

□ Forest School at home □

Dear families,

I hope you are all safe and well and managing ok in these strange times. I wanted to join in with the teachers to make a little offering for the weeks ahead. I appreciate many of you may not have gardens, but I'm hoping that while the government allow us to go locally for walks, you have found some way of accessing the natural world; somewhere there aren't lots of other people and where you can get a regular dose of nature. If you feel it's inappropriate to stay a while, hopefully you can feel ok about gathering a few of nature's gifts to take back and explore at home.

As you know, the all-important principle of Forest School is that it is child-led. It's about play, self-motivated challenge, exploring, discovering and most importantly, cultivating a personal connection with, and appreciation for, the natural world. Our job as adults is to watch and learn from and about our children, guiding and supporting them to further their curiosity. None of these ideas are intended to add to your to-do list. They're just starting points, something for the pocket if you're heading out, or to encourage you to spend more time by your window.

The science is all there. Time spent in nature is linked to lower stress, restored attention, a balanced nervous system, increased levels of cancer fighting cells, the activation of neural pathways associated with calm and decreased levels of anxiety and depression. And for those who can't get outside at all, studies have shown that just looking out the window or even at a picture of the natural world, can reduce stress.

Best wishes,

Sally-Ann Woodrow : Forest School Leader

Core Routines of Nature Connection

The Core Routines of Nature Connection are learning habits that we can develop to learn nature's ways. Because children are usually excited and busy with their friends at Forest School, time for establishing these routines in the way that could be life changing for them, is limited. Now feels like the ideal opportunity for us try them out at home.

Sit spot

This is our own special place where we go to regularly connect with nature. It could be a tree in the garden, a rock on a local walk or a chair near a window. To sit and be, to observe and feel the changes and cycles of nature. By sitting still, we can enable wildlife to be more comfortable with our presence and therefore show more of itself to us. None of us want to be told to find our sit spot. But we can gently encourage each other by doing it ourselves and then sharing our stories of what we saw and heard.

Expanding our senses

At Forest School, we introduce the idea of paying attention to our senses through appreciation of the ways and unique traits of animals. Here are some of our practices:

Owl eyes – Owls can't move their eyes, which is why they have to turn their heads. Imagine being an owl and try to use your peripheral vision. If you hold your hands out to the side, can you see them when you're looking forward?

Deer ears – Deer ears have huge bulging muscles that turn like satellite dishes to focus on different sounds. Cup your hands behind your ears and focus on different sounds. What's the furthest/quietest sound you can hear? Move them to the front, can you hear behind you?

Racoons feel their way through the world with their long and sensitive fingers. How does your clothing feel? The wind? Your heart beating?

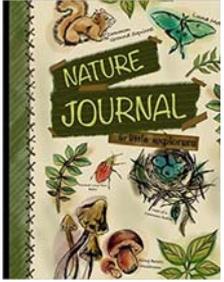
Dog nose – How do you smell best? With long breaths or quick sniffs? What individual smells can you identify as Spring emerges?

Fox walking - Our normal walk is, in fact, a controlled fall. With each step you take, you have already committed your weight forwards. Watch a cat or fox, how they lightly lift their foot up and carefully place it on the ground before they commit their weight onto it. Imagine there is a puppet

string attached to your knee and that you're just going to lift your leg from the knee keeping your ankle and foot as relaxed as possible. Allow your foot to dangle loosely, then slowly bring that foot back down to the ground, noticing which part of your foot lands on the ground first. When your foot is fully placed on the ground, you can then transfer your weight onto that front foot. As we walk in fox walking, we move more slowly but more stealthily. You can now try both your usual walk and then swapping to fox walking to feel the difference.

Nature journal

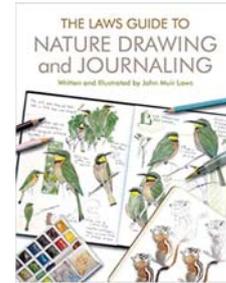
A great way to train the mind to pay attention. Whether you are drawing pictures or describing, this practice focuses and calms us, concentrates our senses and incites more curiosity. It gets us dipping into field guides in an active way, which then sends us out with more questions. Again, this is something best modelled by adults and there are some lovely purpose designed journals available. You can 'look inside' both of these examples on Amazon. The third book is an instruction manual on learning to draw nature.



