

Beach schools  
offer unique  
opportunities to  
support children's  
learning and  
development,  
says **Judit  
Horvath...**

# Beside the

# Seaside

**B**each school is a well-rounded, flexible, child-focused approach with underlying principles adopted from the forest school model. It's unique in emphasising learning outside of the classroom while providing children with the freedom to observe the ever-changing environment, to take risks and to learn to assess risk for themselves through adults' open-ended questions. The environment and its daunting size touches children's psyche, and – perhaps surprisingly – the large space brings them closer together. All aspects of the curriculum can be taught outside through discovery, investigation, and storytelling that stimulates shared thinking; beach schools demonstrate topics in a real context, engaging all of the senses and creating a stable base for future learning.

Unlike traditional outdoor programmes, which often start with questions to investigate, beach school is led by actual interests; leaders may initiate investigations, but they never direct. Its focus differs from forest school as the site is huge and open, and the environmental changes – for example, from sea to rock pool – happen within hours, offering endless opportunities to explore. Similarly, riversides and lakesides are constantly 'on the move', holding

children's attention in a different way.

## Not just the beach...

Possible locations for beach schools include the shores of all natural waters, from rivers, streams and brooks to lakes and seashores, all of which have their own unique eco systems to offer as a learning resource. The biological zones, flora and fauna differ in all places, and recording findings with children is an exceptional learning possibility in itself, highlighting the importance of sustainable environmental education and healthy lifestyle.

By way of example, in our locality, Southend-on-Sea has a large tidal range and intertidal area. Only the uppermost 25-metres comprises a sandy beach, whilst the remainder is mudflats, yet when we visited with the children, we found about 15 different species of seaweed on one beach alone. Similarly, at the Prittle Brook – situated in South Essex and encased in concrete shuttering resembling an open sewer along its length – we observed fish, ducks, squirrels,

foxes, butterflies, numerous insects, magpies, jays and bats. Wildlife can be found everywhere if you're willing to look quietly.

## Ways of learning

Beach schools are flexible, accommodating the differing ways in which children learn with appropriate pedagogy styles, based on observing individuals and following the dynamics of the group aided ongoing self-reflection. These employ multiple methods, combining techniques that place children in the centre; focusing on nature, space, skill development, challenge and listening and recognising the different languages and voices of children. They are participatory, treating children as experts and agents of





## Beach school in practice: maths

Practitioners may find it hard to link the beach with specific areas, so as an example, the following points will show how beach school activities can support children's development in mathematics...

**1** *Number sense* means the ability to count accurately. On the beach we can really count anything: steps, stones, shells, poles of shelter, etc., and then we can link the numerals with names of objects. Verbal counting helps to develop mathematical language, magnitude comparison, quantity identifying and size understanding (more, less, bigger, smaller, etc.)

**2** *Patterns* are appearances of things – numbers, shapes, images – that repeat in a logical and recognisable way. Patterns help children to make predictions, to figure out logical connections and to develop and use reasoning skills. The beach is actually built from patterns which allow the children to:

- seek similarities, differences and symmetry (in seabed, sand);
- make connections (how many steps away is the sea);
- build and construct (using stones, sand);
- sort and group in order (shape, size, colour, characteristics);
- understand dimensions (looking for 2D and 3D shapes);
- symbolise personal likes/choices through objects.

**3** Children develop an ability to *recognise* mathematical problems, and they readily make ideas 'real' by using words, pictures, symbols and objects in their role play and in their social situations (e.g. acting out personal and fairy tale stories with numbers in them).

**4** The development of *spatial sense* in early years leads to later understanding of geometry. On the beach it can be introduced by the observation of shapes, size, position, weight, length, direction and movement. The unbeatable advantage of the beach as a learning environment is that it constantly changes (due to natural forces) while retaining stable elements, objects, in it.

## RESOURCE TROLLEY

### Be prepared

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**5** *Observing* their immediate environment helps children to understand mathematical instructions (e.g. following a map, creating a treasure trail, identifying and describing the position of things).

**6** Beach school provides opportunities to think through a problem and to recognise that there is more than one path to a satisfying answer (e.g. walking to the sea in different ways). It means using past, existing knowledge and logical thinking skills to find answers.

**7** When observing the natural environment even listening to sounds offers *mathematical understanding*:

- Counting and comparing beats of waves.
- The notation of sounds and organising the patterns of sounds helps children understand spatial relationships.
- Tonality (higher, lower) and pace (faster, slower) of sounds – being measurable attributes – develops measurement skills.

**8** The beach creates countless mathematical *mark making opportunities*. There is a strong case that children's first marks cannot be dismissed as a generic 'scribbles' stage, because children are expressing, in form and content, identities, structures, symbols, events and meaning from their worlds.

## about the author



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their own lives; and reflexive, including children, practitioners and parents in reflecting on meanings and addressing the question of interpretation. A framework for listening is embedded into practice, which has the potential to be used both as an evaluative tool and a teaching method.

Children's leadership skills and ability to deal with failure, and the transformation of their confidence levels, are the most noticeable developmental changes arising from beach school. Overcoming fears and exhibiting more confidence in taking risks (like jumping, climbing rocks), a willingness to contribute and take part, and a wish to try new things was present in many of the children at the start of our project; by the end of the sessions this was universal. During sessions children asked questions, showing how much they were thinking about the activity they were involved in, and also revisited activities, play and learning that had taken place during previous sessions. Regular reflection on immediate achievements, combined with the celebration of success, helped the children take pride in what they were doing.

A typical programme focuses on a number of main topics, for example, field studies of ecological systems, beach structure, beach management systems and wildlife conservation; sensory activities; beach crafts; team-building games; imaginative activities; physical play and construction; assessing risk and safety; observing flora and fauna; observing seasons, weather and tides; building shelter; fire lighting; role playing with found resources; and sand and stone play.

## THE BEACH SCHOOL APPROACH

With the UK's over 11,000 miles of coastline, plus its many rivers and lakes, the beach school approach has a real validity to those working in early years settings. A confident working team with a sound knowledge of health and safety, emergency rules, flags, tidal times and rip tides is a necessity, and a qualified leader is required to devise a programme that's entirely based on individual children's interests; this allows the children to build on skills at their own age and stage. Beach schools provide an emotionally safe environment for children to explore, built on routine that is established with regular repetition throughout the programme.