

Bringing forests to life: The Awyr Iach Project

by Eileen Merriman

'Activities in woodland settings can help shape the minds of children – they learn practical skills that can help them for the rest of their lives'

With forest schools and woodland learning becoming more popular there is a need to provide relevant training opportunities for practitioners. Eileen Merriman details one project that aims to do just that.

WHILE SPENDING time outdoors, a special partnership can develop between staff and children. There is a feeling of camaraderie – you are all in the same position – struggling sometimes to walk up a steep slope, delighting in discovering insects hiding in the folds of tree bark, straining to hear the sound of a busy woodpecker.

As an adult you can feel refreshed at being able to spend time in a healthier environment, it is good for our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. We might suddenly feel that although we have the same responsibilities of looking after the children, we can relax more because they are interested in their surroundings – learning ‘just happens’ naturally without it having to be over-structured.

When the children are calmer (as a result of more time outside and our new-found relaxed state of mind) then we can observe them and get to know them better. We can also learn a great deal from, and with, them. As someone whose eyesight is fading due to age, I am astounded at their powers of perception.

As a result of renewed interest from practitioners in outdoor experiences for children, there is a need for higher-level training. Wales is piloting a new curriculum for children aged between three and seven-years-old – the Foundation Phase – which has outdoor learning as a key feature. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has identified the need for training existing practitioners in understanding the benefits of outdoor experiences.

The WAG also has the environment as a key focus of its policies:

‘Teaching and Learning – all students need to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge base, values and attitudes to be active global citizens in creating a sustainable society’ (Starting To Live Differently report, <http://new.wales.gov.uk>)

Helping children to care for the environment is one of a number of common threads running through the action plan for ‘education for sustainable development and global citizenship’ (ESDGC).

Woodlands are an ideal resource to achieve this aim because the principles of forest school education teach that we need to protect and preserve the environment for future generations.

Activities in woodland settings can help shape the minds of children – they learn to appreciate the beauty and diversity of the forest; they learn practical skills that can help them for the rest of their lives – indeed many of the children in forest school settings go on to share their knowledge of the woods with their parents, in turn creating a new interest

that the whole family can share. Another aim of the above action plan states:

‘All educational establishments adopt a whole-institutional approach to ESDGC’

More and more schools are developing forest school sites in local woodlands to use with their children – this is a simple approach to fulfilling the aims of the WAG’s ESDGC strategy and Jane Davidson’s (minister for education, lifelong learning and skills) vision that ESDGC ‘is built into every aspect of our day-to-day life’

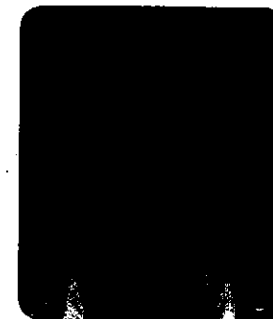
WHAT IS THE AWYR IACH PROJECT?

The project is located at Trinity College, Camarthen, in west Wales. It is ideally situated for access to both the countryside and coast. The college owns its own expanse of farm land and we are currently looking at developing forest school sites actually on the campus itself.

A precise explanation of the Welsh language title ‘Awyr Iach’ is difficult: It literally means ‘healthy air’ but this fails to translate the full meaning because it also encompasses principles of wellbeing.

