

Reclaiming Snack Time: the importance of comfort

Cooking and eating in the open air are part of life's simple pleasures and an essential part of outdoor sessions. Yet a focus on snacks and food has not had the attention it deserves. It's time to think more deeply about the role of snack time for physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Dr Mel McCree makes a case for inclusive practice for nurture through food and nutrition.

Ensuring our participants are fed and comfortable is a fundamental starting point to any session

This is an essential part of a trauma informed, inclusive, recovery approach that we cannot afford to ignore. If you work outdoors with people in the UK, you will have noticed increases in need, precarity and general anxiety. Life became more stressful under austerity and in the pandemic, particularly for those in poverty and underserved communities.

According to [UNICEF](#), UK children's wellbeing is at an all-time low. Child poverty is now at 4.3 million, with wide geographical disparities, meaning some UK areas are at crisis levels. There are statistically more people of colour and single parents in these groups. Precarity is a critical race, class, gender and equality issue. That's one in three UK children, and

their parents, facing basic survival challenges.

Young adults are also at a critical point in their mental health, with challenges finding jobs, education and homes. One third of mental health problems in adulthood are directly connected to adverse childhood experiences (ACE) ([Young Minds](#)).

I paint a grim picture to acknowledge the reality that many outdoor practitioners work with. We can't solve the causes or the bottomless need, but nurture, food and nutrition is one way we can make a big difference.

Meeting needs for recovery with a trauma-informed approach

We all need our essential safety, food, warmth and wellbeing in order to flourish. Not just participants but

practitioners too. Can you plan to meet this need in your sessions? Even if you run very short sessions, keep reading for ways you can take action.

Nurture at snack time as inclusive practice

Why do we have snack time or a tea break? Firstly, this is not a break! Gathering together to share food and social warmth is where we 'build the village' and, I argue, the most valuable part of a session. For example, many practitioners report how outdoor cooking with refugee families is hugely successful, prompting the sharing of recipes and memories from home.

Amongst others, we can take the [nurture group approach](#) to support and recognise core social skills. Let's be honest and value snack time as the group experience highlight that it frequently is. It is incredibly important as a way of making the



outdoors inclusive and accessible to all, from poverty proofing, to sensory processing, and meeting our basic needs so we can relax and enjoy ourselves.

From my own perspective, when I get stressed, one of the first signs is my denial of my own sensory signals for food, drink and rest. I often find myself in desperate need of food and a cuppa. The anticipation looms large on my inner horizon until I can't concentrate on anything. Having a snack, or 'a nice cup of tea and a sit down' whenever you need it, is not always invited or seen as appropriate, so I can delay for social reasons. This becomes learned behaviour and my own signals become harder to recognise. However, once I meet my basic needs and refuel, I become calm, grounded and able to function again. If I leave it too long, then it takes longer to recover.

Sackville-Ford (2019, p93) notes how adding breakfast had a calming effect on behaviour in his Forest School sessions.

We can't expect people to function and wait for breacktime if they are tired and hungry. We can't expect regularly tired and hungry participants to bounce back from a snack immediately.



There are other challenges to inclusion in providing nurture through food. Sometimes, in a group, we can also feel too fragile to show up for a tea break. Joining in can be incredibly challenging for those who avoid direct conversation. It is possible to create an open snack table or spaces to snack solo. Those with sensory processing challenges may also need support in navigating snack time. Being outside brings a new dimension to the senses and many report that participants will experiment and try out all kinds of new foods when outdoors.

