

# Take To The Trees

IMAGES BY  
CORIN LAWFULL



*Harried, time-poor, over-assessed and screen-obsessed: the unhealthy patterns we fall into as adults are being passed on to our children.*

One in ten kids – an average of three in every classroom – has a diagnosable mental health problem, according to a 2017 report by the Children's Commissioner for England. Over recent years, there has been a steady decline in children's emotional wellbeing, with 36% more calls being made to Childline from young people wanting to talk about mental health problems.

The reasons for the steady decline in children's wellbeing are complicated – and multi-faceted problems often have multi-faceted solutions. How can we create space for our children to be curious, to play and to daydream in a society that seems to care only for marks on a scoresheet?

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in Forest Schools (an alternative schooling method with a strong focus on the outdoors) as a means of improving children's wellbeing through connection to nature.

“Growing up today seems to

be harder than ever,” writes Alexia Adrianopoulos in the *Young Mind's Wise Up* campaign, which calls on governments to rebalance the education process by putting wellbeing on an equal footing with academic success. “Children and young people face a host of novel stressors that I cannot even purport to understand. In a confusing, addictive, 24-hour online world, young people need new tools and more support. For schools to succeed in helping their students, our priorities as a nation must be realigned and the education system must rebalance academic learning and emotional wellbeing.”

Forest School offers an innovative way of learning in that it advocates the benefits of outdoor activity. While some schools might have one outdoor session a week for a set year group, others might have multiple sessions a week spanning all year groups. Some schools might not even have indoor buildings, choosing for all learning to take place outside.

The ethos of Forest School turns traditional metrics-driven learning on its head. Instead, children are taken to the woods – where the environment leads the teaching.

## WHAT IS A FOREST SCHOOL?

Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between children and the natural world. Such programmes are run by qualified Forest School practitioners and offer learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.





I meet with Forest School Association (FSA) Director Sarah Lawfull on a sunny January day. We sit overlooking a wide expanse of fields, sipping coffee from a flask.

The FSA is a professional body and UK wide voice for forest schooling that promotes best practice, cohesion and quality Forest Schools. Sarah has taken me to a spot that's dear to her heart: an Earth Trust site in Didcot that looks out on Roman remains, an Iron Age hill fort and patches of woodland where she has led many a Forest School session.

Talking with Sarah about the potential of these programmes to transform children's wellbeing and learning is truly inspiring. "I have seen Forest School have a huge impact on individuals' self-belief" she says. "The approach is to empower children and young people to manage their own risk in environments that

are safe because we have identified the rich learning that happens when given freedom to make choices about whether to, for example, climb a tree or swing across a ditch."

#### MARVELOUS THINKING HAPPENS IN OPEN SPACES

According to a study completed by the mental health charity for children Young Minds, 90% of school leaders have reported an increase in the number of students experiencing anxiety or stress over the last five years.

Sarah argues that the very nature of many schools is stress-inducing for a lot of children. "There are bright lights, lots of bright colours, a lot of noise and a lot of instructions."

In particular, Sarah notes the vast number of instructions children receive from the moment they wake.

"As adults we say, '*This child never listens*', but if we actually knew how many instructions that child was given from the time they woke up to the time they went to bed, we would be stunned."

Looking back at her time as teacher, Sarah reflects that there was an ever-present apprehension about Ofsted inspections. She feels teaching approaches have become increasingly mechanised as a response.

"There was a culture that meant you needed to be seen to be doing the right thing all the time. Often, schools can be quite frightened of parents and of criticism.

"Schools feel they need to train children to be able to get through SAT exams because the school is measured on what the SAT results are and they'll only get enough children into the school if their

SAT results are good. The whole system is very skewed towards looking at productivity in a factory-like, business-like context.”

While Sarah believes in the importance of a rich, academic education, she worries that schools have become weighed down by concerns about inspections and test results.

“I believe children should be provided with rich educational experiences and supported to read and write and do their maths, but we have forgotten that children need to have communication and connection.”

It would seem that many parents are on the same page; 73% of parents say they would prefer to send their child to a school where children are generally happy, even if previous exam results had not been good, over a school where exam results were better.

Other types of intelligence are being ignored and sidelined in favour of passing exams. There are so many ways to be clever and Sarah references Howard Gardner’s *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, which states that traditional views of intelligence in relation to IQ are too limited. Instead, we should look at the different types of intelligence that exist, such as musical, interpersonal and linguistic.

“There’s a fabulous education guru called Guy Claxton and he wrote a book called *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*. It looks at two different modes of thinking: at pace and measured sitting around and seeing what comes into your head.

“One of the things he talks about is Einstein and how he would get great ideas from looking out of the window or staring at the wall. Some of the great thinking that only happens when you have the space to do it. Children don’t get that space – they are bombarded and taken from one thing to another thing to another thing.”

## HOWARD GARDNER’S MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES



### Visual-Spatial

They think in terms of physical space and like to draw, do jigsaw puzzles, read maps, daydream. They are very aware of their environments.



### Bodily-kinesthetic

They have a keen sense of body awareness and like making and touching things. They can be taught through hands-on learning, acting out and role playing.



### Musical

They show sensitivity to rhythm and sound. They are sensitive to sounds in their environments and may study better with music in the background.



