

## Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

**The project:** Into the Woods

**The organisation:** Forest of Avon Trust

**The project researchers:** Nicola Ramsden and Rachel Tomlinson

**Participant group:** young adults with learning difficulties on City of Bristol College Horizons course

**Number taking part:** eight (aged 17-24, 5 male & 3 female)

**Activity:** woodland activity sessions using the Forest School model, including: games, arts & crafts, fire-lighting and cooking, practical conservation work.

### **Top 3 messages:**

1. Experiencing positive emotions and moods through being in a group was found to be important to this group. Despite being young adults this group enjoyed the opportunity to 'play' and devise games. Creating opportunities for this would be beneficial.
2. Developing themselves, succeeding in new tasks, becoming competent and showing others were found to be important. Tasks that encourage this outcome are already part of good practice in Forest School.
3. Connecting with and being with others as a group came out as significant, particularly when interviewing college staff post-woodland sessions. This highlights the importance of spending time talking with staff to find this information as we can then build on this during sessions.

### **Background**

The Forest of Avon Trust (FoAT) believes that trees make a huge contribution to our quality of life. The charity plants trees, provides training and advice, and brings the benefits of trees to children, businesses and communities through tree planting, activity days and Forest School across the former county of Avon.

Into the Woods works with the FoAT to encourage people to go to local woodland, connect with nature and build the confidence to explore other woods in their own time. Into the Woods specialises in working with groups and individuals who may not normally visit woods, including adults with learning or physical disabilities, mental health service users and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

### **Research focus**

To investigate the potential impacts on health and wellbeing of a range of woodland activities provided in Forest School-style sessions and to understand what leads to these impacts.

We feel there is a lack of evidence to back up assumptions that being in a natural setting is beneficial. We wanted to gather evidence in order to review our work and help us adapt sessions to have the most beneficial outcomes. We also wanted to demonstrate the impact of our activities to partner organisations e.g. colleges and daycare centres.

### **Context**

A six week programme of Forest School style sessions, one day a week for six weeks during autumn 2011.

Sessions centred on New Barn Wood, an enclosed area of woodland surrounded by the open parkland of Ashton Court Estate, a public park owned by Bristol City Council. The woodland here comprises mature trees including sycamore and oak, with smaller trees/shrubs such as holly and hazel.

The participants were students with learning difficulties attending the City of Bristol College's Horizons course. This three year course is for school leavers who've been in a special school or supported in mainstream education. It aims to provide students with challenges to help them develop independence and the skills needed for adult life. The Forest School-style sessions aimed to build students' resilience, develop physical confidence and stamina, learn about personal safety around fires, tools etc., work together and learn about and appreciate the natural world.

Sessions included: sensory activities e.g. listening, blindfold 'meet a tree'; art/creative activities e.g. making music, clay creatures; practical tasks e.g. coppicing, making a toilet screen; fire lighting and cooking; games e.g. hide and seek, stalking. Participants travelled to the site in a minibus and had a packed lunch in the woods each week.

Participants weren't able to easily express complex ideas, thoughts and feelings and the research methods reflect this.

## Expectations

The following indicators were expected to be significant outcomes by stakeholders both from the college and within the Forest of Avon Trust. They were also amongst the ten most frequently recorded during sessions:

- Developing oneself
- Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships
- Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

These are also shared outcomes of Forest School best practice. Many of the woodland activities were therefore planned with these in mind.

College staff expectations primarily focussed on personal and social development. This was most often represented by the wellbeing indicators: 'developing oneself' and 'feeling safe and supported'. This reflected the aims of the college course where staff monitored students' move towards greater independence.

Connecting with others through shared experience came out significantly in the inter-session stakeholder interviews (during a half term break) but there seemed to be few expectations of this before the sessions had started except for team work.

## Methods used

- Pre-session interviews with staff
- Inter-session (during half-term break) interview with course tutor
- Pre-session card sorting – potential participants were shown photos of different woodland features or activities and chose those they liked or did not
- Pre-session slideshow & discussion
- Sticker sheets – one sticker labelled with each participant's name, any comments or significant events noted
- Blackboard – for anyone to draw or write on
- Scrapbooks – each participant was given a small notebook in which they could draw, write, stick in things they had collected or made;
- Feedback games – such as woodland charades where one person would mime something we'd done that day and the others had to guess what it was;
- Videos taken by researcher and watched by researcher later
- Videos taken by participant and watched by researcher later
- Researcher reflective diaries
- Feedback sheets filled in by City of Bristol College staff – questions about what participants had enjoyed or not and what they would like to do next time
- Post session weekly discussions between researchers

### **The most useful methods for this group were:**

Slideshow with sound (pre-woodland – gathering expectations): students seemed to respond quite naturally to what they were looking at/hearing without many prompts.

Post-woodland discussions between researchers: a good way of 'blurring out' what we thought had happened, immediately afterwards.

Mid-session interview: the tutor could answer questions about our observations as she knew the participants. She could tell us whether students behaved differently in the woods compared to college.

Sticker sheets: students were self-conscious or found it difficult to answer direct questions about how they felt. This gave them a voice without putting them on the spot.