Putting our senses first

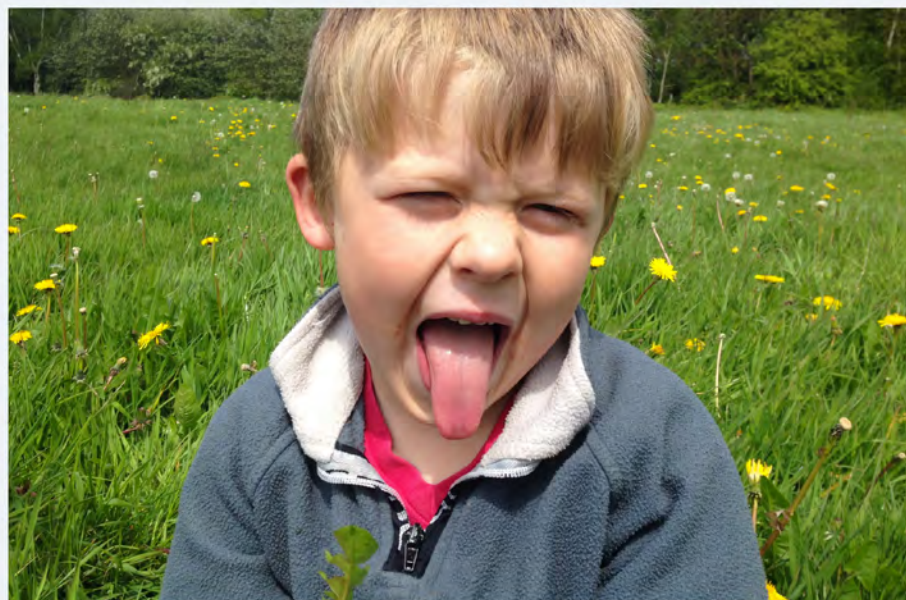
Despite all the books now on outdoor pedagogy, hardly any of them mention food. Notable exceptions are by authors Annie Davey, Jon Cree and

Marina Robb (see refs). Perhaps this is because, in our privilege, we take the presence of food and water for granted. Our stomachs have forgotten what it feels like to be really hungry and it is easy to forget to count our blessings.

The late Erin Kenny, describing a day in the life of [Cedar Song Nature School](#) (a 100% outdoors pre-school on an island off Washington state, USA), started her snack time by acknowledging how lucky we are to have food. It doesn't have to be pious, and a simple bit of appreciation probably makes it taste nicer, along with fresh air.

Our sense memory is strong. The quality of the biscuits is often the thing you remember about a team session or day out. When the break arrived, were you surprised or disappointed by what was on offer? What snacks are memorable for you and why?

Annie Davy, in *A Sense of Place*, talks about the window of the senses, or SWIM: Survival, Wellbeing, Independence and Meaning. Starting with our survival and wellbeing makes so much sense (in both senses!) if we want participants to gain independence and successfully create meaning. She notes that hunger can be a confusing & difficult sensation to assess, linked to emotions & cravings.



Encourage sensory exploration with some gentle reflections or prompts: My food feels / smells / tastes like...? What about yours? Where do you feel it on your tongue as you chew? Now you've eaten, do you feel full? Are you thirsty as well?

In their book *The Essential Guide to Forest School and Nature Pedagogy*, Marina Robb and Jon Cree describe the full [eight senses](#): the five survival senses and three functional senses of proprioceptive, vestibular and interoception. Consider all the ways that nature and food stimulate our sensory development and how our brains integrate this input, such as the balance and flow in diverse ecosystems that moves our '[gaze of fascination](#)' around, relaxing the eyes and restoring our attention. Recommended for screen breaks!

Outdoors is a wonderful place of subliminal multisensory stimulation. Cooking and eating can enhance all the senses. Which particular ways can you support this for your participants, to build that long term healthy relationship to food? For example, how is the tactile experience and can you prompt in more to enrich it? How about tasting food twice, as many cultures do? Once with the fingers, the second time with the mouth?

Robb and Cree also note the importance of clean fresh water and food hygiene. I recommend Richard Irvine's [soap dispenser](#), portable taps and [handwashing guides](#) in the previous issue of this magazine! ([see Outdoor Practitioner issue #2](#))

Wild wood case study

The scenes in the case study will be recognisable to many practitioners. There are deep principles inherent in these precious moments. Some children regularly reported feeling tired and in need of space when they arrived. One child said '*this is the only time I get some peace and quiet*'.

Wild Wood case study hot chocolate as a holistic process

I worked with a Wildlife Trust group for disadvantaged young children (5-9) to research their long term project (2013-16), visiting the same local woodland each week year-round for a few hours. The children always chose what to do, including lots of free open-ended play, and took part in planning future sessions. However, making hot chocolate with a fire-based kettle was the one consistent activity that everyone agreed must happen every week. They came to site straight from school lunchtime and it wasn't just the warm, sugary snack they craved, it was the whole ritual of making and sharing. Observing this project really taught me the value of snack time.

