

Forest School: safe practice handbook

To be read by school lead staff & all Forest School staff



<organisation name>

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Content	Page
Our Forest School - aims & ethos	3-4
Principles of a Forest School	5
Environmental Policy & Impact Assessment	6-7
Health & Safety	8
Risk Assessment	9
Hygiene outdoors & child protection	10
Data protection & cancellation policies	11
Emergency Procedure - overview	12
Medical: essentials & care plans	13
Division of roles & responsibilities	14-16
Lost persons	17
Emergency procedure	18
Missing Person/s Procedure	19

Our Forest School

This Forest School project is being run by <xxx>. The organization has public liability insurance to £5 million through <xxx> Insurance and all staff are PVG checked.

<xxx> is a certified Forest School leader and holds an Outdoor First Aid certificate.

To achieve the most from our Forest School, we work with low adult to child ratios, and therefore often requires additional support from school support staff or parent helpers.

Our Ethos

We believe everybody should have regular, long-term access to a woodland or natural environment, throughout the seasons, which provide them with inspirational and challenging outdoor learning opportunities. Forest School offers a learner-centred approach, where participants can learn through self-guided play and exploration. Participants will be given the opportunity to develop their curiosity, confidence, self-esteem, creativity, empathy, communication skills, knowledge of the natural environment and ability to assess risk. Depending upon the children's interests, activities may include den building, wildlife exploration, natural art, tree climbing, woodland crafts, campfires, foraging and journeying.

Our Aims – see over

Our Aims

For children to:

- gain a **sense of the feeling of health and wellbeing** that comes from spending time in the outdoor environment
- establish a **meaningful connection with nature**, and in this way learn to care for the natural environment
- feel **nurtured and confident** during Forest School sessions
- experience a **sense of community and opportunities for social play**
- **experience opportunities for autonomy and choice, with space to explore and follow their curiosities and interests**
- experience opportunities to develop **skills in the assessment of risk** and to **challenge their physical skills**
- Given time, space and careful adult support, to be able **to play and discover independently**, and **gain pleasure and a sense of achievement from such experiences**

And to help children and adults to:

- make connections between Forest School experiences and possibilities at school and home.

Principles of a Forest School

Forest School is an inspirational process, that offers all learners regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences outdoors. The good practice principles of Forest School as outlined by the Forest School Association (FSA), and which we adhere to, are that:

1. Forest School is a **long-term process of frequent and regular sessions** in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaptation, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School.
2. Forest School **takes place in a woodland** or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
3. Forest School aims to promote the **holistic development** of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
4. Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take **supported risks** appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
5. Forest School is run by **qualified Forest School practitioners** who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.
6. Forest School uses a range of **learner-centred processes** to create a community for development and learning.

Source: www.forestschoollassociation.org

Environmental Policy & Environmental Impact Assessment

We aim increase our participants and staff awareness of the natural world, and model thoughtful decision-making about the environment and its wellbeing.

On site activities follow practices that minimise impact on wildlife and the woodland ecosystem. We try to share with and involve participants in thinking about why this is important. Before leaving a site we try to 'leave no trace'.

Minimising Impacts

Activity	Impact	Mitigation
Collecting wood	Dead wood is important to any woodland ecology as it has a multitude of uses, from homes for minibeasts to beds for fungi, so it is very important for any healthy woodland habitat.	Limit the frequency of fires and evaluate the amount of dry, dead wood before having a fire. Collect only the minimum amount required for any given activity. Remove as little dead wood as possible from site.
Fires	<p>Changes in soil chemistry can lead to increases in PH levels, carbon, phosphorous, etc. which can be harmful to some plants, whilst other essential nutrients may be depleted.</p> <p>Fire can travel underground to roots even after appearing to be extinguished.</p> <p>Fire uses deadwood – a valuable woodland resource</p>	<p>Carefully chose locations for fires. Scatter ash widely into undergrowth.</p> <p>Ensure that all fires are extinguished fully before leaving a site.</p> <p>Ask yourself, do I need this fire? If yes, how small can I make it? Carry in bought wood from a sustainable source.</p>

