

Fruits of the FOREST

Take a tip from the Danes and make the natural world – including fear and risk – a part of children’s daily learning experiences, urges Jane Williams-Siegfredsen...

The term ‘forest school’ is used to describe an engaging and motivating approach to play and learning outdoors, for children, young people and adults. In 1993 I was among a group of lecturers from Bridgwater College who took their early years students on a study trip to Denmark; we’d heard about the good practice there and wanted to see for ourselves what made it so special. I remember my first visit to a ‘skovbørnehave’ (forest kindergarten). I was

totally bowled over by what I saw – children free to roam the wooded area beside their kindergarten. The youngsters were confident and competent in their play, climbing trees and imaginatively making up games using the natural materials around them, and although there was a language barrier, they took delight in showing us their skills and knowledge. I recall seeing a small boy high up in one of the trees, and calling to a pedagogue close by, “There’s a child up there!”

‘Yes there is,’ confirmed the teacher. Horrified, I exclaimed, “But he may fall out!”

“Yes,” agreed the pedagogue, “he might. But they don’t usually.”

At first I wondered how the practitioners could allow children to take such risks and why they seemed so unconcerned that an accident might happen. Now, 19 years later, I understand; children need to start to develop their physical skills and agility at an early age and alongside that, with the



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support and encouragement from carers, develop their understanding of how to assess risks and challenges. Children generally do not climb beyond a height with which they feel comfortable, nor do they like pain and fear.

After that study trip a 'forest school' was started for Bridgwater College's children's centre; the concept spread and there are now forest schools in many parts of the UK. The term itself was a made-up English name for what we had seen in Denmark – there are no 'forest schools' as such over there, but there are 'skovbørnehaver' (forest kindergartens), 'skovegrupper' (forest or wood groups), 'naturbørnehaver' (nature kindergartens), and ordinary early years settings that use the outdoor area they have available. I moved to Denmark in 1997 and have the pleasure and privilege now to spend my time working with a number of early years settings – some are in the forest and others in the town, but all use their outdoor area and nature every day, all year round.

How did it start?

The Scandinavian approach to using the outdoors as a part of the pedagogy of early years settings has its roots in the work of Froebel, who inspired Danish pedagogues to start a kindergarten system that included natural environments and opportunities for young children to develop and learn outdoors. From this a more child-centred approach to learning and development evolved, leading to more humanistic beliefs around childcare and education.

Present day Danish pedagogy sees child upbringing and the relationships between the young person, the family and society in a democratic and humanistic way – for example, a survey conducted in 2009 by Copenhagen Council listed the values that parents and pedagogues feel to be most important for children to learn in early years settings as: self-worth, independence, consideration for others, and tolerance. They also consider the important experiences



about the author

Jane Williams-Siegfredsen is the author of

Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach (Routledge) and the director of Inside-Out Nature, which offers inspirational and innovative training and resources to make outdoor play and learning fun and effective. For more information on the company's new in- and outdoor sensory swing, call 0845 8057852 or visit www.insideoutnature.com

children should have in these settings to be those that are: of and in nature; with animals; and involving peace and tranquillity.

There is no one type of 'forest school' in Denmark; each setting varies depending on where it is situated (in a rural, semi-rural or urban area), and according to the people using it (pedagogues, children and parents) – no two are the same. There are settings that are situated in woodland, usually referred to as forest or nature kindergartens. In these, the natural surroundings provide the starting point for activities inside and outside, for either the whole or a significant part of the day, every day, all year round. Sometimes things are discovered and investigated by the pedagogues and children in the natural surroundings outdoors, and at other times

items may be brought inside for further exploration and discussion. Most of these kinds of kindergarten are relatively small, with between 20 to 30 children and four or five practitioners; though a few are much larger with over 100 children.

Another common type of provision would be kindergartens that have 'forest groups'. These are assemblies of children and carers who go out of their setting for either part or the whole of the week to a woodland area, often by bus. Such groups usually have a permanent or semi-permanent shelter in the wood, although others, in urban areas where woodland is too far away, rent allotments in the town and develop these as their outdoor environment.

Of course, not all kindergartens in Denmark

How's it going?

Assessment and evaluation are an integral and ongoing pedagogical process in early years settings. When monitoring the effectiveness of how your setting is using its outdoor space, the process should be viewed actively, interactively and reflectively:

- Actively, because assessment and evaluation are a part of the whole cycle of events and the pedagogue is an active part of that cycle.

- Interactively, because in most nature and forest kindergartens the pedagogues work in pairs or teams. The synergetic effect of making assessments and evaluations together with others – adults and children – can deepen the understanding of the learning that has taken place.

- Reflectively, because for assessments and evaluations to have any relevant meaning the pedagogues (and wherever possible children) need to reflect on the process – was it the best way to do it? Did we achieve our goal(s)?



are specific forest or nature kindergartens or have forest groups. Many settings just use the outdoor area that they have available, but even in these, the children will be outside for part of each day all year round.

Free-range learning

The curriculum for pre-school settings in Denmark became law in 2004 and every institution has to make an institutional curriculum plan that covers six areas of learning:

- All-round personal development
- Social development
- Language
- Body and movement
- Nature and natural phenomena
- Cultural expression and values

Within these six areas the pedagogues should facilitate four learning processes: 'to be able', 'to experience', 'to enjoy' and 'to understand'; regular access to the natural environment fully supports this.

For example, in order 'to be able' to develop physical skills children need opportunities to climb, jump, run and cycle, and these processes include the sensory, bodily, social and intellectual competencies that children develop through them. Youngsters develop positive self-image by using the outdoor environment because they can 'test' themselves through the physical activities in which they participate. They develop important self-regulatory skills by learning to take turns and follow routines.

'To experience' in nature means that children can feel wonderment in the outdoors, and experience joy, happiness and also being frightened, in the safe knowledge that others are around them.

'To enjoy' means that young people, through nature, take pleasure in sensory experiences – the smells, sounds, tastes and textures that being in an outdoor environment brings. Sitting round a fire, feeling its warmth on a cold day, listening to the trees rustling in the wind, and tasting the pancakes cooked

over a fire, all give pleasure and enjoyment that is part of the learning process.

'To understand' means that the outdoor environment is the natural arena where children can learn about some of the 'mysteries' of life-cycle processes, and ethics and morals can be discussed by the educators and children in their natural context. Finding a dead animal, for example, raises many discussions on life and death, and the fascination the next day at discovering that the animal has disappeared or been part eaten, leads to a deeper understanding of the forces of nature and gives children the possibility of talking about their feelings – sympathy, fear, and so on.

Educators in Denmark believe that these four learning processes are crucial if the child is to develop the skills and competencies of being a whole person. Evidence that children being outdoors on a daily basis, all year round, benefits their learning and development has been documented in Scandinavia for over 20 years, and more recent studies in the UK corroborate the findings, which include that:

- Children's confidence is developed by them having the freedom, time and space to learn and demonstrate independence.
- Social and emotional skills are increased by children gaining an awareness of the consequences of their actions on peers through team and paired activities that involve sharing, negotiating and turn-taking.
- Children's communication and language development is increased through sensory experiences and using natural materials.
- Motivation and concentration is developed by children's fascination with nature; they are more attentive, have better powers of memory and are less easily distracted.
- Physical skills are improved by children being outdoors, illustrated by evidence of better balance, agility and strength.
- Children's health and immunity is strengthened through being outdoors regularly; they, along with practitioners, seem to be ill less often.

