



# Forest School for Wellbeing

**Supporting children and young people  
with social and emotional needs**

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**Scotswood Garden**  
www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk

Established in 1995, Scotswood Garden is much more than a community garden. It is a longstanding environmental and community organisation and Local Wildlife Site based in the heart of our local neighbourhood. The 2.5 acre natural, wild garden boasts 2 wildflower meadows, heritage orchards, beautiful woodland, 2 ponds, one of the oldest Forest Gardens in the country. We provide a range of education, training, health and wellbeing services for people aged 0-90. We use nature based interventions to support people to gain new skills, inspire creativity, improve mental and physical health and strengthen relationships. We have been delivering Forest School programmes since 2007 and accredited Forest School training since 2013. We are an FSA recognised Forest School Provider.

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All photos by Claire Foreman and Lily Horseman

**"It's a school but different because there's trees to climb. You have a lot more freedom at Forest School, you're allowed to run a lot."**

(Yr 4 student)



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# An Introduction to Forest School and the Breeze Project

**“There’s more to life than what you think, in a really good way... You can set your mind free.”**

(Yr 9 student)



**In Forest School (FS) learners spend regular time in an outdoor, woodland environment leading their own learning through activities such as fire-lighting, cooking, using tools to create wooden objects, den making, creative activities and lots of games.**

Creating a fun, supportive environment and providing children and young people with exciting, achievable tasks, enables them to succeed and build confidence and self-esteem, and develop new skills which support their learning back in the classroom. The term Forest School was originally introduced in the UK in 1993 by Bridgwater College, Somerset, based on what they had learnt from Scandinavian models. Since then Forest School has grown and is now used across the UK and internationally with children, young people and adults of varying ages, needs and abilities<sup>i</sup>. Forest School practice is informed by the work and teachings of educators such as Froebel, Pestalozzi, Margaret MacMillan and Waldorf Steiner, all of whom argued that children learn through doing, and/or highlighted the importance of children’s connection with the natural world. Froebel emphasised the importance of children’s play as ‘the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling’<sup>ii</sup>. Forest School recognises play as an integral part of learning and development through its learner-centred processes.

The Forest School Association (FSA) in consultation with members has produced six principles<sup>iii</sup>:

- ▲ FS is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
- ▲ FS takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- ▲ FS uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.

- ▲ FS aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
- ▲ FS offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- ▲ FS is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

The Breeze Project was conceptualised by Harriet Menter, Scotswood Garden, as a targeted project to support children and young people (CYP) who struggle in the classroom due to social and emotional difficulties. Over the last 3 years we have worked with five schools (one first, two primary and two secondary special schools) with CYP whose social and emotional difficulties stop them from achieving their full potential. The CYP have attended FS sessions once a week for between four months and two and a half years (term time only). The sessions are planned, delivered and evaluated by the Forest School leader and trainer from Scotswood Garden, together with school staff who undertake the training. The project has been evaluated by Newcastle University and has been found to have a significant impact on the CYP’s wellbeing which is why we are sharing our learning with other schools.

In our experience nearly all children and young people love Forest School, this is particularly significant when working with CYP who almost always express negative emotions in relation to school. CYP who struggle with the classroom environment tend to find Forest School an easier place to excel, as it provides more of what they require, for example plenty of space, opportunity for lots of movement, lack of pressure, and opportunity to do things in their own way.



## The benefits of Forest School – what is the evidence?

**“You learn how to get along with people, good teamwork. Working on things you could never normally do in school.”**

(Yr 8 student)

**“This is my den, I actually made this den!”**

(Yr 1 student)

There is a long held belief among many educationalists that nature is good for children but more recently robust research has evidenced the outcomes. Analysis of hundreds of outdoor studies show that experiences in nature improve academic learning, personal development and environmental stewardship<sup>iv</sup>. The evidence further suggests that this boost in learning is achieved through providing a more supportive context: 'Greener environments may foster learning because they are calmer and quieter, because they foster warmer relationships, and because the combination of 'loose parts' and relative autonomy elicits particularly beneficial forms of play.<sup>v</sup>

Forest School has become a popular outdoor learning experience in UK primary schools, as well as some secondary schools, specialist schools and a range of informal learning contexts. As discussed on page 5, Forest School has six principles which underpin its practice and define it from other outdoor learning experiences. A growing body of research evidence has demonstrated the benefits of Forest School including improvements in:

- ▲ Social and emotional development<sup>vi</sup>
- ▲ Academic attainment<sup>vii</sup>
- ▲ School attendance<sup>viii</sup>
- ▲ Environmental attitude and knowledge<sup>x</sup>

Research has further begun to examine how impact is achieved through the six Forest School principles and how this may lead to varied impacts for individual children and young people<sup>x</sup>.

