



## A voice of experience from the forest

Jo Gilks has worked in the forest with nursery and primary age children for the last four years and has supported several children on the autistic spectrum and with sensory processing needs. She has many examples of children adapting to the forest with adjustments being made that have benefitted all the children

I sometimes hear people say that Forest School and nature cure autism. It does not. Nevertheless, many of the environmental conditions such as noise, colour, artificial lighting and crowds, which can cause an overload of the senses, are not present in the woods. Or if they are, there is the space to move away from them before the senses become overloaded. Therefore, children seem calmer, and many of the coping behaviours observed in children who are feeling overloaded are not needed, or are needed less often.

*Natural settings tend to be very rich in a range of sensory stimuli presented, but these stimuli are usually less intense than those*

*found in man made environments. For example, natural light under a forest canopy is far gentler than the strip lights found in many conventional classrooms and the objects which the light falls on are seldom reflective in the way that many surfaces indoors may be.<sup>1</sup>*

Following children's fascinations and interests can lead to some remarkable play opportunities. One child was always taking off his shoes to feel the ground, so we made a mud pool that bare feet could feel and enjoy. Another child was only interested in pirates. It is amazing how you can actually deliver the whole EYFS curriculum through a child's interest in pirates: making treasure maps, building

pirate ships from cable drums and a parachute, learning sea shanties, digging for treasure, using tools and learning knots to make pirate cutlasses. Yet another child was very particular about lining up wood, sticks and other treasures. We facilitated this by providing a safe space where the creations were not disturbed and gently moved the play forward by modelling shop role-play and creating parks from natural materials.

A child joining us one Autumn aged two years, was 'diagnosed' with developmental delay, although the parents had not shared that with us. It soon became very clear that this child had no communication, made no eye



contact, was not at all interested in the other children and did not seem to understand simple concepts. Many, if not most, two-year-olds struggle to remember to 'stop and come back' when they reach the boundary flag, but this child didn't seem to understand what this meant at all. On his first day he crossed the boundary more than twenty times. He would not eat or drink anything or let anyone change his nappy. He did not sit, play, or show any concern that his parent had left him, but he did seem to be attracted to leaves and ribbons blowing in the wind.

Some of my colleagues expressed concern that we were not the right setting for the child: it wasn't safe, and he wouldn't be able to stay. Safety is of paramount importance when your setting is outdoors, with no walls and just flags to show children the boundaries. But, so is supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). We are required by law, and I would argue morally, to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that all

### 'All children are made in the image of God ...'

children can access our service in an equitable and meaningful way. All children are made in the image of God, and we have the responsibility to ensure that they are included in our community in a way that makes them feel they are valued, important and loved.

I assured my concerned colleagues that we would need to make some adjustments and I would have to speak with the parents, but first I wanted to do some really detailed observations and assess the child's development. Meanwhile, we would assign one member of staff to shadow the child to ensure he was safe, didn't wander off, and we

could see to what things he was drawn to in the forest. Over the following three sessions I observed and assessed and then invited the parents to come for a meeting. At this meeting the parents shared the child's developmental delay. We agreed that they would provide some food that they knew their child would eat, as he had taken nothing so far. Furthermore, we would have a member of staff with the child all the time until we felt it unnecessary. We agreed to use the graduated approach to set small targets and provide support as part of a targeted plan, and we that we would review the plan regularly with the parents.

Slowly the child learned about boundaries with the help of some painted tree rule cookies. Slowly, very slowly, with support he started to become interested in adults, then other children. He began to play alongside other adults and then children. Eventually, he started to interact with other children in play. We made some adjustments to our routine to support this child.