It took time. They built slowly on their independent skills over years. It was a challenge at first for some to sit, drink and talk peacefully with each other around the fire pit. Then over a few years, they went on to find and chop wood, safely build and light



a fire, heat the water, carefully watch, set out cups, pour the hot water with help, hand it round with fruit and biscuits, then tidy up. Indeed a ritual worthy of merit and reward. I understand why the children saw it as the essential memorable ingredient of the session.

This level of responsibility and achievement was something all the children wanted to take on. It gave them confidence, self esteem and social recognition. They gained trust from the leader by safely handling risk and learning skills. For children who had a complex and challenging relationship with school, this was a badge of honour. They loved to be recognised as the one who independently provided and cared for their fellow peers. Importantly the group, valued their time to rest and socialise at this point in the group.

As the children got to know the space, they roamed further. Snack time was the one point that everyone was together. It was a time for jokes, stories, sharing news and reflections. A calm settled over the group. It was also a time for wildlife watching, as the robins and other birds gathered alongside to pick up the crumbs. Then, the sugar rush was absorbed by the wide ranging play that followed.

DEFINITIONS

Trauma-informed practice develops strengths-based understandings and responses to the impact of trauma, emphasising physical, psychological, and emotional safety and empowerment

Nurture group: short-term intervention for pupils with social, emotional & behavioural difficulties that make it harder for them to learn in mainstream class

Proprioception: the sense of self-movement and body position

Vestibular: the sense of knowing where your body is in relation to the environment

Interoception: understanding and feeling what's going on inside your body





Wild wood snack time discoveries

- Snack time is key to belonging and a successful group process
- Enjoy the ritual of coming together to share
- Give space for people to take turns to provide for each other
- Encourage experimentation and time to try out new skills, behaviours and tastes
- If people are tired, hungry or cold, meet these needs first
- Give space around snack time for a range of sensory and emotional processing
- Allow food and drink at any time
- Be open to other species – flora in the food and drink and fauna for company!

How does it change our approach when we value this unique chance for rest and a break from life challenges?

How does your thinking change about snack time when in context of all the social, emotional and sensory processing going on?

The [evidence](#) from this study demonstrated that supporting wellbeing through outdoor play and

learning facilitates improvement in school readiness and achievement. The children were learning both practical and soft skills, such as sharing, collaborating, independence and responsibilities. They learnt to recognise their own bodily cues for hunger, tiredness, cold, movement and rest.

It shouldn't need to be stated that learning to look after our basic needs and senses is the foundation for

being ready to learn further, but in increasingly pressured school and social environments, it needs saying again and again. Ultimately it was not about the hot chocolate, it was about the social bonding, personal growth, relationships and awareness that happened around it. It helped us as a group to feel welcomed, safe, connected, relaxed and calm.

