



# This is our classroom

A teacher's guide to Forest School at Kent Country Parks

# What is Forest School?

Forest School is a long-term sustainable approach to **outdoor learning**. It **builds self esteem** and **independence** in children and young people through the **exploration** of, and **experiences in the natural world**.

## A natural guide

Nature is the teacher and participants will develop a sense of awe, admiration and love for the outdoor environment.

## Long term

Delivered by a trained Forest School practitioner, regular sessions mean that skills are integrated into children's everyday lives.

## An holistic approach

The programme looks closely at all areas of development, including physical, linguistic, intelligence and social.

## A tailored programme

Each programme is unique to the group and responds to the needs of the children within the group.

## Practical experience at the heart of development

Practitioners are given time and space to observe the children. This means they can then tailor activities to each learner, so they gain a sense of achievement; a rewarding way to develop skills and interests.

## Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning helps children and young people to value the freedom of choice; an invaluable skill throughout life.

## In the heart of Kent

We offer Forest School at Shorne Woods, Brockhill, Lullingstone and Trosley Country Parks.

# The history of Forest School

The original concept of Forest School began in Sweden in the 1950s and has since developed throughout other Scandinavian and European countries. During the 1980s the Forest School concept was established in Denmark for pre-school children, as part of their Early Years education. The Danish Forest School was visited by a group of students and lecturers from Bridgewater College in Somerset. The group were so inspired that they brought the concept back to the UK and began what is now recognised as Forest School.

Since the 1990s the Forest School initiative has grown exponentially throughout the UK, with many counties now offering some form of Forest School provision. Kent County Council's Country Parks have been offering Forest School at Shorne Woods Country Park since 2006 and this is now available at Brockhill, Lullingstone and Trosley Country Parks. Kent Country Parks' education rangers hold advanced Level Three Forest School qualifications.

*"...A good Forest School programme evolves and develops over time, in tandem with the growing skills and confidence of both participants and Forest School Leaders..."*

(Forest School Scotland)



## How does outdoor education compare to Forest School?

	Outdoor education	Forest School
Role of leader	Instructor	Facilitator – Level Three qualified Forest School practitioner
Time	One-off visit	Long term and regular
Group size	Up to 30	No more than 15
Trust and consolidation	Leader instructs group, limited involvement with individuals	Leader builds trust over a period of time
Space	Free play often restricted due to group size	Opportunities for self-initiated learning
Learning	Usually structured activities to meet specific group objectives	Activities tailored to meet the needs of individuals
Risk	Limited opportunities to take appropriate levels of risk	Opportunities to take an appropriate level of risk

## The benefits of Forest School

Forest School programmes can be **tailor made** to suit all **ages and abilities** and contribute to the **holistic development** of children and young people.

### Benefits of children being outdoors

There are countless pieces of international research that highlight the importance of children spending time in natural outdoor spaces.

### Physical health benefits

- increased oxygen levels outside increase brain function
- increased gross motor movement reduces chance of obesity and increases bone density (reducing chances of osteoporosis)
- sunlight increases vitamin D production
- increased resilience to illness.

### Mental health benefits

Spending time in green spaces reduces cortisol (a stress chemical) levels in the brain and therefore has a calming influence. The reduction in cortisol also increases receptivity for building neural pathways (learning) in the brain.

### Social benefits

Research suggests that in natural play areas the leaders tend to be the most intelligent and imaginative. When playing outside, communication, teambuilding and language skills are developed.

### Risk awareness

Playing outside allows children to learn about risk assessment and risk taking. Children that are exposed to acceptable levels of risk at a young age are less likely to make bad judgements in the future.

### Behaviour

Due to the calming effect on the brain and the increase in physical space outside, improved behaviour is often noticed. Research is taking place into ADHD and the outdoors, as ADHD symptoms are not as apparent when children are playing in a natural space.



*“The whole session was very **inspirational** and we came away with many **ideas** to **improve** our **outside play** and **forest exploration**.”*

(Sue Marrable, Sticky Fingers Pre-School)

### Social development

The very nature of Forest School experiences means that they often encourage co-operative working in groups. For example, an individual might be lifting a log to build a shelter and enlist help because they are struggling, or see someone else struggling and offer to help without being asked. These kinds of activities help young people to identify their own strengths, recognise the value that they bring to relationships and consequently learn to value the contributions made by their peers. Forest School provides endless opportunities for co-operation, social interactions and sharing.

Teambuilding activities form a key part of Forest School sessions for older groups. For example: working in pairs to saw wood to make a mallet, group fire lighting, cooking competitions and problem-solving challenges.

