

## Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

**The project:** The impact of regular Forest School sessions on young teenagers wellbeing

**The organisations:** Otterhead Forest School and The Castle School, Taunton

**The project researcher:** Jenny Archard

**Participant group:** Six-week Forest School group, including some students who had been to more sessions, from Castle School, Taunton

**Number taking part:** 13 students overall

**Activity:** Series of six day-long Forest School sessions at Otterhead Lakes

**Top 3 messages:**

1. Play of all kinds is a very important component in Forest School sessions, even for older young people. It helps them feel in control, build relationships and creates the ground for many other positive outcomes.
2. For Leaders and Teachers to know that being in a place that is 'different to the everyday' and that provides the opportunity for 'developing relationships with adults', is a crucial part of Forest School for this age group.
3. We need to ensure that Leaders understand what a 'natural connection' is for a young person, and then create opportunities so that they can build their own ways and language. We need to create time for all in the woods if we want to maintain and grow our species' connection with the nature we spring from.



## Background

As a Forest School Leader, I worked with The Otterhead Forest School team from 2008-2011, which is where this research took place in 2011. The key members of staff at that time had been some of the pioneers of the use of the Forest School approach with older children and young people with behavioural issues. They worked mostly with young teenagers with behavioural or nurture needs, either in groups or on a one to one basis. Their base was the old coach house at Otterhead Lakes, a mixed woodland local nature reserve in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. On any day there was a variety of groups of students in the woods, being supported by the team. As the project researcher I was part of the Otterhead team at the beginning of this project, then left to create a new woodland social enterprise.

All students came from The Castle School in Taunton, which had been sending pupils to Forest School provision for some years.

As a practitioner-researcher, my own interest was in the longer term well-being of the young people I had experience of working with, and finding ways to record and document changes for them.

## Research focus

The focus was:

- To observe and document impacts of the Forest School process on young people, especially those who only came for 6 sessions
- To see what, if any, improvements could be made in practice to enable greater benefits for young people
- To share findings widely with those in the Forest School movement as there has been little research work done with teenagers

## Context

The data gathering part of the research took place in the late autumn term of 2011, with follow-up in the late summer of 2012 and final reporting in 2014.

Thirteen students participated in the research. Five were year seven and eight students new to Forest School and coming for a day a week in a six week block. Eight were longer term students from years seven to eleven who had in general been attending a day a week from between six weeks to four years. All students had some kind of behavioural or nurture needs.

Students were brought to the Forest School by school minibus, and school staff did not stay for the sessions. Each of the six week sessions were led by two Otterhead Forest School staff, joined by the project researcher. The project researcher had worked with some of the longer term students earlier in the year. The longitudinal research was carried out six months later by the project researcher with help from GfW staff, in different woodlands without the participation of Otterhead staff for practical and logistical reasons. The longitudinal research made clear connections between types of wellbeing experienced and what students recalled the wellbeing being derived from.

The research used a set of well-being domains and indicators of wellbeing experience developed prior to data collection to guide analysis and reporting, but expanded these further in response to emerging findings.

## Expectations

From initial interviews, Forest School and Castle school staff most commonly expected to see students achieving social, psychological, emotional and physical well-being.

The most frequently anticipated wellbeing outcomes for students were those around **social well-being**; feeling 'safe and supported within and through social relationships', socially 'confident', and 'accepted'.

*"Social, emotional aspects – all the sort of making friends, learning to play and fall out and make up and all the stuff that they should be doing at school but find it hard to"* (FS?).

These were closely followed by expectations of opportunities for achieving **psychological well-being** especially 'feelings of being competent'.

*"I think that they just don't cope with five days a week in school. I think it's something very different as part of their working week, it gives them an opportunity to – it brings them confidence and raise self esteem."*(CS)

*"... a sense of achievement really, that they can achieve in a different way, even if they've been told that they're failures in certain ways."*(FS)

The achievement of **emotional well-being** was the next most common expectation, especially 'experiencing positive emotions and moods'.

