



# The Role of the Adult at Forest School

## A Guide for Helpers

*"Everyone is a Genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."*

~Albert Einstein

### About Forest School

Forest School is a specific approach to working with people to develop their self esteem, emotional intelligence and independence using a natural space over a long period of time (most programmes run for at least a year). The philosophy is learner led, and subtly facilitated by the supporting adults to ensure learners are set up to achieve by breaking tasks into small achievable chunks. Many types of activity may take place within a Forest School programme (Bushcraft type activities, conservation work, games, natural crafts, green woodworking, field studies type activities etc) but it is not what we do, rather how we do it that is important for Forest School to support self esteem. It is a combination of the natural environment and the atmosphere facilitated by the supporting adults that is key. You can find out more about the ethos from the Forest School Association here: [www.forestschoollassociation.org](http://www.forestschoollassociation.org)

### Role of the Adults at Forest School

- **Establish trusting relationships** – The early stages of a FS programme is about forming relationships and working towards a trusting community. A significant trusting relationship between the learners and the adults is fundamental to developing self esteem. Forest School aims to provide a community where everyone (children and adults) are equal in status and respect.
- **Unconditional positive regard for all learners** – This is crucial to developing self worth. Unconditional positive regard provides a sense of emotional security which is a basic human need. Some children we work with may not get this anywhere else in their lives.
- **Modelling** – Children copy what others do. Adults should model desired attitudes and language, particularly in regards to emotional awareness and coping systems. Adults are encouraged to share emotions with the group and model how they appropriately deal with them, thereby providing a framework for learners to copy. For example we might purposely fail at something, share how that made us feel and then model a strategy of managing frustration appropriately and trying again.





- **Enable appropriate choices** – Choice is essential to motivation. Through observing learners interests and skill levels we are able to predict things which would be appropriate for them.
- **Support & encourage as appropriate** – Different learners have different strengths and weaknesses, the adult role is to observe what a learner may struggle with and offer support as appropriate when needed. However, it is also important to know when to stand back and allow learners to do things themselves to build their competencies & self esteem.
- **Support Learners manage risks** – The natural world has inherent risks within it, as do some of the activities we may undertake. Forest School aims to give learners the

opportunity to take appropriate risks and share with them methods and systems to reduce them. It is widely recognised (including by the Health and Safety Executive) that if children are not allowed to take risks, and therefore learn about making appropriate choices, they are more likely to cause themselves or others harm in the future.

## **Strategies to Support Learning & Development**

Forest School aims to support a learners holistic development and views all aspect of a person equally important (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual and linguistic). Forest School programme may have a particular focus, but still will aim to support the whole child/person. Some methods conducive to Forest School are:

- **Observation** – gathering information about a learners interests, needs and skills is crucial to the success of a Forest School programme. The Forest School leader will collate this information at the end of each session. In some cases there may be a focus on these observations which are deemed a priority for individuals.
- **Modelling** – role modelling skills, choices, attitudes through practical demonstration can be more powerful than a verbal explanation and yet subtle in its approach. It is a less threatening way of opening dialogue and supporting learners. Talking to yourself whilst modelling skills or asking for a child's advice about an aspect often draws learners in to engage with an activity.
- **An Open Mind** – being open to new ways of doing things or different ways to approach a problem is crucial to supporting learners creativity. At Forest School there are a very few things which are set in stone (the things which relate to health and safety – such as handling tools, fire etc). The majority of the activities could be undertaken in a variety of ways and may have different outcomes for different learners, diversity should be encouraged.





This can be further supported through practicing non-judgemental dialogue. This can feel odd to begin with as judgements and praise are so deeply rooted in our way of speaking, especially to children. Some example non-judgemental sentence starters;

- **“... ..”** – Silence can be a powerful tool, creating space to just be without the need for words. Communication will still occur through body language, eye contact, expression and gestures.
- **“I notice....”** – Making concrete observations without judgement can be a way to open a conversational space. E.g. *“I notice you measured the poles to be equal length and have tied a square lashing to make your shelter”*
- **“I wonder...”** – Pondering things yourself, models a curious mind and also invites learners to share their thoughts and ideas on a subject, without the pressure to answer. E.g. *“I wonder how the worm knows where it is going”*
- **“Thank you...”** – Sharing gratitude for something is a powerful way of acknowledging the choices someone has made, as well as modelling appreciation for life. E.g. *“Thank you for helping coil the ropes, that means I have more time to clean the tools”*



If you accidentally judge a child or praise them, try to be non-judgemental on yourself! It is challenging to re-learn something like this and takes practice! Acceptance and awareness is the first step to conscious change.

## **Working with Behaviour**

*“All behaviour is a form of communication”*

~ Anon

At Forest School we steer away from a rewards (including overt praise) and sanctions based approach, as this is not conducive to the aim of increasing self esteem. We aim for a community based approach (rather than containment), which hinges on mutual respect, trust, honesty and choice. We recognise that this is not possible to do overnight and it is the long term nature of Forest School which enable this process to take place.

At Forest School we recognise that behaviour is a result of emotions and emotions are a result of needs (either those which are met or unmet). Unmet needs trigger emotions such as anger, fear and sadness which then usually result in perceived negative or inappropriate behaviours. At Forest School we aim over time to address not just the behaviour but also the emotions and the needs too.

Within William Glasser's 'Choice Theory' there are 5 basic needs that all humans have and these are the root of all human behaviour (whether they are met or unmet):

- Survival needs (food, shelter, safety etc)
- Love & Belonging (feeling cared for and connected to others)
- Power (feeling competent, significant)
- Freedom (autonomy)
- Fun (play & learning)

At Forest School we aim to provide an environment which meets these needs for the community.

A strategy which may be used within Forest School is Marshall Rosenberg's 'Nonviolent Communication' – a type of dialogue that can be used to share how a situation is making us feel and to find mutually satisfying solutions. It is important to avoid judgement and blame when using this method. It is designed to be clear and honest, allowing the individual to reflect on their behaviour themselves and choose alternative behavioural patterns.

There are 4 stages in the dialogue:

1. Make a non-judgemental observation of the behaviour/thing that is causing an issue (*"When I see/hear....."*)
2. Name how it makes you feel (*"I feel ....."*)
3. Explain why it makes you feel like that, based on your needs (*".....because I need/value....."*)
4. Request an alternative, without demanding or blaming (*"Would you be willing to..."*)

As an example – *"When you wave the knife around, I feel scared as I have a need for my safety and your safety. Would you sheath the knife and put it on the log please?"*

If you are interested in finding out more about theories we have mentioned here, we would recommend taking a look at the following (there is info online and some clips on Youtube):

- Alfie Kohn (written a book called - Punished by Rewards) - [www.alfiekohn.org](http://www.alfiekohn.org)
- Sir Ken Robinson (advocate for creativity in education) - [www.sirkenrobinson.com](http://www.sirkenrobinson.com)
- William Glasser (Developed 'Choice Theory') - [www.wglasser.com](http://www.wglasser.com)
- Nonviolent Communication (developed by Marshall Rosenberg) - [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org) and [www.nonviolentcommunication.com](http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com)