Activity	Impact	Mitigation
Eating & drinking	<p>Food waste may attract animals/insects to the site or increase numbers of certain species, leading to adverse changes in biodiversity.</p> <p>Sugary or milky drinks can change soil chemistry.</p>	<p>Inform participants of these impacts and advise them to take away their food waste.</p> <p>Advise participants not to pour drinks onto soil. (finish or collect dregs)</p>
Tree Climbing, Shelter Building, Swings, Art	<p>Damage to trees.</p> <p>Some art materials cause long-term damage.</p>	<p>Restrict these activities to suitable trees that will tolerate them.</p> <p>Use only naturally occurring materials (not chalk)</p>
Collecting Natural Materials	<p>Damage to plants - some plants are far more sensitive to losing their leaves or flowers than others. This changes in different seasons.</p>	<p>Inform groups which plants not to pick. Ensure leaves or flowers are taken from fallen parts where possible. When picking is necessary, pick in way that does least harm to the plant & see 'BSBI Code of Conduct'.</p>
Hand hygiene	<p>Most wet wipes contain plastic.</p> <p>All soap will have a negative impact on the soil.</p>	<p>Either buy biodegradable ones, refrain from using them, or limit use (i.e. tear in half if hands not too dirty). Always dispose of them in a bag to be taken away.</p> <p>Use eco-soap, if needed. Site hand-washing area in less sensitive area of wood. Use bowl to collect suds.</p>
Toilet Use	<p>Human waste entering waterways</p>	<p>Wild toileting is not planned for but a last resort. Toileting area will be at least 30 metres from any waterway.</p>

Health and safety

Forest School leaders undertake to take reasonable steps to ensure the health and safety of all participants during 'activity' parts of Forest School sessions as follows:

- children and staff at Forest School
- parent helpers and observer visitors

Health & Safety Executive (HSE) Play Statement

Forest School recognises the value of risk to child development, as outlined by the HSE in (www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm) and Scotland's Play Strategy:

"Striking the right balance **does** mean:

- Weighing up risks and benefits when designing and providing play opportunities and activities
- Focussing on and controlling the most serious risks, and those that are not beneficial to the play activity or foreseeable by the user
- Recognising that the introduction of risk might form part of play opportunities and activity
- Understanding that the purpose of risk control is not the elimination of all risk, and so
- accepting that the possibility of even serious or life-threatening injuries cannot be eliminated, though it should be managed
- Ensuring that the benefits of play are experienced to the full

Striking the right balance **does not** mean:

- All risks must be eliminated or continually reduced
- Every aspect of play provision must be set out in copious paperwork as part of a misguided security blanket
- Detailed assessments aimed at high-risk play activities are used for low-risk activities
- Ignoring risks that are not beneficial or integral to the play activity, such as those introduced through poor maintenance of equipment
- Mistakes and accidents will not happen"

Risk Assessment

In light of the HSE statement on previous page, Forest School leaders undertake to ensure that the appropriate circumstances, equipment, knowledge, procedures and training are available to all participants in Forest School. This allows them to ensure the safety of themselves and others during the session.

This will be done by Forest School leaders in the following ways:

1. Carrying out risk assessments (RAs)

- generic site and activity RAs
- daily check of site
- specific activity procedures (where required)
- dynamic risk assessments of activities that evolve, but are not already covered in a written RA, by making appropriate control actions and sharing these with staff & children (these will be added to a RA after the session)

2. Sharing of risk assessments

- in writing with all staff in advance
- in session plans (where new procedures may be added)
- with whole group at appropriate times during the sessions (including sharing results of daily check)
- during post-session staff review

3. Ensuring effectiveness

- staff will satisfy themselves by that all children and vulnerable adults have the facility to understand relevant health & safety information (additional support will be put in place as necessary)
- regular monitoring to ensure that control actions are being deployed
- reassessing, reviewing and changing control actions as necessary

All staff should ensure that they familiarise themselves with the risk assessments and procedures, and implement them. In addition, it is the responsibility of **all participating at Forest School** to use **common sense** to keep themselves and others safe.

Hygiene Outdoors

Where Forest School leaders are also managing the provision of hygiene and pastoral care, we undertake to provide a safe and healthy working area for all our participants, staff, visitors and children. The following provisions are standard for each session and are listed in the daily plans:

- hand-washing wipes, water and eco-soap are available
- hygienic toileting procedures are in place
- appropriate accident and emergency provision is in place, in terms of equipment, trained personnel and planning
- staffing ratios fall within regional guidelines
- all staff and children have appropriate clothing and footwear for the conditions, and staff use appropriate Personal Protective Equipment for hazardous tasks (i.e. litter picking)

Child protection policy

- Forest School leaders hold clean PVG registration and are informed in basic child protection strategies and disclosure. Forest School leaders undertake not to be alone out-of-sight with any one child.
- All toileting and personal care will be carried out by school staff.
- Support staff and volunteers (including parents) engaged by school will be inducted and managed in accordance with school child protection policies by school class teacher.
- Any concerns and disclosures will be reported to the class teacher, who will then follow school procedures.
- Permission for Forest School leaders to take photographs and use the images in raising awareness of Forest School has been put in place, via an 'opt-out' form.

