

Children deserve to grow
and learn in a place
& alongside
a force that is as wild
and alive as they are.

-Nicolette Sowder



Forest School

A photograph of a person walking through a forest. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants, and is carrying a backpack. They are walking on a path that is partially covered in shadows. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in green grass and fallen leaves. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

“THE BEST
CLASSROOM AND
THE RICHEST
CLASSROOM IS
ROOFED ONLY BY
THE SKY.” –
MARGET MC
MILLAN

What is Forest School?

Forest School is a child-centred learning process, providing learner inspired, hands-on experiences in the natural environment. It's creative and can increase a child's confidence as they problem-solve and learn to **manage risks.**

A photograph of a child with long blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, a dark blue vest, blue jeans, and dark sneakers with red and white stripes. The child is carrying a large, bright yellow backpack and is balancing on a large, dark, horizontal log in a forest. The child's arms are outstretched to the sides for balance. The background is a soft-focus forest with green foliage and tree trunks. The ground is covered with fallen leaves.

NATURE IS A TOOL
TO GET CHILDREN
TO EXPERIENCE
NOT JUST THE WIDER WORLD,
BUT THEMSELVES.

STEPHEN MOSS

600 x 700



NATURED

The key characteristics of Forest School:

- **It is an ethos** and philosophy. It promotes self-esteem, creativity, confidence, play and a child-centred learning approach.
- **It is learner-centred**, focusing on the curiosity of the child rather than tasks to be finished; it's holistic learning that helps the child to grow socially, emotionally and physically.
- **It enables children to get outside of the classroom**, direct their own learning and exploration and build relationships over time.
- **It is a long-term approach** to learning and not a one-off session, with a recommended minimum of 24 weeks but ideally a lot more. The longevity of Forest School ensures that the establishment of boundaries feels safe and secure for the children. It takes time to get to know people and create a trusting community, expecting children to get the benefits of this over a few sessions will just add more pressure.
- **While 'forest' may be in the name, it's not a requirement to have access to a forest.** Whilst woodlands provide an ideal environment for Forest School because of their diversity and opportunities for exploration, it can be practiced on a beach or any other outdoor environment. You don't have to 'go' to the forest – the scrubland beside the school is fine.
- **It provides opportunities for supported risk-taking** and often includes the use of knives, fire, and outdoor shelters.



“RESTORE BALANCE.
MOST CHILDREN HAVE
TECHNOLOGY, SCHOOL AND
EXTRACURRICULAR
ACTIVITIES COVERED.

IT'S TIME TO ADD
A PINCH OF *adventure*
A SPRINKLE OF *sunshine*
AND A BIG HANDFUL OF
outdoor play”

PENNY WHITEHOUSE

Provide consistency in your sessions

An important part of any Forest School is the longevity and consistency of its group dynamics. The identity of the group is just as important as the identity of the individuals. The group includes adults as well as children. It's not ideal when the group is disturbed, and the participants change. As soon as you lose a member, the feeling and atmosphere of the group can change.

Mark Sackville-Ford in the book 'Critical Issues In Forest School' suggests: "Where a child leaves a school, rather replace this 'space' with another child I suggest that you leave the space as vacant. Otherwise, you will reset the project and therefore the potential gains from the project can be diminished". This might seem counter-intuitive because of the desire to provide Forest School to as many children as possible, but the importance of group dynamics in this kind of social education shouldn't be underestimated.

