

# FOREST SCHOOL

Young children should not only be experiencing *being* in the natural world, but *playing* in it too, and forest school settings offer countless opportunities to do both, says **Chris Holland...**

**F**orest school is increasingly seen as a way to take both the EYFS and National Curriculum outdoors; indeed, thousands of children now spend time in contact with the natural world this way each week.

On occasion, forest school sessions represent the only time that some children spend outdoors in a natural environment. Being outdoors, and more specifically in nature, is incredibly important to the health and

Images courtesy of Chris Holland

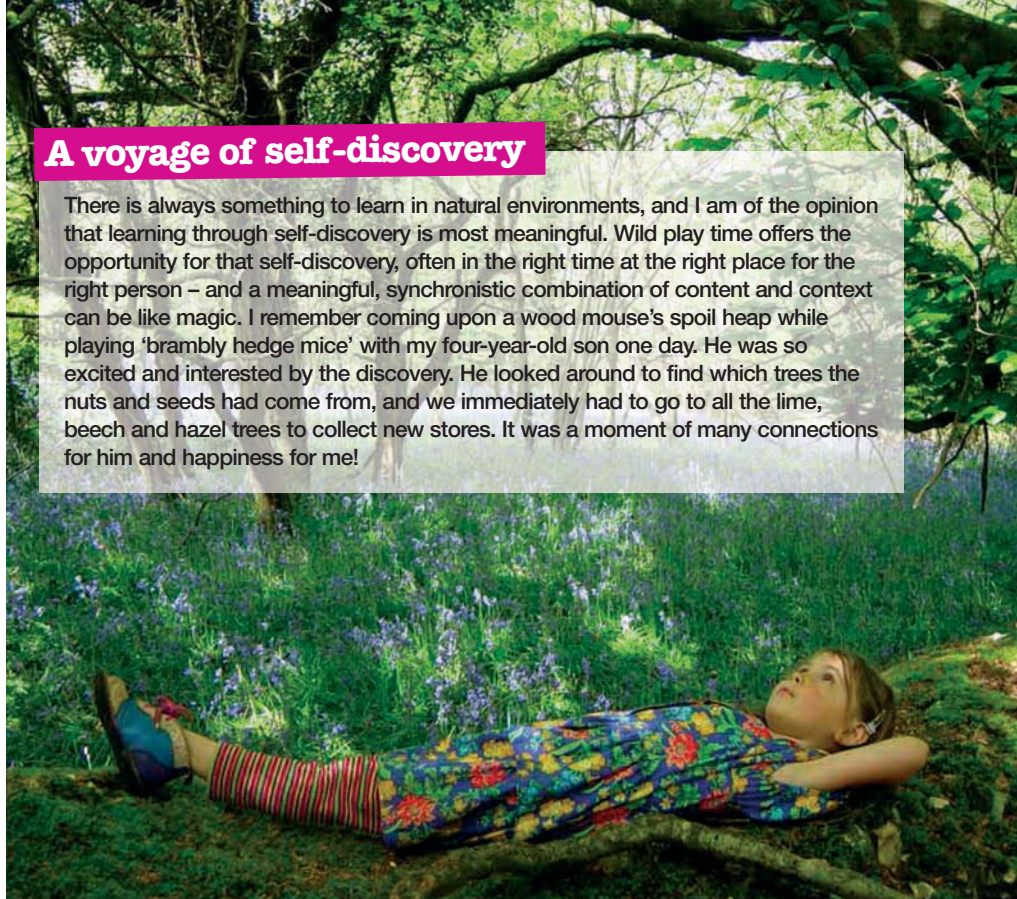
happiness of our children. A recent report, *Natural Childhood*, by Stephen Moss and the National Trust highlights this very fact, and also makes mention of 'nature deficit disorder'. It's a non-medical term, admittedly, but one which accurately labels the reality that the amount of time our children spend in natural environments is at risk – from a combination of our increasingly busy lives, a lack of available countryside in which to play, and the concerns of parents, who have been prompted to wrap their offspring in cotton wool by media-generated horror stories.