### Physical development

The Forest School setting gives young people space and freedom within defined boundaries. It gives them the opportunity to run, balance, jump and climb and consequently helps them to become more spatially aware. Physical challenges such as tree climbing, shelter building and obstacle courses give younger children the opportunity to experiment with their changing size and strength. They are given the opportunity to develop their fine and gross motor skills by handling things appropriately. For example: moving logs, playing pass the pine cone, climbing trees, whittling wood and tying knots.

### Intellectual development

The Forest School environment is the perfect setting for the development of an enquiring mind. The journey to the country park, the walk to the Forest School site and the setting itself provides endless opportunities for young people to ask questions. Whose footprints are those? Why does the wood in the fire turn black? Why do the leaves turn a different colour? The regularity of Forest School sessions enables young people to experience seasonal changes and consequently make comparisons. The Forest School practitioner will not spend a session teaching about a particular subject but instead weave the learning process into a story or activity.

For older groups the woodland setting provides the opportunity to participate in conservation tasks and learn practical skills including woodcraft and survival skills, and develop environmental knowledge and understanding.

### Language and linguistic skills

Forest School promotes communication skills. It provides the opportunity for young people to express their feelings, ideas, thoughts and needs orally through exploratory and imaginative play and creative activities. By having direct contact with the natural world and being able to experience things first hand, the Forest School area can spark a young person's natural curiosity and provide ideas and observations to share through language.

### Emotional development

The outdoor environment provides the time, space, peace and freedom for young people to establish deep thought processes. The Forest School ethos and setting provide an environment where they are able to develop the strength and resilience they may require to cope with emotional difficulties. Safety games encourage young people to take responsibility / show concern for one another. Review and reflection time encourages them to consider the impact other people have on their Forest School session. For example, they may be asked if they can describe how somebody has helped them.

### Building self confidence

Young people have the time to become familiar and confident within their Forest School setting and accustomed to the routines associated with it. The familiar structure and content of Forest School aims to provide stability, security and consistency. Once the boundaries are known there is time for freedom of thought and the opportunity to take acceptable risks. Confidence may be boosted by learning new skills. For example: how to build a shelter, how to toast a marshmallow in the fire, or overcoming a fear or dislike. Forest School practitioners set small achievable tasks so the participant always feels a sense of achievement.



## Forest School for Early Years Foundation children

Run over six weeks, Kent Country Parks' **Seedlings** Forest School programme has been specifically designed for Early Years children. It includes **sensory, bushcraft** and **play-based** activities, and games and songs, all of which encourage the children to build relationships and self-esteem.

The programme provides the opportunity for young children to improve their balance and co-ordination, work together on activities and learn to take turns. It also helps them to develop an appreciation and understanding of their woodland setting and overcome any apprehensions about dirt or getting wet. The programme will evolve as the children develop. Each programme is unique to the group and responds to the needs of the children within the group.

Forest School is the perfect setting to observe, identify and consequently support and develop young children's schemas. Schemas are the patterns of play exhibited by young children during the early stages of their learning and development. Working together, parents/guardians, staff and Forest School practitioners can provide more purposeful play through recognition of preferred learning styles.



## Some examples of supporting and extending schemas at Forest School

<b>Schema</b>	Forest School activities
<b>Rotation</b>	Dropping stones in the water to make ripples, games around the fire and mixing ingredients for campfire cooking
<b>Circulatory</b>	Counting tree rings, stirring muddy mixtures and making dream catchers
<b>Enclosure / enveloping</b>	Rolling in leaves, den making, making a fairy bed, collecting leaves and stones and treasure hunts
<b>Connection</b>	Tying knots, journey sticks, bracelets, kites and daisy chains
<b>Filling</b>	Collecting wood for the fire in a bag, pouring water into containers, filling dens with leaves, woodland furniture
<b>Transportation</b>	Transporting a story from one place to another, moving across rope bridges and floating things downstream
<b>Trajectory</b>	Tracking, looking at levers, pulleys, ropes and string
<b>Boundary</b>	Woodland obstacle course, feeding fire, and making jewellery / woodland furniture using lashings

**Our findings:** In the programmes we have run at Kent Country Parks, we have observed many positive effects. A programme for pre-school pupils run over a year highlighted that regular visits to the woods had supported the school in achieving **improved** Early Years Foundation Stage Profile **results**.

