

Doncaster Forest School: Chitter Chatter

Forest School practitioner Claire Bowley describes the theory and practice of a pilot programme developed for disadvantaged families

In the spring of 2021 Doncaster Forest School piloted a new twelve-week Forest School intervention called 'Chitter Chatter'. The pilot worked collaboratively with a team of specialists from Doncaster Family Hubs, Doncaster Forest School and Bentley High Street Primary School.

The practice

Three families were invited to attend Forest School sessions at Robin Wood, adjacent to Bentley High Street School in Doncaster. The families who attended had little knowledge of one another but as the sessions progressed, positive interactions and supportive relationships formed not only between the children but also amongst the adults.

Each session followed the Forest School ethos of encouraging holistic development, and practitioners worked alongside the families in exploring a range of experiences whilst supporting the participants and modelling positive parenting skills.



Sessions took place over lunchtimes and into the afternoon and were flexible in structure. The start and end of each session allowed for time around the fire circle for preparation and reflective discussions. At lunchtime the meal was central to the intervention and this was prepared by the families and cooked on the fire. This gave the whole session a sense of belonging and togetherness which as the weeks progressed was tangible within the group. The woodland experiences that were provided were based upon practitioner observations and reflections of each session. The team took time to reflect and plan together at the end of each session. As practitioners' knowledge of the participants

The theory

Chitter Chatter was developed building on the knowledge of several child development theories including Erikson's Growth and Change ², Vygotsky's Social learning Theory ³, and Bowlby's Attachment Theory ⁴.

The practice framework was written by Janine Ryan (Head of School for Education and Arts at Doncaster College and Doncaster Forest School) who, following an evaluation of previous interventions, recognised the measurable impact that Forest School could have on children living in the most disadvantaged wards of Doncaster.

past and present experiences whilst promoting positive outcomes. Communication and language development of all participants was key to the sessions and foundational theories supported the development of the framework and its aims.

'Every child, to be educationally successful, needs a language rich environment, one in which adults speak well, listen attentively and read aloud every day... if every child is to be ready for school, language must become a priority in every home.' ⁶

The practitioners at Doncaster Forest School benefitted from having Trauma Informed training ⁵ and understood the importance of having an Emotionally Available Adult (EAA) within their practice. The EAA supported participants by providing empathetic listening and a safe place to support and reflect on

The practice framework was created with parents as a central theme. Family involvement, effective parental relationships and positive parenting ensure positive outcomes for children.



"I was very nervous but excited at the same time about the thought of Forest School. Now I really look forward to Wednesday as it means it's Forest School day. I like being able to learn new things. Using the tools is my favourite. It is a really calm environment with no distractions. All the adults are very helpful and like to talk to us about what we are doing. The mud throwing was very good and being able to squelch in the mud too but with my wellies on. I enjoyed the fire based activities such as helping light it and cooking or making snacks on it. I also enjoyed that all activities are a choice & nothing is forced." Child participant



increased, personalised opportunities for exploration, confidence building, resilience and building of self-esteem were provided.

Children were involved in starting fires, campfire cooking, den building,



balancing and obstacle course making. They also engaged in team games, seed/mud bombs and explored different sensory experiences.

Nature connectivity and the impact of Biophilia theory ¹ was observed as the group connected with the natural world around them. Clear tarpaulins were used during rainy sessions as windows to the sky, families lay and observed the rain, trees, and sky above them.

Over the course of the twelve weeks families relaxed and got to know each other and shared special moments with their children and each other. Progress was recorded by the use of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires and the outcomes showed an improvement in social and emotional wellbeing as well as

improvements in emotional literacy and language and communication.

Doncaster Forest School program lead Kelly Severn said:

"Chitter chatter enabled the Forest School ethos to support children, parents and collectively families to create a small supportive community group. The parents had opportunities to see their children interact with others, engaging in risky play, connect with nature amongst other factors. Chitter Chatter is a unique but powerful framework which gives back to our families and communities."

The sessions ended with a small graduation ceremony where the children were presented with a Forest School certificate and goodie bag to remind them of their Forest School experience.

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The framework aimed to build on parental strengths whilst recognising the part each family member can play.

'In addition to higher academic achievement...parental involvement leads to greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance, fewer behaviour problems at school, and greater social and emotional development.' ⁷

The pilot was delivered with the collaboration of professionals with different expertise from Doncaster Family Hubs, Doncaster Forest School and a learning support member of staff from Bentley school. This collaborative approach brought a range of professional perspectives and experiences and added a joined-up approach.



A parent said:

"It would be my vehement recommendation that Forest Schools is given the opportunity to continue the excellent work it does. There needs to be some semblance of continuity for these children in order for longer term benefits to be realised; our girls are testament to the success of the programme and the Forest School team's dedication."

References

- 1 Biophilia: [info](#)
- 2 Erich Fromm, Erich (1973) *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973)
- 3 Erikson, E.H. (1995) *Childhood and Society*
- 4 Vygotsky, L (1962) *Thought and Language*
- 5 Bowlby, J (1997) *Attachment and Loss, 2nd edition*
- 6 Trauma Informed approach: [info](#)
- 7 Boyer, EL (1991) *Ready to learn*, the Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of teaching
- 8 Clark. C (2007) *Why families matter to literacy - a brief research summary*. National Literacy Trust

