Forest School

Forest School is defined by 6 core principles.
These were agreed by the Forest School community in 2011.

The Long-Term Principle	The Nature Principle	The Risk Principle	The Holistic-Learning Principle	The Leadership Principle	The Community principle
Forest School is a long-term process, of frequent and regular sessions, set in a woodland or a natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. These sessions take place throughout the year, so that learners can experience all seasons. Initial sessions establish physical and behavioural boundaries as well as initial observations of learners.	Forest School sessions take place in a woodland or a natural wooded environment to help learners develop a relationship with the natural world. Woodlands are a prefect environment to give learners time to explore and discover.	Forest School offers learners opportunities to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and the individual, e.g. climbing a tree, sitting in a hammock, swinging on a rope swing. Forest School offers opportunities to use simple tools appropriate to the learners and on completion of risk assessments.	Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of learners, building resilience, confidence, independence and creative thinking. Forest School also aims to develop the physical, social, cognitive, communicative and emotional aspects of learners.	Forest School is led by qualified Practitioners who hold an accredited Level 3 Forest School qualification. They continuously maintain and develop their professional practice and ensure there is a high ratio of adults to learners. Practitioners also hold an up-to-date paediatric, outdoors, first aid certificate. The Forest School Leader is a reflective Practitioner and sees themselves as a learner too.	Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a sense of community where everyone can develop and learn together. Forest School employs a learner-centred pedagogical approach that responds to the needs and interests of learners. Play and choice are integral to the learning process. Reflective practice and observations are key part of every session which inform future planning.

Please visit the Forest School Association website for more information:

Full principles and criteria for good practice | Forest School Association

Autumn Term

The autumn term starts in September and ends in December. That means that we experience two different seasons during the autumn term: autumn and winter. In September we take time to get to know each other, and Miss Sarah teaches forest school indoors, using crafting activities to bring the outdoors inside, e.g. using palm drills to make holes in conkers and mould clay to make snails and hedgehogs.

We also spend time preparing for our outdoors forest school lessons by looking at photos of our walking routes in Hadley woods, The King George Playing fields and the Hadley Green ponds. We use Google maps to see where we will be walking and think carefully about how we walk through the woods and hazards we may encounter, e.g. bumpy paths with protruding tree roots, stinging nettles, prickly brambles and spiky holly bushes. We also spend time talking about things students may feel nervous about, such as meeting cats or dog on our walks, or slipping in the mud. This prompts conversations about appropriate footwear for the woods, and we encourage students to bring in a pair of wellington boots.

During our weekly walks, we observe changes that we notice in the weather during autumn and winter, e.g. cooling temperatures, the increase of wind and rain. Group discussions at this time of year encourage children to observe the differences between deciduous and evergreen trees and we think about the reasons why leaves change colour and die. We try to make links between the changes in the trees and the changes in the weather.

We learn to identify common trees found in our local woodlands and make connections to help us understand the important part they play in the woodland's ecosystem. For example, the oak trees produce acorns which provide a source of food for animals to eat, including squirrels, mice, birds, deer, foxes and badgers. They are also a habitat for a wide range of wildlife to live, including birds, bats, insects and lichens.

Our discussions also include thinking about the changing of the clocks in October and how this affects the number of day light hours we experience. This leads into further conversations about animals preparing for hibernation, such as hedgehogs, and learn that this is a time of year where they will go into a deep sleep to save energy during the cold weather we experience during winter. Miss Sarah encourages students to think about reflect on their own experiences, as humans can also feel less active during colder months of the year, just like the animals and the trees we observe in the natural world.

Each week, students are given free time to explore the woods as we all find different things interesting. Learning is led by the students interests and supported by the adults. There is time to focus on learning practical skills, such as, how to tie simple knots and build a rope swing, or how to assemble a hammock safely between two trees. There are also risk-taking opportunities, e.g. using the rope swing, lying in the hammock or climbing a tree. We also take our hot water thermos with us so we can share a hot chocolate or a mint tea whilst we have our group discussions in the woods or by the ponds.

Sometimes we bring tools into the woods, such as secateurs and link them to crafting activities to focus the children's attention to certain things that are happening in nature. For example, we may take a pair of secateurs to cut sticks from a dead tree and then decorate the sticks with different coloured wool or make stick people characters. Crafting activities are always linked with conversations about things that are occurring in nature.

At this time of year, we start talking about bird migration so everyone understands what it is, why birds chose to fly to warmer climates and what flight patterns they take, e.g. swifts travel south from the UK, through France, Spain and Morocco until they reach Tanzania.

We also take time to think about the birds that have not migrated and how they might need some extra food during the wintertime as it is the coldest part of the year meaning that there are less insects for them to eat. We use this as a learning opportunity to search for evergreen, coniferous trees that grow pinecones and we collect them to make bird feeders with.

Students also become very familiar with the birds that we spot in our woodlands, including wood pigeons, robin redbreasts, magpies and ring-necked parakeets. Miss Sarah helps children learn how to identify these common birds by their plumage (their feathers) and their calls/songs (the sounds they make).

Towards the end of the term when it is December, we start to talk about our winter holiday that is approaching, and we anticipate how things will feel in the natural world by the time we return to school in the new year. We think about what weather to expect in January and how it will feel even colder.

Spring Term

The spring term starts in January and ends in March. That means we experience two different seasons during the spring term: winter and spring. In January we continue to observe changes in the weather and recognise that the temperature has dropped, so it feels colder. We think about what clothing is appropriate to wear now to help us feel warmer, e.g. gloves, scarves, woolly hats. Miss Sarah realises not every student feels cold during colder months of the year and talks to individuals to understand more about how they personally feel during the winter.

