



The great escape

Three-quarters of children in the UK now spend less time outdoors than prison inmates. What's the answer? Send them to forest schools, says *Lucy Jones*

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meet by the clock tower of an elegant Tudor manor. It's early, not yet 9am, but the sun is out. Through a gate, a group of 11 preschoolers rush into a vast field of wildflowers. Teachers hand out notebooks and pens so they can record what they find. A couple of girls study a flower identification sheet together and work out that the bright yellow plant is lady's bedstraw.

"Let's do butterflies and crickets!" yells a small boy dressed as a pirate, complete with bandanna. "Barnaby's looking for thistles."

Elves & Fairies Woodland Nursery, in rural Dorset, is held outdoors all day, almost every day. The "classroom" is a large clearing in the woods, shaded by oak trees. The "staff room" is a shack decorated with skulls and pine cones. At the end of the patch, there's a compost lavatory and a small book-lined bothy. In wet or cold weather, though, the children are nearly always outside.



We take our seats on logs around a fire pit. The risk assessment, which is quite long, holds the children's attention. No walking through the fire ring. If you pick up a stick, it must measure smaller than wrist to elbow. Why don't we touch toadstools? "They make you poorly." Why don't we play with brambles? "You might get hurt." Why don't we pick plants or flowers? "We leave them there to grow, because we're sharing the forest with all the creatures."

The nursery opened in 2007 with only two children, and initially Kirsteen Freer, a former Steiner school music teacher, struggled to increase the numbers. Parents already following a more alternative way of

life drove in from miles away, but it took time to convince local families that it wasn't just a "hippie preschool".

There were other hurdles to overcome: from struggling to acquire insurance for certain activities (scissors, tea knives) to dealing with absurd health-and-safety red tape (stepping stones an inch high were deemed dangerous), it took a while to get going properly and convince parents of the school's legitimacy.

"I think they felt that if the children are just playing outside, how are they going to learn anything?" Freer admits.

In January, the local perception changed when Ofsted awarded the nursery an outstanding rating. "All of a sudden, the local people realised that, 'Oh wow, that weirdo school is actually functioning as something worth sending our children to.'" She was inundated with interest and the nursery now has a waiting list.

It's not the only one. Full-time woodland nurseries are springing up across Britain. Little Forest Folk opened in London in 2015 and launched its fifth branch in Barnes in July. In Scotland, 20 outdoor-based nurseries have registered with the Care Inspectorate in the past five years, and the first "nature kindergarten" opened in Wales this year, joining others in Hampshire, Dorset and Surrey. Elsewhere, the number of teachers trained by the Forest School Learning Initiative to run child-led, risk-based sessions of learning and play in



natural areas has climbed steadily from 23 in 2007 to 320 this year.

Long a staple of the Scandinavian education system, the idea of outdoor learning isn't entirely new to this country: there were more than 100 "open-air schools" in Britain in the 1930s, because it was thought fresh air and access to the natural world was good for the general health of children. But by the early 1990s, an increasingly risk-averse culture had seen it fall out of favour.

BRANCHING OUT Previous pages, above and overleaf: pupils revel in outdoor classes at the **Elves & Fairies Woodland Nursery in Dorset**

That's all changing — and it's changing out of necessity. Three-quarters of children in the UK now spend less time outdoors than prison inmates, and the area around a child's home where they can explore unsupervised has shrunk by nearly 90% since the 1970s. The reasons for this are myriad: restricted access to green space; increased traffic and motorways; high-rise developments and the demise of street play; a "safety first" culture driven by fear of injury and accidents, combined with the tech revolution and a more sedentary lifestyle.

The pros of outdoor learning are plenty. It has been found to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, to improve social and motor skills, motivation, concentration and communication skills. It makes children more physically active (nearly 10% of all children in the first year of school are obese) and the environment itself is good for health. A four-year study by researchers at Plymouth University found that 90% of pupils from 125 schools said they felt happier and healthier after learning outside.

The planned activity for the day at Elves & Fairies is to make leaves out of clay, but the children can choose what they want to do the rest of the time. Some chop vegetables, others help build a fire, the rest roam around to explore and discover. There are musical instruments, trees to climb and dens to build. While the children lead the



activities, the teachers ask questions and encourage them to think and learn, weaving in literacy and numeracy. A stick in the shape of a Y is found. What letter is this, the teacher asks. And what words begin with this letter? Counting happens organically: how many molehills, for example, or sticks for the fire.