*"xx's mum said to me that it's the only day of the week she doesn't have to drag xx out of bed."* (CS) *"just that little glow inside, that they've had a positive experience and some fun and some achievement and it's just like that nice little feeling inside"*(FS1).

Those that were least common were the **natural connections** and **physical wellbeing themes**.

Three less easy classifiable experiences of wellbeing: '*Different from everyday life*' (being out of school, being outside, having space to think); '*Developing relationships with adults*' – (staff acting as role models, trusting staff, asking staff questions, seeing staff learning); and '*Understanding own behaviours/emotions*' (helping students look at what has gone wrong) were picked up during stakeholder interviews.

From initial conversations with new students, their expectations were to be doing things that were physical and fun and led to learning about leadership, their own behaviour, tool-use and nature.

## Methods used

Semi-structured group interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed. These were used with the Otterhead staff team and the Castle School staff before the research sessions began with the students.

Semi-structured individual interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed. Used with Otterhead staff team, and individual students at Forest School.

Observation recorded in a diary, accompanied by photos and videos, some taken by students for research purposes. Some of the audio from the videos was used for data and transcribed.

- 'Flash card' prompts for follow-up interviews. These were a series of 20 statements that the students could put into an order to describe what they had got the most from whilst being at Forest School as a prompt to further discussion. The statements were linked to the well-being domains and indicators guiding the data analysis, but were put into language students were more likely to use.

Reflective Diary. This was completed as a journal of the process of being involved in the research, and captured my own feelings about progress as well as developing observations.

I also tried using peer interviews, but in general this did not work or generate any decent data (except in one case); instead it caused rather a lot of hilarity and fun!

## Results

The experiences of wellbeing amongst students that I observed most frequently during the six-week period of the Forest School programme, with some examples, were:

**Feelings of being in control** - Students showed different ways of being in control of their own experience in the woods. One student chose to make his own fire each week, away from the group fire. Another was asked if she wanted to make a willow star, and instead she chose to watch what her friend was doing.

**Energetic** - Most students walked, climbed, ran and played on the site explore walk in the first session. Sometimes being energetic was a 'free' activity that students created themselves, and sometimes it was supported by staff after the learners had initiated it.

**Experiencing positive emotions and moods** - I observed laughter and smiles often, which doesn't mean that everyone was happy all the time, and for some it was much more subtle; one smile on making something or achieving a task.

**Feelings of being confident** - From week one, staff encouraged students to be confident in front of the group and in one-to-one interactions. In interview one student commented, *'My confidence has improved - I wouldn't speak to people when I first came'*.

**Supporting others through social relationships** - There was a positive atmosphere modeled by the staff who were generally friendly in their relationships with each other and to the students. Two students supported each other a good deal during the six weeks and made a short video together of why they like forest school.

**Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity** - As soon as the young people get off the minibus, some of them are running down the hill, chasing each other and laughing.

**Different from everyday life** - Most students commented that they liked to come to Forest School as it was a day out of school. Students said that being at Forest School gave them the chance to have a break, make friends with different people and allow them to learn different skills. I could see it being a respite from their everyday worlds.

**Developing relationships with adults** - I saw staff making a point of being available, open to questions and friendly whilst ensuring boundaries are kept. Students engaged in rough and tumble with staff and were physically close, sometimes even clingy. One student said *“Normal teachers just talk down to you quite a bit and then, like, they don’t take much notice of you. They [forest school staff] take notice of you and the things what you want to do.”* This quote also suggests that developing relationships with adults who allow you some control may be significant for some.

**Playing (with sticks, with others or alone)** - The activity that stood out the most was playing and the amount and type of evidence I amassed suggested to me that it was an experience of wellbeing in itself. The students play the most whilst in the woods, and will play on the way to the woods and on the way back. Playing happens alone, in small groups, large groups, with sticks, with mud, with staff; it was sometimes an organised game (by students or staff), initiated by students or it appeared to be completely unplanned.