Data protection

<xxx> undertakes to keep all information relating to this project confidential and to dispose of it in a timely fashion, except where:

- concerns around child protection supersede data protection issues.

Cancellation or Curtailment

If it is not possible to relocate to a safer area, the session may be cut short or cancelled in the event of:

- a Met Office severe weather warning being in place for the area
- a forecast of high wind speeds approaching or above Beaufort Scale Level 7 (50kph/32mph), or frequent strong gale-force gusts (75kph/47mph)
- a combination of wet and cold making hypothermia more likely
- thunder and lightning
- heavy snow-loading on tree branches.

If session is to be cancelled - by Forest School staff or the school - all staff will contact each other as soon as possible (the school is responsible for contacting parents). Participants will walk back to school if already out on site. All staff will do their best to reschedule the session to an alternative date within the same term, whilst acknowledging that this may not always be possible.

Emergency Procedures

Roles & Responsibilities

In the event of a **minor incident** such as a bump or light scratch:

- Class teacher will administer first aid or enable children to self-care while activity session continues as planned.

In the event of a **more serious incident**:

- Forest School leader to administer first aid (whilst ensuring safety of self, group and the casualty)
- Forest School leader will delegate supervision of group to another staff member
- Class teacher will contact school and follow their emergency procedure and reporting procedure. (Teacher to carry school emergency plan and key numbers.)
- Forest School leader will action the emergency procedure (see appendix)

Reporting

- Forest School leader will complete incident report form for their insurance purposes
- Class teacher will complete school reporting procedures

Reviewing

- Class teacher to hold debrief with children.
- Forest School leader to hold debrief with staff.
- All relevant policies and procedures will be reviewed and amended as necessary at that point.

Essential equipment

- Forest School to carry group first aid kit and administer first aid in the event of a more serious incident.
- Forest School leader to provide materials for keeping casualty warm.
- Class teacher to carry basic cuts and bumps first aid kit.
- All staff to carry charged mobile phones and ensure they have all relevant numbers.

Medical conditions and care plans

- Medical info is stored in school and accessible in event of emergency.
- Class teacher will create a summary of medical and care info, and share with staff on a need to know basis.
- Class teacher will carry all necessary medication and administer any care plans.

Forest School

Project staff

Forest School leaders: <xxx>

Forest School assistant: <xxx>

Class teacher: <xxx>

Division of responsibilities

The Forest School leaders will assume overall responsibility for children, staff members and parent helpers during activity sessions, except as stated in Section B below.

A. The **Forest School leaders responsibilities** include to:

- Carry out, communicate and supervise adherence to risk assessments and management for site and activities (carried out before sessions)
- Provide weekly session plan and aims, based on consultation with project staff and children and observations
- Advise if cancellation or curtailment of outdoor activities is necessary
- Supervise staff and children at all times during activity sessions
- Set boundaries for activity areas
- Carry out regular head-counts
- Ensure adequate supervision (see lost person procedure)
- Action missing child procedure if necessary
- Ensure pastoral care (except toileting and minor injury treatment) as follows: group first aid equipment
- Provide materials to keep non-walking casualty warm
- Option to provide some seasonal, locally-sourced woodland food/drink, in line with school food hygiene policy (if part of session plan)
- Work with school and other staff in the area of behaviour management if this is needed.

B. The following remain the **responsibility of school** via their class teacher
(left hand column can be used to tick off actions)

All times

Discuss any queries or concerns with FS programme leader (xxxx) or daily leader (xxxx)
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Before programme

Ensure the following are in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • school photo consent in place for children • forest school photographic consent
Familiarise self and school support assistant with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • site, and activity RAs, • overall programme aims
Manage parent volunteers in line with school policy
Ensure children and adults (school staff or parent helpers) have access to appropriate clothing and footwear for all likely weather conditions.
Risk-assess, and plan safe operating procedure for walking alongside roads and when crossing roads, in accordance with the school's safe walking policy. Consider how to involve children in this
Make large print, laminated sheet indentifying all steps in school emergency plan & key contact numbers, including FS staff (see handbook)
Agree with HT length of time on site staff can search for missing person before referring matter to school (5 mins?)
Review medical information for children, staff and self and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inform Forest School leader of any relevant information (for example nut allergies, severity, type etc) • ensure you have all necessary care plans and medication
Establish necessary groupings within class, each of which will have a key adult allocated to them (four groups)
Ensure direct supervision/awareness procedure is in place for individual group members who might find safety procedures difficult i.e. named adult for named individual