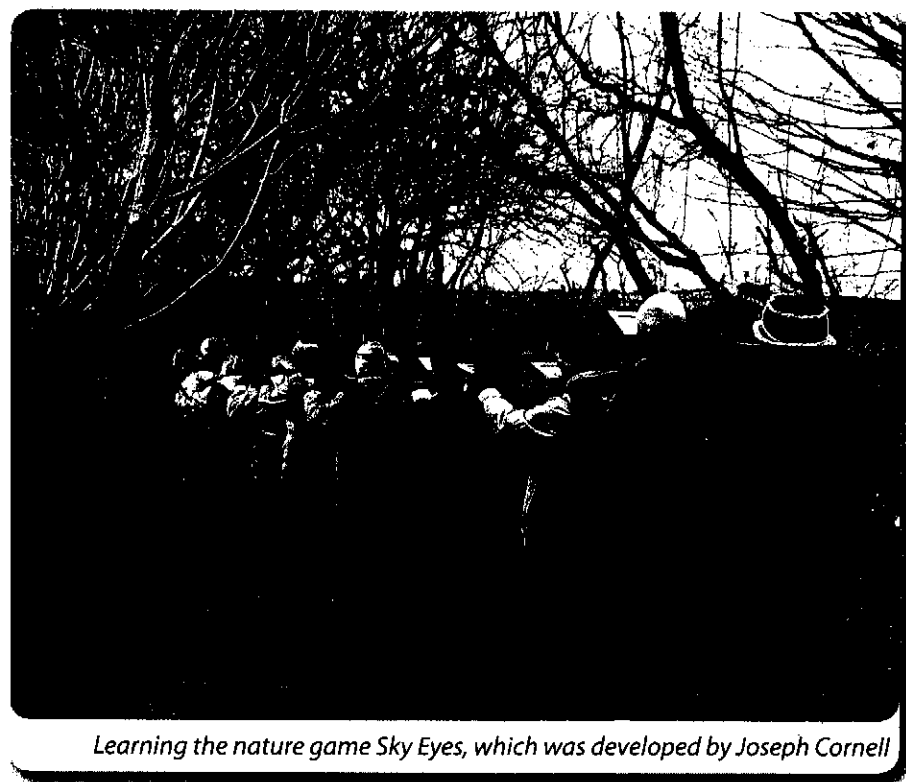
- The aim of the project is to provide a bilingual research and training base for outdoor experiences that meet the holistic needs of learners in Wales.
- The project developed from discussions between Trinity College and Forestry Commission Wales, which identified the opportunities for involving Higher Education Institutions in forest school training and research.
- While current training is available to Level 3, there is a need to offer modules and courses at a higher level. Trinity College, a college within the University of Wales, has the appropriate expertise within its staff, to develop these courses.
- To date, a generic Level 4 module has been written – this relates to the benefits of outdoor experiences to all learners – Awyr Iach is a joint project between various schools at Trinity, including Early Years Education, Youth and Community, Social Inclusion, Outdoor Education and Initial Teacher Training. Future students could work in any of these fields.
- There are plans to develop further modules including Level 7, Masters modules.

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Learning the nature game Sky Eyes, which was developed by Joseph Cornell

WHAT TRAINING IS ON OFFER?

A Level 4 module in Forest School Practice has been validated as part of the BA in Community Development. This module will be available to other courses as an optional choice – if students in the BA Early Years Education, for example, choose it as an optional module, it would be incorporated into their degree programme.

The module could also be offered on a flexible basis for students who work full-time by attending evening or Saturday lectures or via e-learning. The module could take the place of the theoretical part of the forest school leadership training.

Training the Forest School trainers – working with the Open College Network (OCN) Wales Forest School Training Network, we plan to develop a Level 7 Masters module in Forest School Practice, which would upgrade the current level of some of our trainers' qualifications. The college has several relevant Masters courses, such as in Education, Teaching and Learning, Outdoor Education and Early Years Education, for which these specific modules could be counted as options.

There is also provision for continuous professional development and INSET training for practitioners to enhance and develop their skills.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE COLLEGE RELATING TO EARLY YEARS EDUCATION?

Currently, the outdoor campus is used by BA Early Years Education students to build living willow

sculptures, to learn how to erect shelters and to practise nature games.

We also use a local permaculture farm where students are introduced to the principles of sustainability. This has proved to be a spiritual time for many when they understand the beauty of nature for the first time. They discover the usefulness of nature when they make and use their own charcoal. There is also great merriment when they realise that they will be using compost toilets that day, and huge relief when they discover how acceptable they are.

