

# “Are we going to the forest today?”

The experience of a primary schoolteacher taking children to the forest

“Are we going to the forest today?” is the question children ask me first thing in the morning, as they walk through the classroom door. While we put on our outdoor clothing, there’s a buzz of excitement amongst the children as they discuss their plans for the den they are going to continue constructing or a dinosaur trap they are going to dig. I have never before seen the same enthusiasm for any other activity or lesson.

I read Richard Louv’s explanation that *In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy; a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace*<sup>1</sup>. I have experienced this with children in the forest and see how they love to find hidden, enclosed and secret places; places where they can be quiet or where their imaginations can come alive, free from adult conformity or agenda. Sometimes I’m privileged to be invited to join their play, which on one occasion required me to take on the role of a big bad wolf! Sometimes I’m asked to join tea parties where I’m served all sorts of forest delicacies made from mud, leaves and sticks. I love to listen to the narrative of their play, and I am often surprised at what great storytellers they are. For example, recently, I was sold a ticket for a train ride – on a log. It was the most exciting train ride I’ve ever been on! We stopped at many stations in England and Europe where children either got on or got off. The train eventually arrived in Africa, and there were lots of suggestions for the many animals we would see there. I don’t remember how I got back from Africa, but it gave me some insight into their knowledge of the world and the travel some children have done with their families.

Activities such as tree climbing, balancing on logs, creating a spark

with fire steels and using loppers to cut branches allow children to stretch themselves and maximise their potential. It’s been wonderful to see children progress from being spectators of other children climbing trees to becoming agile climbers themselves. I love the look of achievement on children’s faces when they have persevered and finally create a flame with fire steels. A big part of learning outdoors is for the children to understand safety: knowing the risks so they can manage them. We talk about what could be challenging in the environment. For example, we talk about nettles and how to cope with them.

Even though being outdoors breaks from the classic classroom model, it enhances the curriculum rather than just being free time. Having the opportunity to go out in the rain helps children to understand more completely the world around them. The children have become quite observant of the changing seasons that are so evident in the forest. Our RE topic was ‘The Creation’ with the question: how does God want us to take care of His creation? In the woods, we could directly experience it. We lay down on the forest floor and listened to the sounds of nature (and nearby traffic) and just appreciated it. Every log in the forest was turned over in search of minibeasts living there which were then observed in more detail under hand-held microscopes. Of course, we then needed to discuss respecting living creatures and returning them to their habitats. We found a practical response to the question of how we can care for God’s bugs: each child creating a bug home in a plant pot using sticks, leaves, bamboo, bark, etc. These

were then placed in pallets to create a large bug hotel.

We were given another opportunity to put ‘caring for God’s world’ into action. A village resident asked the children to help to make homes for hedgehogs in the woodland area next door to the school. After an initial demonstration of how to build a hedgehog home, the children eagerly got busy in teams. This led to great interest in hedgehogs, which we later researched and wrote about.

After a busy session in the forest, the children love to help to lay a fire and sit around it as we discuss our adventures and activities while sipping hot chocolate made with a Kelly Kettle. For an extra treat, we make popcorn on the fire in a special outdoor popcorn pot. There is always great excitement as the children hear and watch the kernels popping into little white clouds.

Being in the forest environment makes a difference. There is no doubt that children have higher self-esteem and improved confidence outdoors. They have the time and opportunity to practise their social and physical skills; they have the chance to improve their communication with peers and adults. When I’m asked: “Are we going to the forest today?” I know that I owe it to them to get outside into natural areas and allow the spontaneous learning to take place.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Louv (2005), *Last Child in the Woods*, Atlantic Books, London, page 7