There is good news, however. Nature connection is happening. For example, at a headteacher's conference I attended recently, I discovered that many of the primary schools in Sussex are adopting the forest school model. Phew! At least some of our children are getting what they need to become healthy, happy adults.

But while many educators are aware of the value of taking children out into the great outdoors, 'nature time' is only part of the story; play is also essential, both to children's development and, it seems, the survival of the species. For example, in his book *Evolutionary*

## A voyage of self-discovery

There is always something to learn in natural environments, and I am of the opinion that learning through self-discovery is most meaningful. Wild play time offers the opportunity for that self-discovery, often in the right time at the right place for the right person – and a meaningful, synchronistic combination of content and context can be like magic. I remember coming upon a wood mouse's spoil heap while playing 'brambly hedge mice' with my four-year-old son one day. He was so excited and interested by the discovery. He looked around to find which trees the nuts and seeds had come from, and we immediately had to go to all the lime, beech and hazel trees to collect new stores. It was a moment of many connections for him and happiness for me!



*Playwork* (Routledge, 2011), Bob Hughes notes that "the growing body of scientific evidence confirming a direct relationship between play, evolution and brain growth, demonstrated that play work should [be viewed] as comprehensive support for deep biological processes...that enabled the human organism to withstand the pressures of extinction."

Similarly, a recent article by Marc Bekoff in *Psychology Today* (25th Feb., 2012) highlights the need for the young of humans and non-humans alike to have times of adult-free, wild play. In his piece, entitled 'Animal Emotions', Bekoff proposes that "play functions to increase the versatility of movements and the ability to recover from sudden shocks such as the loss of balance and falling over, and to enhance the ability of animals to cope emotionally with unexpected stressful situations."

school setting what starts as making mud pies and 'bits of nature soup' can easily develop into making actual nettle soup or wild garlic risotto – essential basic living skills for when children get older. While making nests, dens and homes, children work together to collect and build. At the same time, they will discover that they may be moving, destroying or creating homes for other creatures in that environment. They may even come to understand the needs of other flora and fauna to survive, and develop empathy and a caring attitude to the places, plants and mini-beasts they play in and with.

Of course, boys and girls can't help being destructive and wanting to bash and stomp sometimes, but they will also want to nurture and care for real or imaginary playmates. It's natural, and nature does as much teaching as children do playing. Given the opportunity, children will play a lot of the time.

Forest school settings provide the perfect setting to offer children outdoor experiences, as well as opportunities for them to indulge in some wild play time. As always, a balance needs to be found between adult-led and adult-free play, but it's clear to me that wild play – aside from giving stressed parents (or practitioners) a few moments of peace from organising their excitable children! – represents the perfect opportunity for those same children to develop a respect for the natural world and gain essential survival skills.

## A place to play

So how can our children's need to be, and play, outside best be met? One day a week during term-time I run an 'outdoor play and nature connection' after-school club. Having called it 'bushcraft club' and 'forest school club' for several years, I changed the name to reflect children's need to engage in unprescribed activities, in a woodland setting. Sometimes we organise activity; sometimes the children play and we interfere as little as possible! The fact that it is always oversubscribed tells me that the children are getting something they want and need from it.

My view is that the combination of time alone, time playing with friends and time with adults in nature provides a vital developmental link to our ancestors and our future. Biologically we are all animals, and we are all part of the land we live in. We learn to respect ourselves and those things around us – the elements, the flora and fauna – by becoming aware and making connections. In a forest

## about the author



Chris Holland is a nature connection and outdoor play professional based in Devon, but working nationwide. His unique and playful blend of bushcraft, environmental art, foraging, forest school, nature awareness, outdoor play and storytelling is enjoyed by people of all ages. He is also the author of the playful nature connection guidebook *I Love My World*, which is available from [wholeland.org.uk](http://wholeland.org.uk) and [Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk) for RRP £15.95 (see this issue's Store Cupboard for more details).

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