Reflective diary: useful as a practitioner tool for reviewing sessions and how we felt people had responded to them.

Observational video: very useful in the analysis stage as it's raw data and we had time to observe videos again and discuss what was happening (although this relied on our interpretation).

Participant video: gave a different perspective and focus to what was going on and allowed participants to express themselves e.g. one participant talked alone to the camera but rarely in the group.

## Results

### Experiencing positive emotions and moods

This was by far the most common indicator of wellbeing, perhaps because it's relatively easy to observe. It's also straightforward for participants to express positive feelings and a common/'normal' thing to verbalise. Games and 'play' came out very highly as sources of this. The fire was also significant when students directly interacted with it e.g. lighting it and cooking on it. Personal creative moments were also connected e.g. creating the clay creatures or playing music.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods was mentioned by stakeholders before the sessions started but wasn't seen as particularly significant, perhaps because it was an assumed outcome. In addition it may not be judged to be an important educational developmental outcome. It was however the most significant indicator recorded during the sessions.

*(CBC03\_video\_01) Everyone is playing music on sticks, with leaves etc. People are singing along in a circle and seem to be enjoying themselves, there is laughter (especially from CP3).*

*(CBC06\_SV1\_observations) CP8 is really pleased with his quick lighting of the fire and wants others to see. He is very pleased with his success, 'Look at that one, it's still burning!'*

### Connecting with others through shared experience

Over half of recordings of this indicator were associated with a 'what' people were doing. It was strongly connected to games (especially ring-on-a-string), but also often occurred during sensory activities (in particular, blindfold meet-a-tree). Students had to work with each other during these activities which brought them together as a group. It was also often associated with a familiar place or routine and sometimes students recollected what they had done on previous sessions. There is quite a lot of overlap when looking for the root of this wellbeing e.g. the fire circle quickly becomes a familiar place and it is strongly associated with the daily routine (the group sits here during mealtimes and spends relaxed, sociable time there); it may also be important as a place of ritual. So the wellbeing might come from the place (fire circle), routine (lunchtime) or people (group sitting together).

*(CBC06\_F1\_diary) CP2 was reminiscing about last week when she and CP6 had played a game where they drew a line in the ground. They also chatted about which way was best into the woods.*

### Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

This indicator was almost always associated with a 'what' code. The majority of these were practical tasks of some kind, such as using tools, whittling sticks, cooking food and tending the fire. It was coded only twice with a 'who' code, which was surprising, given that part of the indicator is "being seen to be competent" so requires other people to recognise the competence.

The indicator often occurred as participants became familiar with an activity and/or routine and took ownership of it. Sometimes, it was difficult to decide whether the root of the wellbeing was the place or the activity. Activities are often associated with a particular place such as the fire circle. There were only seven negative occurrences of this indicator, occurring most often when participants found it difficult to use the firesteel. However activities were chosen/set-up so that an initial challenge was followed by a sense of achievement.

*(CBC05\_F1\_F2\_discussion01) F1: CP5 was really pleased with lighting the fire actually. When she came up to wash her hands she went "I was brilliant!"*

*(CBC06\_F1\_F2\_discussion02) F2: For two weeks in a row now, somebody's gone and got the wok (fire wok) out, stuck the legs on and... asked who wants teas and things and gone round and sorted out what people want to drink.*

### Purposeful

Practical tasks seem to be the most significant source of participants feeling purposeful, perhaps because the nature of the tasks mean that there are clear and well defined goals which the participants wanted to reach. The fire was a significant route to this wellbeing. The participants seemed to enjoy their time around the fire and cooking so were motivated to light it. They seemed to enjoy using the fire steels in themselves, again perhaps because they expect to reach a pleasurable goal (lighting the fire) at the end.

This is quite a difficult indicator to record as it is not a commonly expressed feeling. We nearly always relied on our own interpretation of behaviour. Perhaps this is also why practical tasks seemed most significant as we were able to observe people setting out to achieve goals.

*(CBC03\_F2\_diary) They all get really involved in picking up the chestnuts, even CP8 who'd been saying he couldn't see any. I think they did feel proud to be able to find them and collecting the nuts in a bag gave them a good sense of achievement.*

*(CBCmid\_interview\_CS1\_F1\_F2\_01) CP6 is quite reluctant to engage normally [at college] so the fact that he is engaged when he's in there [the woods] is good.*

### Developing oneself

Many instances of this indicator came from practical tasks such as cooking as well as 'play'. There were many new things for participants to try for the first time. Food seemed to be significant (chestnuts and damper bread). Activities such as fire-lighting were repeated from session to session so that participants were able to learn/develop skills over time.

From our observations we saw that over time the participants were increasingly willing to try new things, and when the students felt that they had 'achieved' they did sometimes vocalise this. However it is possible to both over and under-observe this indicator as this is based on observations over six weeks only. Participants may have done some things before without us realising it e.g. they may frequently try new food, but we assumed they didn't. On the other hand they may not have done some things before e.g. we assumed that they could all choose appropriate clothing for the woods but they may have had to learn this during the sessions.