When I ask the teachers about the benefits they have observed, the word most commonly repeated is "confidence". Through outdoor play and learning, the children, says Freer, grow in independence, both physically and mentally. This sounds like an antidote to cotton-wool parenting of potential "snowflakes", the young generation criticised for a growing lack of resilience. ➤

Today, the sky is blue and the air is warm, but how do the children cope when it's freezing cold and the rain is lashing down? If a child is cold they can retreat to the bothy, but Freer says that most love rain — and the heavier the better. Without complaint, the children help prepare lunch, fetch and carry the plates, and water the vegetable garden. Over the day, I witness no crying, fighting, bullying or whining. "This is the right way for children to grow up," Freer says.

"Forest schools lend themselves to the 21st-century approach to the curriculum," says Kathy Sylva, professor of educational psychology at Oxford University and an expert adviser to the government on the early-childhood curriculum. "It is about discovery, projects, helping the child acquire, discover and construct their own knowledge, instead of filling them up with knowledge. To really prepare a child for living in this world, we can't just have the old academic subjects and skills. We need essential life skills."

However, she concedes that five days a week in a forest would be "risky", and questions whether a forest could provide a "wonderful book area" or a setting for the physics side of science, with batteries, bulbs and microscopes. The disadvantages of outdoor learning are less researched, but, realistically, not every teacher wants to spend a day in the rain in a physically demanding setting with no electricity or running water.

"There was a negative vibe around forest schools at the beginning," says John Blaney of the Forest School Learning Initiative. Even the Forestry Commission was initially reluctant to be involved. "Forests were somewhere people went in wellies and took only memories and left only footprints. They had this idea that we were going to trash their woodlands." Parents and other schools have also questioned the value and safety of teaching children to light fires and use knives.

Even as these views change, not all children have access to large, idyllic woodlands. In urban areas, it is even trickier for children to reap the benefits of outdoor learning because there are simply fewer green and natural spaces.

In east London, I spend the morning with a half-term forest school in Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park. As we wait to venture into the woodland, a girl with long plaits and huge blue eyes crouches down to examine a passing insect. Is that a stag beetle, I ask. "A lesser stag beetle," she says. "It lives in the woods." It is one of many tidbits I learn from this seven-year-old. Did you know that nettle juice is better than dock leaves in soothing a sting? Or that not all nettles sting? (It depends on the sex.)

An aeroplane rumbles overhead as we sit under a large sycamore tree. There are 13 children, aged from three to seven.



Through the trees, I spy Canary Wharf and overground trains speeding past.

Kenneth Greenway, the ranger who runs the forest school, sets down the rules in a fun and practical way. "Don't fight with sticks — they are for imaginative play. No boy/girl rubbish, no dividing the genders. I don't like it. Be kind and considerate. Don't stick things in your mouth if you don't know what they are."

The children are older than the ones I met in Dorset, so the activities are higher-risk. A group uses parabolic mirrors to make fire, another whittles sticks with knives, others hammer wet charcoal. After 90 minutes, they go deeper into the woods, as though they have adapted and feel comfortable exploring further.

"I think it's really important that children have an opportunity to engage in risky

play," Greenway says. "If they do hurt themselves, they learn an important lesson, that it's not the end of the world. It would be really bad luck if they seriously injured themselves, but they're not going to at all."

He tells me about a seven-year-old who was disruptive and struggled in the classroom. "As soon as he came outside, he was a different person — and even the teachers were surprised. He wanted to engage, he wanted to be engaged with, he wanted to learn and said he wanted to do it as a job."

Boys who struggle to sit still and concentrate on their lessons are a good fit for forest school. Research, including a 2009 government report on gender and education, finds that girls show better concentration. For teachers, time spent in the woods helps boys focus when they return to the classroom.

A 2013 study of brain-wave readings in natural settings confirmed that nature can reduce mental fatigue, which can, in turn, alleviate antisocial behaviour.

Fred Banks, assistant head teacher at James Dixon Primary School in southeast London, attests to the effect on behaviour. Staff were concerned about a class that hadn't gelled. The answer? The group was prescribed forest school for a term. "By the end, we had reached a point where these children within the classroom were able to function independently with each other. It stopped low-level disruption and helped with compromise and resilience."

The government's statutory framework currently outlines that nurseries must provide access to an outdoor play area or ensure outdoor activities are taken daily. Among parents, though, there seems to be a growing appetite for "greener" learning. In May, a petition calling for a GCSE in natural history was signed by more than 10,000 people.

There are signs that normal nurseries and classrooms are starting to adopt the outdoor ethos. Up the road from Elves & Fairies, Wimborne First School was inspired to set up its own Wellies and Waterproof area. At James Dixon, outdoor education has become a regular part of the pupils' activities. Year 1 grow sunflowers while they're learning about Van Gogh; year 2 cultivate runner beans alongside studying Jack and the Beanstalk.

Back in Tower Hamlets, I finish my forest school session lying on my stomach on the ground next to the pond, watching newts with two small girls, who patiently teach me how to tell the difference between a male and a female. I leave the park and walk into the hubbub of the city with worm slime on my hands ■