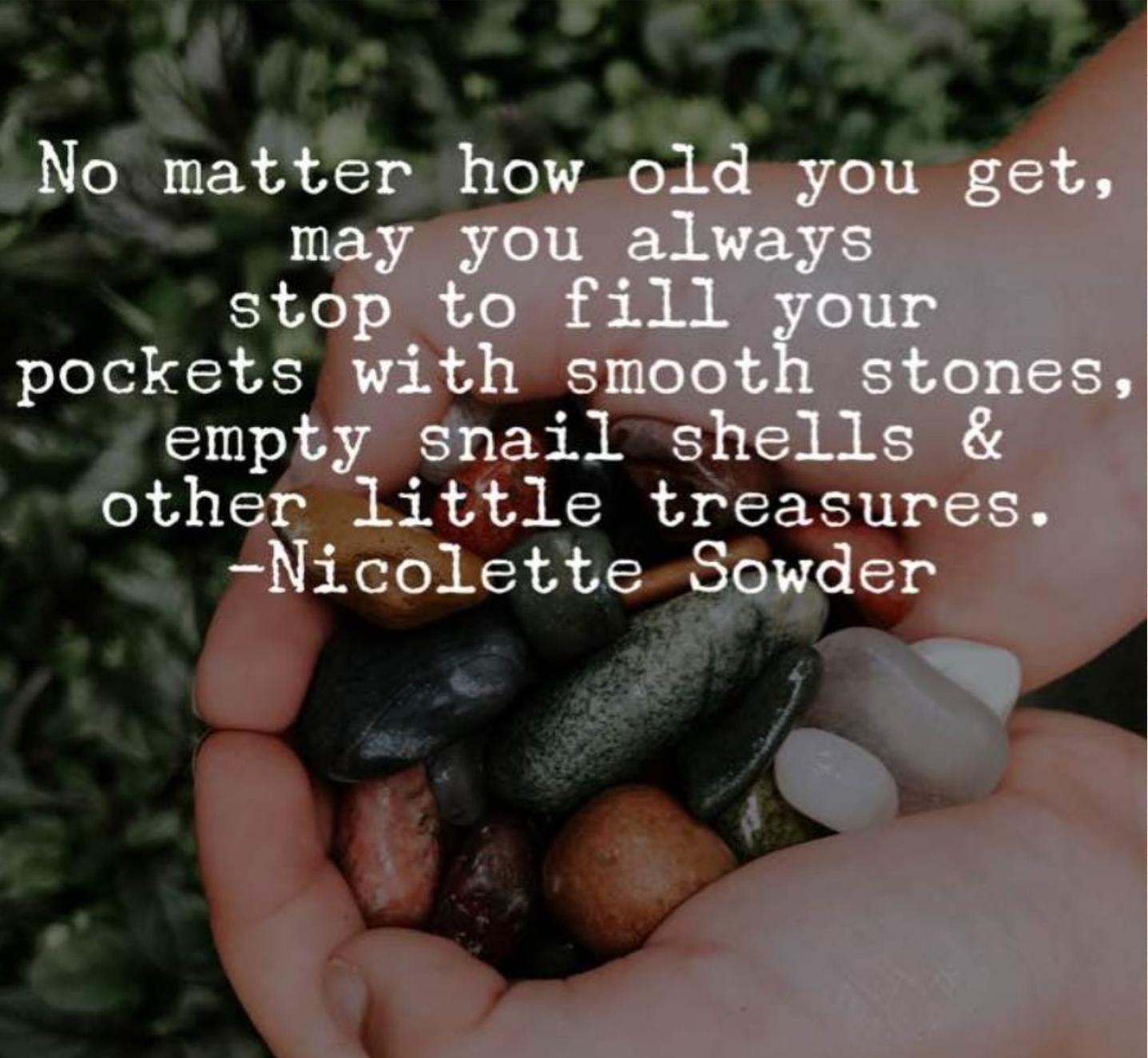
Encouraging and managing risk-taking is also important if you want to provide consistency and create an environment where children feel free to explore.

Here are six managed risk activities that children may encounter at Forest School:

- Playing at height such as tree or rock climbing
- Playing at high speed such as rolling, running or somersaulting
- Playing with tools such as bow saws and knives
- Playing near dangerous elements such as rivers, lakes, fires, or slippery ground

Within all these activities there is a degree of risk. The three questions you need to ask yourself are: What are the risks? What are the benefits? How can we make it safer?

The process of reflective observation is crucial in Forest School, both for the leaders and the learners. Observations happen over many sessions, and change can happen slowly for the learners. Allow the process to unfold and grow; like any other process in the natural world, it needs time and care.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a collection of smooth, colorful stones and empty snail shells. The hand is positioned over a background of green grass. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, typewriter-style font.

No matter how old you get,
may you always
stop to fill your
pockets with smooth stones,
empty snail shells &
other little treasures.
-Nicolette Sowder

What does self-directed play mean and why is it important?

This is often the aspect of Forest School that can come into conflict with traditional views on teaching. Children spend much of their lives being transported from one activity or pursuit to another; school, clubs, classes, trips. It's important that they develop the social and emotional skills to negotiate their own actions. Play is the place this happens; the more uninterrupted by adults the better.

Practices like Forest School *facilitate* children's play, they don't *teach* it. This process requires trust. This leads us to the question: Do you believe in the power, creativity and agency of children?

Children's agency, which is their ability to act independently and make choices, is a human right. As The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states: "Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." (Article 31).

Without agency, we are not encouraging resilient future generations. Given the opportunity, children can and will learn to develop mature responses to challenging situations. When children are uninterrupted in their play, they learn to negotiate boundaries. Forest School facilitators are there to support the child's exploration, but their main job is to create the framework the child freely builds upon.

It's
a wondrous thing how
the wild calms
the child.
-unknown



The challenges of Forest School

Forest School may come into conflict with the aims and objectives of any given school. The fact that there are no set objectives and outcomes at Forest School is an alternative to much classroom learning.