Day before each session

Familiarise self and PSA with daily session plan including planned learning outcomes
Familiarise self and school support assistant with any changes to activity RAs or operating plan
Pack school rucksacks (packing lists supplied, as required)

Before each session

	Ensure children and adults (school staff and/or parent helpers) are dressed appropriately for weather and planned activities (clothing and footwear)
	Ensure each child has the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• awareness of which group they are in and who their key adult is (if relevant)
	Inform other staff of any changes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• to supervision needs and arrangements,• to medical information information (on a need to know basis)• pastoral information (on a need to know basis)
	Ensure all children are present before leaving school and inform Forest School leader of numbers

During each session

	supervise and advise other adults in walking procedure to designated handover point (consider how to involve children in this)
	form part of staffing team, participating actively on all parts of session as identified in daily operating plan and session plan
	carry out any care plans
	carry out toileting
	carry out minor injury and other personal care procedures for children (consider how children can be enabled to treat own minor injuries)
	take reasonable care of your own and other people's health and safety
	assist Forest School staff by carrying out regular head-counts of the whole group during sessions

After each session

	Participate in review at end of session and raise any queries suggestions or concerns to Forest School leaders
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Lost person/s

Precautions

Every precaution is taken during a session to make sure that every child is safe and accounted for, also to make sure that they are within the boundaries. These include:

- ensuring children are aware of and manage boundaries
- ensuring children know to ask an adult to go with them if they want to go out with boundaries
- ensuring children know to respond to gathering sound such as a whistle
- ensuring head counts are carried out every time group gathers
- conducting regular head counts during free play sessions
- ensuring any children that are at risk of wandering have a named staff member monitoring them visually throughout session
- all staff to be aware of where a child is heading when they move on from an activity or area during free play and check that another adult in the area has noticed them.

Missing child

If it is found that a child is missing, a Forest School leader will manage the incident according to the Missing Person Procedure (see page 19)

Debrief

- Forest School leader to ensure emotional state of lost child, other children and staff
- When appropriate discuss incident with child and agree measures to make sure it can't happen again
- Carry out individual risk assessment for child

Emergency procedure

(FS staff carry laminated copy with first aid kit)

School Staff/Teacher Mobile: _____

School number:

Forest School leader:

FS Assistant:

1. Delegate supervision of group to competent staff member.
2. **A**irway?
3. **B**reathing? (No ► phone emergency services; administer CPR 30/2 etc)
4. **C**irculation? (More than a cup of blood lost ► phone emergency services)
5. **D**eformation/discovery
6. **E**nsure (Phone services if needed, or delegate)
7. Delegate member of staff to meet emergency services (swap mobile phone numbers)
8. Ask school group leader to contact school and follow their emergency and reporting procedures.
9. Monitor and record vital signs

Phoning emergency services

- We need an ambulance
- We are a group of school children on an excursion. The casualty is years old. The casualty has sustained injury, and their vital signs are
- Meeting place is gateway beside <insert road name and postcode of nearest emergency vehicle access point>
- A member of staff / adult helper will meet you there.
- There is a short walk down a woodland path from there.

Missing person procedure

Conducted by FS leader

1. Sound emergency gathering signal.
2. Gather group at agreed meeting place.
3. Note time.
4. Ask group where person was last seen, what they were wearing / doing.
5. Rest of group to be looked after / occupied by an assistant leader.
6. Send remaining staff off **in pairs** to search immediate area for an agreed length of time (i.e. 5 minutes). Ensure at least one person in each pair has a mobile phone *with enough credit and battery life*. Swap numbers. Searchers should stay within an area they know and be aware of their own safety. Leader to be informed immediately person is found.
7. Arrange for searchers to return to the meeting place after the agreed length of time.
8. Notify school / centre by phone and they will contact police.
9. Alert any other staff on site to the fact that there is a missing person.
10. At this point, a decision may need to be made regarding the rest of the group. If it is close to their intended leaving time or if they are in walking distance of their school / centre they may wish to go home or wait in vehicles.
11. After the incident is over, complete a full report using the 'Accident / Near-Miss' report form.