

“We’re going down to the woods today....”

Case Study of a Forest School project with Carr Manor Primary School Nursery



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### Background:

“We’re Going Down to the Woods Today” was a Forest School project developed in partnership with Carr Manor Primary School by Lily Horseman of Kindling. Carr Manor was a Creative Partnerships Enquiry school during 2009/10 and this project came about as a result of their enquiry question.

Established in 2002, Creative Partnerships is the Government’s flagship creative learning programme, designed to develop the skills of young people across England, raising their aspirations and achievements and opening up more opportunities for their futures.

This Case Study is drawn from the project end form completed by Annie Berrington of Get out More, [www.annieberrington.co.uk](http://www.annieberrington.co.uk), who was the Creative Agent overseeing the project.

The enquiry question was

**What impact does a programme of exiting, meaningful outdoor experiences in local woods have on the outcomes of a group of nursery children, mainly boys, some of whom have English as an additional language.**

The Nursery was already taking children out and about in the local community as part of their Explorer days. During explorer days they went to a variety of locations such as the library, mosque, cafe, supermarket, pet shop etc, as well as visiting the woods. The teachers and Early Years practitioners were least comfortable with the woods visits and felt like they had run out of ideas to do there.

This was the point at which Lily Horseman met with Annie Berrington and Hilary Murtagh, the Teacher leading the Foundation stage. Through a series of meetings and discussions a series of Forest School sessions and an inset training day for staff was planned. The children chosen to take part were identified as having lower levels of involvement and well-being than their peers as well as lower levels of attainment on entry in the communication language and literacy area of development. The project also aimed to have a positive impact on the enthusiasm of the foundation stage staff for teaching and learning outdoors and to encourage a wider and longer reaching effect beyond the target group and the length of the project.



The philosophy of Forest Schools is to encourage and inspire individuals, of any age, to enjoy the opportunities offered by natural play, through positive outdoor experiences. By participating in engaging, motivating and achievable tasks and activities in a woodland environment each participant has an opportunity to develop intrinsic motivation, balanced emotional and social skills. These, through self awareness, can be developed to help reach personal potential. Forest Schools has demonstrated success with children of all ages who visit local woodlands on a regular basis, with trained practitioners and through play and self directed learning, have the opportunity to learn about the natural environment, how to handle risks and most importantly how to use their own initiative to solve problems and co-operate with others.



Lily Horseman is a freelance Forest School practitioner and trainer who has over 11 years experience of working with children, young people and their communities. Since 2002 the majority of her work has been around the themes of nature, outdoors, adventurous play and social and emotional development.

The school had identified that attainment levels in speaking and listening of children entering the foundation stage were increasingly lower than national expectations. In 2009 Foundation Stage profile results showed that 10 reception children fell into the bottom 20% of attainment in Leeds. They wanted therefore, through creative intervention to narrow the gap between the lowest and highest achievers and improve rates of progress in nursery of targeted children. Boys have been identified in the school improvement plan as under achieving in writing particularly in key stage 1. Low attainment in speaking and listening on entry to the foundation stage is an identified contributing factor affecting levels of progress in this area.

All involved feel that the project idea was appropriate to Carr Manor as it addresses one of the key factors in the school improvement plan; communication, language and literacy in boys. It was felt that the Forest School approach was the right one as it captured their imagination and gave them tangible experiences so that they are now in a better place to learn. The focused, narrow approach has enabled them to look at the impacts on individuals and improve outcomes for them. Now that the results of programme are coming in it has convinced them that programmes of this nature need to be available to all of nursery and rolled out to other boys higher up the school.

### **Parent involvement**

The school recognised that parents are children's first educators and therefore have a huge impact on their children's achievement at school therefore had intended to involve parents in the programme, although this aspiration changed not long after the project began. Initially parents were invited to come too, however only 2 did and it was observed that the children's behaviour was changed by the parents' presence so this idea was dropped.

