with:

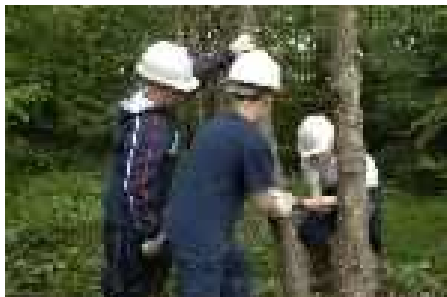
I learned:

- How to make rope from natural materials
- About the forest animals
- To do first aid assessing the situation
- How to build a fire safely
- How to be a responsible person
- That my actions affect the environment
- To tie knots and build shelters
- To play new games and have great fun
- To be aware of the changes in the seasons
- About the different trees and plants in the forest
- To work as part of a team
- About how to use the Morse code
- To listen and communicate
- To use tools safely
- To identify animal tracks and follow them
- About Scottish forests and how important they are to history
- Companionship and trust
- To sculpture models from things in the wood
- To work with people I would not normally work with
- I became aware of all my senses and how they helped me survive
- I had time to talk to my teachers and think in a quiet space

On the basis that forest schools aren't set up with the intention of getting children to 'learn' a lot – really Jim Smalls, Forestry Commission Ranger and his team who organise Fauldhouse Forest School seem to have done a remarkable job.

It brings a real smile when you watch Jim and Elaine out in the wood with the children. As it should be, they're like extended parents for the day, which is quite difficult to achieve in our culture of 'don't touch the children and make sure you get parental permission before you cover a cut with a plaster.' The kids tease Jim and link arms with Elaine. Being out of the confines of the school walls clearly relaxes everyone and as Elaine says, 'on Forest School days I have time to talk to the children. They like to tell you about things out of school and you can reassure them'. You can't help a child if you're holding him or her at arms length.

What if someone just can't manage the bow saw or get the fire to light?



The idea is that the all Forest School activities the children do are broken up into small achievable chunks so the children are basically set up to succeed. For example: A typical forest school programme with P6/7 might start by getting the children to design and build a base camp, in the middle of which will be a hearth where one of the core activities each session is learning how to light a fire. The children are taught how to use fire lighting tools, e.g. a bow and drill. However, at least to begin with, the object of the exercise is not actually to light a fire. There are always staff and fire lighters to make sure the marshmallows do get toasted that day. A first task might be learning how to make the bow turn

around – which isn't easy. If pupils achieve making smoke by the end of the day, great, but that's not the objective, because if it was, half the class would go home feeling like they'd failed.

Does outdoor learning just turn the tables on the less practical children and show that academic success isn't the be all and end all? It seems not. We understand that all children benefit from forest school in one way or another through activities which are designed to give each child the opportunity to learn at their own speed and in their own way. Perhaps the difference is simply that it's not just the kids who do best at the 3Rs who get the top marks.

Elaine Clark told us about one little boy who has great difficulty with the curriculum. Faced with a task to design a den at forest school, he produced the most successful structure of the class. *'This is a child who could be written off academically and is unlikely to do well at school, but for me he has brightness. It showed in his face, he was so proud of what he'd done. It's the pride that children can achieve something they've never done before which is so wonderful'.*



What if my child comes home with only nine fingers?

It must be petrifying at first for both teachers and parents to let children loose in the forest environment. Many parents worry about their children's safety just walking to the local shop by themselves, let alone going to the woods to build fires and chop down trees.

Customer management and communication are crucial to any sales situation and it's no different for a school wanting to convince parents that a Forest School is a good idea. First-hand accounts of what happens at Forest

Schools from pupils who have already done the course are a good way to inform new parents. Face-to-face meetings with staff who will be looking after the children and can input on safety and logistics are important. And there's always risk assessment to fall back on. I just don't remember that being part of it when our parents let us go miles into the woods by ourselves as kids and mostly, we've survived.

But what better way to understand what's going on than to go out with your child on a Forest School day and see for yourself. Falla Hill has been lucky enough to have good parental support, with several parents attending sessions and almost no complaints about muddy clothes. The school pooled parental opinion from one 2005 class on whether parents felt their child had benefited from Forest School and in what way. These amongst other comments are testimony to the success of the course:

- 'Forest School has been of great benefit to my child, the kids are learning new skills every week that will be with them for life. Things that we took for granted as kids.'
- 'It has become the best day of the week. It can only benefit any child lucky enough to be on the course. Highly Recommended'
- 'More aware of the environment, sleeps better on a Wednesday night, comes home from school enthusiastic about what she has done without being prompted'

The attached letter from Mr & Mrs Hedges in 2005 who attended four forest school days says the rest – [LINK to "parents letter" pdf file.](#)

It's about building up trust in a situation of perceived freedom – parents/staff, staff/pupils, pupils/pupils. Gain trust and you're half way there.