### Interpersonal

They are understanding and love interacting with others. They have empathy for others, street smarts and can be taught through group activities and dialogues.



### Intrapersonal

These learners are in tune with their inner feelings. They have strong willpower, confidence and opinions and can be taught through independent study and introspection.



### Linguistic

These learners have highly developed auditory skills and often think in words. They like reading, playing word games and making up poetry or stories.



### Logical -Mathematical

They think conceptually, abstractly and are able to see and explore patterns and relationships. They like to experiment, solve puzzles and ask cosmic questions.



With teachers hurrying children on from one lesson to the next, Sarah argues there isn't the time to speak to children about their emotional wellbeing.

"Forest School takes you out of that and gives practitioners – and other members of staff – space and time to observe, to listen and to have conversations. Very rarely do children have that chance."

Children are also able to fail in the woods without repercussions. In classrooms, children are rarely given this opportunity; when they fail, it's in the context of an exam or a test and is perceived as a bad thing.

"Children fail a lot but it's to do with target-setting – you're not meeting this or that standard. It's all a bit nebulous. But learning to climb a tree or wanting to light a fire or cross a ditch is something children can try, have it not work out and learn that this is okay."

#### IMMEDIATE CONNECTION

Sarah believes that parents like to see a designated learning outcome for schooling, a written document that sets out what will happen. Forest School turns this method of thinking inside out by letting nature lead the way.

"If you are the class teacher, you have an idea what the children are doing the rest of the time and where their focuses are. You might have conversations with the children in the woods like, *'Remember when you were doing your art last week, that's just reminded me...'* and you might sneak in a little link."

In Sarah's experience, the real learning happens when what occurs in the woods comes back into the classroom. "There's that transference of skills and attitude rather than knowledge in the traditional sense. It's not about measuring what knowledge they've got, it's about measuring if they are

able to learn: to care for themselves, to identify what someone else is feeling.

"A lot of people will say, if they're in the woods then they're not doing their reading, their writing – and they are not learning. Actually, some of the richest learning comes from being outside, mulling things over for a long period of time and then talking about them back at school."

Sarah has noticed an increase in the children's curiosity as a result of a Forest School environment.

"Understanding the community aspect of woodland is something children get really quickly. There was one amazing time when there was a little boy who found a snail – actually the shell was completely empty but I didn't tell him that – and he spent about an hour waiting for the snail to come out and telling it stories and singing it songs. He was delighted."

Aside from this, being in nature opens the door to bigger questions around life. Sarah describes her first Forest Session with a group last year when an injured rabbit jumped into the clearing. Far from being horrified, the children wanted to make the rabbit a hospital.

"They used logs and leaves and we created a space for the rabbit. A few sat with the rabbit and it was really in a sorry state. When he breathed his last, they started jumping about saying *'Can he see me? Can he see me?'*

"The conversations that happened afterwards about what it means when you're dead and children who had had someone who died in their family like grandma or granddad, their dog or hamster – and this was day one of taking them to Forest School – you're right in there with massive issues."

#### STRONGER TOGETHER

As a professional body, the Forest School Association is wonderfully diverse. Within the body, there are

directors, trainers and education providers from a wide range of different backgrounds.

"Some of them have come through from an environmental education background; others are people who have been involved in outdoor adventure education such as Duke of Edinburgh, Scouting or Guiding, then they add forest schooling into their mix."

The Forest School Association has drawn its influences from similar movements in Denmark, Finland, Norway and drawn ideas from kindergartens in Germany as well as France, Italy and the States.

"There are a lot of people adding into the Forest School story, which makes it really exciting and rich. I think the diversity of it will ensure forest schooling grows and is able to meet the needs of children, young people and teachers."

Sarah's enthusiasm and passion for the transformative power of Forest Schools is truly remarkable.

"It's about understanding the deep connection we have with the earth and caring for the environment," she ponders, as we start to pack away our coffee flask. "There is a move within so many areas of society towards getting back to basics and making life simpler."

Forest School is just one countermeasure to an increasingly connected, digitised world that leaves little room to breathe. Perhaps the next time we're feeling grim about the mouth, we can take to the trees. ○













# Alternative Schooling

Gradually, a shift is taking place in our approach to education; one that takes us from hierarchical structures and exam-driven learning towards individualisation and varied teaching styles.

As it has become apparent that children's wellbeing is in steady decline, several alternative schooling methods have emerged – from forest school initiatives to homeschooling.

This shift is also being played out in the architecture of our school buildings. D1 Kindergarten and Nursery in Kumamoto, Japan is a prime example of building design being used to encourage children to interact with each other and the environment around them.

The brief for the school required a built environment that would bring the outdoors in and let children play, move and explore. Designed collaboratively by Hibinosekkei, youji no shiro and Kids Design Labo, the kindergarten breaks down as many physical barriers as possible.

No partitions divide classrooms, providing maximum flexibility and freedom of movement. Classrooms can be opened up fully, giving access to the outside.

In the center of the building an atrium and courtyard allows sunshine to filter through in the summer and rain to pool in the winter. Children are encouraged to interact with the natural world through splashing in the water or even skating when the water freezes over in winter. ●