



London Children's Forest

An established early years educator shares her experience of growing a forest from seed, with her Kindergarten children, so far...

Back in 2023, my manager asked me if I would like to go on the Children's Forest Facilitator training. I wasn't sure what it was, but I had heard wonderful things from some colleagues who had attended the previous August, so I said yes. As the four-day course in a remote woodland in Sussex approached, I became nervous at the realisation I would be sleeping in a tent that I would have to transport and pitch myself. But as you do, I pushed that to the back of my mind and when the time came I headed off to Sussex with two colleagues from our sister nursery. And what a treat we were in for!

The setting, although very muddy, was idyllic. The Children's Forest is based in a woodland on a farm,

with compost toilets and a lake you can swim in. We were awoken by the birds singing, and Anna Richardson or Pippa Johns playing the violin, with a fire to keep us warm and for cooking. The four days training was like nothing I have ever experienced. It was an immersive journey through a programme of getting to know the trees, connecting with nature, story telling and singing. We imagined a new children's forest for 'the future children of all species' and created art to embody this vision. Finally, we planted a tree in the Children's Forest, which they are growing on one of the farm's fields, writing our wishes for the tree and the new forest on birch bark and burying them with the tree's roots.

Adapting for London

Back in East London after the training, we started to think about how we could replicate this in London. As time passed, it became obvious we couldn't reproduce it. We are not in rural Sussex; we are in Tower Hamlets with its wonderful diverse population, rich languages and traditions. We are rather lacking in farmers' fields. So, after some thinking, planning and dreaming, the London Children's Forest was born. It was to be a younger sibling to the original Children's Forest, with the same ideals and values, but a bit rougher and readier, and needing to be a little more innovative.

Each Children's Forest has a fire at its heart, with the trees planted



around it, radiating from the centre. Our fire is at our Kindergarten base in Bethnal Green, where we meet monthly on a Saturday with Jack Durnall from the Children's Forest. He drives up from Sussex to lead us in singing tree songs at Tree Choir. This was the first change to the original model, as our heart fire would be at the spiritual heart of our forest rather than the physical.

Each Monday and Tuesday we hold forest school at the local nature reserve. In September 2023, we decided to embark on a 'Forests from Seeds' project. With advice from Pippa John, we decided to focus on a different tree each week. We told stories of the tree, mapped where we found each tree at the nature reserve, learnt how to identify them, sang songs about them and used their leaves, wood or fruit in craft and cooking. We have had great fun over the last year in our 'forest' at the nature reserve. We have carved wood, made elderberry tie-dye, alder ink, and cooked cherry and plum

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pies, blackberry jam and hawthorn ketchup on the fire.

Sowing and growing

One crucial part of this process was collecting the local tree seeds and planting them. We did this each week, collecting and planting the seeds of the tree we were focusing on and putting them in the cold frame at the nature reserve for safe keeping. Early in 2024, we transported them back to Kindergarten to be safely housed in our new tree nursery. This was essentially a cold frame, but with rodent proof wire instead of glass or plastic.

There the seeds sat, waiting until spring when some of them started to grow. Over the summer we have tended them, watered them, loved them, cared for them, talked to them and sung to them. At a local food growing hub, opposite our forest school site, in the garden of a block of flats, we were lucky enough to be gifted a growing bed for our seedling trees. We have been slowly



transporting the seedlings, with the children, from the safety of the Kindergarten to the growing bed. The children have been planting them into their new home.

I asked for our bed to be built such that, our children reach all the trees, and the children at the local special school, many of whom have significant needs and disabilities, would also be able to access them from wheelchairs. It is critical to the ethos of the London Children's Forest to be accessible to all, involving as many of the community as we are able. We have met some residents of the flats who all have their own growing beds for fruit and vegetables and have chatted with them about our trees. The seedlings will stay there until they are strong enough to be planted out into their forever homes as part of the London Children's Forest.

Planting

Lacking in farmers offering fields for a new forest, it became apparent at an early stage that a Children's Forest in London would need to be more nomadic. Some

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trees would be planted on a patch of land at one site and others planted on at different locations throughout London. We have a vision of the future where you can download a map of all the trees that comprise the London Children's Forest and take a trip around the city to visit them. But that is some time off. So far, we have planted an elm in the park, in partnership with Trees for Cities. In our Kindergarten garden, we have planted two apple trees, a pear tree, a plum and a cherry tree. We planted last year's Christmas tree, named by the children 'Charlie Bella', and an olive tree named Olive, donated by a Palestinian family and planted as a prayer for peace. Each time we plant a new tree, we sing a tree blessing.

*"We sing our blessing to the trees;
may golden sun shine through your leaves;
may rain fall clear and fair winds blow;
that ancient forests here may grow"*



It is a beautiful and special moment. The children share their wishes for the tree, sometimes they bury their wishes with the tree's roots. Our first tree, the elm, planted in the park, we named Jane, after a much loved friend and colleague who had recently passed away. Talking about Jane with the children opened up the opportunity for them to talk about people (or pets) they knew who had died and how they missed them. Some children 'wrote' notes or drew pictures for grandparents and a much loved pet dog who had died, and we placed these special messages among the tree roots.

In the spring of 2024 we had our first official London Children's Forest tree planting outside our Kindergarten. A group of children and their parents gathered at Long Wall Ecology Garden, on the bank of a river in Newham, to plant some apple trees. We learnt an apple song, drank apple tea, heard a story of the local area and how over the years it had become what it is today. We shared our vision for a Children's Forest there, and the

children made a representation of this with sticks for trees and clay animals. The children then planted the trees, shared their wishes, and we sang the tree blessing to each of the trees in turn. We returned in the summer for a tending day, visiting the apple trees, weeding, watering and giving them some love.

The future

Over the next few years, we are planning to plant more trees, including some that we have grown ourselves from seed, collected by the children at Kindergarten and Forest School. We are looking for more small spaces we can have tree nurseries to grow our seedlings into saplings. We have plans to further involve the community in this project. Later in the year, we will be having our official launch of the London Children's Forest. Together with the children, their families and the community, we will begin to realise the dream of a new London Children's Forest for 'the future children of all species'.

- If you would like some inspiration for stories and songs, wild food, crafts and celebrations, I can recommend the book — *The Children's Forest* by Dawn Casey, Anna Richardson and Helen d'Ascoli.
- If you are interested in learning songs about trees, have a look at *The Children's Forest — Song Forest* on Sound Cloud at <https://tinyurl.com/4hkzsdr5>, accessed 22/11/2024.
- If you would like to hear more about the training that The Children's Forest offers, you can find this on their website at <https://childrensforest.earth>, accessed 22/11/2024.
- If you would like to follow our London Children's Forest journey, you can find us on Instagram at <https://tinyurl.com/22azwwbt>, accessed 22/11/2024.



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