

Seven key features of effective practice

1. The best for every child

- All children deserve to have an equal chance of success.
- High-quality early education is good for all children. It is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- When they start school, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are, on average, 4 months¹¹ behind their peers. We need to do more to narrow that gap.
- Children who have lived through difficult experiences can begin to grow stronger when they experience high quality early education and care.
- High-quality early education and care is inclusive. Children's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are identified quickly. All children promptly receive any extra help they need, so they can progress well in their learning.

At Forest School, the principle of "The best for every child" is at the heart of all practice. Every child is valued as unique, capable, and deserving of equal opportunities to succeed. The inclusive, outdoor learning environment ensures that all children—regardless of background or ability—can access high-quality early education through hands-on, play-based experiences. Practitioners carefully observe and adapt activities to meet individual needs, identifying any special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) early and providing prompt, tailored support. For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the natural setting helps narrow developmental gaps by fostering communication, social interaction, confidence, and independence. Those who have faced difficult experiences benefit from the calm, nurturing routines and sense of belonging that Forest School provides, helping them build resilience and emotional wellbeing. Through child-led exploration, reflection, and supported risk-taking, every child is encouraged to develop holistically and reach their full potential.

2. High-quality care

- The child's experience must always be central to the thinking of every practitioner.
- Babies, toddlers and young children thrive when they are loved and well cared for.
- High-quality care is consistent. Every practitioner needs to enjoy spending time with young children.
- Effective practitioners are responsive to children and babies. They notice when a baby looks towards them and gurgles and responds with pleasure.
- Practitioners understand that toddlers are learning to be independent, so they will sometimes get frustrated.
- Practitioners know that starting school, and all the other transitions in the early years, are big steps for small children.

At Forest School, high-quality care is at the centre of every interaction and decision. Practitioners ensure that each child's experience is positive and nurturing, always placing the child's wellbeing and perspective at the heart of practice. Forest School recognises that young children are learning independence and supports this through encouragement, gentle guidance, and understanding when frustrations occur. The natural environment itself contributes to this high-quality care,

offering calm, consistent routines and opportunities for exploration that nurture both emotional and physical wellbeing.

3. The curriculum: what we want children to learn

- The curriculum is a top-level plan of everything the early years setting wants the children to learn.
- Planning to help children to develop their language is vital.
- The curriculum needs to be ambitious. Careful sequencing will help children to build their learning over time.
- Young children's learning is often driven by their interests. Plans need to be flexible.
- Babies and young children do not develop in a fixed way. Their development is like a spider's web with many strands, not a straight line.
- Depth in early learning is much more important than covering lots of things in a superficial way.

Forest School supports children's school readiness by developing their independence as they learn to dress themselves and prepare for outdoor experiences. It nurtures resilience when things don't go to plan and strengthens their self-help skills. Through rich, meaningful experiences, Forest School promotes a lifelong love of learning in nature and nurtures the whole child. It builds key skills, confidence, and curiosity through hands-on exploration in a natural environment.

Forest School aligns closely with the EYFS Areas of Learning and Development. Communication and Language is supported through conversations about what children see and experience outdoors. Personal, Social and Emotional Development is strengthened through turn-taking, cooperation, and shared problem-solving. Physical Development is enhanced through balancing, climbing, and safe tool use, all of which contribute to early writing skills and overall coordination. Language development is woven into every session, with practitioners modelling new vocabulary, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging children to share ideas and create stories inspired by the natural world.

The approach also supports the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning and complements continuous provision. Children play and explore as they investigate materials, develop persistence when challenges arise, and think creatively and critically as they solve problems—such as during den building or collaborative outdoor projects.

Forest School places children's individual interests at the heart of the learning experience, enabling them to guide the direction of their own exploration. Each session strengthens different aspects of development, from physical coordination and problem-solving to emotional resilience and social understanding. The Forest School approach ensures that every child has the opportunity to grow, thrive, and achieve their full potential within a supportive, nature-rich environment.

4. Pedagogy: helping children to learn

- Children are powerful learners. Children can make progress in their learning, with the right help.
- Effective pedagogy is a mix of different approaches. Children learn through play, by adults modelling, by observing each other, and through guided learning and direct teaching.
- Practitioners carefully organise enabling environments for high-quality play. Sometimes, they make time and space available for children to invent their own play. Sometimes, they join in to sensitively support and extend children's learning.
- Children in the early years also learn through group work, when practitioners guide their learning.

- Older children need more of this guided learning.
- A well-planned learning environment, indoors and outside, is an important aspect of pedagogy.