Let's explore the main challenges:

1. Pressure to make Forest School accountable for how it is directly impacting the child.

Schools are under pressure to hit targets and achieve high ratings and that trickles down from the top. Being aware that this is an issue is important in creating a cohesive community and culture between the Forest School setting and the wider school or educational setting.

2. The expectation that this learning will be documented and evidenced.

Some aspects of learning are incredibly hard to quantify. For instance, it's hard to evidence the progression of a child's emotional literacy or feelings of being connected to a wider world. Be ready and able to articulate how the group dynamics and the outdoors make an effective environment for this social and emotional development.

3. Expectations that children's learning should be linked to the curriculum.

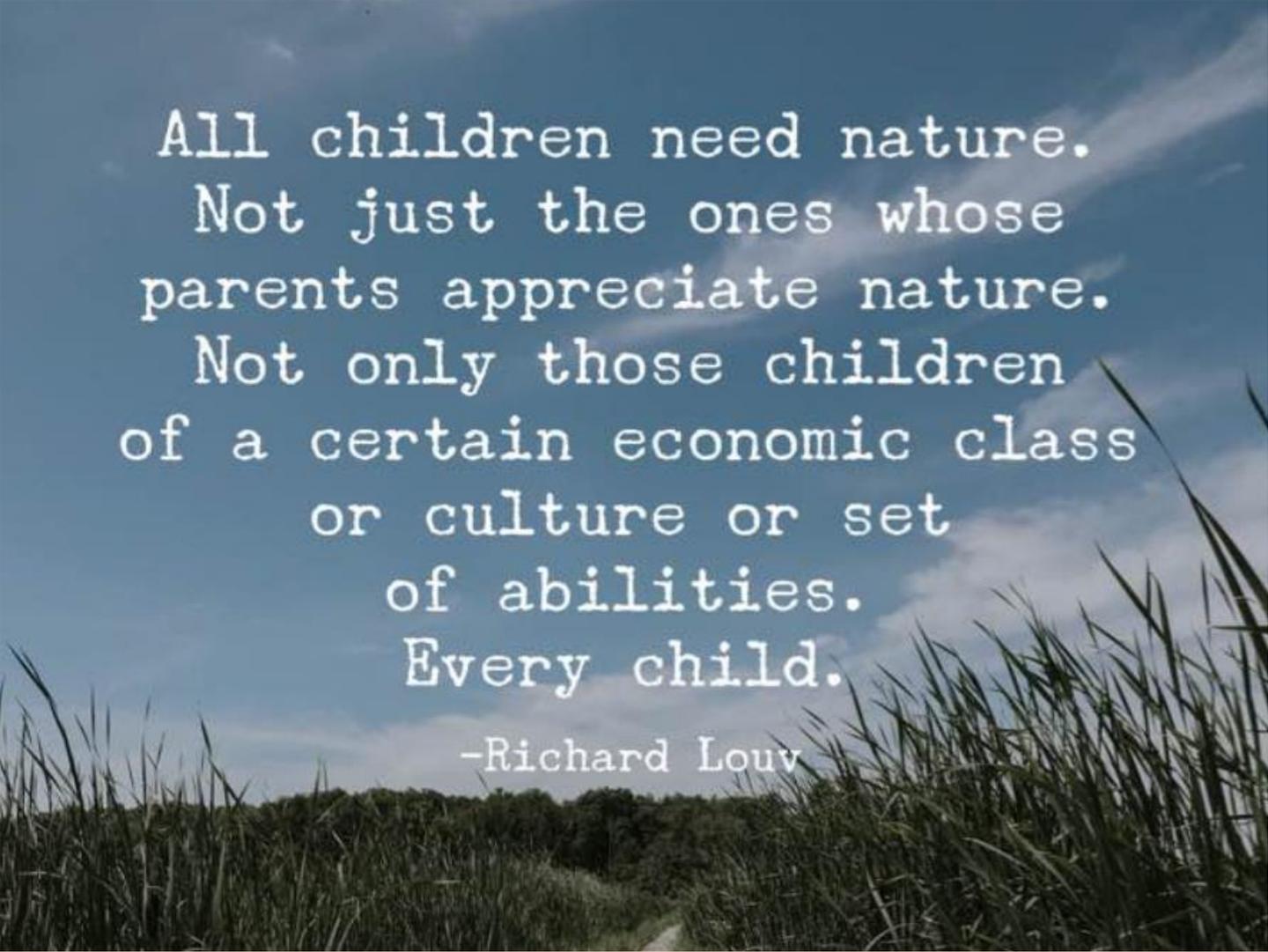
There are numerous ways to teach Maths, Science, English and many other aspects of the curriculum through outdoor learning. The practitioner must try to strike a balance between the expectation that Forest School needs to incorporate the national curriculum and the very philosophy of 'friluftsliv' that underpins authentic Forest School experiences.