All of our students work in our 48-place day nursery to help develop their garden, where students link with children and staff on projects to create, for example, weaving areas, heuristic baskets, and copper pipe xylophones. This works on several levels: The staff receive informal CPD, the students get realistic opportunities to practice their skills and the children gain by having new experiences.

The modules currently offered that relate specifically to outdoor learning in the early years, include:

- A Level 4 module, entitled 'Language and Outdoor Play' run as part of the 'Higher Education Certificate in Bilingualism and the Welsh language' course.
- A Level 5 module, entitled 'Stepping Out: Learning in the outdoor environment', run as part of the BA in Early Years Education.
- A Level 7 module offered in the MA Early Years Education.
- INSET delivered to individual schools at their request, looking at how they can improve and utilize their outdoor areas.

WHY DO WE NEED THE AWYR IACH PROJECT?

- To provide more Forest School Leaders and Trainers – there is an increased demand for training and a limited supply of trainers currently, particularly those with Welsh language skills.
- To empower those without qualifications – for example, some learning support assistants have the opportunity to gain a Level 4 qualification. As a result of our current students undertaking an outdoor module, they find that they are in a position to lead the school team in the development of the outdoor area.
- Clear links to the Foundation Phase curriculum.
- To offer improved employment prospects – for example, if students leaving teacher training courses could show that they have forest school skills it would make them more attractive to schools that run such programmes.
- To support learners in understanding sustainability.
- Gaps in our present knowledge: There is a real need for more research into the benefits of forest school and the Awyr Iach team has members who are keen to become involved.

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The future

- There will be more modules linked to adapting and using a variety of outdoor settings/environments – looking at how coastal areas can be used for outdoor learning. One local day nursery regularly takes their children to Pembrey Sands where sand sculptures are created from seaweed, pebbles, shells, flotsam and jetsam from the beach (see case study 2).
- Develop opportunities for students studying through the medium of Welsh, including Welsh language and bilingual OCN units.
- Development of Welsh medium forest school provision and assessment, so that students who work in Welsh medium schools can submit their portfolios in Welsh.
- Developing some of the college land to create two forest school sites.
- Working with partners, such as the National Botanic Garden and Aberglasney Gardens to offer sites for student training.
- Developing practical workshops for parents to help them understand, first-hand, how the outdoors can promote all areas of children's development. They hear their children's excitement after forest school sessions – it seems only fair that they can experience it for themselves. These sessions could take the place

of indoor staff-parent socials/fundraisers, where it is often difficult to coax people to come. The fact that you are outdoors makes it more informal and you could charge a small fee to taste the food cooked on the campfire. This could be a way to attract more forest school helpers, perhaps, or perhaps it will generate sufficient interest to start a course.

Case study 1: Training

While establishing the Awyr Iach project, during early discussions with Forestry Commission Wales staff, it was advised that the lecturing team who would be delivering the theoretical modules should also be trained as forest school leaders.