As we explore the woodlands, playing fields and duck ponds, we have group discussions thinking about winter being a time for nature to rest. We reflect on what we learnt in the previous term and remind ourselves that there are less daylight hours during the winter months, so it gets dark a lot earlier. This leads on to discussions about spring being the next season that we will experience and how the clocks will go forwards by one hour, so the daylight hours will start to increase again.

We have discussions about how we feel when there are less day light hours, thinking about how it can affect our energy levels. We make links with the animal kingdom who will soon be coming out of hibernation as we transition into spring and think about similarities between animals and humans, i.e. we also may feel less active during the colder months of the year and more active during the warmer months of the year.

Miss Sarah starts to explain that there is a predictability in nature and helps children to notice and observe the cyclical patterns in the natural world. We see so many exciting things on our nature walks that are signs that spring is coming. Tiny snowdrops begin to appear, followed by delicate crocuses and the daffodils. We discuss how spring is a time when things begin to grow again, a season where we celebrate nature waking up from its sleep during winter. Each week we watch how the buds on the trees develop, blossom appears and flowers start to grow again.

We also think about the birds coming back from periods of migration, preparing their nests for their babies to be born. We spend time visiting Hadley Green ponds and learn how to identify mallard ducks, Egyptian geese, jackdaws, black-headed gulls and moorhens. Students enjoy spending time watching how they interact with each other. We make observations each week and have interesting conversations, e.g. how can we tell the difference between female and male mallard ducks and we observe changes we notice in their numbers and their behaviours. This helps us make links and understand that they will soon be approaching mating season and building nests to prepare for their baby ducklings to be born.

We often see dog walkers during our forest school walks and some students like to ask permission to stroke them. Miss Sarah also invites Harry the Schnoodle to join us occasionally; he works with a charity called Spread a Smile. This experience gives students an opportunity to take a dog for a walk and face any fears they may have about dogs.

By the end of the term, some students feel ready to learn new walking routes that take them slightly deeper into Hadley woods, others still prefer shorter walks and choose to stay and relax at base camp where our hammock and rope swing are. Miss Sarah makes weekly observations and talks to students to reflect on individual interests and to help inform plans for their next forest school lesson.

At this time of year, we also start thinking about birds building their nests in preparation for the breeding season. We focus on common birds in our local area, such as sparrows, starlings, blue tits, and chiffchaffs. Miss Sarah teaches children how to identify birds by their plumage and their calls.

Summer Term

The summer term starts in April and ends in July. That means we experience two seasons during the summer term: spring and summer. By this point in the year we hopefully don't not need to take our coats with us every week on our walks. This is because the weather starts to get warmer. Instead, we start thinking about wearing suncream and sun hats to protect us from the sun.

As it starts to get warmer, we notice things are growing at the entrance of the woods and Miss Sarah shows students the plums trees and brambles where fruit will begin to appear. Over the coming weeks, we take time to stop and look at how the fruit is growing think about how we will eventually be able to pick the fruit and eat it or take it back to school to cook with in our food tech lessons.

The canopy layer of the woods starts to reappear as the leaves grow back on the trees and we notice how this provides us with shade, the woods feel quite cool in warmer weather. It is a very relaxing place to assemble our hammock, and students enjoy laying down and looking up at the fresh green leaves and listening to the birds. As we walk up the King Geroge playing fields, we see even more bramble bushes and talk about how blackberries ripen later in the summer and we check on their progress weekly.

When we visit the duck ponds at this time of year, we see ducklings and goslings that have been born and take time to sit and observe their behaviour. Sometimes we notice that litter has blown into their pond and we take a fishing net with us to help take the rubbish out of the ducks' home and put it in the bin.

There is also a huge cherry laurel tree near the duck pond where we take children who want to use it to explore and practice their balancing and climbing skills. This experience gives children the opportunity to think about taking calculated risks and Miss Sarah teaches them how to judge a safe height to climb to and shows children how to choose appropriate branches that are thick enough to take their body weight without breaking.

Our circular route back towards school takes us along residential roads where we look at people's front gardens and admire how they are coming into bloom with beautiful flowers of all colours and varieties, including fragrant lavender, roses and fuchsia.

Flowers attract insects, so we take time to slow down, observe and identify them. Sometimes students may feel nervous about insects hurting them and we make this into a learning opportunity to think about how important insects are, reinforcing that we do not need to fear them and that it is important for us to look after them. This leads us into discussions about pollination and how vital bees are in our ecosystem.

Some people have allergies at this time of year, we talk about hay fever and make sure adults carry any medications that individuals may need.

This is the time of year where we start to find tiny caterpillars in the woods hanging from the trees on long threads of silk, which sparks conversations about lifecycles and the stages of pupation for caterpillars before they emerge from their chrysalis into butterflies. Huge parts of grassland in the playing fields are left to grow tall during this time of the year. The tall grass and wildflowers are the perfect place for us to set up our picnic blanket and watch the butterflies.

Sometimes when we sit near the ponds, we are lucky enough to see dragonflies and damselflies, they have inspired crafting activities.

We are always thinking about the animals that live in our local woodlands. At this time of year we have been fortunate to spot mucjack deer in our woods and studetns have even spotted the deer eating apples that have fallen on the ground near the alleyway opposite our school. Deer are beautiful, gentle and shy creatures.

Miss Sarah asks students to think about how they feel during these months and we talk about how our energy levels may rise when there are more daylight hours. We also compare how we feel now to how we felt at other points of the year, e.g. during winter.

As we start to prepare for our summer break, we also think about when we will come back to school and see each other again. Miss Sarah reminds students of the cyclical pattern of the seasons, and we talk about returning to school in September when it will be autumn time again.