Recipe for a healthier hot choc

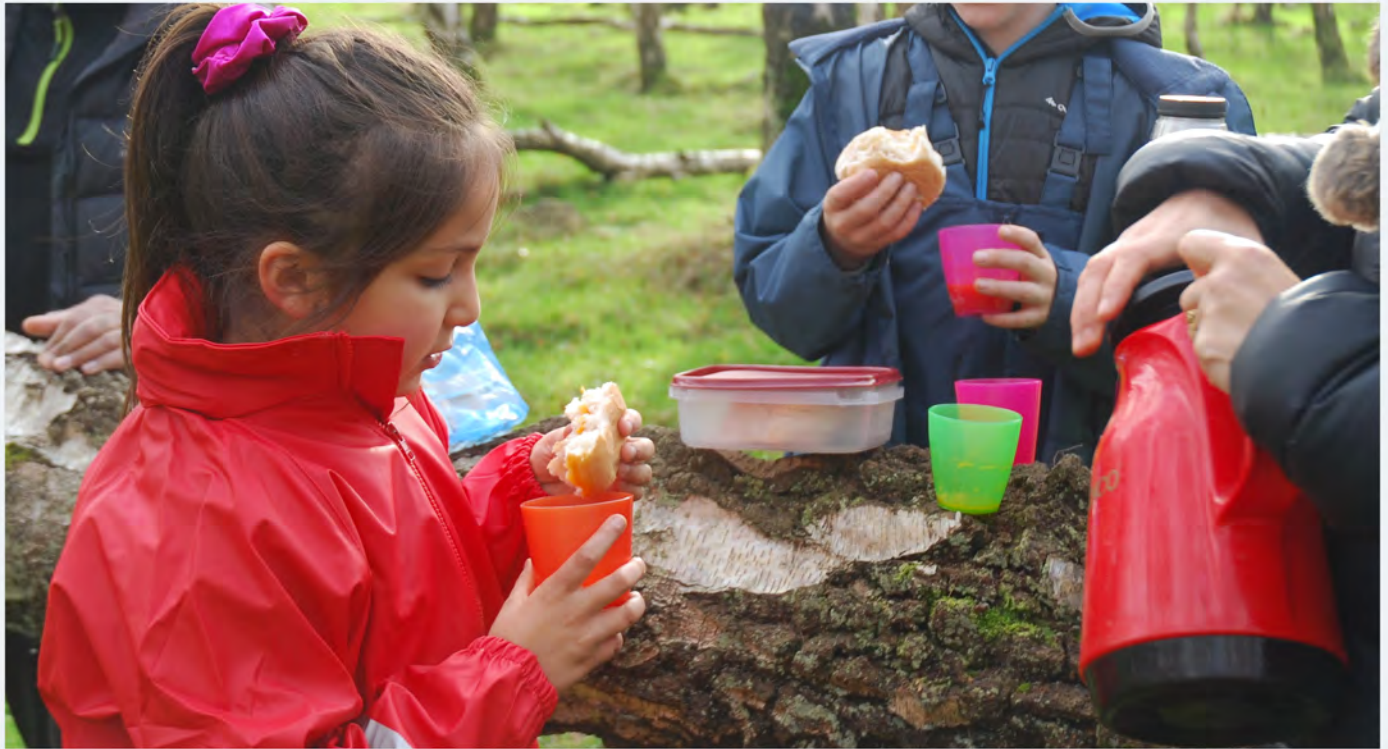
Preparation

- Pre-mix before the session
- Store in flasks, either ready to drink or stronger to add water

Ingredients

- Use cocoa powder with non-dairy milks or a full fat organic dairy milk
- It's good to have options
- Add a small amount of healthier sweetener such as xylitol, stevia powder, maple syrup or coconut sugar. See how little you can get away with
- Try adding a drop of vanilla, orange or mint extract
- Obviously for a big group some ingredients can be expensive, so save it for treats
- Buy in bulk or from wholefood suppliers to lower the cost
- Healthy hot choc has less sugar spike than instant, sustains for longer and you won't tell the difference





Keeping it healthy: nutrition, foraging & working with nature

I hear you. The sugar debate is real. Your snack doesn't have to be junk. Consider the debate around marshmallows: some foods are just a nostalgic throwback and not at all appropriate. However, sometimes hot chocolate is used to signal familiar comforts to newcomers, and over time, tastes can become more adventurous.

It takes time, months, or years as in the Wild Wood study, to attune to a place and to feel confident to use what you find and learn about the uses of plants around you, even the obvious nettles and berries.

Foraging has a positive neural and sensory feedback loop, encouraging safety and belonging. As we tune into how the world provides, we connect directly with the rest of nature.

In the Wild Wood study, some nurture needs were met with wider species connection. *'I like getting juicy blackberries'*, said one child. *'Fruit gives you energy and it's free!'*

Never underestimate the power of a brief forage and the wonders of a blackberry face paint or cup of nettle tea.

Outdoor practitioners may not have the time or budget to lay it on thick with luxury treats, but there are quick and inexpensive ways to make things special.

Practitioner tips for alternative hot drinks

It is so enjoyable to expand participant's ideas of what kind of drinks are available

- rotate drinks to give variety and a range of sensory experiences
- ingredients can be special in many ways e.g. sharing a personal favourite with a story, some cultural context or a memory, foraging from a particular place, growing your own
- hot apple juice or ribena
- make tea from the hedge
- Foraging leaves and berries can be a revelation



Case study: Nik Elvy & the Curious School of the Wild

Based in Cornwall, Nik Elvy has done more than most to poverty proof the outdoors and her focus on food is timely and welcome. "We know that food can be a ticket to participation, and without it people may not join in, so we make sure we provide food as a default in all of our work. We are well known for providing second breakfasts"

Nik's explanation for this is simple; to lower the stigma of being hungry. Many children and even adult practitioners might turn up to a session having not eaten, so second breakfasts have become a regular feature. If everyone can have it, it is normalised, and this blanket approach is crucial. Too often, Nik knows that people may not attend if a session is badged as for the disadvantaged or poor. To survive with dignity, people practice 'poverty masking' and this needs respect.