Another programme run with a Day Nursery over seven months showed that **independence** of the very young could be encouraged through making them **responsible** for each other and for taking the equipment to the Forest School site. The programme was instrumental in supporting creative play and increased **communication** skills in those with and without English as a first language.

*"Everyone felt as though they had achieved something....even the quietest members of the group could not stop talking about it on the way home."* – **Group Leader**

## Forest School for primary children

Primary school children seem to **thrive** in a woodland setting, as they are still young enough to **enjoy games and stories** while also being able to develop **practical skills** and take on a greater level of **responsibility**.

At Kent Country Parks' Forest School primary-aged children are encouraged to consider health and safety issues and develop their own risk assessments and safety codes. With careful supervision, they will be introduced to a range of tools and, with assistance and close supervision, use these to make objects such as mallets, pegs and pencils.

Group tasks and team-building activities will be regularly undertaken to encourage social interaction and communication, and the levels of challenge are adapted according to abilities.

Although there is no prescribed list of activities at Forest School, many National Curriculum programmes of study will be met through the Forest School programme and themes of study can be brought into sessions and developed back at school.

Like the Early Years groups, the primary participants will also be given time for self-initiation wherever possible.

*"Forest School gave our children the **freedom** to develop their own **interests** and **imagination**s at their own pace, without the pressures of a busy classroom and full timetable. It allowed them time and space to investigate and discover the world around them, **think for themselves** and **challenge themselves** both **physically** and **mentally**. Our children came out of the experience more **confident to try out new experiences**, keener to **investigate independently** and showing a greater interest in their surroundings."*

**Stelling Minnis Primary School**

## Forest School for year 6-7 transition

The Education Ranger Team is able to work with school staff looking to find **innovative ways** to support pupils make the transition between **Year 6 and Year 7**.

A team-building day incorporating Forest School activities can be run for the beginning of the new school year. This could be extended into a longer-term programme to support co-operation and communication skills over the first few months. Extensions can include campfire cooking and woodland crafts using traditional hand tools.