However, with the rapid expansion of Forest School in the UK and internationally, there are concerns about the dilution (or omission) of the six Forest School principles from some practice. McCree has introduced the terms Full Fat FS, FS Lite and FS Ultra Lite, with the warning that 'tokenistic approaches may lead to poor practice<sup>xi</sup>. Whilst Sackville-Ford<sup>xii</sup> has emphasised the need for educators to be clear about what they are trying to achieve through outdoor learning and ask if Forest School or another outdoor experience is the best way of achieving this.

The six Forest School principles can be challenging for schools practically and pedagogically as, outside of early years, practices can be very different to classroom norms. Research does show that the more experience adults have of Forest School, the less anxious they are about the risks involved<sup>xiii</sup> and that they begin to see themselves as facilitators of learning rather than teachers<sup>xiv</sup>. Kemp and Pagden say that for Forest School to be successfully embedded, school leaders need to be clear about its purpose within a whole curriculum approach.<sup>xv</sup>

There is evidence that Forest School can benefit children and young people in a range of ways and that the physical and pedagogical environment may be particularly beneficial for children and young people with social and emotional difficulties, many of whom struggle within the classroom environment. These benefits are not achieved easily but through persistent commitment to the six principles that embody Forest School practice.



# Forest School for wellbeing: practical guidance

The following is not an exhaustive list but drawing on ten years experience of delivering Forest School, three years of the Breeze Project and many conversations with schools, the following identifies some of the important lessons we have learnt about what works well. All schools will be working within their own constraints but to maximise impact we recommend the following:



## Clarify what you are trying to achieve through the project and carefully select children and young people who you think will benefit

Think about what the project offers and how that meets a need identified in the children and young people (CYP). Needs might include:

- ▲ CYP struggling with social interactions
- ▲ CYP struggling with mental health issues especially stress and anxiety\*
- ▲ CYP struggling to make sense of what has happened/is happening to them (trauma, major life events)
- ▲ CYP struggling with the classroom environment

\*This is not a medical intervention and should not be used in place of one.

Forest School complements other school based social and emotional interventions, as it gives CYP opportunities to feel playful, safe and listened to.

## Attendance at Forest School is not conditional

Attendance at Forest School should not be used as a reward or punishment, and a CYP should not be excluded from Forest School due to their behaviour (unless the leader feels s/he cannot keep CYP safe). The aim of the project is to address issues around emotional wellbeing, this is just as important (if not more so) when CYP are struggling. All behaviour is recognised as a communication of a CYP's needs. The CYP we are working with are experiencing a high level of need (as listed above) which we are trying to meet. Excluding the CYP from the session does not allow us to meet these needs and help the CYP improve their behaviour or emotional wellbeing.

## Providing freedom with (some) structure

Children and young people decide how they spend their time during a Forest School session, with adults in a supportive role. This means we do not follow a scheme of work although there are likely to be some routines to sessions, such as coming together to welcome the group, share and discuss plans and reflect on experiences. Some CYP can initially find this freedom difficult (particularly older young people who have become used to structured learning) and may need support to follow their own interests.

## Continuity of staff and children

To address issues of emotional wellbeing we need to establish a relationship of trust and shared understandings between all members (adults and CYP) of the Forest School group. Bringing in new people (CYP or staff) can undermine this process and cause anxiety for CYP in the group, so it should be handled carefully with thought and preparation. However, in appropriate circumstances it can be a positive, providing opportunities for existing members to become 'experts' and to help newer members.

## Timetabling the sessions

Longer sessions (2.5 hours or more) lead to greater impact as CYP have time to really get immersed in their activities, develop skills, work through issues (disagreements with peers), stick with a problem (like lighting a fire) and achieve success. If a session is shorter than 2 hours the outcomes will be compromised. Not all CYP will be able to manage a full day initially so it may be necessary to build up to it. In our experience we have started to see impact after one term, however, to really embed these changes we recommend (at least) a full school year.