Nik's team are trained in a trauma-informed approach which supports them to understand the possible causes of complex behaviours. They aim to create a 'low-demand environment' where the power to choose is paramount.

There will be many readers who feel the pinch of short timed sessions. Nik chooses to run longer sessions so there is time to cook and eat properly. She



usually runs an all-day play scheme in residential areas. Time is also important for her in working over the long term, with all age groups and participants growing up attending her sessions.

Nik and her team have some achievements to be proud of. She says her longest term group will cook and eat anything. They recently made and ate paella with prawns on the green of a housing estate where they meet. Progression to this advanced stage of outdoor cooking was made possible by a long lead-in period, that started with hot chocolate and hot dogs. She works to actively counter children's requests for marshmallows and hot chocolate when they see a fire, by supporting them to try different options and enjoy a food adventure. There are teachable moments using the Fare Shares scheme to save food waste, with the fun challenge in working out ways to cook and eat what turns up.

Sometimes having a fire can get in the way and Nik is a brilliant advocate for keeping it simple. If there is no reason for a fire or it is not appropriate, think outside the box. Take a camping stove or flasks; think what will make your group cooking succeed in an easy practical way.

Make a [DIY pot noodle](#) or use packet soup. I love that she says 'food turns a walk into an adventure'. What a great way to look at it, and a great provocation for parent and toddler groups, or others that meet without camp kitchens. Park bench session anyone? Nik's lateral thinking really shows how it is not always traditional campfire cooking that will meet your group's needs. If the priority is to eat, within the time, resources and environment you have, then think how to do that easily. As the permaculture maxim goes, minimum effort for maximum efficiency.



Outdoors, changes are constant. The weather, terrain, layers of clothes, seasons, canopy etc. Nik believes this is why always having food helps participants to know what to expect. They can rely on its presence and this is a wonderful way to encourage nurture and wellbeing.

Nik Elvy's top food tips

- Think of the food that you can make that has options to choose e.g. baked spuds or veg chilis with toppings
- The feeling of choice is paramount! Especially for sensory processing and neurodiverse inclusion
- It doesn't have to be fancy eg. go for flask food on a park bench for a quick win
- Try not to introduce new things before time; keep it simple
- The important stuff is to enjoy shared eating outdoors, not to give yourself impossible tasks
- If you can, provide a second breakfast for all
- Join Fare Shares and get free food
- Be community led, so the group learns to look after each other
- If working longer term, look for new recipes and ideas to keep it interesting



The importance of snack time - questions to get you started

What happens if you...

- think that snack time IS the lesson plan?
- assume we are all tired, hungry, traumatised and in need of nurture?
- start with small achievable tasks - this golden Forest School/life principle applies to us as practitioners as well as the participants
- provide what is possible with the time and resources you have?
- use wellbeing outcomes to demonstrate your success?
- don't have a fire (eg have flasks, picnics & build up to it)?
- have snacks and spare clothes to share at any time? Try reminding parents, schools, settings etc to pack them for their child where appropriate
- Apply some long term thinking to your planning?



Equipment & tips for success

Some thoughts & questions to consider on the practicalities of taking snack time outside



Setting up the snack area - are you sitting comfortably?

The main aspect of comfort outside is protection from the elements, and how they affect temperature.

Think about where and how people will be sitting. How can this be made more comfortable?

Serving and eating

- Use plastic / metal cups for warm drinks
- Use cups and spoons for more liquid foods - pasta and sauce work well this way as it's very easy to hold the cup in one hand and a fork or spoon in another

Try • **tarp shelters** • **foam sit mats**
• **log seats** • **picnic benches**



- Use small bowls when eating warm food outdoors - handing out smaller portions helps keep the main food warm, and also reduces the chance of food sliding off a plate (Ikea one's are ideal as they can be cupped in one hand and an implement held in the other).

Hand & pot washing

- If snacks are more complex than just held in the hand (eg soup), what happens to dirty dishes and implements?
- Can they be collected in a box and taken back to wash?

