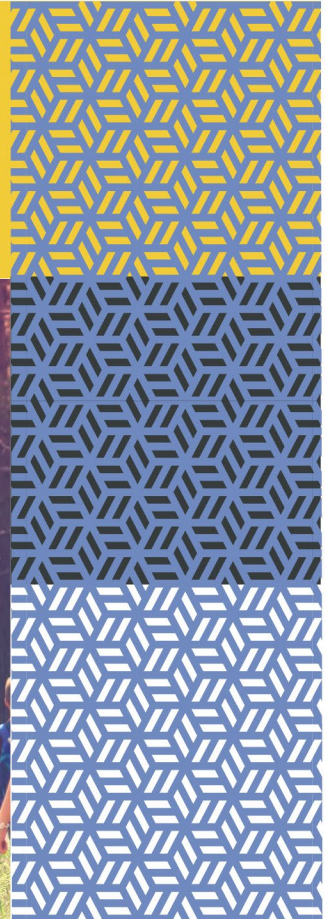



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# Risk Control Forest School



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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 dating 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

In 1995 Bridgwater College developed a BTEC 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.

### What's Involved?

The idea of exposing small children to knives and fire might be counter-intuitive to most, however, safety is of paramount importance during Forest School sessions. All leaders of Forest School must maintain 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 School 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 their tree stock. A sensible approach will involve the maintenance of a healthy tree stock and the effective management of the surrounding environment to satisfy many health and safety requirements.

Industry guidance on tree management should be considered as part of an effective approach to tree management.<sup>2</sup>

An effective system for managing trees and surrounding areas should also meet the requirements set out in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999<sup>3</sup> (guidance is also contained in HSG 65 Successful Health and Safety Management<sup>4</sup>).

Local Authorities should also be mindful that the Occupiers Liability Act 1957<sup>5</sup> 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 falls within Section 1(5) of the Occupiers Liability Act 1984<sup>6</sup>. 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 1998<sup>7</sup> (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, its maintenance and inspection, as well as training and supervision.

Safeguarding of children should also be important, with particular attention drawn to the Children Act 1989 (as amended)<sup>8</sup>, The Children and Social Work Act 2017<sup>9</sup>, and the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006<sup>10</sup>.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999<sup>3</sup> require employers to carry out risk assessments and make arrangements to implement necessary measures, appoint competent people and provide appropriate information and training.

The Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981<sup>11</sup> 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 Controls

A careful consideration of the location and contextual factors of the Forest School based on the foundations 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 a Level 3 practitioner 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 any paths and trees
- Ensuring that all staff have the correct level of training and experience, with all leaders maintaining a Level 3 Practitioners qualification
- The correct adult to pupil ratio is clearly specified and adhered to in order 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 locations 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 a competent person
- Ensuring all personnel have the correct level of DBS vetting, especially when outsourcing staff
- Any medical or health 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
- All training records should be retained

- 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 extreme / 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 insurer representative.

## Summary

Forest School has developed over the years and offer a wide range of activities for children, some being more hazardous than others. They offer a wide array 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 via training programmes. Through the robust implementation of risk assessment methodologies and effective controls, Forest School environments are able to offer valuable learning opportunities whilst not exposing the children or supporting adults to a significant risk of harm.

## References

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## Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

## Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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