*(CBC03\_F2\_diary) Everyone tried a chestnut – even CP8, once he'd found out that CP7 was eating one. And almost everyone liked them – CP8 didn't like his. CP5 absolutely loved hers and waxed lyrical, telling everyone she loved them, and asking for more.*

*(CBC04\_F1\_F2\_discussion01) F1 "CP4 is quite dirt aware - he was worried about getting mud on his trainers" F2 "yes, at first,.....but later on he wasn't complaining, he seemed to have got over it"*

### Feelings of being confident

The most significant recorded instances were when people felt confident in front of the whole group and in the place which became familiar during the project. We felt that this indicator was likely to increase over a greater length of time.

Again feelings of 'confidence' can be hidden from observers, someone may be feeling quietly confident but not express this and it may not be obvious to those watching. Those participants who either vocalise their

confidence by saying 'I'm good at this' or demonstrate it in their behaviour are likely to be recorded more often.

*(CBC02\_F1\_diary) I feel that CP7 in particular is beginning to really engage with being in the wood. He talks about it more rather than other things and I feel that he's more relaxed in the group.*

*(CBC05\_F1\_F2\_discussion01) F2: 'I really noticed on the way to the wood from the bus, he (CP6) wasn't the last... he was up with the rest of them and he wasn't with a member of staff, and he didn't need anyone.'*

## Reflections

Experiencing positive emotions and moods, the most regularly recorded indicator, was closely connected to fire and 'play', already important elements of Forest School practice. It was important to remember that some young adults may enjoy play (there was an obvious appetite for it in this group). As practitioners we need to be open to this without patronising participants. Play allowed participants to bring their own ideas to sessions, organise games and share with peers.

Connecting with others was also significant in stakeholder interviews. In our yearly follow-up, staff mentioned that people interacted with each other in the woods in a way that they didn't in college. Students don't sit together over lunch in college but were happy to do so in the woods. This stressed the importance of long-term, rather than one-off, woodland sessions as people can build a shared experience. It also highlights the importance of talking to staff about the differences they notice in different environments.

It was sometimes hard to decide what was the root of the wellbeing. A range of factors may have led to wellbeing e.g. some participants didn't like getting muddy shoes but it was unclear whether they didn't like mud or if they had learnt from parents/staff to keep their shoes clean. The source could be social or personal.

It was hard to interpret what we saw/heard at times. Some responses/actions seemed to be learned behaviour but we couldn't be sure.

We found it hard to compare stakeholder expectations (from pre-session interviews) with the findings from the actual woodland sessions. Stakeholders tended to talk in the abstract and focus on the environmental aspects of the 'place' (the woods) rather than specific activities. Our research analysis focused on activities, such as collecting wood, and individual components of 'being in the woods' such as uneven ground, weather, mud, individual relationships in the group etc.

## Action points

Always go to the participant setting before being in the woods. Take a 'warm-up' activity to prompt discussion, encourage participants to tell us their thoughts about the forthcoming sessions and introduce ourselves in a familiar place.

It's useful to hold individual interviews with stakeholders before sessions begin (in a more basic/short format). This means that as practitioners we can find out what stakeholder expectations are and at the end of the sessions evaluate whether these have been met or changed. We could create a template of questions to ensure that we do this in a more formal way during each project.

Scrapbooks: these started out as somewhere for participants to stick things in or to draw in whenever they wanted. They quickly became associated with 'special place' (a time of reflection) and always used at that time for drawing or noting down words or signs. The tutor continued to use these and 'special place' at college. The group could use the scrapbooks as a prompt to think about their time in the woods.

Two-way feedback - We feel that it is important that we also feedback to participants so that reflection is mutual and not a one-way stream. As part of our practice we already gave participants personalised 'certificates' to recognise their contribution to the sessions and identify individual strengths.

Helping people to get to know each other (including leaders and support staff) and feel familiar with their surroundings is key to people feeling more confident. Allowing time for this to happen in various ways is important to embed into practice, informally e.g. eating lunch together or exploring the area in different ways. A minimum of six sessions is good Forest School practice.

## Summary of findings

Rank (most reported)	Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors
1	Experiencing positive emotions and moods	Most common were 'what'/activities: games and 'play' (18), fire (12), creative activities (9), cooking/eating (8); as well as the place: being in the woods (5), being in a familiar place (3).
2	Connecting with others through shared experience	Most common were 'what'/activities: games (15), sensory activities (7) but also where we were: fire circle (5) and who participants were with: other students (5), the whole group (5).
3	Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)	Most common where 'what'/activities: practical tasks (22), cooking/eating (6), fire (7)
4	Purposeful	Most common were 'what'/activities: practical tasks (17), fire (7), creative activities (6), games / 'play' (5), sensory activities (5)
5	Developing oneself	Most common were 'what'/activities: cooking/eating (9), new/unusual activities (8), games/'play' (6), practical tasks (6)
6	Feelings of being confident	Most common were 'who'/people and 'where'/place: whole group (10), familiar place (9), leaders (4), other participants (4)

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