For younger children



for older children



Mapping

You can map anything – your house and back yard and how it fits into your larger sphere of life, a favourite spot or the route where you wander. Put everything down, trees and plants (try to identify them), birds glimpsed, animal tracks, shady and sunny spots, the four compass directions, showing where sun rises and sets etc. The point is not an end product but a continuing process, forcing us to pay attention to our surroundings, to see life beyond ourselves and to “story” our places. Children love adding fun names like death crossing or slimy frog waters. Why not map your home site for Forest School? I'd love to see it.

Birdsong

Birdsong is a wonderful reminder of the constancy of the natural world, oblivious to our human struggles. Learning a few birdsongs, and the messages they are communicating, is incredibly rewarding. There are apps and online sources galore to tap into during this more peaceful time.

Field guides/nature programmes

If you have any field guide books, get them out and make a habit of regularly flicking through them. When out and about, examine closely a plant, bird, animal track, hold it in your mind's eye, and look it up when you get home. The more we practise using these wonderful treasure chests of hard-earned knowledge, the more we build up and further curiosity. The internet is awash with nature programmes that can help us build up our family knowledge of animals, plants, ecosystems; whatever takes your fancy!

Thanksgiving

Taking a moment to see the grace in the elements of the natural world – frogs, rain, spiders' webs, or the sun – deepens our relationship with each one and reminds us of our interdependence and kinship with nature. This core routine calls us to remember to express gratitude for the things that make it possible for us to be alive. Things common to all humans, as well as those specific to each of our lives.

The above thoughts come from a learning programme called nature mentoring. There is no way my little summaries have done it justice and if you would like to learn more, my bible is the *Coyotes Guide*, a 500 page tome full of wisdom and practical ideas. Or look up Jon Young and the *Wilderness Awareness School*.

Games

All of these games can be played with just three people, some of them with just two. In Forest School, we use games as keys to invisible learning. E.g. we are playing hide and seek, but we are learning to be still, alert, attentive and curious.

Before starting any of these games, check your area for hazards both at ground and eye level. Also establish your boundaries.

Me to tree or plant/flower/brick in the wall maybe! - anywhere

Need: Something to use as blindfold (bandana, scarf, sweater)

One person is blindfolded. The other person leads blindfolded one to a tree/plant/flower and lets them feel it and smell it. They are then led back to their starting point and when the blindfold is removed, they have to guess where they have been.

Web of life - anywhere

Need: String

This game illustrates interrelationships among all members of nature's community, portraying how air, rocks, plants, trees, animals function together in a balanced web of life. Form a circle. One person starts with the ball of string and says one thing they can see in the natural world, e.g. tree. They then throw the string to their opposite person, who says something that might be dependent upon trees. And so it goes on, continually bringing in new elements, animals, insects, until you have created your own ecosystem, with each person with both hands up, each representing different things. To demonstrate how each individual is important to the whole community, take away one member, eg. a logged tree, by tugging on your string. Everyone who feels a tug on their string gives a tug is affected.

Squirrel nuts - anywhere

Need: Blindfold, "nuts" (eg. beanbag, small ball, pair of socks in a ball)

One person wears a blindfold. Another has to communicate to that person, either just through touch OR speech, where they can pick up a pair of socks/ball/etc. Blindfolded person has to pick up their "nut" and throw them, either at a third player, or at a tree, a target, whatever.

Steal the Spines from the Hedgehog – anywhere

Need: blindfold. Could develop using a pot of cutlery instead of sticks and water pistols for the guards.

This game encourages slow and stealthy movement, encouraging us to think and sense like a predator. Think about how cats move. Their back feet land in the space the front feet have just left, ensuring the ground is already clear and compact.

Gather a few sticks for the hedgehog's spines and leave in the middle of the playing area. Choose a blind guard and a thief or thieves. The aim of the game is for thieves to sneak in, steal a stick and sneak back, without being detected by the blindfold guard. If they are "hit" they have to return to their starting point. You may want your third person to be a spy rather than another thief, depending on how accurate your blind guard is.

Eagle Eyes – somewhere with hiding places, we played this last term with Beech Class

Eagles have incredibly keen vision. For hundreds of yards above a field they can spot a small rodent. In this game, mice hide from an eagle, who has to use his superior binocular vision to spot his prey.