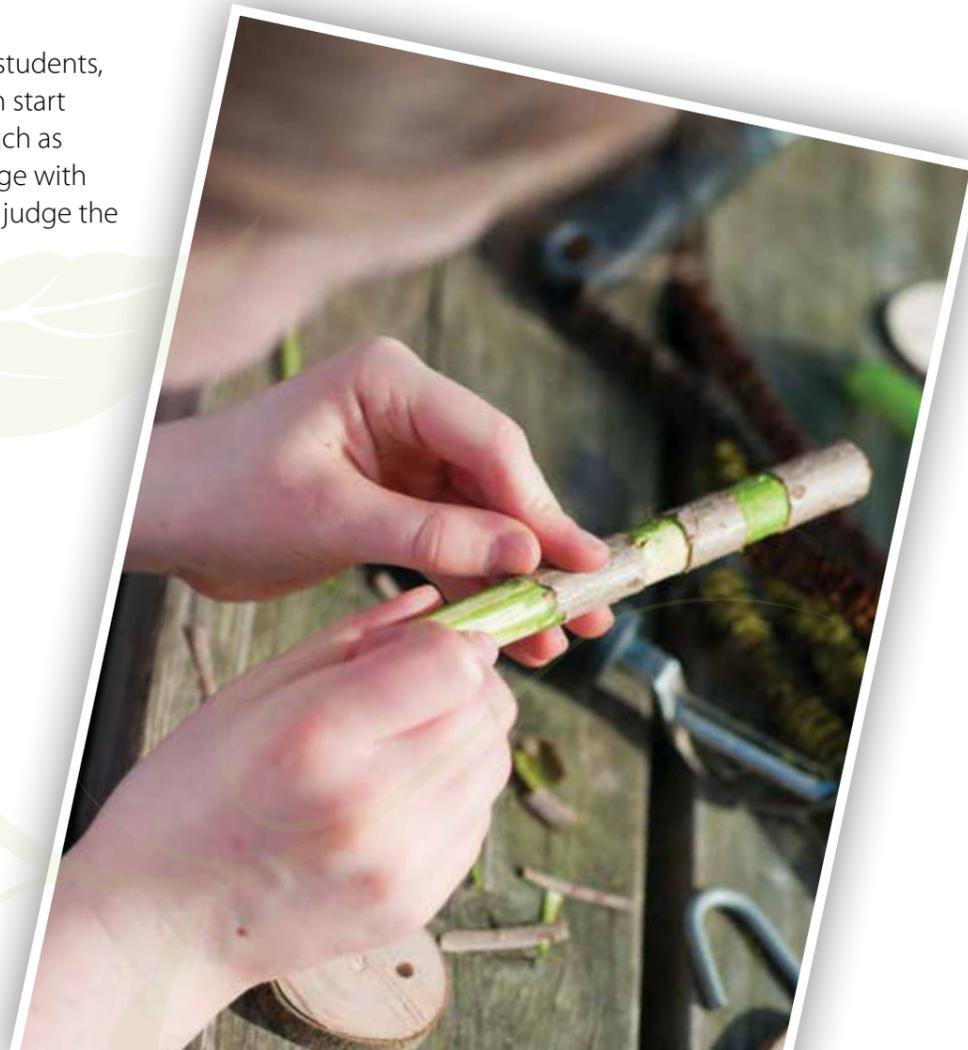
## Forest School for secondary pupils

Forest School has been shown to be successful with all age groups. At secondary level it can provide an **enriched element of the curriculum** and can support many areas of the UK National Curriculum. Forest School is particularly suited to those who may struggle with the school environment and provides them with a setting where they can excel at practical tasks while learning.

The activities within a Forest School programme can also fit schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, as the students are learning new skills. Some activities, such as making a bench, can take place over a number of weeks and can cover units such as materials, mathematics and design technology.

When working with secondary school students, the Forest School practitioner will often start with something a bit more involved, such as whistle making or fire lighting, to engage with the students. The practitioner will then judge the

students' progress and then allocate activities accordingly. All these activities are very controlled and with a maximum number of 15 students, the practitioner is able to pay every one the correct amount of attention.



## Examples of curriculum links

### Art

Mud hedgehogs, wild masks, tree faces, willow work.

### English language & communication

Learning names of flora and fauna, storytelling from collected woodland items, introducing new words, capturing the imagination of children, development of more sophisticated language and vocabulary, use of sensory experiences as a developmental tool or stimulus.

Early Years groups may like to put an emphasis on descriptive words such as squelchy mud, cracking ice and snapping sticks in a combination of music / sound and literacy / English.

### Music

Making woodland instruments, listening for animal noises as well as others present in the environment e.g. road / air traffic etc.

### History

Research history of woodland / uses of wood (ship building) and woodland site itself.

### Design and technology

Shelter building, animal homes, cooking, design boats to test on the pond, wood working, using tools.

### Drama

Acting out woodland minibeasts, woodland plays.

### Maths

Finding shapes, surveying numbers of minibeasts, working out the girth of trees / speed of flow of streams, use of maths in bushcrafts (measuring, counting, size).

### ICT

Geocaching, using video camera.

### Geography

Map making, looking at human impact on woodland.

### Science

Food chains, lifecycles, habitats, taxonomy.

### Physical education

Woodland obstacle course, animal actions (jump like a grasshopper), climb a tree. Simply walking to the Forest School area can help develop stamina.



## Forest School and SEN groups

Forest School strives to be inclusive, **catering for all** needs and abilities. The Forest School ethos helps pupils to succeed by providing the opportunity to undertake achievable tasks. It is therefore an excellent medium for pupils with autism spectrum disorders.

The Forest School practitioner provides activities which aim to build confidence and encourage social interaction and communication in an environment which is different from the classroom or school. The programmes we offer can also be beneficial for students in nurture groups who may have social difficulties, as it removes them from the setting which they find stressful.

The Forest School practitioner takes time to observe pupils during their activity and is careful to select tasks which support their personal and emotional development.



## Forest School for students with emotional and behavioural disorders

Students who have emotional or behavioural difficulties (EBD) often have issues which are deep rooted and have to be addressed carefully. The **environment** in which Forest School takes place has been shown to be beneficial to these students as it provides a **calming** atmosphere for learning and interacting.

Often situations arise in schools that inflame students with such difficulties and we hope that the students will learn to use the outdoors to calm their feelings. Forest School practitioners are trained to deal with potentially volatile situations and often the relationship between a practitioner and student is different to that with a teacher in a formal school setting. Generally the practitioner is on first name terms with the students and will try to relate more to the student and provide an outlet or simply a listening ear.

Working with EBD students has shown that Forest School opens up career opportunities that students may not have realised were there. This can then encourage the students to progress academically.

The Forest School practitioner can work with the students to provide a portfolio of work which can then be used as evidence of coursework for a number of qualifications.