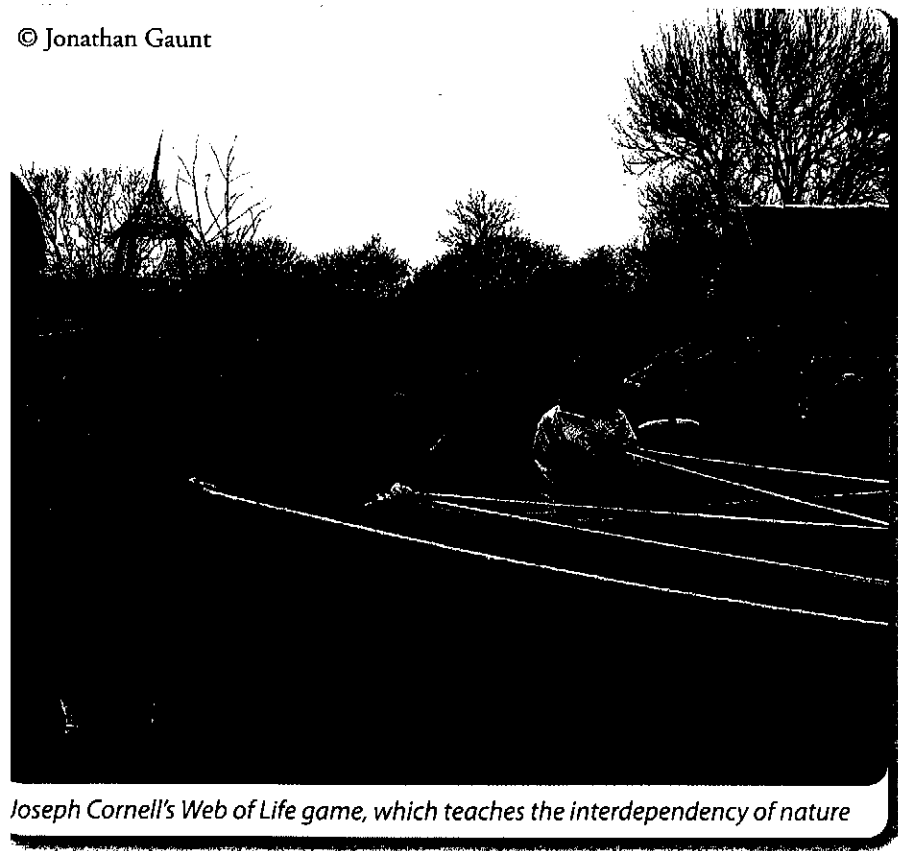
In effect, we will all be 'singing from the same hymn sheet' and conveying the appropriate values as taught by our Forestry Commission trainers. This gives us more credibility with students because we will have the necessary understanding to link practice to theory. It will also benefit the trainers because we might be called upon to support future practical training, particularly if Welsh-speaking trainers or assessors are needed.

WHAT DID THE TRAINING CONSIST OF?

To gain the OCN level 3 Forest School Leadership qualification we were required to undergo the following:

- In September 2006 we joined five school staff members for our initial full week of training, which consisted of a mixture of indoor theory and outdoor practice, including setting up a forest school site at the National Botanic Garden of Wales. We learnt how to sharpen and use tools safely, how to plan activities to promote the holistic development of learners and how to conduct risk assessments.
- This was followed in early January 2007 by two days of intensive practical training outdoors in Brechfa Forest on what must have been the windiest and wettest days of the year! We practised and were assessed at lighting and safely extinguishing campfires (yes, in that weather!); cooking a range of foods on the campfire; erecting shelters; and making useful articles from natural materials, including a wooden mallet.
- A two-day 'first-aid for outdoors' course was attended where we had to consider the remote nature of many outdoor adventure environments – some of us had to re-think previously taught procedures to ensure that a casualty could be brought closer to a rescue point. With forest school, a requirement of setting up a site is that there is an access route for emergency vehicles.
- Compilation of a portfolio of evidence, including our planning, delivery and evaluation of six practical sessions with our chosen client group (in my case, young children). One of these sessions must be

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Joseph Cornell's Web of Life game, which teaches the interdependency of nature

assessed by a forest school trainer who monitors the whole session (for approximately two hours). I am pleased to say that I passed, although if you do not quite manage it the first time, the assessor can return. The following is an extract from my portfolio after completing the sessions with children.

HOW MUCH PLANNING IS INVOLVED FOR A FOREST SCHOOL SESSION?

This is a summative evaluation of planning and leading six sessions with 18 children, aged four and five-years-old, which I undertook during Forest School Leadership training.

A huge amount of time and effort goes into preparing for the sessions and getting all the equipment and the children ready. I was very lucky to be able to train in a setting where staff and children were used to forest school activities, where equipment had already been gathered, policies had been written and children's outdoor clothing had been provided via sponsorship.

