



The Children's Forest

A former trustee of Love Early Years shares the integral role of song in Children's Forest practice

Throughout my early years career, music, nursery rhymes and children's songs have always been at the heart of my work. A few years ago, I attended training with Musiko Musika, an organisation that creates original songs to help children engage with and learn through music, often weaving cultural projects into their work. Their songs were inspiring, but nothing prepared me for tree songs.

The Children's Forest, based in East Sussex, is a movement that supports children and

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their communities to plant trees and care for forests for future generations. Working with landowners, schools, home education groups and local communities, they encourage children of all ages to connect with

nature, with each other, and to work towards a healthier future for our planet.

In 2023, I was fortunate to take part in the Children's Forest facilitator training with several colleagues. We spent four immersive days camping in the woods, experiencing the process as children would. Guided by Anna Richardson and the Children's Forest team, we learned about trees, plants and animals through story, song and play. From this experience, the London Children's Forest was born.



Songs

A central part of the Children's Forest approach is song – songs about trees that not only bring joy but also teach us about the trees themselves. For instance, the Oak Tree song revealed to me that oak leaves begin golden, turn green, and return to gold before falling in autumn. The Hazel song taught me to notice the tiny, brilliant red flowers of the hazel – something I had never seen before, but now look forward to each spring.

At kindergarten, we keep a basket of musical instruments for the children to choose from, along with a large djembe for the adult leading the singing.

At forest school, it's more

Our year is guided by the seasons and the trees

of a punk pedagogy, with DIY instruments made from bowls and sticks, or simply using our bodies for percussion. We clap hands, stamp feet, and make rhythm together.

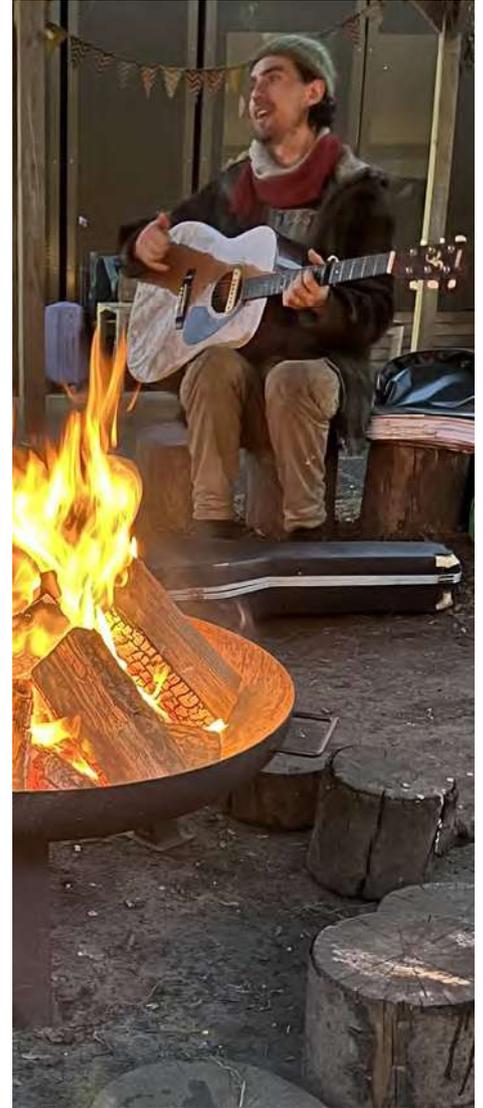
Months and weeks

Once a month, Jack from the Children's Forest visits our East London setting to lead a Tree Choir.

This community event, open to everyone, brings adults and children together around the fire to learn and sing songs to the trees.

It's a beautiful gathering, with parents, children, elders, and educators sharing songs and stories beneath the night sky. Inspired by this, a colleague and I even wrote our own song for the London plane tree.

Singing with and for the trees has become an integral part of our forest school and kindergarten practice. At forest school, our year is guided by the seasons and the trees, with the autumn term marking the start of our main seed-collecting time. Each week we focus on a different tree. Alongside



free play and child-led learning, we weave in a story about the week's tree, a nature craft, some cooking where appropriate, seed collecting and planting, and, of course, the tree song.

This autumn, we begin with the hawthorn tree. We share the story of the Hawthorn Bear, told using stones, singing the Hawthorn Song, making hawthorn ketchup, and perhaps creating natural hawthorn mandalas.

Impact

On a personal level, it has deepened my connection to the trees around me, especially the urban trees we often take for granted. I now find myself pausing

The impact on the children has been profound

to rest a hand on a trunk as I pass, whispering thanks, or humming tree songs on the train ride home.

The impact on the children has been just as profound. Recently, a four-year-old asked if we could sing the Plane Song to the tree while walking through the park after Forest School. We all gathered around a London plane, placed our hands on her bark, looked up into

her vast canopy, and sang together. It was a moment of pure joy and reverence.

References

For the tree songs, see YouTube: <https://youtube.com/@childrensforest>. Many of the songs can be found in the Children's Forest book: D Casey, A Richardson, H d'Ascoli (2019), *The Children's Forest*, Hawthorne Press, Stroud (See *Early Days* volume 8 number 1 page 20 for a mini review.)

The Children's Forest website: <https://childrensforest.earth>

The London Children's Forest journey is told on Instagram: @londn_childrens_forest



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