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Making the most of the local, natural environment to support children's all-round development: Footprints Montessori Day Nursery

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Brief description

The woodland walks and 'forest school' provide opportunities for children to take part in both planned and spontaneous activities that benefit all areas of learning. Children are learning to share and play together, they are stimulated to talk and ask questions, to problem-solve and learn about the natural world around them. They are developing their physical skills and learning how to manage risks in an environment that gives them freedom to explore and use their senses.

Overview – the nursery's message

'I have always been interested in the natural world and have never forgotten the things I learnt about it when I was a child. So I want the children at [Footprints Montessori Day Nursery](#) to have similar experiences. In the age of computers and with the fears parents and carers have for the safety of their children, many miss out on the pleasure of being able to play freely in their local environment. When I opened Footprints, it was my ambition to provide them with the sensory delights that the countryside offers, the freedom to run, to lie on the long grass and look at the sky, the time to stop and examine small creatures and a knowledge base and interest on which to build.'



Sandra Stedeford – owner and manager

The good practice in detail

'It was my husband who first suggested I should open my own nursery', says Sandra Stedeford, the owner and manager of the nursery. 'I knew what I wanted, which was a rural location with plenty of outdoor space where children could learn and explore. It took me 10 years to find the right place but we now have a wonderful location with plenty of space both indoors and outside'.

Footprints is very lucky to have beautiful outdoor play areas for sole use by the nursery children. The staff believe that children, especially boys, learn best when they are outside and value the learning that takes place in these areas. As well as the gardens, the nursery also has access to a woodland area and pond to add to the children's experiences. 'Being outdoors has a positive effect on children's sense of well-being and helps all aspects of children's development and learning' says Sandra. 'It offers opportunities for doing things in different ways and on different scales than indoors. It gives children first-hand contact with weather, seasons and the natural world and it gives them freedom to explore, use their senses and to be physically active and exuberant'.



Outings to the woods take place as part of their regular 'forest school' activities where children enjoy building dens and tents. Children's walks in the woodland area have a positive impact on their knowledge and understanding of the natural world. In addition, they are also beginning to learn how to keep themselves safe. For example, they talk about the importance of not picking and eating the berries unless an adult is with them and the older children remind the younger ones to keep away from the edge of the pond and to mind the nettles. Children also recognise dock leaves that can be used if a child is stung by the nettles.

'By having the freedom to explore during walks in the woodland, children are able to use their imagination or just run round. The woodland walk gives us lots of different routes to explore and the seasonal changes make everything look different', says Helen Rogerson the room leader for children aged two to three and a half years of age. All children in the nursery, regardless of their age have an opportunity to go to the woodland, even the non-mobile babies. Most of the time the different age groups of children go out at separate times but now and again the whole nursery goes together. 'The children love to meet up with their siblings', says Helen. 'They give each other hugs and the older children take care of their younger brothers and sisters'.



The woodland walks and 'forest school' were developed by Sandra and the staff who work in the pre-school room. 'We wanted to give them more



than just a walk', says Sandra. 'We wanted the walk and the forest to be interesting, a place where they could learn about flowers and berries and local nature, where they can collect leaves in autumn and have dinosaur hunts.' The children love being in the woods. They laugh and chat with each other, and with staff, the whole time they are walking and they spontaneously organise their own activities.

Sandra says that she first became interested in developing a 'forest school' when she was studying for her foundation degree. She had always been interested in the use of the outdoor area where children can learn about nature and their local environment and the



'forest school' seemed to build on this interest. She is also developing the skills of other staff in this area. 'We are looking forward to the staff member in our room attending the 'forest school' training, so that we can build on and develop what we do now', says Helen Rogerson. 'The children love going outside and are happy to go out in all weathers. We have all-in-one suits for them to wear when the weather is bad, but we are guided by what the children want to do and if they don't want to go outside they don't have to.'

Going on a woodland walk....

Before setting out to walk to the woods, the children are given a purpose or task to complete. Today, they are going to look for flowers of different colours. The children lead the walk, chatting as they go. They are allowed to run among the trees and play hide and seek in the long grass. Staff do not constantly worry about where they are because the children quickly learn the importance of keeping in touch with each other and staff and are trusted to never stray too far.

When it is time for a snack and a drink, the children decide to stop by the path. Although staff encourage them to move further down the path where there is a bit more grass to sit on, it is the children who make the final decision about where they will stop. The social interaction of the children means that this is a group decision where all the children agree about where they want to stop. After a couple of minutes chatting and snacking, the children sit very quietly listening intently to the birdsong, suggesting the names of birds they can hear. When they finish their drinks, they keep hold of their plastic cups for gathering flowers in.

The children are eager to talk about the many activities that they have been involved in outdoors including den-building, minibeast hunts, blackberry picking and frogspawn watch. They are not only learning about the colours of flowers but also the environment that surrounds them. They gather flowers, are interested in the different sizes and shapes and ask about their names. If the teacher does not know the names of the flowers, the children place them back in the plastic cups. 'We can look it up when we get back', says one child to the group he is standing with. 'Yes, and see what they are called', the other children agree. When the children reach the pond, they gather together and feed the ducks. There is a small wooden bridge by the pond where the children pretend they are *The Billy Goats Gruff* and a troll lives underneath the bridge. As the children cross over the wooden bridge, one child puts her finger to her lips and says 'shush, we've got to be quiet in case the troll is under the bridge'. More children join in, some of them stopping on the bridge to look over the side to see if they can see the troll hiding. 'I think he is under the water', whispered one little boy so they all quietly creep across the bridge.

At the old tree trunk, the children balance as they walk across it. Some children make one end into a bus and others dig in the hollows of the tree to see what they can find. Nothing about the woodland walk is rushed; everything goes at the children's pace with staff using gentle persuasion to encourage them to return to the nursery when it is time. 'I would like to stay here all day', says one child and all those around him agree.

The outdoor area is motivating the children to learn about their environment but is also contributing to other aspects of their development. Nursery staff can see the impact the use of outdoors is having on learning and on behaviour. Children are increasingly becoming active learners who are keen to find out things for themselves, to investigate and explore. They are developing their independence and forming relationships with their peers and those who care for them. 'Although the children are learning lots of new things outdoors, I think what the children enjoy most', says Sandra, 'is to be free to do whatever they wish, to play together, to sit and contemplate, to lie in the grass, to sing and play imaginative games on an old fallen tree and to just be themselves. The children get back to the classroom tired but happy, relaxed with a sense of well-being that cannot be achieved in front of a computer or television'.



The nursery's background

[Footprints Montessori Day Nursery](#) opened six years ago. The nursery operates from a converted barn on Manor Farm in West Horsley, Surrey. The nursery is organised into four rooms to accommodate children in different age groups. All children have access to two outdoor play areas that are for nursery use only. The nursery takes a maximum of 62 children at any one time and has over 100 children on the register.

Manor Farm developed the woodland area, known as Bens Wood, as a public space before the nursery was opened. Since the nursery has opened, the woodland area has developed from a small wood to mature woodland with a pond that the children can use. Bens Wood is covered by the [DEFRA](#) Permitted Footpath Scheme for use by pedestrians.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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