

# In the thick of it

Forest school and outdoor teaching are becoming a key part of the early years curriculum, offering deep learning opportunities as well as cultivating a kinship with nature, writes *Nicole Weinstein*

**W**hether a child enjoys making potions in the mud kitchen, collecting interesting sticks or sliding down mud-filled banks, they are interacting with the natural world in a way that is meaningful to them. Many of the essential resources needed for forest school and outdoor learning are based around children's basic needs: ensuring they are warm; have food; a drink; a mat to sit on; and appropriate footwear and clothing. If a child is not warm and comfortable outside, they will not enjoy, learn or play well.

The first and most important question to ask when considering how to extend your outdoor offering is: does our setting actually need a forest school, or could it be a woodland or outdoor explorer project? Forest school is an ethos and approach that offers children regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees. Sessions are led by a practitioner who has a Level 3 forest school qualification.

Liz Knowles trained as a forest school leader in 2000 and went on to set up Muddyfaces in order to supply forest schools and outdoor learning projects. She says, 'If your intention is to access the outdoors more often, and you have someone who is confident



and competent, don't let not having a forest school qualification be a barrier to getting out and connecting with nature in the way that best suits your children and staff. Once you have been out lots and feel it's time to develop your project, it's time to consider forest school and committing time and money in training your staff.'

Here are the top five pieces of kit needed for forest school and outdoor learning projects:

## **CLOTHING AND FOOTWEAR** **Robust waterproof trousers**

These are worn most days, even when it's not raining, to keep out the damp, cold and mud. Togz Warm and Dry Dungarees are good for the winter months, and then switch to the Togz

## **All of the Wild Wood Forest School sites have been designed to facilitate free flow**

Shell Dungarees in the summer. Trousers start at £22 from Muddyfaces.

Also popular at Muddyfaces is the Ocean range, which is more affordable yet still offers an effective waterproof option. Trousers start at £15.

Also try Togz Waterproof Rompers, £29, and Togz Jacket, £33, from Mindstretchers.

Muddyfaces' tip: 'Buy alternate sizes in different colours to help with recognition when putting them on. Alternatively, if you want to buy all one colour, attach a colour-coded swatch to the clothes hook to make the different sizes obvious.'

## **Wellies**

This is a little tricky due to foot sizes. Ideally, parents will supply these but if not, Muddyfaces recommends the Dunlop Children's Wellies (£10.99). If you have non-walkers, check out the Togz Fleece Lined Overboots (£10), which keep toes warm and dry while crawling and sitting about outdoors.

## **STORAGE AND TRANSPORT**

Whether you opt for individual rucksacks or a collective bag, think about how far you need to travel and how you are going to carry all your resources – drinks, clothes and safety gear.

## **Carts**

These are very popular at forest school, particularly for heavy water containers



**Muddyfaces' Complete Outdoor Safety Kit**

and cooking pots. Try the Garden Trolley, £89.99, from Muddyfaces.

## Rucksacks

Provide each child with their own bag to carry their lunch and water bottle and a space to put discarded hats and gloves. Try the Rucksack – Child's (£6.99) and the Rambler Rucksack, 44L (£32.99) from Muddyfaces.

Alternatively, try the Highlander Forces 33 (£35.95) from Greenman Bushcraft.

Muddyfaces' tip: 'Create a simple chest clip to help keep rucksacks on shoulders.'

## SAFETY GEAR

A first aid kit accompanied by a trained forest school first-aider are essential, according to Darren Lewis, licensed trainer and forest school practitioner at Mindstretchers.

The First Aid Kit (£16.99) and Welfare Kit (£24.75) from Muddyfaces contain plasters and non-alcoholic wipes for minor cuts and grazes. If venturing off-site, consider investing in a Complete Outdoor Safety Kit (£115.99), which includes a whistle, survival bag and torch.

## SHELTER AND COOKING

### Shelter

A shelter is essential to gather under when raining heavily, and to store

bags and resources. Forest school leaders soon become adept at rigging shelters. Try the Muddyfaces range.

## Cooking

Using fire to cook requires cooking equipment and good-quality fire woks such as the Fire BBQ (£208.33), the Soup Bowl (£55) and the Fire Striker (£10), all from Mindstretchers. Or try the Bon-Fire Pancake Pan (£25.95) and Petromax Dutch Ovens (from £35.95) from Greenman Bushcraft.

