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The forest school; a thrilling and inspiring environment for pre school children: Fleetwood's Charity Pre-School Group

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Brief description

Fleetwood's Charity Pre-school Group uses the forest school environment to provide a thrilling and inspiring environment for children to explore and take risks. Children thrive in this inclusive, exciting and stimulating setting, because practitioners focus their attention upon their unique and individual needs. They are healthy and safe and develop superb skills for the future.

Overview – the provider's message



'We use the [forest school](#) to encourage and inspire our children through positive outdoor experiences. It's not about the forest it's about putting skills in place for the children – personal skills, team work, environmental skills, physical skills, writing and early numeracy. Children love the activities. Some take the skills home and influence their families. We are lucky to have this site and it is the site that has encouraged us to develop this approach. But the woodland is not essential - with imagination any school could develop this approach.'

Julia Crompton, Pre-school Manager

The good practice in detail

Many of the children in this pre-school group do not otherwise get the opportunity to play and explore in this type of environment where they are allowed to take risks and challenge themselves. The most recent [Ofsted Early Years Inspection Report](#) says, 'Children giggle and chatter in the forest school and they choose with excitement what they want to explore. They find insects and observe them carefully, make tents and dens to role-play traditional stories like Cinderella, or sit in the sun and chat. They make mud pies, paint "magic potions" on the trees and use stethoscopes to listen to the "heart beat" of the tree trunk. They watch via webcam the resident bird nesting, and they complete a chart counting down the days until the eggs hatch. Children have a rich and varied choice each day. They plant fruit and vegetables for their own consumption, paint, make music from pots and pans, or dig in the sand or ground.



Children cooking outdoors on a campfire

The outdoor environment offers children the freedom to explore, use their senses and be physically active and exuberant.

Children are safe and they learn about taking risks. They climb trees and use tools and implements very sensibly in the forest school under excellent supervision. Children cooperate and share while they play, and their fascination and enjoyment is evident in everything that they do,'

The pre-school group is co-located with the primary school and shares the same outdoor resources. Over the last five years, outdoor learning resources and tools have been developed. Children come into the woodland at least one half day each week. At other times, they make environmental art or watch bluetits raising chicks in the nest box using CCTV. They

play music on simple homemade environmental instruments. Throughout, they develop their skills of teamwork and cooperation, listening and observation. A typical start to the day involves a listening task. Children sit quietly with closed eyes and listen to the sounds of nature. One child has learnt to distinguish the calls of the cock and hen blackbird.

Being outdoors offers opportunities for doing things in different ways and on a different scale. Children create art work from leaves, twigs, stones and mud and in the autumn colour the mud with blackberry juice. From pre-school onwards to primary school, they learn to use tools, starting with a potato peeler to peel bark from twigs and create a point, through to using knives and saws for progressively demanding challenges.



Making mud pies

Julia identifies the benefits of outdoor learning as being those of, increased self-esteem; improved social skills; development of language and communication skills; improved physical

motor skills; improved motivation and concentration; and increased knowledge and understanding of the environment.



John Belshire, Headteacher and Chair of the Management Group, is delighted with the children's skills and builds on them in later years in the primary school. He believes that the emphasis on developing children's learning through working in the natural environment has contributed to the improvement in overall standards in the school identified by inspectors in March 2011.

The forest school is planned so that the youngest and oldest children spend the most time in the woods. The next step is to increase the time spent outside for children of all ages. 'Children who have been taught how to safely use sharp tools at a young age will plan and tackle more challenging projects as they go through school', says John.

The outdoor activities link with those indoors, such as art, reading, literacy and early numeracy. Julia and her colleagues have developed boxes of resources for reading, writing, art and numeracy which children can use both indoors and in the forest school. 'We involve parents and grandparents,' says Julia. 'It is essential to have the right volunteers who will interact with the children and not just stand and watch.' Many parents enjoy the activities as much as their children. Some children take these skills home. One mum spoke warmly of her child's enthusiasm for growing carrots and other vegetables at home, with the added bonus that he is delighted to eat his own home-grown produce.

Julia often shares her experience with other pre-school groups, and has identified that key barriers to this environmental approach are concerns about health and safety, risk assessment and staff knowledge and expertise.



A hotel for bugs

Her advice is:

- to start small
- build up expertise, confidence and resources
- build the confidence of staff and volunteers to allay fear
- involve parents who have a range of environmental or gardening skills to get the school started

She says that it doesn't need a big outdoor resource although that helps. Innovative and imaginative arrangements, such as using neighbouring gardens, can be very successful and involve the local community. Alternatively, the outdoors can be brought indoors. Dens, much loved by children can be constructed on a patio, and mud can be played with anywhere.

Provider background

[Fleetwood's Charity Pre-School Group](#) is run by a management committee and operates from a classroom in the primary school, which is situated in a rural village in the Wyre district of Lancashire. The children attending come from the surrounding area and most move into the Reception class at the end of their pre-school year. The setting is registered for 24 children. Children may attend for all sessions or a selection. The setting supports children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and children who speak English as an additional language. The setting receives support from the local authority and has achieved 'Step into Quality', the Lancashire quality assurance scheme.



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