

In autumn 2013 I was lucky enough to be one of twenty childminders to be funded by Bristol City Council to do Level 3 Forest School Leader training.

The course was run jointly by Redcliffe Children's Centre – an outstanding centre of 'Early Excellence' – and the Forest School Learning Initiative. As such this was a Forest School training like no other. Over the course of a year we spent regular days learning at Redcliffe Children's Centre and at various woodland locations, as well as studying from home. We spent time lighting fires, building dens, learning how to use tools and observing Forest School sessions happening. But the training taught me much more than simply using bush craft skills with children, it completely transformed my understanding of childhood and how I work as a childminder in all settings, not just the woods.

Through our experienced and confident teachers, I came to understand that Forest School should be truly 'child-led'. Forest School is not a place for planned activities, chosen and overseen by adults, but a place where children have freedom to explore, investigate, think of ideas, make decisions and take risks. As practitioners, our role is to stand back and observe. We were challenged to start questioning whether our input into children's play and activity was helpful or interfering. As a childminder I had always involved myself in children's play and activity, so the idea of stepping back was a big shift for me.

At my own setting I began to experiment by sitting somewhere out of the way but with a clear view of the children. I observed them closely, but only joined in when they invited me to, or gave them support when they requested it of me. I was astonished by how quickly their play evolved. They were communicating with each other more, developing their personal, social and emotional skills rapidly. They were problem solving, negotiating and compromising. Their imaginative play really took off, and rather than moving from one activity to another, the children started to spend hours on end lost in make-believe characters and worlds with each other. It was clear to see that they benefitted vastly from the opportunity to direct their own play.

I also changed my attitude towards risk. As a childminder it's easy to become very risk-averse, but I learnt that risk-taking is a key part of children's development. It's very simple when you think about it: if a child falls over and scrapes their knees they learn something. If we endlessly catch them (or worse yet – prevent them from running in the first place) how will they learn to move safely and with awareness? I came to understand that children have a right to take risks, and that as a practitioner it is not my job to prevent children from suffering minor injuries. My job is to observe them and ensure they don't attempt anything likely to result in serious harm. And since standing back and allowing children to set themselves challenges I have realised that most children are good at risk assessing. Now in my setting I write 'risk benefits' instead of 'risk assessments'!

In balance, I learnt the importance of recognising and managing serious risks that can be present in woodland environments. Dead branches falling from trees, highly poisonous plants and managing use of tools and fire with care are skills I have developed. Without this knowledge and risk management, the children would be unable to enjoy true freedom in the forest, where they can then assess and take manageable risks for themselves.

In March 2014 I teamed up with Rowan, another childminder from the Forest School training, and together we ran six Forest School sessions as part of the course. We each had to track three children over the six two-hour sessions, writing detailed evaluations of their activity and development. One

of our sessions was observed by an assessor, who gave us wonderful feedback, and some ideas about how to take our sessions forwards.

When our six Forest School sessions were done we were staggered by the impact spending time in the woods had had on our children. Some of the children had made truly astonishing progress during their few sessions, with a clear knock-on effect when we were at our home setting too. We decided to continue running our weekly sessions indefinitely.

Rowan and I have now been running Forest School with our childminded children for sixteen months. Every Tuesday morning, my assistant Sam and I welcome six children (aged 1-4 years) into our home. Forest School is very much about encouraging independence, so the children get themselves dressed and ready for visiting the woods. At 09:30 we leave the house on foot and walk the five minute journey to Troopers Hill Woods and Nature Reserve, where we meet Rowan and her three children. The children walk into the forest independently, and we gather in our 'base area'. One adult runs a circle time while the others check the site for hazards. Next, we do a group walk around the site where the children lead a risk assessment. Children aged two and upwards are able to tell us which plants are poisonous or painful to touch, where there are trip hazards and exactly how to respond to other dangers, like finding litter, fungi or being approached by a dog.

Then it's playtime! As Rowan and I have grown in confidence, our sessions have become more and more child-directed. The children choose exactly how to spend their time, and we very rarely provide activities unless they have been requested by a child. When many people think of 'Forest School' they imagine children making perfect creations, such as mud sculptures, dream catchers and bows and arrows. But in truth, with Early Years children these activities are usually rigidly led by adults, and so we resist the temptation to send home creations to impress parents, and instead allow children to follow their own lines of interest.

So what exactly do children do in our sessions? From our base area they go off and explore. Visiting the same site weekly allows them to make detailed observations of the flora and fauna found there, including noticing small changes over time. The children become very interested in the seasons and spend time discussing what they notice. They are curious about minibeasts and have become skilful in finding and handling them. They climb trees, run and balance on the tricky slopes of our site. They play amazing imaginative games, using sticks, mud, stones and leaves as props. Some children find quiet places to sit and chat with each other. We often notice babies sitting and quietly watching, listening and feeling their surroundings. Occasionally a child will lie down and have a sleep on the forest floor. The children enjoy exploring music and song around 'the music tree' (a tree we bang with sticks to produce sounds and rhythms). Older children go exploring in small groups with Sam in the deeper woodland. During these 'adventures' they choose where to go, sometimes leading Sam into very overgrown territory! They can usually lead the way to our base area, no matter how far they have travelled. The list could go on.

As practitioners, we stand back and observe the children as much as possible. What we see is amazing: children make decisions, assess risks and take risks. They demonstrate social skills. Quiet children can become confident leaders, and children who are stressed can find calmness. Their physical skills develop rapidly. They make links with all seven learning areas of the EYFS in most sessions, spontaneously comparing lengths of sticks, reciting favourite stories, creating pictures or structures with natural materials...

The training has been of huge benefit to the thirteen children we have brought to our sessions over the past year. And now the benefits are cascading to others, as we have started inviting other childminders to join us for six week blocks of Forest School along with their children. We have been able to share knowledge and skills with teachers undergoing the Forest School Leader training by allowing them to observe our sessions. And we are delighted to have been invited to Redcliffe Children's Centre to give a talk on setting up and sustaining Forest School sessions long term.

If you are a childminder and you would like to join us for a block of Forest School sessions please get in touch with me. If you want to find out more about Forest School I strongly recommend booking into an introduction evening at Redcliffe Children's Centre. Prepare to be inspired!

Parent comments:

*"Millie has been taking my 2.5 year old son to her Forest School sessions for the past year. The change in him has been huge. At the beginning he was not keen on playing outdoors due to disliking getting his hands muddy! Now, he is happy to be foraging, picking, discovering, building etc. with the best of them. Massive thanks to Millie and her forest school."*

*"My daughter is really outdoorsy as it is so we are very pleased that she gets to spend even more time exploring nature. Her jumping, crawling and balancing have definitely benefitted!"*

*"Forest School has given our child a massive head start in terms of learning about the world, building confidence and social skills. We have been inspired to create our own Forest School group led by parents that has given the kids and parents a wider circle of friends, with whom we now go on holiday. For our kids it's a connection to nature which is vital to physical and mental wellbeing."*

*"Since starting Forest School sessions our son has become so much more imaginative when playing outdoors. He is always creating dens out of sticks and branches in the garden and pretending rocks and stones are musical instruments. In the past he seemed to need to have more equipment such as swings and slides and lots more toys in the garden to keep him occupied, but now I just open the door and he is just so happy running off exploring, discovering and enjoying being in nature for much longer periods of time."*