More developed sites may carry out dishwashing outside. This is also a social part of the snack and meal process

[Outdoor Practitioner #2](#) has a big feature on handwashing.

Food prep and waste

Think about -

- How and where will food be prepared? Food hygiene
 - How complicated and time consuming will prep outdoors be?
 - What equipment do you need?
 - What will happen to any waste?
- Site hygiene - after snack time have a hunt to search for dropped food to prevent attracting vermin, particularly to a regularly-used site

- How will food be given out? Often food is lost or dropped whilst children are moving about, and particularly when they transition from standing to sitting. Would it be more successful to have the group sitting down comfortably and the food handed out to them? This can be coordinated by a couple of children.



Simple snack time recipes

Cold snack ideas

- pre prepared carrot & veg sticks (more established projects might peel & cut carrots on site)
- take fruit to cut up
- make fruit kebabs

Warm food

Stuff you can pre-prepare and / or bring in a flask:

- drinks - hot milk, hot choc, squash
- tinned or packet soup and pasta

- hot dogs in hot water in a flask
- bring bread rolls, ketchup etc separately
- pre prepared baked potatoes wrapped in a tea towel and put in a box - on site cut them open and add beans from a flask and pre-grated cheese (be aware of travel & prep time so spuds are still warm when you're ready to eat)
- hot noodles or pasta and sauce
- [DIY pot noodle using a storm kettle](#)

Basic campfire food

- cook potatoes wrapped in foil and warmed in embers (you could part-cook them beforehand). Warm beans in the fire + add other toppings
- hot drinks
- packet or tinned soup
- soup and pasta
- pancakes • bread on sticks (damper)
- bananas & chocolate
- caramel apples - slices of apples dipped in brown sugar and cooked

I hope this article helps you to think differently about snack time. There are many inspiring, creative ways to be inclusive and to take a trauma-informed recovery approach. As you get to know your groups, you will know what might work best for them. Put wellbeing first and the rest will follow. Quality snack time is part of a restorative pedagogy that is desperately needed.

Mel McCree

Mel McCree is based at Bath Spa University & the first person in the world to write a PhD on Forest School practitioners. She is co-founder of the Forest School South West skill share network, Going Feral play days for adults, and Co-Director of Earthstars Education and Play CIC, supporting practitioners in their outdoor setting development & training.

[Mel Mcree website](#)



Evidence for gaining support

How do you advocate for all this with your senior leadership and get support from funders? Be a **Snack Champion** and share this evidence and the links below.

[Evidence of outdoor wellbeing as essential grounds for learning](#) Mel McCree, Roger Cutting & Dean Sherwin (2018) The Hare & the Tortoise go to Forest School: taking the scenic route to academic attainment via emotional wellbeing outdoors

[Critical Issues in Forest Schools](#) - Sackville-Ford and Davenport (2019)

[Addressing childhood adversity & trauma](#) - Young Minds

[Trauma informed schools UK Trauma / Trauma informed practice](#)

[Trauma informed practice toolkit](#) - Scottish government

[Sensory integration & nutrition](#) - Autism Awareness Centre

[Outdoor food hygiene training](#) eg [Blake Training](#)

[Fare Shares Community Food membership](#) to receive food donations

[Muddy Faces Outdoor Hub](#) pages on [foraging & food outdoors](#) for a foraging guide, recipes etc including dandelion jam and a wonderful story of the [deep learning](#) that goes alongside.

[Nik Elvy's fantastic Youtube channel](#) with recipes, microadventure demos etc.

[Learning through Landscapes outdoor recipes](#) for campfires using typical school grounds produce.

There are some good **books that focus on outdoor cooking**. Try [Cook Wild year round cooking on an open fire](#) by Susanne Fischer-Rizzi.

Annie Davy's book [A Sense of Place](#)

Robb and Cree's book [The Essential Guide to Forest School & Nature Pedagogy](#)

No list is complete without a [blog link to Juliet Robertson](#) for practical snack ideas and a nod to [Lily Horseman](#) too, who excels in outdoor baking. Check out those macarons in hazel leaves, mmm!

One final reflection...

... perhaps we could take a leaf out of the French book on cuisine. For why do the French eat snails? Because they hate fast food!