**Understanding own behaviours/emotions** Staff challenged poor behaviour on many occasions, and give options for better, more positive, behaviour. In interview, one of the longer-term students described how being at forest school had changed his behaviour, *“It’s sort of learnt me to deal with a lot of people, cos before I end up sorting out a clash and then going home, it sort of, you learn tolerance with people, so then he winds you up and winds you up and you can ignore them for a certain while before you end up sort of hitting the top.”*

Longitudinal research with a smaller group (six months later) suggested that many experiences of wellbeing had endured over time. The table below shows 8 students self assessment of what had made them feel good, and how these may link with the wellbeing themes and experiences.

Activity leading to wellbeing ('Flashcard statement' given to young people)	Students recollecting this as a significant activity (n=8)	Wellbeing theme and experiences
Being with friends and hanging out	7/8	Social - Feelings of being confident . Different to everyday life.
Clearing up and looking after the forest	7/8	Physical - Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity Psychological - Energetic Natural - Engaged in relationship to nature
Being in the woods	7/8	Physical - Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity Psychological - Energetic Natural - Closeness to natural world. Different to everyday life.
Making new friends	6/8	Social - Feelings of being accepted. Different to everyday life.

Making a den or shelter	6/8	Psychological - Feelings of being in control / being competent / purposeful / Physical - Feelings of physical comfort
Playing running around games	6/8	Physical - Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity Psychological - Energetic. Playing
Messing about with sticks	6/8	Physical - confidence in. Psychological - energetic. Playing
Being allowed to decide what to do	6/8	Psychological - Feelings of being competent; Developing oneself Social - safe and supported within relationships Psychological - being in control
Getting comments from others about how you are doing	5/8	Social - safe and supported / supporting others. Developing relationships with adults.
Going for walks in the bog and playing in the stream	5/8	Physical - confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity Emotional - positive emotions and moods. Playing
Carving sticks using a knife or other tools	5/8	Psychological - being in control / being competent / purposeful Emotional - experiencing positive emotions and moods
Cooking food on the fire	5/8	Psychological - being in control / being competent / purposeful
Spending time on your own	5/8	Psychological - being competent / developing oneself Social - safe and supported within relationships . Developing relationships with adults

Experiences of wellbeing that appeared to remain significant for *students* included:

**Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity** (Physical) There is an interesting overlap with other experiences of wellbeing - Energetic, and Closeness to the natural world.

**Feelings of being confident (in social relationships)** (Social) Experienced frequently through 'being with friends and hanging out' and links to 'Developing relationships with adults' (below).

**Developing relationships with adults** (Unclassified) - linked to experiences of getting comments from others about how you are doing and spending time on your own. Spending time on your own is included here students described activity in terms of their developing relationship with an adult enabling it to occur.

**Energetic** (Psychological) - very frequently observed in early data, again as playing games, running around, going for explore walks; and links with two high placed flashcards (Messing about with sticks; Playing running around games).

**Different from everyday life** (unclassified) - Frequently observed in the first data, as being associated with being out of school and having space to be and to think, and links strongly to recalled social and natural experiences; of being with friends and hanging out, making new friends and being in the woods)

**Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)** (Psychological).

Links to recollections of carving sticks using a knife or other tools, being allowed to decide what to do and cooking food on the fire

**Experiencing positive emotions and moods** (Emotional) - Frequently observed in the first data, and linked to students with going for walks in bogs and streams and carving sticks using a knife or other tools.

**Playing - with sticks, with others or alone** (new indicator) - very frequently observed in the first round of data and linked with messing about with sticks, going for walks in bogs and streams and playing running around games).

The surprises are the two that became more important:

- **Feelings of closeness to the natural world AND Being engaged in a relationship with nature**. Neither of these had been observed in the first round of data, but were linked with two of the experiences most recalled by students as leading to wellbeing (Clearing up and looking after the forest; Being in the woods), indicating that they had become more important over time. Looking again at the earlier data, I would also suggest that my view about what constitutes 'closeness with nature' and 'being in a relationship with nature' is different to how the students experienced these aspects.

And one that was not articulated frequently in longitudinal responses:

**Feelings of being in control (psychological)**

This does not appear strongly in the follow-up data, but I suspect that is because it is an indicator that flows through or underlies many of the others, rather than being explicit.

