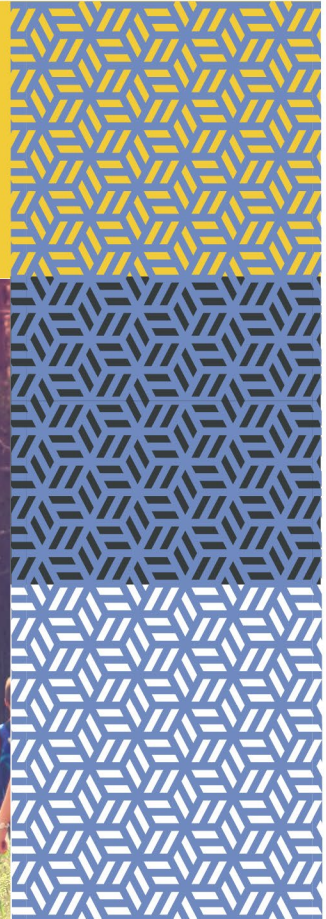



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Risk Control
Forest School



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Risk Control

Forest School

Introduction

Forest School in the UK may seem to be a fairly new movement, however, in reality the concept is based on a rich heritage of outdoor learning going back at least to the 19th century. Philosophers, naturalists and educators such as Wordsworth, Ruskin, Baden Powell, Leslie Paul, Kurt Hahn, Susan Isaacs and the Macmillan sisters all laid the foundations for what is known today as Forest School.¹

During the 1970s and 80s the UK education system moved toward a more teacher / outcome-centred approach in an attempt to improve numeracy and literacy, primarily through the introduction of a national curriculum. Somewhat in response to this, there was a growth of 'alternative' educational models in the 1990s and it is in this context that Forest School emerged.¹

In 1995 Bridgwater College developed a BTech in Forest School and started to offer it to early years practitioners in particular. Many involved in outdoor learning saw this as something that built upon the UK's outdoor learning heritage and soon Forest School was being offered around the UK.¹

What's involved?

The idea of exposing small children to knives and fire might seem scary, however, safety is of paramount importance during Forest School sessions. All leaders of Forest School must have a Level 3 Forest School qualification, which covers essential safety training such as risk assessment and food hygiene. There should always be adult supervision and guidance whilst the children are taught to understand risk and encouraged to assess risk for themselves.

Because Forest School learning is child-directed, the scope of the activities that can take place is enormous. Typical activities include:

- Sensory walks
- Foraging
- Shelter building
- Mini beast hunts
- Tree climbing
- Campfire cooking
- Woodwork using tools (Axe, saws knives)
- Nature art
- Games like Hide and Seek
- Fire building and lighting
- Puddle and mud jumping
- Using knots and lashings

Assess the Risks

Each Forest School may have differing facilities to operate within and as such each should be risk assessed accordingly. Policies and procedures should be written which are appropriate to individual requirements and circumstances. Not all schools have the facilities to conduct activities on-site and therefore may have to use local amenities, such as parks and woodland.

The age, medical / health status and disposition of the participating children should be considered prior to attending a Forest School environment, with a risk assessment identifying any concerns and controls which should be put in place.

As Forest Schools can involve activities in and around trees, Local Authorities, as tree owners, should be mindful that the public safety aspects are addressed as part of their approach to managing tree health. A sensible approach will ensure the maintenance of a healthy tree stock, the sound management of the environment and will usually satisfy health and safety requirements.

An effective system for managing trees should meet the requirements set out in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999³ (guidance is also contained in HSG 65 Successful Health and Safety Management⁴).

Local Authorities should also be mindful that the Occupiers Liability Act 1957 states that a duty of care is owed to all visitors and that the occupier must be prepared for children to be less careful than adults.

Bringing hazards to the notice of visitors comes within Section 1(5) of the Occupiers Liability Act 1984⁵. The occupier (in this case – the council), discharges his duty by 'taking such steps as are reasonable in all circumstances of the case to give warning of the danger concerned or to discourage persons from incurring the risk'. Any signage provided must be clear.

The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998⁶ (PUWER) would also have to be considered for all hand tools such as saws and knives as these should be used safely and appropriately maintained and stored. Specific consideration should be given to the suitability of work equipment, maintenance, inspection, training and supervision.

Safeguarding of children should also be of significant importance, with particular attention drawn to the Children Act 1989 (as amended)⁷, The Children and Social Work Act 2017⁸, and the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006⁹.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999⁹ require employers to carry out risk assessments and make arrangements to implement necessary measures, appoint competent people and arrange appropriate information and training.

The Health and Safety (First-Aid) Regulations 1981¹⁰ makes provision for appropriate first-aid arrangements, specifying that employers should provide, or ensure that there are provided, such number of suitable persons as is adequate and appropriate in the circumstances for rendering first-aid.

Implement the controls

A careful consideration of the location and contextual factors of the Forest School based on the deliberations of a risk assessment will need to be drawn up and implemented. These considerations should include:

- It is good practice for LEAs to provide concise guidance for head teachers and governors on their expectations for checking staff qualifications and competencies
- A Forest School handbook written by Level 3 practitioner or a group of practitioners within the same setting, containing the policies and procedures developed to ensure compliance with statutory requirements
- Consideration is given to the maintenance of the Forest School environment, including the management of the paths and trees
- Ensuring that all staff have correct level of training and all leaders to have Level 3 Practitioners qualification
- The correct adult to pupil ratio is maintained to ensure continuous and effective supervision
- Ensuring that all instruction is tailored to each child's ability and the correct level of supervision is maintained
- Any tools are correctly used, maintained, inspected and stored. Pre-user checks are essential
- Ensuring that areas are inspected before use to ensure that the site is safe to use and free from any items which may cause harm
- Inspection of trees to be undertaken on a regular basis by Level 3 practitioner and Local Authority
- Ensuring all personnel have the correct level of DBS, especially when outsourcing staff
- Any medical concerns associated with children are highlighted to staff. A sufficient number of trained personnel should be present and training should include responding to anaphylaxis shock
- There should be clear arrangements for maintaining training records

- Ensuring that all personnel tasked with cooking food have been correctly trained and have a recognised food safety certification
- The lighting of camp fires requires a management procedure to be implemented, ensuring that there is suitable fire safety standards implemented including firefighting equipment to hand
- Emergency procedures are prepared to cover factors such as medical emergencies, a missing child, and adverse weather conditions
- All risk assessments and associated guidance should be reviewed on a regular basis

Insurance Implications

In our experience, the public liability policy of a typical council would not generally exclude Forest School activities, however, if there is any doubt then clarification should be sought from the insurer or representative.

Summary

Forest School has developed over the years and offer a wide range of activities, some more hazardous than others. They offer a number of benefits to children including social and physical / health. They also provide the individual with the ability to learn about risk. Forest School arrangements require a documented risk management approach in order to effectively control the risks. This approach should include clear policies and procedures and the establishment of appropriate competencies. Through the robust implementation of controls, Forest School environments are able to offer valuable learning opportunities whilst managing the risks effectively.

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Get in touch

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