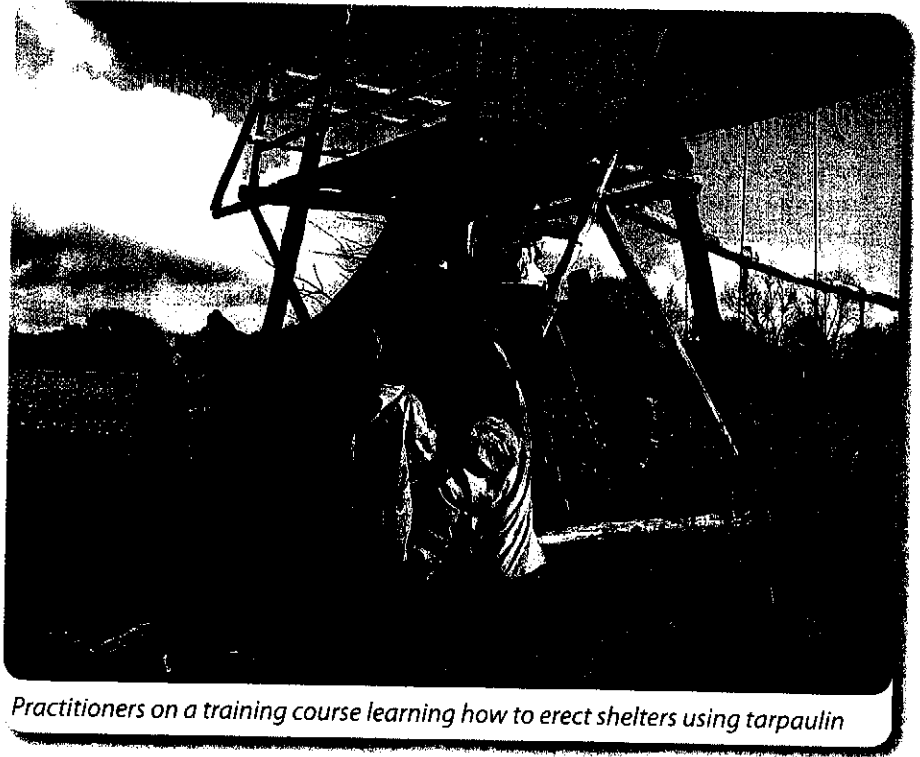
A team spirit is vital among the staff because the leader relies heavily on others, including volunteers, to assist and take the initiative for organising resources and children. I was fortunate to have helpers who were enthusiastic, vigilant to the needs of the children and willing to take part in children's games. Sessions, such as this, reminded me of the huge contribution made by staff – the crucial role of the learning support assistant must never be underestimated.

The preparation of the forest school site is also something that needs much thought. We were using a relatively new site and it took some time before everyone was happy with the seating of the log circle – the height and stability of the logs need to be considered, so that young children are safe and comfortable.

A clear communication strategy between the leader and helpers is essential. This is something that took me a couple of sessions to realise. I had a clear idea of the planned activities and what I hoped the children would gain from them, however, if I did not explain this to the four helpers, the learning experience for the children in their groups might be lessened. A5 papers were distributed to helpers from the third session, with main activities and aims listed to provide guidance.

During training, the weather had a profound effect on how well sessions worked. Yes, it is important to go out in most weathers (strong wind being the main exception, due to the possibility of falling branches), but whether it is cold, wet or sunny can alter everyone's mood, and ability to relax and enjoy the activities.

The first session I led was on a frosty day in January – children's fingers and toes got very chilly despite appropriate clothing and some of them became upset. I was grateful to the class teacher (a trained forest school leader herself) for her guidance



Practitioners on a training course learning how to erect shelters using tarpaulin

on the need to adapt activities to suit the weather – she got the children all following her on a stamping walk to get their body temperature back up.

She also reassured me that it was important to the child's learning that they experience different temperatures – children often do not know what it feels like to be cold because they spend a great deal of time indoors in centrally-heated buildings and most get ferried to school by car or bus. It is also good experience to know that you can warm up afterwards.