Perhaps this suggests that 'being in control' is not an indicator, but one of the pre-conditions for woodland well-being to take place.

## Reflections and Conclusions

The research has given **plenty of good evidence** that Forest School has made a difference in well-being terms to the students who came to these six sessions, including those who only came for six sessions. It was also shown that the initially recorded well-being benefits endured in the longer term, but that some appeared to become more important, and others less so, over time.

The most recorded well-being experience were found to be focused round social and physical benefits, but psychological, emotional and other types of well-being were also found to result from the FS studies. Interestingly, nature connection well-being only became evident in the longitudinal data, but was found to be important at that stage.

Play stands out as an important experience for young people as part of the Forest School session, one that may have been implied but is not stated by the stakeholders.

Physical and nature connection well-being were not mentioned in stakeholders' expectations but were found to be important to students. Perhaps because these are implicit outcomes, they are not being described as a benefit or outcome, and thus could risk being lost or overlooked by both sets of stakeholders.

Perhaps Forest School (and other) leaders like myself are looking for the 'wrong' behaviours or indicators to judge if children and young people are really making a connection to nature, or perhaps not being exposed to the woods means not having the language that we expect would be used to express an experience of nature connection well-being.

Differences between stakeholders' expectations is an interesting and unexpected part of this research, and my reflection here is that this could have an impact on the well-being outcomes for students. **Being more clear about what expectations the Forest School experiences are fulfilling for the students and for the school, and being able to measure these in a simple way looks like a good idea, as well as improving connections and communications between the two stakeholder groups.**

### Action points

- Pay more attention to the physicality (those things that lead to young people being energetic, being able to enjoy physical activity and play) that Forest School sessions with young teenagers can create and make it a more explicit activity and outcome for students
- Pay more attention to activities that encourage students to make direct links with nature, in ways that these young people find engaging, and for Forest School leaders to find out what 'caring for the woods /place' might look like and use activities (or even non-activities!) that help their learners feel more connected
- Be clear about what expectations the Forest School experiences are fulfilling for the students and for the school that is sending them, and be able to measure these
- Have more overt ways of monitoring well-being outcomes so that the expectations are more closely matched
- For Forest School leaders to encourage all kinds of play amongst teenage students

### For Forest School Leaders and Schools accessing provision

Play of all kinds is a very important component in Forest School sessions, even for older young people. It helps them feel in control, build relationships and creates the ground for many other positive outcomes.

For Leaders to know that being in a place that is 'different to the everyday' and that provides the opportunity for 'developing relationships with adults' is a crucial part of Forest School for this age group.

Ensure that physicality - play, making, exploring - is an explicit part of Forest School sessions with young teenagers.

We need to make sure that Leaders understand what a 'natural connection' is for a young person, and then create opportunities so that they can build their own ways of connecting and their language to describe it. This may be to use activities that are directly focused on exploring nature, and encourage students to make their own personal connections with nature, so that they can benefit and begin to learn the 'language' of nature. It's a bit like walking in their shoes rather than ours!

If a school is sending young people to an off-site Forest School provision, be clear about expectations and outcomes on both sides, and make sure there are ways of monitoring well-being outcomes.

To know that six weeks of Forest School sessions do have a well-being impact.

### **For Further Research**

Find out more about the difference between those who regularly access nature and those who do not; not just what has been called the 'nature deficit disorder' but the impact it has on language, cognition and people's understanding of the world around them.

Look at the difference in well-being outcomes between young people in regular woodland sessions who are engaged in explicit, led nature connection activities, and those whose leaders let those activities develop.

### **For the Wider Community**

Make opportunities for 'more time in the woods' and 'time for all in the woods' if we want to maintain and grow our species' connection with the nature we spring from.

### **Contact details**

Jenny Archard, Neroche Woodlanders, Young Wood, Staple Fitzpaine, Near Taunton

[jenny@nerochewoodlanders.org](mailto:jenny@nerochewoodlanders.org)

07541 080397



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