



Mountfield Heath School

Forest School Deep Dive

Forest School (FS) sits in a unique place within the school timetable. Being a child led, responsive programme, it does not follow a structured, progressive system in the same way that a traditional curriculum subject would. Indeed, it would be counterproductive to impose such a traditional structure on it; it is an experience more akin to a therapeutic intervention than a traditional subject. The progress of a session, or series of sessions, will depend on the moods and enthusiasms of the children involved, chance events and encounters during the session, and the maturity and developmental stage of the children. In addition, children should not be expected or forced to participate in a given activity, or given a level of expectation of what they will achieve.

In practical terms, this would mean that a child would not be told that they will be learning to climb trees, or told they have to climb to a given height. This imposes a definition of success, and subsequently the chance of failure. A child presented with the opportunity of tree climbing may choose to join in, or to pursue another interest. Anything they achieve will be their choice and their own achievement, and the more powerful and valuable experience for that.

That said, the types of experiences made available for the children, the broad expectations of how they may engage and behave on sessions and the amount of independence and responsibility given to the children by staff will alter and develop as they progress through the school; a younger pupil or newly joining MHS will experience FS sessions in a different way to an older pupil, albeit sharing a similar fundamental experience. This overview seeks to establish a broad framework for the delivery of FS at MHS, and ensure that the children gain full benefit from the sessions.

The following is taken from the Forest School Association (FSA) and gives an overview of the aims of Forest School, and how it should be implemented:

Forest School is an inspirational process that offers ALL learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees.

Forest School is a specialised learning approach that sits within and compliments the wider context of outdoor and woodland education.

The ethos is shared by thousands of trained practitioners across the UK and beyond. Its roots reach back to early years pioneers in outdoor learning and across the sea to Scandinavia.

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MHS subscribes to the FS principles outlined by the FSA. These principles were first articulated by the Forest School Community in 2002. They were reviewed in 2011 and sent out for a 5-month consultation to Forest School networks and practitioners in all UK nations. They were published on the Institute for Outdoor Learning Forest School SIG page in Feb 2012, and in the minutes of the GB trainers' network. The 6 principles form our **intent** for FS at MHS:

- *FS is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.*
- *FS takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.*
- *FS uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.*
- *FS aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.*
- *FS offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.*
- *FS is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.*

For a more detailed overview of the ethos and implementation of FS, see the MHS Forest School Handbook, which is saved in TeacherShare.

In short:

- Quality Forest School is **long enough**
- Quality Forest School is **risky enough/safe enough**
- Quality Forest School promotes **holistic development**
- Quality Forest School is **natural enough**
- Quality Forest School has **learner led outcomes**
- Quality Forest School is **run by qualified and reflective leaders**

Implementing a Forest School programme at Mountfield Heath School

As a specialist provision for children with autism and complex social, emotional and mental health needs, MHS has a number of challenges and considerations in delivering Forest School, especially when considering more inherently risky activities such as fire-lighting or the use of tools. As such, sessions are split between the school site, and a local woodland. The school site is used predominantly for riskier 'bush craft' style activities, which are more safely delivered in a more controlled environment, whereas the rich natural affordance provided by an establish woodland provides opportunities for extended play and nature connection. The balance between these sessions will alter as the developmental stage and experience of the children increases. At all times, comprehensive risk/benefit assessments are used to determine the most appropriate experiences for pupils.

Each class takes part in a FS school session for a morning or afternoon each week throughout the academic year. This results in pupils accessing FS provision throughout each of the different seasons, which will have a natural impact on the type of experiences and activities they will experience. Inclement weather is not a barrier to FS, and is used as an opportunity to tailor activities to promote awareness of, and deep connection to, the natural world.

The following tables break the sessions down into different groupings. Given that MHS groups pupils by stage and need, rather than strict chronological age, there is necessarily flexibility and overlap. Expectations, tools and skills are cumulative; i.e. we aim for more experienced pupils to fulfil earlier expectations.

Class groupings Indicative Developmental Stages	Independence and boundaries	Nature connection	Group work and interaction	Adult support
Curiosity Pathway	Children within this pathway would be expected to work within shortened boundaries, typically staying within adult sight, or even closer, perhaps holding hands if less confident.	Children would typically be curious about the world around them, but require adult mediation to explore and understand, or adult questioning or planning to ensure they get the best outcomes.	Groups may be smaller (pairs or threes) and often include adults, or very close adult support. Intensive Interaction is woven into sessions.	Adults would be expected to lead sessions (albeit responding to suggestions from the children) and provide very direct support and reassurance.
Discover Pathway	Children should be becoming more independent, choosing the appropriate distances to be from adults, although adults should still monitor and discuss to ensure boundaries are appropriate.	Children should be developing some knowledge of the animals and plants around them, identifying the more common ones by sight and making comments and predictions about where they may be and why.	Children should be able to work together and discuss and negotiate together to achieve tasks with varying degrees of support; some may be more independent in doing so, but require adult support and intervention to achieve positive outcomes.	Adult support should be lower key, with activities being more child led, and adults using questioning, or advice to support the children and guide their ideas
Explore Pathway	Children should be confident and able to make choices and plan activities for themselves – they should effectively choose their own boundaries, choosing the appropriate distances to be from the adults dependent on terrain and activities. Children would also be expected to have more control and choice over clothing – e.g. choosing trainers over wellies if wanting to climb*	Children should be confidently able to identify common woodland species and talk about the relationships between them and their habitats.	Children should be able to collaborate and work together, negotiating with each other and responding positively to others ideas. Groups should be more fluid and alter according to the activities undertaken.	Activities should, ideally, be entirely child led, with adults providing low key, minimal support as needed. Children should be confident in seeking advice and support when needed.