At Forest School, children make progress through repeated, hands-on experiences that enable them to refine their skills and deepen their understanding over time. The outdoor environment provides endless opportunities for exploration, discovery, and problem-solving, allowing children to learn through play and real-world engagement. Staff and supporting adults support this process by modelling activities and demonstrating skills. When appropriate, we extend knowledge through sensitive guidance, open-ended questioning, and reflective dialogue that promotes critical thinking and independence. Forest School follows a learner-centred pedagogical approach, as outlined by the Forest School Association's Principles and Criteria for Good Practice. This approach ensures that learning is responsive to each child's needs, interests, and developmental stages. Through strong, trusting relationships and consistent encouragement, children foster curiosity, resilience, and confidence. In this way, Forest School enables children to make meaningful progress in all areas of development—social, emotional, physical, and cognitive—while developing a deep connection with the natural world.

5. Assessment: checking what children have learnt

- Assessment is about noticing what children can do and what they know. It is not about lots of data and evidence.
- Effective assessment requires practitioners to understand child development. Practitioners also need to be clear about what they want children to know and be able to do.
- Accurate assessment can highlight whether a child has a special educational need and needs extra help.
- Before assessing children, it is a good idea to think about whether the assessments will be useful.
- Assessment should not take practitioners away from the children for long periods of time.

At Forest School, assessment is a continuous, reflective process that focuses on each child's holistic development rather than on formal testing or predetermined outcomes. The emphasis is on observing how children develop resilience, confidence, independence, and emotional wellbeing, recognising that these skills form the foundation for future learning and can be transferred into the classroom over time.

Because learning in Forest School is experiential and led by children's curiosity, assessment is carried out through careful observation, and reflective dialogue rather than structured assessments. The Forest School lead and supporting staff notice how children approach challenges, collaborate with peers, solve problems, and express their thoughts and emotions. These insights are then used to inform planning and tailor support, ensuring that each child's individual learning journey is valued and extended. In this way, assessment at Forest School celebrates children's strengths, promotes intrinsic motivation, and provides a deeper understanding of their growth across cognitive, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This supports continuous assessments of all the EYFS areas of learning and development.

6. Self-regulation and executive function

- Executive function includes the child's ability to: hold information in mind
- focus their attention
- think flexibly
- Inhibit impulsive behaviour.
- These abilities contribute to the child's growing ability to self-regulate: concentrate their thinking
- plan what to do next
- monitor what they are doing and adapt
- regulate strong feelings
- be patient for what they want
- Bounce back when things get difficult.
- Language development is central to self-regulation: children use language to guide their actions and plans. Pretend play gives many opportunities for children to focus their thinking, persist and to plan ahead.

At Forest School, children naturally engage in role-play and imaginative activities, which provide valuable opportunities to develop focus, cooperation, and forward thinking. Through these experiences, children plan their ideas, take on different roles, and work collaboratively with their peers, enhancing both their social and communication skills. The open-ended nature of play in the outdoor environment allows children to explore real-life scenarios, helping them to practise self-regulation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution in meaningful contexts.

Children thrive in the Forest School setting because it allows them to follow their own interests and curiosities in a child-led, play-based way. This autonomy fosters motivation, creativity, and a sense of ownership over their learning. The freedom to explore at their own pace, combined with supportive adult guidance, helps children build confidence, independence, and emotional resilience through achievable challenges. Overall, the Forest School environment nurtures holistic development by enabling children to learn through active, purposeful play while forming strong, positive relationships with both nature and their peers.

7. Partnership with parents

- It is important for parents and early year's settings to have a strong and respectful partnership. This sets the scene for children to thrive in the early years.
- This includes listening regularly to parents and giving parents clear information about their children's progress.
- The help that parents give their children at home has a very significant impact on their learning.
- Some children get much less support for their learning at home than others. By knowing and understanding all the children and their families, settings can offer extra help to those who need it most.
- It is important to encourage all parents to chat, play and read with their children.

Partnerships with parents are an important part of Forest School practice, helping to create a strong link between home and the learning environment. Communication with families is open and ongoing, ensuring that parents feel involved in and informed about their child's Forest School experiences. With appropriate permissions, photos of Forest School sessions are shared on the school website, allowing families to see the range of enriching activities their children take part in. In addition, Tapestry is used to share individual observations and photos with families, celebrating each child's achievements and the enjoyment they experience while learning outdoors. This sharing of evidence helps parents to understand the skills and progress their children are making, as well as the values and principles of Forest School learning. Children also enjoy talking about their Forest School adventures at home, strengthening the connection between their school and family life. Parents are encouraged to contribute by sharing their own observations or weekend activities on Tapestry, which promotes a collaborative approach to learning. Through this partnership, parents and practitioners work together to support each child's growth, confidence, and enthusiasm for the natural world. Tapestry is also used to celebrate and extend the learning that takes families the opportunity to talk about their experiences at home. They are encouraged to upload nature-based photos/experiences that they have enjoyed and wish to share with the teaching staff too.