

# The Forest School Phenomenon



Pre-Prep pupils gather at the new gates for the Forest School on campus



Alison Blasdale, Head of Millfield Pre-Prep, shares her insights into the benefits of a Forest School experience and why it's not just about the trees.

*"Mrs Smith taught us how to pick the stinging nettles safely, and then we made stinging nettle pancakes over the fire. When we ate them we didn't get stung!" Florrie*

These are the words of five year old Florrie who recently described what she did in a Forest School lesson. This is the kind of

experience that Forest School offers – learning outdoors, having the freedom to explore the environment, take risks and stimulate imagination and senses.

Forest School is not a new initiative for schools in the UK; it originated in Scandinavia but also has its roots in earlier, pioneering open-air education concepts such as Margaret McMillan's outdoor nurseries. Now it is growing rapidly, spurred on by concerns that children are losing touch with nature and no longer getting the chance to take risks.

At Millfield Pre-Prep we've been running Forest School since 2007. The initiative is based on core principles that allow children to develop a relationship with nature over time, not just as a one-off visit, and to explore and learn from the natural world. In a supported environment, children learn important

life skills such as communication and self-esteem. They also learn how to work and play together; often forgetting they are being observed by adults. Some of the favourite attractions we observe are the messy mud kitchen, where children learn to cook over an open fire, and saw wood, which all add to the children's skills and growing sense of independence.

At Millfield Pre-Prep all children take part in regular outdoor learning opportunities, predominantly at our onsite Forest School, which is led passionately by Lucy Smith and two other fully trained

*"We found a treasure map in the forest, it made us get to the treasure box. In the treasure box was rum and golden treasure snacks!" Oliver*

Forest School practitioners. This year sees the addition of a new outdoor classroom and compost toilet in our woods, which will further extend the time spent learning.

Over the last academic year we expanded the Forest School programme beyond our woods to a broader range of outdoor experiences and visits for our young children. Year 1 visited Gore Farm, Avalon Marshes and Chesil Beach. On each of these trips the children have been fully engaged in determining the topographies of these varying natural environments. They have studied the ecology, noted the specific features, created dens and homes for wildlife and also (and possibly more importantly) had lots of fun playing, climbing, scrambling and exploring.

Year 2 carried out local area habitat studies using both our own grounds here for grassland surveys, as well as visiting

*"I liked going in the water and finding crabs. You had to lift up the seaweed and they tickled when I held one." Emilia*

Musgrove Willows and Wetlands, Westhay Nature Reserve and local orchards. They have been actively involved in carrying out a wide variety of tasks linked to science and geography topics being studied back in the classroom. This has also been further extended to a new initiative of the 'Den Building Club', taking place in the woods after school every Friday. A great way to end the busy working week – for the staff and the children!

We also took all our Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) pupils to Kilve for a 'Beach School' day which proved to be a huge success. The children explored and

identified the creatures in the rock pools with enormous enthusiasm and wonder, counted and sorted pebbles, created rock sculptures and towers and compared and contrasted the features of a beach and our woods back at school. Active learning at its very best; hands on, in the moment and purposeful.

There is no doubt that our children enjoy their outdoor learning experiences – their smiling faces, dirty hands and enthusiastic chatter tells its own tale. In an increasingly risk-averse and sterile world it is a refreshing tonic. It reconnects us with nature, removes us for a short time from the digital frenzy of the modern world and allows children to explore the natural environment at their own pace.

Time stands still for a while at Forest School – isn't that something that we could all benefit from in our busy lives?