Just one hiccup – it used to be easy for parents to turn out and help at any time. Now regulations surrounding disclosure make this a little more difficult, more onerous on schools, and less spontaneous for parents who unexpectedly find themselves with a bit of free time to help. And not every parent can afford to pay the costs involved, which means they could lose out. Whatever the ways around the problem, it's worth looking into early on - to the mutual benefit of schools, parents and kids alike.



Oh No! What if I lose the kids in the wood?

You show them the boundaries, you set them the tasks, make sure the ratio of adults to kids is right and then *you have to let go*. Almost. In reality, we hear that the children stay quite close at first – the wood isn't an environment they're used to - and the tasks you set are quite specific both in type and how long they should take, so the chances are, everyone will get on with it and turn up again on time. Use of tools, recognizing a need for safety, is

closely managed and maybe being in an out-of-school location helps, but children do like to feel responsible and that they're being trusted to do things the right way. Elaine Clark told us that a new teaching methodology gradually evolves and you no longer feel you have to be the one instructing and watching out for every word and move.

The Curriculum for Excellence doesn't mean that every teacher has to exchange stilettos for wellies and take kids on regular excursions to the woods. It's not everyone's cup of tea. But it does give those who *would* like to, the freedom to use programmes like Forest Schools to follow an alternative method of teaching. Apart from all the obvious logistics and parental concerns, Falla Hill say that some of the greatest challenges were the weather and taking away the fear of 'getting dirty'. The first, you have no control over anyway. And the second? We understand the children quickly realized the practicalities of keeping their boots clean and both staff and pupils soon developed a 'fondness for mud'!

The school's on the map

When Anita Craig, Headteacher of Falla Hill was approached by the Forestry Commission in 2004, she was very responsive to the idea of setting up a Forest School. Mrs Craig is strongly in favour of outdoor education for the benefits she feels it brings to the children. She also comments on the enormous benefit there has also been to the school and community as a whole. Falla Hill were 'Highly Commended' in the 2006 FEI Scottish Finest Woods Schools Awards and the FEI chose the school as the location for it to launch its Woods For Learning Strategy. Pupils have presented to Ministers at the Scottish Parliament, attended an Outdoor Conference in Dundee and have contributed to local community events displaying and explaining photographs of what happens at Forest School.

Anita Craig: *'Being a Forest School has given the pupils and parents real pride in their school. It has lifted the school's profile both locally and nationally and has shown the children the many different types of experiences they can become involved in. It's given us a real drive and enthusiasm, knowing Falla Hill and Fauldhouse can actually go places and meet people.'*

Fauldhouse is somewhere that having a Forest School seems to have had a real impact on the local community. For years, the forest was somewhere associated with fly tipping and burnt out cars. The difference in the last couple of years has, it seems, been remarkable. I asked Anita Craig if she really felt the change was a direct consequence of there being a Forest School *'It's a very big coincidence if it isn't'* she replied. *'The children now look on it as their forest and the parents look on it as the forest school. With some pupils now at secondary who have experienced Forest School, they have a better understanding of how vandalism can affect their younger brothers' and sisters' experiences. Forest School is a good context for learning because it's all about real life. It's on our doorsteps and affects the whole community'*



Magic moments

'There are so many moments - little moments' said Elaine Clark. I was asking her to recall incidents she felt had real impact on the children on a Forest School day. It's easy to see for yourself what she means. Moments which just wouldn't happen if the children were in front of textbooks and teachers don't often get the opportunity to share. It's hard to capture the mood and portray what everyone's thinking. But you can find some of it in the diaries:

'Then we were told to go and look for a quiet spot. But before we went to look for it, Mrs Clark gave us a piece of string to fiddle with. When I went to look for a magic spot, I seen a big crowd of small ants scurrying away. When I found my spot, I sat very quiet while fiddling with my string when a small robin landed about a metre away. I was so excited and happy. I sat a little longer watching the birds land next to me and then I started to catch the leaves falling off the trees.' Natalie