



CAROLINE JOHNSON IS MANAGING DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER OF STABLES DAYCARE LTD.

# Should we offer forest school?

In 1993 the forest school approach arrived in the UK. Originating in Scandinavia, this inspirational philosophy recognises the importance of children's contact with nature. The holistic and sensory learning it offers provides inclusive opportunities for all children through practical activities delivered in an outdoor environment. It encourages children to take manageable risks by exposing them to multiple challenges, and provides plenty of excitement. The shifting weather patterns and seasons offer intrigue and much to discover.

## What do children learn?

The forest school curriculum is relaxed, but effective. It utilises the outdoor environment as children's third educator, one that promotes independence, encourages teamwork, helps to develop gross motor skills and raises self-esteem. It is inclusive of the unique learning styles of children – everyone is given the tools to succeed and, unlike conventional learning, there is no 'wrong', so children cannot fail. They undertake a range of practical activities and carry out small, achievable tasks.

For these reasons, forest school can be particularly effective for children who do not learn well in a classroom environment. Taking children outside of traditional spaces removes academic pressures and allows them to play to their strengths, while learning at their own pace. Children are given opportunities to problem-solve, be creative and imaginative, and show enterprising behaviour. Sharing tools and participating in play helps to teach the children about working together as a group, and allows them to extend their physical abilities. This learning style helps children gain confidence, which in turn promotes their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Being outdoors at a forest school also presents hazards and teaches those taking part to naturally assess risks. Children are prompted to take responsibility for decisions when they are encouraged to make sensible and informed choices about how to deal with unfamiliar and unpredictable situations. This creates conditions where children are also able to test their own abilities and challenge their boundaries. This results in children becoming confident in utilising large natural spaces, as well as encouraging them to develop a relationship with the natural world, which will in turn help to protect the environment for generations to come.

## What do I need?

To run a forest school, settings require more than just a piece of land. Although currently training is not funded by the government or any other agency, you must have a qualified forest school leader to lead the sessions in order to be fully insured. There are various levels of forest school qualification, beginning with the Level 1 Introduction to Forest School, which is a perfect starting point for those to whom it is a new concept. The two-day training course

will give you a solid understanding of the philosophy and give you ample ideas about activities and the learning opportunities it presents.

The Level 2 Forest School Assistant Training is for those wanting to assist at a forest school and takes four days. This is an ideal training level to choose if you want to gain some experience of forest school sessions before embarking on the full forest school leader course. Once you have gained this Level 2 qualification, you can choose to top up to Level 3.

The nationally recognised level of qualification required to lead at a forest school is the Level 3 Forest School Leader Training. This more comprehensive course can take up to one year to finish and involves completing two assessments, one on practical skills and another on delivery. Additionally students are required to run a six-week forest school programme with a group of children in an outdoor setting, preferably woodlands, to complete the tasks. Students on this level of training must ensure they already have a two-day paediatric first aid qualification before they start their programme. There are various providers offering this forest school training, which can be found with just a quick internet search.



74%

*UK children who enjoy less than one hour of outdoor play each day.*

SOURCE: [bit.ly/23UgoW7](https://bit.ly/23UgoW7)



## ASSESSING RISK

During the training, there are procedures that need to be completed prior to taking children into the woods. Prior to choosing the outdoor area, risk assessments must be completed, with daily assessments carried out thereafter, before any child enters the area. Any policies already in place, or that apply to a typical setting, will need to be revised to suit the outdoor learning environment and meet regulations. Permissions will need to be sought from the parents of all children attending and a full explanation of the ethos, aims, learning objectives, activities, safety and safeguarding procedures needs to be provided for parents in advance.

## Planning ahead

Planning activities and applying them to forest school takes careful thought. For instance, children in the early years

will need games about boundaries and how important it is to set and keep them. Younger children will need larger tasks broken down, in terms of expectations, learning outcomes and timespan, to make them more manageable. All children will need to learn about safety when collecting materials and using tools.

Once a schedule of activities has been devised, purchasing adequate equipment also requires due consideration, and you must take into account children's ages and abilities. When purchasing equipment, consider the differing weather conditions and remember your policies and terms and conditions so that parents know exactly what to expect. Doing so will also help you to separate what you can provide from what you need parents to supply, for example, the clothing children need to wear when they attend.

## The business case

Offering a forest school education to children at your setting has potential financial benefits. It may encourage new clients to enrol their children into the setting, while your existing children may want to stay for longer days to enjoy all the forest activities on offer – and, of course, the forest sessions can be charged as extra-curricular activities in addition to the setting's usual fees. Forest school education, alongside the many educational benefits already discussed, is a fashionable philosophy that good-quality early years and primary settings want to be involved in.

## Final thoughts

If you take the plunge and offer forest school sessions, the children will follow your lead – so be excited to take on new challenges and experience enriched learning; be enthusiastic, connect with nature, enjoy the fresh air and embrace

## KEY POINTS

### The what, how and why of forest school provision...

- In forest school sessions the outdoor environment is children's third educator, one that promotes independence, encourages teamwork, helps to develop gross motor skills and raises confidence and self-esteem.
- There are various levels of forest school qualification, from the Level 1 Introduction to Forest School to the Level 3 Forest School Leader Training. Remember, you must have a qualified forest school leader leading your sessions in order to be fully insured.
- Give careful thought to purchasing adequate equipment. Take into account children's ages and abilities, consider the differing weather conditions and remember your policies and terms and conditions, so that parents know exactly what they need to provide.
- Alongside their numerous educational benefits, forest school sessions may attract new clients, and can be charged as extra-curricular activities in addition to your usual fees.

the environment. You may find that there is little room for strict routine and scheduling when learning outdoors, and this can be beneficial, in balance. But vitally, be prepared to run with whatever the environment dictates, because that's half the fun.

***“When purchasing equipment, consider the differing weather conditions and remember your terms and conditions so that parents know exactly what to expect.”***