Transitions: Many of the CYP we work with struggle with school and/or have a difficult home life, therefore the end of the session can often create anxiety or sadness which is communicated through withdrawal or attention seeking behaviour.

This should be treated sensitively and with understanding. Coming together for food and concentrating on plans for the following week can help. CYP may struggle to adapt back to the stricter environment of the classroom and this should be taken into account when timetabling the session.

## High adult to student ratio

Our research has found that higher staff ratio (1 adult to 2 or 3 children) leads to a bigger impact on the CYP involved. Being available to support CYP through challenges related to activities or personal interactions can help in the development and practice of skills and attributes like perseverance, emotional regulation, empathy and compromise. Being there to support CYP to get positive outcomes will allow them to achieve, contributing to a positive self-narrative. We recognise that this places a big demand on staff time but believe that this kind of targeted support which meets the high level of need in the CYP and leads to significant outcomes, justifies this investment.

## Finding a suitable site

A good Forest School site is not too manicured, has trees, space, a variety of different terrains, and an abundance of loose parts (sticks, leaves, mud, pine cones etc.) offering lots of different play and exploration opportunities. CYP enjoy having spaces that are free from adult gaze, opportunities to climb and run, and a chance to observe a variety of fauna and flora.

If you are looking for a site in Newcastle upon Tyne, please see: [www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-schools-research](http://www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-schools-research)

## Forest School for wellbeing: measuring impact using a theory of change

When preparing to assess the impact of Forest School there are a number of possible approaches that may be more or less appropriate according to your context, time available and the children and young people (CYP), families and staff you are working with. We have used a *theory of change* approach, which articulates how stakeholders (schools and their partners) anticipate change will happen, step by step, and evidences whether or not this happens. Theory of change allows you to focus on your own context and CYP, whilst evidencing outcomes and impact.

**"All the children have had successes at Forest School and that helps to build their resilience in class where they often struggle."**

(Senior school leader)



## How to formulate your own theory of change

### What outcomes do you hope to achieve from Forest School?

In order to create your own theory of change you will need to identify what outcomes you hope to achieve from Forest School. These could be for the CYP, families, staff and/or school culture. Examples include development of CYP's social and emotional skills, readiness to learn or sense of wellbeing, staff to be confident Forest School practitioners or for Forest School to be an integrated part of how you address wellbeing in school.

### What are the steps of change that you would expect to see?

Drawing on your experience and knowledge of your CYP and context, as well as relevant research about Forest School and child development, how might you expect to move from where you, the CYP and staff are now to where you want to be? What do you expect to happen at Forest School (FS) and what impacts will you expect to see?

A steps of change diagram (similar to a flow chart) can be useful in explaining this process for each strand of desired impact. To the right is an example of a strand focused on developing CYP's social and emotional skills.

For further details of the Breeze Project theory of change evaluation see: Tiplady, L. (2018) *Impacting on young people's emotional wellbeing through Forest School: The Breeze Project, pilot year*. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University. Downloadable at: [www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides)

CYP attend FS sessions weekly during term time



CYP have opportunities for group work and play (with CYP and adults) at FS



Adults model good social and emotional skills in interactions



CYP supported by adults in their interactions with others (provide positive vocabulary, encourage empathy, praise positive behaviours etc)



CYP encouraged to reflect on and internalise positive interactions and narratives



CYP form friendships at FS – are able to show empathy, negotiate and enjoy interactions with peers



CYP able to use social and emotional skills developed at FS in school and home life



### What evidence or data do you need?

Think about what evidence might support or refute each of your anticipated steps of change? What data are you already collecting (for example attendance, behavioural data or social and emotional assessments) that could be used? What could be integrated into sessions (For example opportunities for staff to do detailed observations of CYP)?

### What feedback and reflections can you collect about Forest School?

Providing opportunities for CYP to reflect on their experiences of Forest School should be integrated into each session, however, CYP with high social and emotional needs can find this difficult and so it is important to provide a range of opportunities to reflect and also to draw on the perceptions of staff and where possible parents/carers.

Below is a table of some possibilities and things to consider. This list is not exhaustive; there are various possibilities which may be applicable to your context and steps of change.

