Good from Woods
Research Toolkit

Into the Woods
I'm Rachel Tomlinson. I work with my colleague Nicola Ramsden as Into The Woods.

We specialise in working outside in natural environments with adults with learning difficulties and using mental health services in and around Bristol.

We use the Forest school model/ethos to work with people who have limited opportunities to visit woods because of:
- Fear
- Access
- Culture
We encourage people to:
- Get into local woodland
- Experience nature close-up
- Have fun and relax in the natural environment

We hope these experiences improve:
- Quality of life
- Build self confidence and independence
- Benefit mental and physical wellbeing.
Our activities depend on and are lead by the interests of the group. They could include:
- Environmental art
- Practical conservation work including coppicing and tree planting
- Fire lighting and cooking
- Sensory activities which may encourage mindfulness
- Surveying and learning about wildlife

We've found that woodlands provide a rich environment to stimulate people with limited mobility and communication in particular.
We've worked several projects with:
The Forest of Avon Trust, a local charity which works to engage people with woods and trees. It is also Natural Connections hub leader for Somerset and Wiltshire

Always been keen for our sessions to promote general wellbeing so interested in the Silvanus Trust's Good from Woods research project from the start.

Also enthusiastic about learning new research skills to look into our practice.
How did we get involved in Good from Woods?

Two research projects:
Young adults at a local FE college
Adults using council day services
Both groups had a range learning difficulties and some mobility needs.

Challenges of researching woodland activities:
How to be rigorous in research
How to recognise and try to avoid bias
How to get participant feedback – people can't talk about feeling, very limited communication
How not to intrude on woodland experience

Why we felt in-depth research of Good from Woods important:
Plenty of anecdotal evidence but perhaps self-fulfilling as people working in area believe it's beneficial and want to promote their work
Wanted to bring higher levels of objectivity
To challenge our assumptions – are our beliefs based on things that we look for rather than a more balanced assessment of sessions?
Opportunity to be part of & feed into a wider research project throughout the south west of England.
Our research

What did we do?

Observed participants and collected feedback: verbal, videos and photos, our own reflections and observations, noted quotes and people recorded their own experiences in scrapbooks and on a blackboard. We looked at the data for evidence of positive or negative experiences in terms of psychological, social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Why was the research useful?
In particular:
Provided us with evidence of what it is about woodland sessions that seems to benefit (or not) participants - the place – activities - or people
Explore ways of gathering feedback in group where people communicate v. differently from each other
Research conclusions

For young adults

Woodland activities/games enabled participants to experience positive emotions and moods and group cohesion.

The woodland & activities created opportunities for people to connect and work with others in a way that they didn't in the college environment e.g. lunch, working & deciding things together

The wood provided opportunities for personal development and feelings of competence – learned skills that their tutor/support workers didn't know about - confidence to showcase these.
Research conclusions

For adults

For the adult group, there was a high occurrence of feeling safe & supported through social relationships - carers in particular.

Importance of relationships - participants and support workers highlighted. Positive relationships between carers and service users encouraged as woodland activities meant they worked on an equal footing in a new environment.

Sensory and creative activities connected with flow/mindfulness encouraged a sense of purposefulness and feelings of competency.
Research conclusions

For both groups

Participants remembered most clearly and mentioned most often:
Using the firesteels to light a fire
Cooking on the fire and playing games.

We think this shows that the wellbeing outcomes - such as Feeling competent, connecting with others - do endure.

Time on their own was important for a number of participants – being able to be alone & quiet, not feeling they have to talk all the time.

The way in which participants all joined in and socialised in the woods was seen as very significant by staff.

 Raised awareness of being part of a larger world – this can help people to look outwards rather than focusing on themselves and their concerns.
As a result of research what do we now do

Most findings highlighted good practice as reflected in Forest School training and ethos.