The project ended with family celebration events with 100% turn out from parents and carers. The children helped build and start a fire to cook popcorn and bread for their families and hung photos of themselves in the woods for everyone to see what they'd been up to. Lily presented each child with a home-made wooden pendant with their name on in recognition of their achievements.



### **Practitioner/School relationships**

Relationships developed well from the outset. Before working with the children, the staff were introduced to the programme and Lily through a staff meeting followed by a training day. This turned out to be a good arrangement as it enabled Lily to develop a programme based around the issues particular to the setting, gain the trust of the staff team and

enthuse them for the project ahead. As well as her expertise in outdoor work and her ability to enthuse and motivate staff and young children, she brought a fresh outside perspective that was able to maintain the bigger picture and help focus on the objectives at a time when there were other internal issues to contend with. Lily and Hilary collaborated on the project and relationships strengthened as the project developed. Hilary was appreciative of Lily's organisational skills at a time when internal issues were compromising Hilary's capacity. Lily and Hilary had complimentary intervention styles which enabled the resolution of social issues to come from the children, rather than the adults. It was felt that the other staff got such a lot out of the training session it would have been good for some of them to come along to more sessions, but the consistency of staffing did work for the children.

Lily enjoyed being made to feel an equal partner and part of the school, rather than an outside visitor. Her input was extremely valuable to this project and there is a strong feeling that it could not have succeeded without her. She was seen as a highly skilled expert, who was able to share her skills and empower individuals with the confidence to pick up skills and use them in future.

*"It was absolutely a collaboration and that's why I enjoyed it"* (Lily)

*"Lily knows everything about the woods and you know everything about nursery"* (child to Hilary)

Likewise, the children quickly built up strong relationships with Lily thanks to her encouraging and gentle ways

*"She sees the good in them, makes individual relationships and notices things about them"* (Hilary)

*"Lily was my friend. She was nice" "I miss her"* (children)

### **The sessions**

In each session the content followed the children's interests and explored different themes that the children had either chosen or shown interest in the week before. The children learned how to whittle and saw wood using real tools. They helped build shelters of all different kinds and a rope bridge which they loved bouncing on. The morning group climbed trees and a crumbling stone wall and explored holes with sticks. The afternoon group were fascinated by bugs and creatures that they discovered living under leaves and in tree bark.

As is the nature of a Forest School there was a structure and boundaries, but within this children are encouraged to develop their own learning and play. The leaders were able to step back quite quickly and observe the children, then facilitate activities based on the children's interests. For example, when a child was using two objects like a tool, Lily incorporated tool use the following week.



This approach was enlightening for the nursery staff who said they sometimes feel they have to 'prove their worth' through leading activities. They noticed that by leaving the children to do their own thing their confidence grew. When the idea of a family celebration event was first discussed, Hilary felt they needed to arrange a demonstration for parents, but Lily suggested that this was not necessary. In fact, the children were keen to show their parents what they could do for themselves.

*"I showed my mum and dad climbing the wall"* Did you feel proud? *"Yes!"* (child)

**Child learning:** The impact on the children who took part in the project has been huge and can be evidenced in each of the categories below:

**Resilience and Emotional wellbeing.**

Children's resilience needs to be high in order to try new things and to learn. This group were selected for their low levels of resilience, emotional wellbeing or communication skills. These increased massively during the course of the project and could be seen in the way they coped with situations. For instance Gemma would fall down and cry repeatedly in the beginning but by the end would fall down but brush herself off and carry on. The children were considered to be lacking in confidence, but actually when their resilience improved, so did their confidence, communication skills and everything else.

**Self motivation**

Activities were quite directed at first but as the programme went on the children would take a lead. They were able to find things they were interested in for themselves and lead the play. For the morning group this involved a lot of fantasy and imaginative play (superheroes, diggers etc). The afternoon group were engaged by creatures, finding them and looking after them. By the last week they had a clear agenda of what they wanted to show their parents such as how to make hot mud or to climb a tree.