I already used Makaton signs with all children, but this prompted me to share some key signs with other staff such as eat, drink, water, milk, sit, stop, help and toilet. Furthermore, I learnt new signs for stick, squirrel and fox to reflect the child's interests in the environment. I produced some Makaton symbol cards for all staff to use with the children and which they carried with them every day. This was in place of a visual timetable, that we had tried but which just did not work well in the forest. As we had a high staff to child ratio (1:4 for all children aged 2-5 years) we could provide the enhanced level of support for the child within our existing staff team. We looked at how we could make sitting time shorter, free play time longer and how we could provide an alternative for this child if he could not or would not join in our log circle, story or singing times. We thought about how we could support the child to understand the forest rules, most importantly stop and come back when they came to the boundary.

One of the most significant adaptations that benefitted the child and the others, was changing our morning snack time from a whole group log circle time to a rolling snack bar. Previously we had arrived at base camp, sat, reminded the children of our forest school rules, washed hands and sat for snack together before going to play. This child could not sit a whole log circle group, it took too long for him, it was too overwhelming. He would not eat or drink as by the time snack arrived he had become distressed and left the circle. When we changed to a snack bar we noticed benefits for all the children.

We talked to all the children about what our planned changes were and why and asked what they thought. They didn't really know what we were proposing but liked the idea of more play. We had three children in the group already who were receiving SEN support who struggled with change, so we spent extra time with them helping them with the transition. Under the new rolling snack routine children

had longer uninterrupted time to play freely. They could choose when to come for a snack or if to come at all. They could serve themselves and pour out their own water and milk. We introduced wooden name cookies for self registration at the snack bar.

The child for whom we had made the adjustment started to show some interest, particularly in the pouring out of milk from a jug into cups. He came over many times, first to pour the cups of water on the floor, then to pour the milk into a cup and then onto the floor, before one day, pouring out a cup of milk and sitting down to drink it. It was like a miracle. This simple thing made me so excited that I ran around the forest telling all my colleagues the child had sat with us and drunk milk! After several more weeks, he ate some banana – another massive achievement.

The child had no language for a very long time; we used Makaton signs and picture cards with him to support his speech. He only ever used one sign: squirrel. Nevertheless, he did seem to



understand the signs we used and symbol cards alongside speech. Slowly, with some therapy outside the setting, he started to say some words. I will always remember the day he bent down to look at a particularly long worm and with pure excitement exclaimed “(s) nake (s)nake!” This was one of many occasions when I observed wonder in this child’s eyes.

Experiencing for the first time leaves falling from the trees in autumn, bubbles landing on frosty ground in the winter, the sight and feel of ice, wind blowing ribbons, seeing squirrels, birds, and a fox in the forest was pure wonder for the child, and for me watching his face.

Early Years is built on the foundation of the ‘Unique Child’, but sometimes I have seen this forgotten when nurseries are trying to support children with SEND. A strategy that works for one child will not be appropriate for another, and it is important to have a tool box of different strategies to try. One of our children used Zones of Regulation to help with their self-regulation and empathy.

**‘... try something, and if it doesn’t work, ditch it and try something else.’**

Another child who particularly struggled with the textures of coats and hats was supported with personalised cards with photos of himself wearing different clothing in different weathers. We used these to help choose which was the most appropriate clothing to be wearing each day. One child needed a ‘bold hole’ for when he was overwhelmed and frustrated. He chose a bush that became his special place. We provided objects in a bag specifically for him which helped with calming.

The best advice is to try something, and if it doesn’t work, ditch it and try something else. When you find the strategies that work remember that they might

not work forever, and you might need something else in the future. That’s OK, it’s not a failure. It is simply adapting to changing needs. Working and supporting children with SEND in the forest is most rewarding, and doing it well really makes a difference to the children and their families.

“I saw my child flourish in the forest. He began to engage in loads of imaginary play, form close and meaningful friendships with his peers and educators, and he so clearly felt like a valued part of his community. He thrived in a way he couldn’t in an indoor setting, and we watched him come alive.”

– *Parent of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*

<sup>1</sup> James M (2018), *Forest School and Autism – A Practical Guide*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, p42

