



## **Bristol Boys Achievement Project September 2017 – June 2019**

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The Impact of Forest School on Characteristics of Effective Learning - specifically being willing to have a go and keeping on trying.

### 1. What we noticed. What interested us.

In our 2017/18 cohort we had a boy heavy group of children, some of whom we observed had a tendency towards 'learned helplessness,' especially when inside and attempting self-care skills such as putting on their shoes after playing outside. In addition, this group seemed to be particularly lively and noisy during some of our inside sessions which could potentially lead to challenges managing their behaviour appropriately.

We are a small pack-a-way setting using a Scout hut and attached grounds. Although we have considered it, we have yet to find a way to run our sessions as free flow. On arrival the children play inside for the first part of the morning and then we all go outside before returning inside at the end for the session for stories and songs before the children go home at 12.15. We felt the cohort of children would really benefit from spending more time outside in a larger space, and fortunately just as we were considering how to implement this, Vicky Paton, a Forest School leader contacted our setting to see if we would like to make use of the Forest School she had just set up in the area.

We thought the opportunity for the children to take part in Forest School sessions one morning a week might offer them new experiences and have a positive impact upon their learning. We were also interested to see whether Forest School would have any impact upon their Characteristics of Effective Learning.

### 2. What we did.

We met with Vicky and after initial discussions, asked if she would come and lead an initial series of 6 Forest School sessions on our site from November to December 2017. Our site is not a forest by any stretch of the imagination, but we do have a large grassy area and a small overgrown, woody area which Vicky thought could work. We contacted the Scouts and they were happy for us to use the site for Forest School activities. Our insurers were also happy for us to go ahead, so long as the sessions were led by a level 3 Forest School Leader. We contacted our parents letting them know of our plans and asking if they would be happy to make a voluntary contribution towards the cost of Vicky running the sessions for one morning a

week. We are fortunate to have a very supportive group of parents and they were all enthusiastic about our new venture.

All members of staff then attended a staff meeting led by Vicky where we established how and when the Forest School sessions would be run and what we needed to do in preparation. We put out a plea for some resources we would need, purchased some and were delighted that one of our staff members had a supply of logs we could use for seating at our base camp area. Finally, we made sure we had plenty of waterproof clothes, warm hats and gloves and we were ready to start!



In November we had our first Forest School session which was a great success and before we broke up for Christmas had arranged for Vicky to return for term 3. During the Christmas break we received an email with details of Forest School training, and I decided to sign up for the level 3 training due to begin in February.

Vicky continued to run Forest School sessions for us right through until the end of term 5 and I then took over leading the sessions in June at the start of term 6 when I had completed the practical assessments of my training. I still had all the written assignments to complete and was looking forward to a summer holiday of essay writing!

We have continued to run Forest School sessions almost every Friday since June 2018, and I have now completed all my assignments and received my Level 3 Certificate in Forest School Programme Leadership. In March we received 30 tree saplings from the Woodland Trust which the children have helped to plant – we still don't have a forest but are heading in the right direction. The children made signs to put on the trees to let other hut users know they needed to take care of them too – a perfect opportunity for mark making with a purpose.



### 3. What we learnt.

We were particularly interested to see if attending Forest School would have a positive impact on Characteristics of Effective Learning, in particular the ability of children 'to have a go' and 'keep on trying' so we asked each key worker to complete CEL assessments for each child in October, February and June. We also spent time making observations of the children, with particular regard to these 2 characteristics. In addition, we carried out 'interviews' with some of the children to find out what they thought about Forest School.

Our Characteristics of effective learning assessments showed most children had increased their scores for having a go and keeping on trying. This demonstrated that Forest School was an effective environment and learning experience for developing these characteristics.

Without looking at any data though, we could tell from the day to day behaviour of the children, what they were saying, observations made at Forest School and elsewhere, and by listening to parents, that Forest School was a success for our setting.

Almost from the very first session, we observed the children playing in such a positive way and being so engaged with the environment and activities that we believed the implementation of Forest school had been the right decision. As the weeks progressed, we observed more and more examples of positive experiences. The activities were not always easy and many needed children to persevere and persist, mastering new skills and helping each other. While we were sawing wood to use to make a planter, one child said, "this is harder than it looks!" He carried on though and didn't give up until he had sawed all the way through his piece of wood. These kinds of activities help to boost children's self esteem as they experience success when they finally manage to find that elusive ladybird they have been hunting for, saw through a branch, or get their den to stay up long enough to play inside it.

Being outside in a natural environment with so many open-ended resources to use and few 'toys' meant the children had to really use their imagination and creativity as they decided what to do. Although this came naturally to some, others struggled initially, but gradually became more adept at this freer play as they observed and learnt from their peers. The Forest School environment and range of activities offered such as cooking over a fire and using real tools, provided the children with many opportunities to experience and manage risk, an important life skill. I was very impressed with how quickly the children understood and applied the safety rule of stopping at the edge of the red rope circle and waiting for an adult to invite them in to work with the tools. Some of the more cautious children were initially concerned about approaching the fire to toast a marshmallow or bread dough wrapped round a stick, but with encouragement and reassurance they were eventually confident enough to take that risk, perhaps after watching others and realising that all turned out well, apart from the occasional singed bit of bread.

On many occasions I observed children sitting with another child around the fire, chatting and making friendships, talking about shared interests and experiences. This is an important part of

developing emotional intelligence – knowing that you have similarities and differences to others and beginning to develop empathy for their feelings. Forest School allowed us to slow down and make time for these interactions in a very relaxed way.

#### 4. What next?

Forest School is now embedded within our provision and the next step is to continue to find ways to spread the benefits to other areas of our provision, such as bringing more natural materials to our inside environment, and finding ways to use real tools and woodwork more frequently as these are so motivating for children.



Recently the planting of the trees provided a great opportunity for mark making and writing. The children were very proud of the trees they had planted and keen to do anything they could to help the trees thrive. One of our concerns was that the other users of the scout hut might not be so careful, so we made signs to put on the trees alerting other users to them. Some children who are not generally interested in mark making, were very keen to make a poster to help protect their tree, especially when they saw them being laminated and attached to the trees. A great example of how Forest School has had a positive impact on other areas of learning. One little boy was so taken with the poster making that he has continued to produce posters at home and his mum has told us that he is planning to plant three trees in his own garden and put up posters so that his dad does not accidentally mow them down!

We have seen the benefit of Forest School for both boys and girls at our setting and are very pleased with the name change of the project to 'Bristol aspiring for all.' Our next piece of research may focus on engagement and how we can influence those children who appear to be less engaged so that they can gain maximum benefit from their time spent in our setting.