Evidence	Things to consider
Attendance of CYP	Do the targeted CYP struggle with attendance, is FS likely to impact?
Social and emotional assessment/self-assessment	Is this part of the school's usual processes? If not, could it be used elsewhere? Are there the resources and expertise to administer appropriately?
Planning and evaluation of FS sessions	This is integral to the FS approach. Do staff have time to complete?
Observations of FS sessions (or parts of)	Can a member of staff observe and take notes whilst others take responsibility for supporting the CYP?
Interviews (with CYP, school staff, parents/carers)	It is important that these are appropriate to the interviewee. What questions will you ask? Will these relate to the steps of change? CYP may find it difficult to engage, consider using photographs, FS diaries or other visual methods.  How will interviews be recorded? Consider that interviews can be time consuming to carry out and analyse.
Questionnaires (with CYP, school staff, parents/carers)	Again need to be appropriate to who will be completing it, consider using visual questionnaires for example smiley faces or blob trees <a href="http://www.blobtree.com">www.blobtree.com</a>  What questions will you ask? Will these relate to the steps of change?



### Reviewing your theory of change

Does the evidence support or refute the anticipated steps of change and if so which steps of change? Is there evidence of progress along the steps of change? Which steps of change are supported by multiple pieces of evidence? Have unexpected things happened? Do the steps of change need altering?



**It's having to be quite reflective on what we've done, rather than just getting through the day ... it made you examine the progress and see six months ago they weren't able to do this or that." (Teacher)**

# Primary school student: Polly



Polly is an adopted child who had a disrupted early life and struggles with relationships. She is a bright, sociable child who has extremely high levels of anxiety which makes it hard for her to engage in learning at school and regulate her behaviour at home. Polly attends a mainstream school where she struggles to keep up with her peers academically. She has had a lot of therapeutic support in the past and receives a range of additional support in school.



Polly attends half-day Forest School sessions weekly with a small mixed aged group of children from her school. Polly had attended a few Forest School sessions elsewhere and was immediately keen to give everything a go, enjoying the opportunity to follow her own interests. Polly proved herself to be an excellent play facilitator for younger children in the group, some of whom struggled with turn taking or listening to other children's ideas during play, resulting in disputes. Polly has a natural ability to gently direct play so that everyone is involved and feels listened to and included. Her enthusiasm for whichever activity is happening also shined through and other children are keen to be part of what is happening. Another child in the group with ASD, started off playing exclusively by himself, and found it very hard to understand how to join in with the other children's play. When he tried, it would sometimes end badly as he was very fixed in his ideas. Polly was able to facilitate his gradual integration into their games and play. She did this without prompting, and probably unaware of what she was doing, reflecting her generous, inclusive spirit and her real joy in playing.

School staff reported that Polly found it very hard to accept praise as her early childhood experience had left her with very low self-esteem. However, during one of the sessions the Forest School leader reflected back to Polly that she was really good at helping all the children to play, she smiled and nodded and carried on playing (not rejecting the praise as she would do at school).

**"Polly is able to smooth things over when there are tensions between others and uses distraction, cajoling and compromise to achieve this. This leadership and confidence has been a pleasure to see emerging from Polly".** (Polly's Forest School report)

**"Coming to FS has made a huge difference to Polly. On the FS day, there are no problems getting her up, dressed and out of the house ( totally different to other days! ) and is noticeably much calmer, more relaxed and more playful in the evenings.**

**We think FS is raising her self-esteem which was at rock bottom. Now she knows she is able to achieve and successfully manage relationships. She is proud of what she learns and makes which is so lovely to see. Her teacher has also commented that Polly is happier and more confident in school which he attributes to coming to FS. I have no doubt that without FS, it would be a real struggle to get Polly into school at all".** (Parent)

## What worked for Polly at Forest School?

▲ **Setting:** At school Polly is lacking in confidence and is often withdrawn. The different expectations of the outdoor setting and the successful experiences she already had at another Forest School seemed to increase her confidence. Polly appeared more relaxed and less anxious in the setting and therefore better able to engage in activities.

▲ **Pedagogy:** The child led pedagogy of Forest School allowed Polly to choose to engage in tasks she was interested in and which she felt she was good at. Polly had time to play and this was encouraged and valued by staff away from the constraints of the curriculum.