Useful to be reminded how important certain activities are:
- Things that promote mindfulness - try to include something that encourages people to 'stop and be aware' each session
- Activities which encourage carers to learn and fully participate with people they support
- Use some feedback methods that we trialled during research, especially for non-verbal communicators

However - also aware of balance between gathering feedback/research and allowing people to become completely immersed in the activity/place.
And it’s the same with a research project – there’s lots of thinking and planning to do before the hammer and nails stage and our toolkit needs to highlight all the steps that get you ready for research. We used the tried-and tested method of flipchart and sticky notes to organise all the ideas and suggestions we and other practitioner-researchers had come up with to make the research process as smooth as possible.

The lab check

This is the list of steps we identified to take you through the research, from start to finish:

- Motivation and buy-in from your organisation: why you want to do the research, making sure your organisation is involved and committed to the research, making sure you have the support of your colleagues
Research toolkit

My colleague Nicola and I are now leading development of a research toolkit for use by other people who want to research effects of activities in the natural environment.

This leads on from the research work we did as part of the Good from Woods project.

We've written a blog about what it was like for us as non-academics to try to create the toolkit.
Consultation

The toolkit is being developed in collaboration with practitioners who researched own woodland activities as part of Good from Woods.

We met discussed our experiences during a consultation day.

We have drawn on the experiences of other people who have done research for Good from Woods including:
- Play Torbay
- Ruskin Mill College
- Embercombe
- Otterhead Forest School
- Woodland Trust
- National Trust
Planning your research

Help with planning and designing your research project from start to finish. This includes planning your time, working with partners and stakeholders and writing your research question/s. Information about research skills includes how to use your existing skills to the full and tips on being aware of bias during the research and reporting.

- Step-by-step guide to planning your research project
- Timesheet template (pdf)
- Research skills
- Research ready checklist (pdf)

Choose your research methods

Questions to help you choose suitable methods, an index of research methods (with a key to help you select methods by particular criteria). This index links to easy-to-follow guides for each method with templates to print off and use.

- Research methods index (with key)
- Guide to choosing research methods (finding what will work for you)
Aim of the toolkit

Online toolkit – easy to access - help woodland practitioners assess effects of their activities on health & wellbeing of participants.

Through this we hope to build a more rigorous body of evidence about the impact of people spending time in the natural environment:
- help people to think about their own bias and leading questions.
- encourage people to be brave enough look for negative and positive.

The toolkit is designed to take people through the whole research process from planning to gathering evidence and reporting results.

Unlikely that many can do full research so the toolkit also provides people with ideas, examples and templates to use independently in shorter pieces of research, evaluation and evidence gathering.
CONSENT FORM

I have read the information about your research project title.

I am happy to take part and give my permission for:

*Please delete any of the statements below you do not want to give permission for

- The audio recording of conversation
- The use of photographs and videos for research purposes only (photographs and videos with only be viewed by participants and researchers)
- The use of photographs and videos in reports and publications (photographs and videos will be published and publicly available)
- Written records of the research and its findings being held by Your Organisation for a period of 10 years (in which all participants will be anonymous, unidentifiable and unnamed)
- The use of this written research data for reports, presentations and publications
- Add any other use you may be planning

Signed.................................................................Date...........................................

Print name ...........................................................................

Address..............................................................................
Brief tour of the toolkit

Please not this is a work in progress so there no design yet! It is still at the stage of the basic information rather than a user friendly website.

Elements: e.g. how to do research, planning, how to keep research rigorous

Templates: e.g. consent forms, questionnaires, report summaries

Research methods and ideas: based on experiences of Good from Woods researchers.
Toolkit – challenges, successes, limitations

Very much a work in progress.

Need to make toolkit more user friendly - website design [text heavy & uninspiring at the moment]

We'd like feedback from non-academics as well as researchers - how useful you think it might be. When and how you might they use it (or elements from it).

Need to disseminate toolkit so that woodland/tree-based project workers can use it (or elements from it) in their own research and evaluation.

From discussions with the other Good from Woods researchers - unlikely that practitioners would go through whole research process without external funding. Can we encourage people to use elements of toolkit in their evaluation of woodland activities?
Good from Woods

Draft Toolkit

http://goodfromwoods.wordpress.com/the-tool-kit/
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