

'Nature calms and heals kids of every kind'

Bridget Galton talks to a Belsize Park couple who believe their Forest Schools are a holistic antidote to the structured, stressful lives led by children today

Forest School has become a buzzword in recent years with parents queuing to sign up for child-led, outdoor play teaching skills like woodcarving and fire-building.

The concept started in Scandinavia, but has grown rapidly here, especially in urban areas where children have restricted contact with nature.

Belsize Park couple Jane Worroll and Peter Houghton have been running projects in Brent and Camden for four years and their first book **Play the Forest School Way** is a bestseller. Out this month, the follow up: **A Year of Forest School** (Watkins Publishing £12.99) is also a practical guide for parents and group leaders with seasonally appropriate games, crafts and skill-building activities.

Worroll is a former tree surgeon and countryside ranger, Houghton a key worker for a children's charity working with "disadvantaged inner city kids".

"Before that I was a wood carver, I started whittling at 13 and have always loved carving," he says. The pair, whose seven

year old son Theo is their "guinea-pig" believe many children have become estranged from nature and need to reclaim their innate connection.

They blame the phenomenon, which has led to childhood obesity and mental health issues, on disappearing open spaces, increased traffic, safety fears, technology and target-driven education.

"It's like a recipe book with everything you need to spend time outdoors with children. We've tried to make it user friendly and an easy read," says Worroll.

Forest School is "an inspirational process that develops self-esteem through hands on learning in a woodland or natural environment." The idea is that activities such as foraging, fire-making, den-building and whittling exposes children to manageable risk and promotes their wellbeing.

Worroll and Houghton outline activities such as clay art, bark masks, nettle soup, baking apples in the fire and a compass treasure hunt - the very antidote to tightly scheduled after school clubs and a



Forest School is not hung up on defined outcomes but fosters self reliance by allowing children to discover things for themselves

risk averse attitude that's intolerant of kids being kids.

Worroll explains that the focus on process rather than defined outcomes is less stressful and fosters self-confidence in the shy and self-esteem in kids who struggle to pay attention in class.

"Schools have to manage a lot of kids with high need these days but we seem to take them on and kids who are struggling in the classroom do very well. We have a lot of kids with special needs. You read the statement and it sounds awful but we don't recognise the child that they describe.

"It's therapeutic, mindful child-centred holistic..we don't play competitive games or force them to do anything. We let kids work

things out for themselves if they want to. Nature is calming and healing in itself, children have the freedom to move about and explore. A lot is unplanned, you can't anticipate finding a huge bug world under a rock."

Houghton adds that Forest School "works for all kids including shy kids who don't explore outdoors much".

"We've had children who are frightened to get dirty and have been told not to muck up their shoes. It takes a while for them to realise, at forest school it's ok."

Worroll adds: "We think about every aspect of each child's emotional need. People get hung up on it being about an activity but the activity is just an

opportunity to provide an experience that's appropriate for that child.

With sharp tools around, safety is key, and sessions start with drawing the boundaries of the play area and citing rules of care for the environment and each other. Theo, who has been Forest schooled since age three, knows how to use a bow saw and a knife.

"We would never start them off with a knife," says Houghton who also teaches knife skills to youths who have fallen into gangs.

"We start them with potato peelers to teach hand skills and using a tool safely. It's an individual approach, some are ready at four; some not until 12. I always think it's not kids who are incapable of using knives. Culturally we are quite scared of it, but a knife is just a tool."

A high adult to child ratio to supervise activities such as carving is vital adds Houghton: "Teachers approach learning from a different perspective. They are worried about kids taking risks, but in the five years I have been doing it, the only injury was on the training course."

Ultimately Forest school never stops due to weather, and makes everyone feel welcome and safe.

"Children today are full of anxiety about things they shouldn't be anxious about," says Worroll. "Forest School builds resilience and the ability to self-regulate, which carries forward into other areas of their lives. Kids are going to face challenges in life, but if you trust in yourself to be able to deal with them that's a life skill."

"Some kids feel they can't carve or do something well but we help them to manage that feeling. Not everyone fits in a classroom but in nature everyone fits in."



Forest School takes a holistic non competitive child led approach that encourages children to explore and get muddy



Modern children are often told not to get their shoes dirty but at Forest School getting mucky and wet is encouraged