Chose an eagle, the rest of the family are mice. Mice hide at least 30 steps from the eagle's nest, but still able to see Eagle. The mice's aim is to find as many hiding places as possible during the game without being spotted. Eagle repeatedly calls out 'eagle's eyes are closing for 10 seconds' (vary the length of time between 6 - 15 seconds) giving the mice time to find a new hiding place. Upon hearing, 'eagle's eyes are opening', mice must stay still and hide. Eagle then scans the environment, by slowly turning around on the spot. If mouse is spotted by the Eagle, they are called into the eagle's nest to feed the eagle's chicks. They stay in the nest for one round getting the chance to see lots of

good hiding places. After this, they rejoin the game. When eagle is ready to end the game, they can let the mice know it is the last time they will close their eyes and for the mice to find a hiding place as close as they dare.

Feeding time – somewhere with hiding places

Similar to Eagle Eyes, mice hide and eagle stands in one spot. When eagle calls feeding time, arms outstretched, mice have to run, touch her hands, shout their name and then flee to another hiding spot. Start your feeding time count on about 35, and reduce by 5 counts each time. Mice are out if they are spotted.

Fox Tails

Need: “tails”, e.g. bandana, long socks.

Establish boundaries. Children have a piece of material tucked in their waistband. Run around and pull another person’s tail off and add to yours. If you have no tail you have to crouch down. You can either steal one from someone going by or another fox can give you one and then you join in again. One fox cannot have more than three tails and only one tail can be stolen at a time.

Forest Fire

Year 1 and 2 love this game. Establish playing space. One person stands in the middle, others are runners and line up along one end. Each runner chooses an animal/bird/fish to be but they don’t tell the person in the middle. Middle person calls out, ‘there’s a fire in the forest and it’s going to burn... e.g. animals with fur’. Runners with fur have to run across to the other side. If tagged they join the middle catcher but can only be jellybeans (jump with feet together to catch not run) or burning bushes waving arms to catch the runners.

You’re only safe if...

One catcher... calling out, ‘you’re only safe if... e.g. you’re touching a maple tree, you’re under an oak tree, you’re facing north’. Catchers tab children moving between objects and join them as catchers.

Other Activities

Mud kitchen

Can you turn an area of your yard or garden/old washing up bowl/wheelbarrow into a muddy area, for play with water, bottles, sticks and maybe a few old kitchen utensils? The role-playing that comes out of mud kitchens goes on for weeks at Forest School. See what amazing dishes they come up with or challenge them to make your favourite.

Nature mandalas, pictures and fairy houses



Birds’ nests

Birds are incredibly skilled architects, with different species using vastly varied materials from mud and dried grasses, to moss woven together with spider webs, animal fur, sheep wool and downy feathers. Somehow, they craft it all with their two feet and their beak, then softening it all down with their breasts. Have a go at making a nest with just tweezers for beaks, a fork for feet and fists for chests. Have some materials ready before you start. Sticky weed works easily into a natural shape, then build it up with some of the materials mentioned above. This is incredibly difficult, even before you get out the tweezers. Then you could make little eggs from mud or clay.



Sticky weed... play a game of sticking it on your family member without them noticing



Grass Rope

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DG26XDPpB8>

Nettle bracelets



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQHvqWCN5Eo&t=19s>

Woodland stick folk – need string

Always a favourite at Forest School. Find a Y shaped stick and another stick for arms and then maybe a nut, stone or something for the head.



Weaving dreamcatchers – need string

Use weeping willow, fresh ivy or larch. (A deciduous tree that drops its needles and can hold onto its cones for years. It has lots of little tiny cones along its bendy branches.)

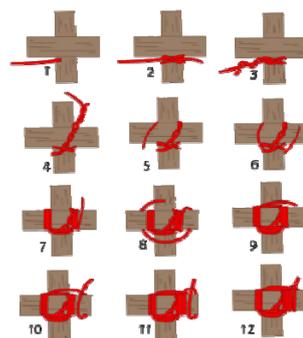
Larch



Photo frames – need string

This is excellent practice for their Square Lashing knot which hopefully some of them will be able to teach you. You can also learn here.

<https://www.animatedknots.com/>



Boats - string & secateurs



Elder bracelet - String, secateurs and a tent peg



The Elder has a thick pith inside it, which can easily be pushed out with a tent peg. Leaves and tiny flower umbels are coming out now, but look for its gnarled and knobbly bark and then you'll forever know it for winter time.



Clay

Make tree sprites, mud cakes, character blob aliens and insects with clay.