**Communication**

Several of the children were selected for their poor language skills. During the course of the project all the children have improved their communication skills, some dramatically so. For example Daniel who was an elective mute was swinging on the ropes and exclaimed "Look at me!" to the adults watching. Following this he began to respond to questions, first one to one then amongst the group. Recently he was overheard volunteering information about the project to the rest of the group back at nursery. Circle time was a regular feature of the sessions and one to which the children were increasingly able to contribute. As well as talking, the children are more able to listen to each other and to instructions from the adults.

**Social skills**

As the children played together they learnt to negotiate rather than fight. Gemma and Freddie fought constantly at first but by the final week went off together to find Spiderman (who lives in a tree there)





### **Problem solving and team work**

Having self motivation, time and space to work through problems increased their ability to work things out for themselves and together. Staff observed an interesting sequence in which a child is trying to pick up a log. He asks for and receives help from a team of other children but the log still cannot be lifted. Alfie finally resolves the issue by bringing them a smaller log, which they all carry off!



### **Knowledge and Understanding**

The woods presented the children with new and exciting ways to learn about the world which were more real than books and classroom based resources. For instance to measure and compare through looking at stick lengths, to experience pattern and shape through arranging wood, to understand how to climb over an obstruction, how insects react and how to look after them, understanding about water and ice from visiting a puddle every week.

The learning for the teachers and school staff was also evident;

#### **Confidence**

The staff feel more confident about taking children out of nursery, not just to the woods but other places as well. They had already visited the woods before Lily began the project and when she arrived they said they had run out of ideas. Staff have used the ideas and skills they learned from Lily and now demonstrate an understanding of the child-led activities in the environment. She was responsible for helping people to feel confident in their own ideas

*"You don't need to do much and things will happen". (Lily).*

#### **Teamwork**

The training day came at a difficult time for the Nursery and there was concern that staff would resent doing it but actually the training brought people together and helped them to accept change. The training day helped to instil positivity and enthusiasm and staff are keen to take their Forest School training further

*"It was also a great chance to tighten the relationships within our teaching team"*

*"I would just like to say that I have had a fantastic time and cannot wait to go again with my first group" (Comments from staff attending staff training day)*

## Wellbeing and resilience

As with the children the project has impacted on the wellbeing and resilience of the staff  
*"We enjoy ourselves at work more. This has an effect on the children and we go out more regularly now. I have never seen such a positive attitude from everyone. If we can pull off the family event, we can do anything. We don't have the same attitudes to the barriers such as paperwork and permissions so we can make it happen"* (Hilary)

The enquiry question had a communication, language and literacy theme but this was not seen as explicitly at the centre of planning or development, but running as a thread throughout. Speaking and listening remained a focus because the experiences gave them opportunities to talk about what they had done through circle time, reflection and informal instances back at nursery.

The greatest learning from the programme has been the raised awareness of the importance of resilience amongst young children and the impact greater resilience can have on the whole child. The setting was surprised to find how important this was and how raising resilience impacted on all the other areas, including communication, language and literacy, as well as self esteem and self confidence. It is felt that if wellbeing and involvement are high, then learning and progress in all areas of the curriculum will naturally fall into place.

The setting intends to take forward a lot of the ideas from the programme, including the idea of running 6 week creative programmes and taking groups to the woods. Reception staff are rolling out some of the things from the training day. During the programme Hilary visited Reggio Emilio to learn about their educational approach and this, combined with the experience of working with Lily has convinced the setting that it would like to employ a creative partner to work with them on a longer term basis. Further Forest School training for staff and appointing Lily as a longer term creative partner are currently being seriously considered. Even without these, it is evident that the setting will continue to visit the woods, use the technical skills they have learnt and develop programmes which allow children to follow their own interests.



*"We need to set ourselves more challenges because we can do more than we think"*  
(Hilary)

\*Children's names have been changed.

Report by Lily Horseman with reference to material from Annie Berrington,  
[www.annieberrington.co.uk](http://www.annieberrington.co.uk)

Pictures by Lily Horseman,  
Kindling. [www.kindlingplayandtraining.co.uk](http://www.kindlingplayandtraining.co.uk)