*"The **ripple effect** of Forest School:*

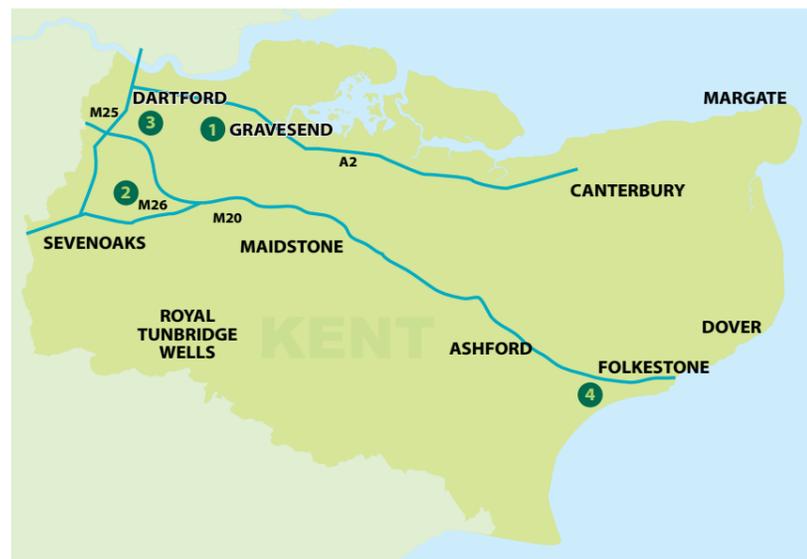
*Owing to children's enthusiasm for Forest School, they bring the experience home. This can result in **changes to out-of-school routines and behaviour**, with parents taking their children outdoors more."*

**- Forestry Commission & NEF, 2006.**

## Forest School at Kent Country Parks

Forest School can take place at the following country parks, many of which are set in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI):

- 1 Shorne Woods Country Park**  
Brewers Road  
Gravesend  
DA12 3HX
- 2 Lullingstone Country Park**  
Kingfisher Bridge  
Castle Road  
Eynsford  
DA4 0JF
- 3 Trosley Country Park**  
Waterlow Road  
Vigo Village  
Meopham  
DA13 0SG
- 4 Brockhill Country Park**  
Sandling Road  
Saltwood  
CT21 4HL



### Free Forest School sessions

Each year we offer 25 free Forest School visits to Trosley and Lullingstone Country Parks. These are funded by Natural England. Please contact Kent Country Parks service at [kentcountryparklearning@kent.gov.uk](mailto:kentcountryparklearning@kent.gov.uk) for more information.

### We can come to you

If you have a suitable setting, we can come to you to run the Forest School sessions on site. The area you use for Forest School doesn't have to be large and our qualified education rangers can give you guidance as to where and how this can be done.

*"Hands on activities, professional staff, course delivered in an interesting way, I never lost interest in the topic at any point. No areas for improvement, these two ladies are fantastic at delivering an inspiring, exciting and interesting course. Thank you both for a wonderful day and I will recommend this course to other people working in schools" - Inset participant.*



### Forest School consultancy

We can also offer a consultancy service to enable you to plan how to use your own school grounds for Forest School activities. We can also provide products such as seating and fire pits to help set up your forest school area.

### Training opportunities

Kent Country Parks offer both accredited and non accredited Forest School training programmes for teaching and support staff. These courses are regularly held at Kent Country Parks sites across the county, but can also be delivered in your school/setting. For more information and to book please refer to Kent CPD online. [www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/cpdonline](http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/cpdonline)



# Kent Country Parks

## Contact

If you'd like to know more about Forest School, we would be happy to talk to you on 0300 333 6031 / email: kentcountryparks@kent.gov.uk or you can find out more and enquire online at [www.kent.gov.uk/kentcountryparks](http://www.kent.gov.uk/kentcountryparks)

## About Multifor

This work was funded via the MULTIFOR Project ([www.multifor.eu](http://www.multifor.eu)). MULTIFOR (03-016FR) Cross border cooperation programme 2007-2013 co-financed by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund ERDF) within the framework of the European INTERREG IV A 2 Seas.

### A PROJECT BASED ON FOUR CROSS BORDER OBJECTIVES

To improve the understanding of the impact of global changes which include the effects of climate change, forest management and pest diseases in forests.

To adapt and optimise sustainable forest management practices by experimental actions conducted in the field and by increasing awareness of forest owners and other forest users.

To reconcile the economic with the ecological and social role of forests through investigating how woodland sites might provide a sustainable source of renewable energy, whilst continuing to manage biodiversity and allow public access.

To disseminate the results and knowledge, collected during the lifetime of the project, between local stakeholders, academics and the general public.



