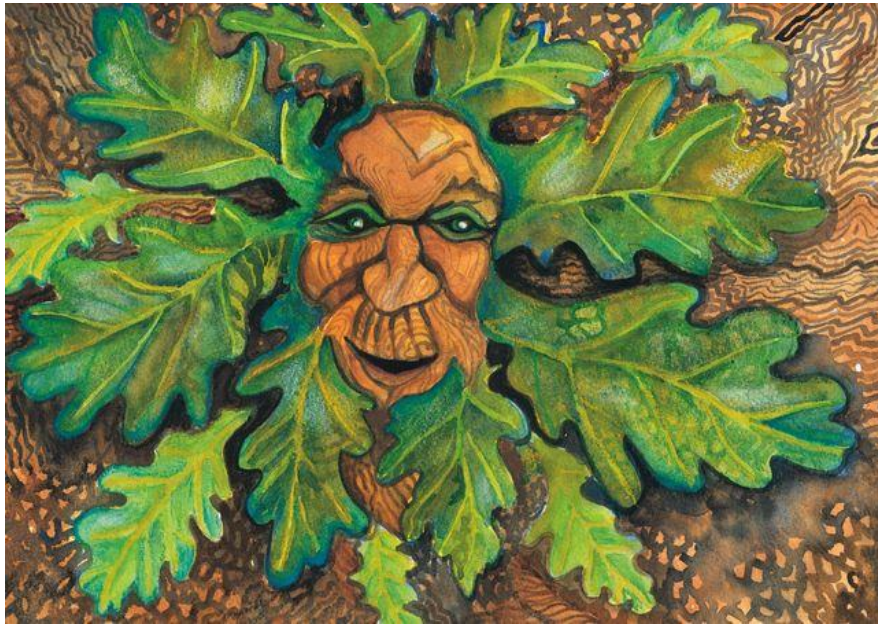


Forest School Information for Parents

By A O'Connor



**St Columba's RC Primary
School**



Forest School Ethos

At St Columba's RC Primary School, we provide the children with the opportunity to regularly participate in a Forest School program, alongside a fully qualified and skilled Forest School leader. (Miss O'Connor.)

This commitment is based on our belief that each child is unique and independently competent. The Forest school program promotes holistic learning experiences that contribute significantly to the development of the whole child. This is done by providing a creative, stimulating and child-centred natural environment which allows the children time to experiment with real life first hand experiences that develop independent thinking and social interactions.

The Forest School ethos is created by a number of overlapping factors, illustrated by the diagram below.



The 4 distinct overlapping factors are;

- Practitioner - Qualified Level 3 Forest School practitioner, with their own speciality and value judgements that facilitate appropriate and safe learning experiences.
- Learners - A group of individual learners who have unique needs, abilities and interests and are at different stages of development.
- Time - Regular (at least weekly) sessions of an appropriate length throughout the year (at least 1 year). Children are allowed the time to revisit, build on and consolidate learning.
- Space - Appropriate, secure and safe physical space, social space and emotional space. Learners are able to choose to work alone or with others.

The ethos of Forest School is based on a fundamental respect for children and young people and for their capacity to instigate, test and maintain curiosity in the world around them. It believes in children's right to play; the right to access the outdoors (and in particular a woodland environment); the right to access risk and the vibrant reality of the natural world; and the right to experience a healthy range of emotions, through all the challenges of social interaction, to build a resilience that will enable continued and creative engagement with their peers and their potential.

Forest School is based more on the process of learning than it is on the content - more on the 'how' than the 'what'. This means that genuine Forest School practice steps boldly out of the shadow and limitation of 'planned activities' and ventures collaboratively into the realms of the unplanned, unexpected and ultimately unlimited. Children and young people are given encouragement to direct their own learning - this often requires catalysing on the part of the Forest School leader either through stimulating play in the outdoors or through 'scaffolding' a child's learning, but mostly through simply observing how children are in the outdoors.

Significantly, and on many levels, a woodland environment is central in supporting this very dynamic approach to learning: the passage of time, from the changing of the seasons, to the contemplation of an ancient tree; the dynamic nature of an outdoor environment - an infinite source of smells,

textures, sounds and tastes; a range of visual stimuli from near too far, high to low, very big to very small; and the infinite layers of historical, cultural, spiritual and mythological significance that speak of our deep relationship with trees and woodland through the ages.

What is a Forest School?

Originally a Scandinavian idea, forest schools operate on the principle that children of all ages can benefit greatly from the hands on learning opportunities inherently present in a woodland environment. In an age when many children have few opportunities to be outdoors, it offers them a way to learn and experience a broad curriculum in a woodland setting, with regular visits throughout the year.

Why Forest School?

Forest School helps to develop;

- Confidence and self esteem;
- Communication and social skills;
- Physical skills;
- Greater understanding and awareness of the natural environment;
- Natural motivation and a positive attitude to learning;
- The ability to recognise and manage risk;
- Healthier lifestyles.

Does Forest School still go ahead in bad weather?

We try to run Forest School whatever the weather. If it is particularly cold or wet or windy, sessions might be shortened or activities changed. As long as the children are dressed in warm layers and have their waterproofs on they should not get cold. Snacks and drinks are important part of Forest School and they will be in line with the weather season.

"It is better to be too warm and take layers off than be too cold."

What do the children do?

Children usually begin by getting dressed in outdoor clothes such as waterproofs and then walk over to the site in the school grounds.

Our school site has a log circle where everyone sits together to enjoy stories, discussions, snacks and sometimes a warm cup of hot chocolate by the fire.

Sessions are planned around the individual's and group's needs and built upon each week. The younger children begin their Forest School experience on the concentrating on safety and establishing boundaries and routines. As the children develop in confidence and familiarity within their environment the sessions focus on the development and consolidation of skills and understanding.

Possible activities may include:

- Hunting for mini-beasts
- Natural crafts - making necklaces from elder, crowns from willow, collages from natural materials and tree cookies.
- Mud/clay sculptures - faces.
- Shelter building and knot tying.
- Using tools for a purpose - such as whittling sticks with potatoe peelers to make toasting forks, bill hooks to split wood.
- Fire building and cooking on a camp fire.

The high adult ratio allows children to undertake new experiences, such as tools and fire lighting and take appropriate risks.



PHOTO GALLERY