I grew to learn the value of free time for children. It happened on one occasion that only half the group were with me at any time due to transport issues, which meant there was plenty of time for free exploration.

My initial thought was 'help! 20 minutes to kill and I have nothing planned', but this was a great experience because it afforded time to really observe what the children were doing. My planning of each session had included time for freedom, but with a goal – 'go where you like in the wood, yet collect sticks to make a nest or moss for bedding'. I learnt that children do not need constant structure – instead, they need more time 'to do their own thing'.

On this occasion, the tiny creatures they found fascinated both them and me – I was learning alongside the children – there was indeed co-construction of learning (woodlice really do fit into the tiniest holes under the bark of rotting branches).

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Children really are fascinating. They have such individual, unique personalities, many are more articulate than we often realise, with a great deal of knowledge about nature

beach, groups go off in different directions, which makes the session more manageable.

The children are transported to each outdoor setting via a coach and a car. The car acts as both the first-aid point and as an emergency vehicle. Each group leader also carries a first-aid kit, which to date has not had to be used.

Many parents were initially reluctant, particularly because this was to be an all-weather project. Concerns included safety and toileting issues. A 'frequently asked questions' sheet was drawn up to try to ease their worries and staff explained that they would pilot the project to see how it progressed.

After a short while, staff noticed an increase in parental demand for Wednesday sessions – word of mouth had spread about the children's enjoyment, including issues about the excitement of the trip in the coach (a novelty for most of these children who travel everywhere by car).

There is now a long waiting list of children who wish to participate in these Wednesdays and indeed the nursery is renowned in the area, with prospective parents phoning up asking whether it is the 'place that takes children out for a whole day' and 'can they put their child's name down!' So, what started as a



Landscape sculpture, created independently by a four-year-old, of his home

There was full involvement (watching minute millipedes in holes of tree trunks) and sustained shared thinking, 'what do you think these spiky leaves will turn into as spring progresses?', 'what might be the name of these jumping insects under this stone?'

When asked to link activities to the topic of 'homes' my immediate thoughts were to plan everything to relate to creatures' homes or homes for people (as in the photograph of a house created by a child as 'landscape sculpture') but as sessions progressed, and signs of spring appeared, the importance of including discussions on flowers, plants and trees became evident. Children's attention was drawn to the fact that the forest is 'home' to these and that they need our protection.

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Forest school research identifies the positive behavioural changes that some children show while in the woodland and I have seen this for myself – a sometimes challenging child can amaze you with their deep interest in what they have discovered and a sensitive child, who found the first two sessions with me (a relative stranger) quite daunting, was able to settle down by week three and spontaneously declare 'this is fun, this is!'

Case study 2: Coastal areas

Setting: Hapus Dyrfa Day Nursery, Burry Port, Llanelli

Co-owner: Sioned Saer (also an Early Years lecturer at Trinity College Camarthen)

Background: The nursery team realised that to begin addressing the requirements of the new Foundation Phase curriculum in Wales, they would need to offer additional outdoor experiences. While the nursery outdoor area was in the process of being redeveloped, an interim plan was put in place – they would take the children to Pembrey Country Park for one day each week. Here they would alternate between one Wednesday spent at the vast expanse of woodland and the following Wednesday at the long, sandy beach.

Practicalities: A maximum of 42 children per day divided thus:

- Age 18-24 months: 6 children maximum.
- Age 2-3 years: 20 children maximum.
- Age 3-4 years: 16 children maximum.

Permission letters were drawn up that included consent for photographs to be taken. A member of staff always goes ahead of the children to conduct a risk assessment and to remove any dangers.

During the winter, children are outdoors from 9 am to 12 noon, then return to nursery for a bowl of cawl (a hearty Welsh broth), freshly made by the nursery cook; at other times of the year, they are outdoors from 9 am to 3 pm. On arrival at the

temporary measure has now become regular practice and has turned into a key marketing feature.

