



Behaviour at Forest School



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Wildflowers

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I previously taught in a mainstream school, where managing classroom behaviour was deemed essential for fostering positive learning outcomes. I completely agree with this approach, and we made every effort to involve the children in establishing and embracing acceptable behaviour standards. At Forest School, however, the learning is primarily play-based and, whenever possible, child-initiated and child-led. This doesn't mean that any behaviour is permissible; the children still contribute to the creation of rules and boundaries they follow, but the Forest environment allows for a bit more freedom in certain areas. For example, in a traditional classroom, if a child chooses to step away from an activity for some quiet time, it could be viewed as insubordination by the teacher. In contrast, at Forest School, a child is encouraged to participate in activities but is never compelled to do so. In some cases, spending time alone may be far more beneficial for the child.

Leaders' actions can significantly affect the group, either positively or negatively. For instance, if a group leader were to escalate the situation mentioned earlier and insist that a child engage in activities, it might lead to feelings of resentment, anger, or defiance in that child. Other children might also feel uncomfortable, sensing the distress of their peer. However, if the leader responds with compassion and seeks to understand the child's needs at that moment, there may be room for negotiation. The leader could suggest that the child attend a tool safety discussion but then allow them to take time alone before rejoining the activity later. It's also important to avoid labelling such behaviour as defiant. From my experiences in group settings and learning in the forest, I've found that when situations become intense or after spending extended periods with others, I often benefit from some quiet time alone. Approaching these situations with empathy can significantly influence the outcomes. What I observed of Lily is that she embraced everyone's unique behaviours.

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I had a child in my sessions who simply wanted to run. He wasn't trying to escape the group; instead, he wanted to explore the vast open space and expend some energy. I allowed him to do this, ensuring he remained within sight, while the others were engaged in games, thus preventing any distraction. This arrangement allowed him to release energy freely. I knew that if I had forced him to participate in the game, he would have been overwhelmed with the desire to run and would not have been fully engaged in the activity.

Various scenarios can influence how a child or adult behaves, some of which may be hidden from us. As Forest School Leaders, we need to be mindful of this. A child who appears unwilling to participate might simply be experiencing anxiety due to the new environment/leader and the expectations placed upon them. In the first week of my sessions, one pupil initially refused to participate in anything. I sent the children to gather materials for a nest, and with the support of a nursery staff member, he happily joined in. When I later praised his nest, his face lit up with pride. I realised that fear had been holding him back, and a small encouragement helped him gain the confidence to speak a bit more towards the end of the session.

The dynamics of the group and a child's role within it are also crucial. Some group members may dominate the situation, causing others to hesitate in stepping forward. Not all groups function cohesively, which can further affect the mood and atmosphere. During the first week of training, I noticed some friction between two group members, who failed to exhibit the empathetic and emotionally intelligent practices expected of Forest School Leaders. This negatively impacted the overall atmosphere, making the experience feel less supportive and enjoyable. I found myself eager to leave and hesitant to return. This experience highlighted the importance of paying attention to group dynamics. I want every participant's experience to be fulfilling, and if a few individuals struggle to manage their emotions respectfully, positive intervention is crucial. I also recognised that leaders must be emotionally stable and mature to guide a Forest School effectively. Like Lily, I aspire to be a leader whom learners admire and look up to for embodying the qualities of a good leader.

Leading a Forest School is a continual learning journey

HOW LEARNERS' NEEDS WERE MET

I believe that Forest School is most effective in small group settings, where I can recognise and respond to the various needs of the participants during my sessions: the child who requires constant reassurance, the child who needs to run, the one who periodically needs rest, the child who needs affirmation, the one who needs to be heard, and the child who needs ongoing attention.

The ability to spend time getting to know the children through regular forest school sessions was essential to meeting the needs of the group that I lead. Taking the time to get to know them and their personalities meant that I was able to respond to them individually because I had a greater understanding of their behaviours.

POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH.

Leading those six sessions taught me invaluable lessons. I have gained confidence as a Forest School Leader and developed a deeper understanding of what is expected of me to deliver an effective program. If given another opportunity, I would strive to offer more choices and encourage risk-taking, ensuring my lesson plans resemble the successful approaches from weeks five and six rather than those from week one. I learned to embrace the idea of allowing children to take the lead and feel a sense of control rather than meticulously planning every detail. Upon reflection, I found that my previous teaching experiences were far more memorable, enjoyable, and productive when conducted in this more flexible manner.