## RESOURCES FOR ACTIVITIES

There are hundreds of activity resources for outdoor learning, so we asked the experts for their top resources in the marketplace:

### Muddyfaces

'The most useful resource is string,' according to Liz Knowles. 'You can collect leaves and create leaf mobiles with it; tie sticks into frames; create stickmen, mark out boundaries and hang things up.'

'Other simple resources include items for investigating nature such as bug jars, magnifiers and den-building kits.'

'Here are some of our most popular items:

- Children's rigger gloves
- Round outdoor shelters
- Den-building resources and kits.'

## INFORMATION

- The Forest School Association, [www.forestschool.org.uk](http://www.forestschool.org.uk)
- Muddyfaces, [www.muddyfaces.co.uk](http://www.muddyfaces.co.uk)
- Mindstretchers, [www.mindstretchers.co.uk](http://www.mindstretchers.co.uk)
- Greenman Bushcraft, [www.greenmanbushcraft.co.uk](http://www.greenmanbushcraft.co.uk)
- The Outdoor Kitchen, [www.outdoor-kitchen.biz](http://www.outdoor-kitchen.biz)
- Wood-fired oven, [www.wood-firedoven.co.uk](http://www.wood-firedoven.co.uk)

## BOOKS

- *Learning with Nature: Embedding Outdoor Practice*, by Claire Warden (Sage, 2014)
- *Nature Kindergartens and Forest Schools*, by Claire Warden (Mindstretchers, second edition 2012)
- Fascination series (Mindstretchers, 2012)



## Mindstretchers

Darren Lewis says, 'In forest school we can enhance a child's autonomy through consultative approaches that engender choice, mastery and self-efficacy. Methods such as Claire Warden's *Talking and Thinking Floorbooks*, an approach that is renowned globally, are proving popular.'

'Here are some of our most popular items:

- Blank Floorbook, £18
- Whittling Peelers, set of 6, £13.20
- Hammer, set of 2, £9
- Junior Hacksaw, £5.90
- Work Gloves for Children, £5
- Mini Tree Wrap, £99
- Talkaround Mat, £70? ■

## CASE STUDY: WILD WOOD FOREST SCHOOL

Claudia Bailey, founder of Wild Wood Forest School, is an outdoor learning consultant and qualified forest school leader, who provides forest school sessions for children aged from three up to sixth form at four schools in Hampshire and Dorset: Durlston Court Prep School; Talbot Heath, Bournemouth; Milford-on-Sea CE Academy Trust; and Lymington Infants. She also runs Saturday groups, summer camps and adult outdoor cooking classes at her own woodland space at the Wild Wood headquarters.

She says, 'Each of my five spaces is very different, in terms of size and location, but they all look very similar. They have each been designed to facilitate child-led free-flow play and are based on the

principles of forest school. None of the sites has storage, so for every session I bring with me the following essentials:

'Transportation: all my resources fit in the back of my Land Rover. I have a Handy Garden Cart, which is made of mesh wire so it doesn't fill with water if it's left outdoors. I also have a large waterproof holdall that has lots of pockets. It can be opened out flat to access the resources and quickly closed up again if it rains.'

'Shelter: three of the sites don't have permanent shelters. In the two years that I've been working there, I've never put up a tarpaulin, mainly because if it rains it's usually also cold and if the children are static, they get cold. So we try to have appropriate clothing and keep moving and engaging in

popular activities like sawing. Two sites have a parachute up on a shackle.

'Tools: I bring a tool bag with a box saw; hack saw; bill hook; electric drill; mallet; simple clamp; peelers for whittling; and knives for the older children.

The art area often changes and I always bring Sharpies pens, which are good for writing on logs, and sometimes watercolours and charcoal.

'Cooking: every session has a fire and we always cook something or make a hot drink. The schools often want to invest in a good cooking system and I always recommend the Kotlich, Grills,



Tripods & Firepits from [www.outdoor-kitchen.biz](http://www.outdoor-kitchen.biz). I use this system with a kettle and it's perfect for group cooking.

'First aid and water – I have a fully stocked first-aid kit and a 25-litre water container which is used for washing-up, drinking and cooking.'

- [www.facebook.com/wildwoodforestschool.newforest/info?tab=overview](http://www.facebook.com/wildwoodforestschool.newforest/info?tab=overview)