Many of the parents assumed that they would be required to supply buckets and spades for the traditional beach-type activities, however, this was not what Sioned had in mind! They have developed a spontaneous approach instead – no activities are planned in advance – when the first child finds something of interest or declares: 'Look what I've found,' that is when staff start to respond and follow the interest of the children.

The children use the weather to learn from because it is not viewed negatively; creativity and imagination have grown

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO THE CHILDREN?

- Physical development and mental wellbeing: Fresh air and huge open spaces where children can run and explore - compare the outdoor experience to if they stayed at the nursery where they would spend the majority of their time indoors (as many may do at home).
- Cognitive development – geographical awareness: The children have learnt that every path they take from the bus will lead to a specific area, such as to the sand dunes. They have learnt the routes and know what to expect.
- Cognitive development – knowledge and understanding of the world: They have learnt that the sea does not remain constant, that it has tides. As soon as they reach the beach they explore the tide line to search for driftwood, shells and seaweed, which are used either in situ to create sculptures, or to take back to nursery in their little truck to create frames for pictures and mirrors.
- Cognitive development – knowledge and understanding of the world: They have learnt the effects of the weather and if it rains they make rain shadows by lying on the sand. They use the weather to learn from because it is not viewed negatively; children learn about shadows created on a sunny

day and explore how to follow the shade; creativity and imagination have also grown, with children using their own ideas of what they want to make.

- Language and early literacy: Mark making with sticks, patterns; staff create 'learning stories' of the children's experiences – these photographs and captions, which are displayed throughout the nursery, provide opportunities for recalling their adventures and prompt discussion among the children and parents.
- Emotional development: Excitement from exploration – will the tide be in or out? What kind of flotsam and jetsam will we discover today? Relaxation – an hour can pass very quickly because children are entranced and motivated by the open-ended possibilities. Individuals have developed in confidence and independence – initially insecure children are now happy to lead the way to the dunes; they have an eagerness and willingness to explore.
- Parent partnership: The learning stories created by the staff are a useful method of helping parents to understand the philosophy of outdoor education and are providing parents with ideas of what they could be doing with their children at weekends – in this way children's outdoor experiences are extended even more.

Useful resources

- *Sharing Nature with Children* by Joseph Bharat Cornell. Published by Dawn Publications (ISBN: 9781883220730).
- *Nature's Playground* by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield. Published by Frances Lincoln Ltd (ISBN: 9780711224919).
- *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* issued by Health and Safety Executive. Caerphilly (2003).
- *Positive Childhood* by Mildred Masheder. Published by Green Print (ISBN: 9781854250940).
- *Toxic Childhood* by Sue Palmer. Published by Orion Books (ISBN: 9780752880914).
- *Play Policy Implementation Plan* issued by Welsh Assembly Government. February, 2006.
- www.wales.gov.uk – ESGDC Action Plan 2006-9
- www.forestresearch.gov.uk
- www.btcv.org
- www.muddyfaces.co.uk
- www.trinity-cm.ac.uk

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Welsh Assembly Government. *Starting To Live Differently* report
<http://new.wales.gov.uk>

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all the Forest School trainers for guiding my practical skills. I would like to thank the headteacher, staff and volunteer helpers at Stepside School, Kilgetty, Pembrokeshire who allowed me to work with them during my training.

Thanks also go to the parents of the children for making sure that they were suitably dressed for their time in the forest. Most of all I would like to thank the reception class children for letting me get to know them – wonderful personalities, each one. **eye**

Key points

- There is an enormous amount to learn from nature – children and adults can enjoy learning together. Time spent outdoors can enhance the wellbeing of practitioners, not just children
- Active learning in the outdoors has skipped a generation (or two), but renewed realisation of its benefits has created a revival
- While practitioners are engaged in outdoor practical experiences, they may also be gaining a qualification as a direct result of further training/CPD
- By helping children to appreciate nature and preserve woodland areas we are building an understanding of sustainability