Morse code

Use sticks and stones as codes to find hidden treasure. Makes a treasure hunt more challenging.

A ● -	J ● - - -	S ● ● ● ●
B - ● ● ● ●	K - ● - -	T -
C - ● - - ●	L ● - ● ● ●	U ● ● - -
D - ● ● ●	M - -	V ● ● ● -
E ●	N - ●	W ● - -
F ● ● - ●	O - - -	X - ● ● -
G - - ●	P ● - - ●	Y - ● - -
H ● ● ● ●	Q - - ● -	Z - - ● ●
I ● ●	R ● - ●	

Foraging

Safe Foraging Practice

Plants have so many healthy gifts to offer and picking wild food is a wonderful way to deepen our connection to the land and our cultural history, but we must be aware of hazards.

It is absolutely crucial to be 100% positive of identification of a plant and its poisonous look-alikes. Please use this document for inspiration, but cross reference with other online sources. To fully understand and identify a plant you need to observe it through all phases of its life-cycle.

Please be aware of the hazards of heavy metals, pesticides, herbicides and contaminated water. Do not gather plants from roadsides, farm tracks, worked fields or near water.

Respectful Harvest

To ensure we are harvesting respectfully and responsibly, here are a few things we can do...

Harvest only where the plant is abundant so we know we can harvest without damaging the ecology. Ask yourself, how can I harvest this plant respectfully? Asking permission of the plant and showing gratitude in the form of an offering, simply sitting in silent gratitude, singing a song, or as was traditional, leaving an offering of oats or barley.

Nourishing Nettle tea or soup

Scissors, cup, gloves

Nettles have been used medicinally, as wild food and their fibres used in textiles and stalks for fire lighting. There are about 100 invertebrate species associated with the nettle, about 30 of which are restricted to nettles for their habitat at least for one phase of their life cycle. Nettles have an antihistamine effect, valuable for treating hayfever and other allergies. The iron in nettles is very easily absorbed and assimilated making it a wonderful treatment for anaemia.

You need to get to the nettles soon now, before they go to seed. To harvest nettles, give children gloves, a pair of scissors and a cup to snip the tips into. Adults can simply pluck the tips off.

With half a bag of nettle tips you can make your own delicious soup or pesto or biscuits (Google stinging nettle cheese biscuits)

Elderflower

The elder tree is a magical and medicinal friend in the forest and the flower heads herald the arrival of summer. Small umbels are out already, they will grow big and white as below, in a month or so. Elderflower has been used in traditional medicine all over the world in many different cultures due to its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. The most common uses are for colds and flu, sinus infections, and other respiratory problems.



Correct ID is essential, you will recognise the heady scent of elderflower, as there are poisonous lookalikes in the Umbellifer family. Also identify from leaves (which are not edible).

Pick your elderflowers on a sunny day when the buds are freshly open, before the petals brown around the edges. Rinse away any tiny insects by dunking the whole flower heads into a bowl of cold water.

Elderflower cordial

There are plenty of recipes online. All you really need is about 20 flower heads, a few lemons and LOTS of sugar. 1kg per 1l of water! Most recipes call for citric acid, which is a preservative and gives it an added sour flavour, but it's not essential. To sterilise bottles beforehand, wash in soapy water, then heat in oven on 120 for 10-15 minutes

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2019/04/elderflower-cordial-without-citric-acid/>

Elderflower fritters

The children LOVE these.

Ingredients

100g plain flour

2 tabs oil

175 sparkling water

Egg – white separated

12-16 elderflower heads

Caster sugar



Recipe

Sift 100g of plain flour into a basin then add 2 tablespoons of oil and 175ml of sparkling mineral water. Beat to a thick paste, then stir in a tablespoon of sugar. **Set aside for 30 minutes**. Just before frying the elderflowers, beat an egg white and fold it into the batter. Rinse 12-16 elderflower heads, shake them dry and snip the flower heads into small stems.

Fry oil in the pan. Test the temperature with a cube of bread – it should go golden in seconds. Then dip the elderflowers into the batter and lower them into the oil. Hold them under the oil by pushing down on the stem. Fry until the batter is pale gold and crisp then lift out and dip straight into a dish of caster sugar. Eat as soon as they are cool enough, they lose their crispness quickly.

Other sources available include:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2020/03/kids-nature-activities-self-isolation/>