

Forest School for All

Writer and experienced Forest School practitioner Teresa Davies shares how she has worked with children with different access needs at Forest School, and a book she has written to help

If you ask any Forest School leader how Forest School has impacted the children and adults in their setting, I think everyone would have many positive stories to tell.

When I am experiencing that overwhelming feeling of trying to balance everything in my life, I find the peace and quiet while setting up for Forest School such a calming and wonderful place to be in that I can't help but switch off from the outside world. Once everything is ready I take a deep breath - that moment before the fun begins and you are about to be inundated with the curious minds of those who are about to join you - and my whole body and mind is ready to take on the world again.

So if Forest School has this effect on many of us as adults, it's no wonder the whole experience creates something magical for those that join us. I have worked with many children, with different complex needs, and have found Forest School always has such a positive impact on their lives.

I have only ever had one child whose physical ability and poor vision challenged me when making the site suitable, safe and accessible. To add to her challenges, the child was not able to wear welly boots as she needed the support of her specially-made boots.

How did we meet the child's needs? Her mum would join us for the walk to the site and a member of staff would assist on the other side, so if they needed to have a hand to tackle any obstacles we were there ready to assist. Pathways were always cleared of any obstacles that would create a tripping hazard and one-to-one support was in place to help the child access as many areas as possible. She was determined to be as much like her peers as possible, and with this amazing mind set and love for the outdoors she achieved so much during her time with us, taking on challenges that, had she not been included in our sessions, she may not have had the opportunity to experience.

Over the years I have seen Forest School sessions help so many children, from children who speak very few words, to one who took on a form of autism when



away from home; all suddenly start to communicate when in a small group working on different projects. Other children attending, who were sensitive to the children's needs, became a huge part of this process, encouraging them to join in and be part of the group. Taking away the pressure of everything in a classroom, it became clear that the space and environment was a great place for these children to flourish; through communicating their needs and things they discover, to building relationships with their peers.

I frequently saw those who were not as academic as some of their peers take charge and lead very successful games and creative activities. Their practical skills had a chance to really shine, and seeing their faces of accomplishment and how proud they were when this was shared with their teachers, peers and parents was incredible. Children who found it difficult to engage in activities and sessions in school or nursery, who were often disruptive, loved taking on the riskier activities and were often the ones with great understanding of the possible risks - becoming engrossed in sawing, using a drill or mallet, creating things with rope, and especially loving cooking on an open fire and eating their creations.

Forest School has brought calmness to all these children's lives - a time to think, space to be able to move around as much as needed, and a chance to use tools and participate in riskier play that helped them to experience a feeling of accomplishment. To add to this, using the natural materials around them seemed to release inner tension, which has been a great way to defuse and change the child's demeanour. Spending many hours sitting on the floor with children mixing

water and mud and then just squeezing it between our fingers and just listening to what the children have to say, the whole process almost felt therapeutic and such an important part of their healing process.

Above all, watching the children's whole body change as they gradually relax, speaks volumes of how important this time at Forest School is for these children and is an important way in which to help support every one's mental health.

About Teresa Davies

When I did my Forest School training I didn't realise the impact it was going to have on my life!

I qualified as a level 3 Forest School leader in 2006. I was trained by Chris Dee (now director of Forest School Learning Initiative) at Wood Norton in Worcestershire, in the woodland there - extremely basic - we even had to dig a hole to use as a toilet!



While training I set up my first Forest School in a local pre-school. We were lucky enough to be able to use a member of staff's land that had a wonderful track across the field and a lovely coppice of trees. I used to pack my Land Rover every Thursday Night and feel like I was camping for a week! We had nothing on site apart from the structure in the photo. We had to build a metal post framework as we kept getting vandalised, but to my knowledge it is still standing 15 years later as we moved it with us when we relocated.

I added Forest School sessions over the years, running 3 different sites over 3 days at the nursery and two schools at one point.

I am now in a lovely nursery in Worcester where we are predominantly outside, which is my ideal situation. I help run Forest School sessions once a week and outdoor learning the other two days, all year round.

I have continued to run Forest School sessions since qualifying in 2006 apart from 10 weeks when I left to create my book before coming to my recent job where I have been for 15 months now.

I hope to continue to create more books that are relevant to Forest School so watch this space!

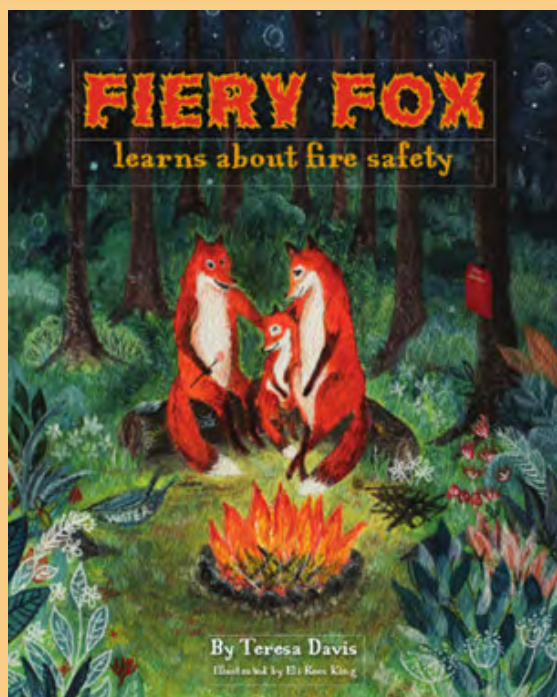
Fiery Fox learns about Fire Safety by Teresa Davis

When I was not running Forest School sessions during the time many people were at home in 2021, I really missed it and had time to think about how I could make my sessions better, and what I could put in place to help the children.

I have found fire safety can be quite a hard subject to talk about without scaring children, so I decided to put a book together with this in mind. I chose illustrations to capture the effects of a fire that was spreading in a woodland, that was not too scary, but had lots of detail from tiny birds and many creatures. I included rules for around the fire which the characters use to keep the family safe, and a 'look and find' page that reflects on the important fire safety aspects we are teaching the children.

The book had to have a happy ending and what better way than to show them sitting in a fire circle, sharing a wonderful moment as a family, as you and I would with our Forest School family!

I also inundated my poor illustrator with all the tiny details of the fire blanket, kindling, water etc to make it as relatable as possible, so when we share the book with children it is all relevant to what they themselves are experiencing.



If you want to find out more about the book visit www.bear-books.net or Etsy bearbooksLtd

