

Learning outdoors with confidence

Since 2012, North Lanarkshire Education Service has been working in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland to promote high quality outdoor learning experiences to young children through a 'Forest Kindergarten' approach.

The Commission's three-day training course, 'Forest Kindergarten: A Natural Approach to Learning', is a practical, hands-on programme designed for early learning and childcare practitioners. Newmains Family Learning Centre in Lanarkshire is one of the settings where the approach has really 'taken root' and is now regarded as core to children's learning.

Forestry Commission Scotland promotes the Forest Kindergarten approach as a means of offering young children frequent play opportunities in woodland or other natural settings throughout the year in almost all weathers.

A core element of the approach is to identify an area of woodland space over which children have a certain ownership. The area will be visited and revisited by children over a sustained period of time. Being familiar with the area allows child to develop it in their own way.

During their time at the forest, children take part in a wide range of activities including exploring for bugs, tracking animals, building dens and designing games for others to play. A core set of materials is taken along to give children ideas about how to take learning forward.

Ruth, Development Officer, says:

The training course emphasises that children take responsibility for the Forest Kindergarten before they even leave the nursery. At Newmains, we involve the children in gathering and selecting the equipment. By involving them in every part of the process, children are developing leadership skills that they will carry with them through their future learning.

The approach promotes child-led learning where children are encouraged to bring forward their own ideas and to build on the ideas of others. The role of the adults in the learning process cannot be overstated though.

Karen Gibb, Depute Head of Centre and trained Forest Kindergarten practitioner says:

Staff have been struck by the difference in children when at the forest, how capable they are. This has really driven home the value of the approach and has helped staff make a commitment to it.

The approach helps children enjoy open spaces of woodland with an emphasis on freedom, exploration, imagination and enjoyment. By spending time there, Newmains children are learning how to respect their environment and to take responsibility for themselves and others. We see this developing with each and every visit.

Karen and her team have had reinforced their belief about the value of play-based learning. Using the stimulus of the available natural elements the woodland offers, children exhibit instinctive and adventurous play behaviours. Staff have found that, particularly in the woodland setting, children are more inclined to explore the potential offered by the environment.

We see children being curious about what they see and what they find. Sometimes they bring forward existing knowledge, which we otherwise would not know that they had.

We know what research has shown about outdoor learning leading to a range of benefits for children's development and general wellbeing including better concentration, better communication skills, greater stamina, improved balance and coordination, increased confidence and appreciation and understanding of the outdoors.

We have observed children demonstrating a range of skills that we would not ordinarily see in such depth. Our children are problem solvers and creative thinkers. They are also developing positive attitudes to learning shown through their increasing confidence to co-operate with peers and adults alike.

Miller's story

Miller was a little boy who loved playing outdoors in the nursery garden so it was important that the forest experience offered him additional challenges.

At each visit to the forest, Miller was drawn to the wide range of natural materials he would find, for example, brick, slate, stone, and sticks. He became interested in how these materials could be used all together to make various bug hotels.

Miller's creativity and imagination had no limits and it was obvious that he drew inspiration from the shape and properties of the materials. He was known to start his design on one visit but then leave it unfinished until the next time he visited. He was always delighted, and relieved, to find his structure had remained intact when he revisited the following week.

The staff at Newmains began to give consideration as to how challenging the nursery garden and indoor environment of the nursery had been. In consultation with the children, a number of 'wish lists' were created. On the arrival of the new materials, staff were struck at the level of co-operation, negotiation, resilience, imagination and confidence shown by the children who had previously had the experience of the forest.

Having been inspired by Miller and his friends, the staff at Newmains are evermore encouraging of children to use open-ended, natural resources in their indoor play just as they do in the forest.