4. Clash of approaches between practitioners concerned with safety versus agency of the child.

Other Forest School practitioners may not be fully committed to the 'friluftsliv' philosophy of Forest School. For some, risk-taking may not be fully embraced or understood. Finding a mutual and non-judgmental approach between team members is key and making time to discuss your different approaches will lead to deeper understanding.

5. Forest School becoming a brand and it becoming diluted.

As Forest School becomes more desirable and popular it risks being used tokenistically to promote schools. Be savvy and research your training providers and settings.



All children need nature.
Not just the ones whose
parents appreciate nature.
Not only those children
of a certain economic class
or culture or set
of abilities.
Every child.

-Richard Louv

The challenges are worth it!

As children connect physically, practically and emotionally to the natural world, unexpected and delightful changes can occur. Previously 'quiet' children have been shown to improve their confidence in communication, speaking out about their boundaries and feelings. Similarly, children who were 'un-cooperative' in the classroom setting have been shown to learn the value of sharing and working as a team.

Every child should have the right to experience the quiet of the forest, the satisfaction of finishing a practical project, the sturdiness of branches as they hold their weight off the ground, the smell of autumn leaves turning into next year's soil, the crackle of the fire.

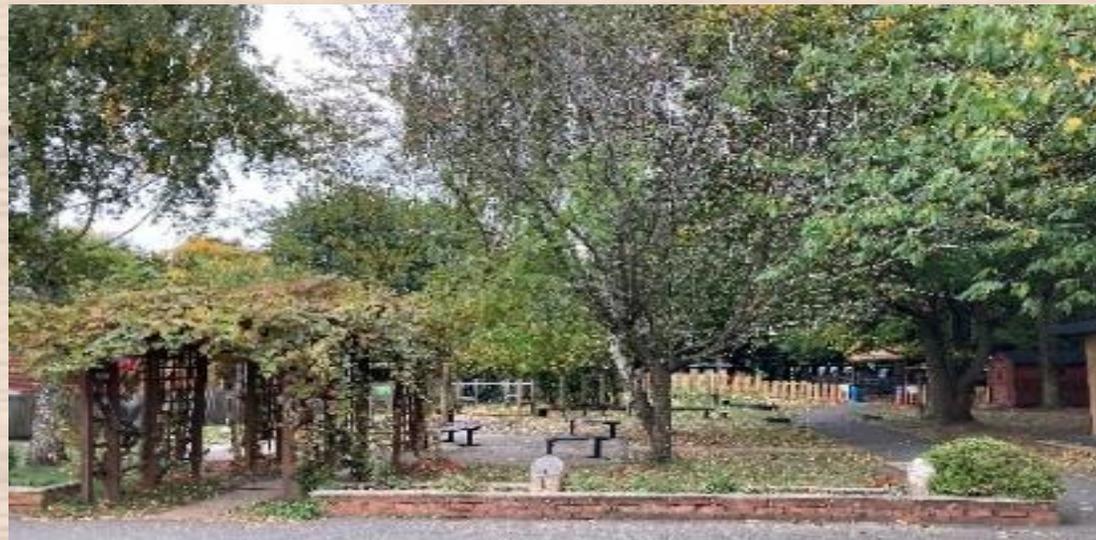
Some children may go on to develop a life-long relationship with the outdoors, influence their parent's relationship to the outdoors, develop practical skills and potentially go on to have careers in conservation. But regardless of the effects Forest School has on the world, the child is and should continue to be at the centre.

Children cannot
bounce off the walls if
we take away the walls.

-Erin Kenny



Share HCIS Handbook



Barefoot

WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR KIDS WHEN THEY'RE BAREFOOT?

WHAT PARENTS THINK HAPPENS:

UMMM, NOT MUCH. THEY'RE
JUST BAREFOOT. THEIR FEET
MIGHT GET DIRTY, OR THEY
MIGHT STUB THEIR TOE.



WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS:

- FEET CAN FEEL!
- FUELS PROPRIOCEPTION AND BALANCE.
- MUSCLES AND LIGAMENTS MOVE AND GROW STRONG AND FLEXIBLE.
- MAINTAINS NATURAL WALKING AND RUNNING GAIT.
- BAREFOOT KIDS HAVE WIDER, STRONGER FEET AND FEWER FALLEN ARCHES.
- BAREFOOT KIDS HAVE BETTER BALANCE AND MOTOR SKILLS.

We could have never loved
the earth so well if we
had had no childhood in it.

-George Eliot



If we want our children
to move mountains,
we first have
to let them
get out of
their chairs.

-Nicolette Sowder

