

# Into the woods

Tom Richardson, whose nursery won the Forest School category in the NMT Nursery Awards, gives his advice on how to set up and run a forest school



**A**t Naturally Learning Charlestown, we take forest school very seriously. It is interwoven into every aspect of our nursery, with each child having full access to our woodland daily. We have seen the rise of forest schools across the country in recent years and the forest school L3 course has proven very popular, though I would argue that the forest school ethos is inherently against a culture of certification. What matters most is a real burning drive to create a magical childhood immersed in nature.

For anyone considering their own set up, here are my ideas and tips for making it work:

## 1 Rome wasn't built in a day

I know this sounds obvious, but we really did take our time developing our site along with our children, as forest school is child-led. So, an area we originally thought would be used for running around has become a tranquil clearing where children bathe in warm summer sun. Go with the flow and see how your site evolves over time and with different cohorts of children.

## 2 Run with your interest or skill

We have a football coach, a wild food expert and a Columbian – they all do their own thing rather than follow a specific 'curriculum', as we

believe forest school is an experience not an activity. We teach our children to kick a ball and give them rudimentary Spanish lessons alongside plant identification and foraging.

## 3 Don't plan – provide

Planning is crucial for forest school risk taking: tool use, fires and freedom to roam and play generally. Rules, resources and safety demos all form part of a plan that the group will have to put together. We have found that, apart from these core activities, which require advance planning and risk assessment, there is no need for a structured plan – nature and the children will offer more than enough.

## 4 Keep it seasonal

Throughout one of the wettest winters in memory, our children have spent their days running freely through the forest, catching raindrops from our parachute shelter, foraging for mushrooms, processing logs for firewood, shoveling excess mud away from muddy areas and replacing it with a layer of woodchip. We focus on building resilience, problem-solving, team-building and bonding in the winter.

In the spring and summer, we observe and study the abundant wildlife around us. We use real field guides and identification books to

find out the names and characteristics of the creepy crawlies and mini-beasts we find, an activity that is not possible in winter. We have wooden logs with numbers and letters that we use to spell out and write our own names and a table heaped with jigsaws, paint brushes and other resources that would not survive winter.

## 5 Be on tap not on top

Being on tap, not on top sums up the best educators. We are nature-led and child-focused. Learning can take place at any moment and we are there to help, guide and support it. If there is an interesting discussion taking place, we can prod and poke with questions that will tease out answers or, even better, more questions.

We still create our own provocations and introduce our own adult-led activities, but the focus of the forest is rarely on knowledge to pass on to our children. More, it's how can we facilitate a love of learning that will last a lifetime. ■

*'What we thought would be quiet areas for reading stories and having conversations turned out to be excellent for climbing frames'*

● Tom Richardson is manager of Naturally Learning Charlestown, part of the Naturally Learning Group of five nurseries in Cornwall. His nursery won the Forest School Award in the NMT Nursery Awards 2019.

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