**Not at the expense of safety – e.g. no child would be allowed on a winter session without coats*

Key/Developmental Stages	Indicative onsite activities	Indicative offsite activities
Curiosity/Discover Pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult led and supported campfire • Use of simple tools, such as potato peelers to create toasting sticks • Cooking of simple foods • Making of “Tree Cookie” medals • Assisting adults with splitting and cutting of firewood • Lighting small fires, using flint and steel, to help start a communal fire • ☐ Basic knot tying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of woodlands • Viewing and feeding of animals • Tracking and searching for wildlife • Scavenger hunts • Assisting adults in building rope swings • Building simple dens • Tree climbing • Paddling (both in lake and in mud!) • Assisting leader to make hot chocolate with Kelly Kettle • Gathering natural materials (e.g. firewood, resources for art) • Map reading/orienteering type activities (including treasure hunts) • Pond dipping
Discover/Explore Pathways	<p><i>More experienced pupils would typically do all of the above activities, but with changes in the level of independence and responsibility – e.g. lighting the Kelly Kettle for hot chocolate without help, rather than assisting, or making a rope swing with the adult supervising to ensure it is safe, rather than leading the building. In addition, some more technical activities, listed below, will be reserved for older and more experienced pupils.</i></p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building more complex objects – e.g. making wooden mallets or animals • Shelter building with tarpaulins on site • Building different forms or fire, or building and controlling individual fires • Cooking more complex items, or using a cooking stove • Use of more complex tools, independent/ chosen tool use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More specialised work with wildlife – e.g. twig traps to track animals, or photography • Creation of more complex and advanced shelters, or group shelters • Creation of activities for younger children – e.g. making a treasure hunt trail • Visiting more remote locations for longer periods of time • Using tools on offsite sessions

The above activities represent a sample of the typical activities that could be used or experienced and is by no means definitive. Below is an indication of the types of seasonal activities and natural resources available for pupils in each of the school academic terms:

	Autumn 1	Autumn 2	Spring 1	Spring 2	Summer 1	Summer 2
Season	Autumn	Autumn/ Winter	Winter	Spring	Spring/ Summer	Summer
Indicative activities	Hawthorn berries Autumnal equinox Nuts/seed foraging	Debris shelters Christmas wreaths Mince pies Winter solstice Hibernation	Wax dipping leaves Coppicing Water filtration Ice/snow Twig ID	Wild garlic Bluebells Wood anemones Beech leaves Spring equinox Bird nesting	Stinging nettle cordage Leaf ID Stream/ pond dipping	Elderflowers Insect ID Meadow flowers Summer solstice Hammocks/tarps

Monitoring the impact of Forest School at Mountfield Heath School:

From September 2025, MHS has run its Integrated Therapeutic Curriculum through a Capabilities Approach, with experiences and pupils' achievements recorded via Evidence for Learning. Unlike traditional curriculum areas, Forest School is not assessment driven. In keeping with the Forest School Principles, a cycle of planning, observation and adaptation informs practice. We recognise that the impact of FS is realised over an extended period of time – often years - and it is therefore not pedagogically consistent to introduce assessment practices that mirror the school's quality and assurance cycle. Instead, MHS has developed its own methodology for measuring the impact of our FS provision through EfL. Unlike other curriculum areas, targets are not set for pupils due to the intrinsically child-led nature of FS sessions. Instead, the Forest School Leaders at MHS have identified the following areas for observation and linked these to the relevant Forest School Principles:

FS Curriculum Strand	Link to Forest School Principle
Autonomy	#3
Cooking	#4
Engagement	#1
Fauna	#2
Fire	#5
Flora	#2
Games	#3
Holistic development	#4
Natural wonder	#2
Preparation	#1
Risk	#5
Rules	#5
Shelter	#4
Spaces	#2
Tools	#5

The FS Leader follows the school's broader Curriculum Policy and demonstrates gathering of evidence through completion of EfL observations. Whilst the FS Leader and SLT may be able to recognise various aspects of progress through a pupil's evidence, FS is not progress driven; it is the quality of the pupil's experience that informs leaders' judgements about the quality of practice.

Trust

At the heart of FS sessions is the development and maintenance of trust. It is down to the individual leader to decide how they interpret and apply the above: all new series of sessions should begin with low risk, simple activities and build up to more risky or advanced sessions as the trust between the staff and children is established. This may mean that some groups will not experience the same activities as other groups of the same age, dependent on their maturity, engagement and interests, which is in line with the personalised nature of the FS ethos.

Trust should be explicitly and regularly discussed with the children as part of all sessions.