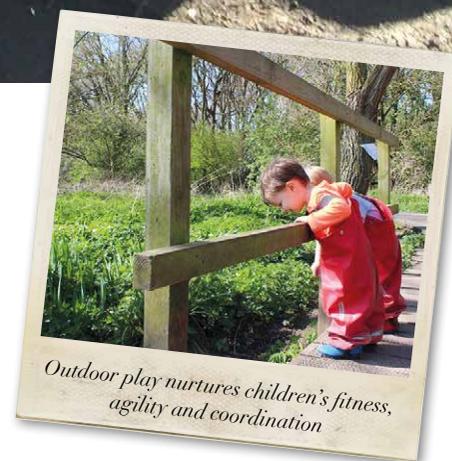




forest folk

Becky Dickinson LOOKS AT WHY WE'RE MOVING EDUCATION OUT OF THE CLASSROOM AND INTO THE TREES



Imagine a nursery where the walls were made up of trees, or a school where the roof was nothing more than the sky above, where play happened amongst woodland, rather than inside a classroom, and where children were encouraged to get muddy and take risks.

Now imagine that school or nursery, not in some rural idyll, but in our very own London. Incongruous as it sounds, increasing numbers of children are benefitting from an outdoor

education right inside the capital.

It's all thanks to the Forest School Association: a Scandinavian approach to education that involves learning in an outdoor environment, regardless of the weather.

The philosophy was introduced to Britain in the early Nineties, when students from Somerset visited some Danish nurseries. Inspired by the outdoor-focused, play-based approach to learning, they employed the same techniques back home and were amazed at

how much the children's confidence and creativity soared.

The idea caught on, and schools and nurseries across the UK began incorporating Forest School principles into their own curriculums. At first, it was often in rural areas, where space was more readily available. Yet in urban areas, where children have less opportunity to explore the outdoors, parents are increasingly seeking out this kind of nursery provision. ▶

WHAT SOME MAY SEE AS BAD WEATHER, WE SEE AS OPPORTUNITIES TO EXTEND OUR PLAY

One of the early Forest School pioneers in London was Carol Eveleigh. She is the owner of The Kindergartens, a group of 12 privately run nursery schools. Every week, children spend one whole day at a local common. Carol says the results are overwhelming.

“The natural environment has a marked effect on the children, it brings a calmness to them. They discuss new things, they problem solve, they work in teams, interact, and they are free to take risks. They enter a magical, ever-changing world and their focus and confidence as a result is amazing.”

In 2014, London’s first full-time outdoor nursery, Little Forest Folk, was established by husband and wife team Leanna and James Barret. The couple have three children of their own – Ella, four, Jack, three, and baby Indie. It was only when they started looking at nursery places for Ella that they realised the lack of opportunity for children in the city to connect with nature.

Leanna says, “We were horrified that the best nurseries we found only offered one or two hours of play outdoors in a whole day, and those hours were generally spent in a sterile outdoor environment. We wanted Ella to experience the joy of free play outdoors, to enjoy a world we don’t believe it’s possible to experience when you are stuck inside a room playing with plastic toys. When we researched Scandinavian forest schools and realised how well young children learn outdoors, we decided it was time for a change in the early-years education system here in London.”

The first Little Forest Folk nursery was set up in Wimbledon, but demand for places has been so high that a second is about to open in Chiswick, followed by another in Wandsworth.

For Leanna, it’s about increasing the connection between children and nature – regardless of location.

“We don’t feel the need to have acres and acres of land to explore. It’s more about the quality of the teaching we provide and the activities, along with our holistic ethos. Any small green space in London can be used for a forest school, providing you have high-quality practitioners and creativity.”

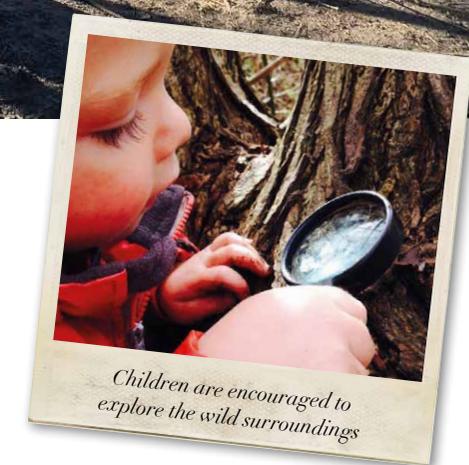
The Wimbledon site is set in a secure nature reserve with a dome for shelter. The fully fenced area consists of open grassland,



This more holistic approach to learning promotes creativity and lifelong positive attitudes towards nature



Little Forest Folk pupils looking for bugs



Children are encouraged to explore the wild surroundings

woods and marshes, with wild rabbits, moles, squirrels, frogs, insects and birds.

Leanna adheres to the saying “there’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing”. Children are provided with high-quality waterproofs, so play is never suspended.

“What some may see as bad weather, we see as opportunities to extend our play,” says Leanna. “On windy days we make kites. On rainy days we use tarpaulins to collect rainwater and guttering to experiment with floating natural objects downhill. The day it snowed was one of our most fabulous days ever. Most other local nurseries closed, but we had an absolute blast.”

For parents, it’s about giving children the physical space to explore, the freedom to be children. And with that comes learning. Katie Marshall, whose son attends Little Forest Folk,



Little ones are able to engage with nature in a safe and secure setting

says it’s the best decision she ever made.

“His ability to think independently, his creativity and imagination, along with his speech has developed immensely and he is so happy running around outside, getting muddy and exploring,” she says.

Come rain or shine, Forest School principles are catching on across London. The advice to parents is sign up early. **U**