▲ **Holistic development:** The mixed aged group allowed Polly to become a leader and a helper, a role she relished, and to be in a group where she was more skilled or knowledgeable than her peers. Reflecting on achievements through review and reflection at the end of sessions, choosing photographs to put in a Forest School book at school working with the school SENDCo and support staff to celebrate her achievements and taking items home to show family, helped to reinforce these achievements as part of the way Polly views herself.



# Secondary school student: Fred



Fred attends a secondary special school for young people with physical and learning disabilities. He has a global developmental delay and cerebral palsy which affects the left side of his body.



Fred attended weekly Forest School sessions for a full day with a mixed aged group of students from his school. When Fred started Forest School sessions he was quiet and withdrawn but with support from school staff and project staff he learnt many new skills including tying knots, making shelters with tarpaulins, lighting fires and using tools to make wooden objects. Fred seemed to get a lot out of the sessions and his confidence appeared to increase. He was prepared to give all the skills a go, including tying knots, whittling and using a flint and steel to light a fire despite the fact that these are all things he might have struggled with due to his limited use of his left hand.

Even though it took Fred a good five minutes to get a safety glove on his left hand, he did not let this stop him from becoming an expert whittler. He made spreading knives, a cat, and various computer game related objects. Many people with unilateral cerebral palsy like Fred will be given therapy that involves them practising bi-lateral activity to improve coordination. If these tasks are fun and engaging to the participants they improve more quickly. Whilst this was never the aim of the Forest School sessions Fred's interest meant that it happened spontaneously.

**"Fred is much happier at FS than at school. He is more chatty and engaged. His LSA has reported that he really looks forward to it. He helped Bob to make the shelter. In the afternoon he cut willow and whittled it. He struggled a bit with whittling but persevered and did well. He cooked an apple on the fire."** (Notes from session evaluation week 3)

**"He can get frustrated with things at school, like sports because he's only got the use of one hand and he can be slower than the others and he does get frustrated but he's never expressed those frustrations about Forest School, he's just so positive about it."** (Parent)

**"He has enjoyed Forest School so much this year and it's one thing he does tell me about. He's told me how he's learnt to light fires and the carving, he's brought things home that he's made and he's so proud of them and so positive and he's often not positive about things."** (Parent)

Fred is enthusiastic about Forest School and school staff and his parent report that the sessions have a positive impact on Fred's mental wellbeing.

**"It's good ... it's a whole different experience, more things to do, you're still learning but it's not the same (as school)."** (Fred)

**"He loves being outside all day, which is great because he has a lot of anxieties about being outside, it's very difficult to get him to go anywhere but not at Forest School. He really enjoys it and he looks forward to going ... Well he's not anxious on a Friday, he looks forward to it and I don't have to shout at him to get him out of bed, other days it can be murder to get him out but not when he has Forest School."** (Parent)

## What worked for Fred at Forest School?

▲ **Setting:** Fred seemed to find being in the natural environment relaxing, even though his parent said he was often scared to leave the house and generally had anxieties about being outside.

▲ **Pedagogy:** Because students were self-directing there was no wrong or right and Fred was able to define what success was in each task he undertook, there was no pressure of getting something "right". Fred seemed to find the activities genuinely engaging and therefore was prepared to work hard to complete them.

▲ **Long-term programme and long sessions:** Fred attended full day sessions for a school year which allowed him plenty of time to work on his chosen projects. Returning weekly gave Fred time to develop his skills and see how he was improving.

## For further information please see:

- ▲ FSA  
[www.forestschoollassociation.org](http://www.forestschoollassociation.org)
- ▲ Scotswood Garden  
[www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk](http://www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk)
- ▲ Scotswood Garden Forest School Training  
[www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-school-training-newcastle](http://www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-school-training-newcastle)
- ▲ Information on possible Forest School sites in Newcastle upon Tyne  
[www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-schools-research](http://www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/learn/forest-schools-research)
- ▲ Froebel Trust  
[www.froebel.org.uk](http://www.froebel.org.uk)
- ▲ Blob Tree reflection tools  
[www.blobtree.com](http://www.blobtree.com)
- ▲ Impacting on young people's emotional wellbeing through Forest School: The Breeze Project, pilot year. Downloadable at:  
[www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides)
- ▲ Theory-based Methodology: Using theories of change for development, research and evaluation. Downloadable at:  
[www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/publications/guides)

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