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A Year of Forest School

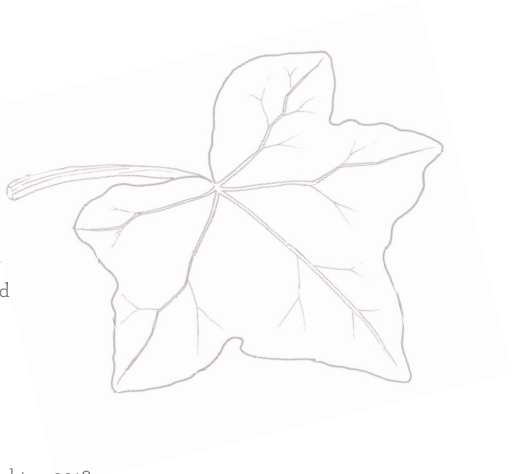
Outdoor Play and Skill-building Fun for Every Season

Jane Worroll & Peter Houghton



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A Year of Forest School
Jane Worroll and Peter Houghton

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

Some activities in this book, for example those involving fire or cutting tools, may be dangerous if instructions are not followed precisely. Always follow manufacturers' instructions when using tools. Wild foods such as berries can be poisonous, so eat only what you can identify as safe. Adults need to assess each child's capabilities and supervise any potentially dangerous activity at all times. Watkins Media Limited, or any other persons who have been involved in working on this publication, cannot accept responsibility for any injury, illness or damages that result from participating in the activities in this book.

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Introduction

Since ancient times, human beings have marked the progress of time by observing the passing of the seasons, each of which deeply influenced their lives, as they still do today for people who work closely with the land. As the months go by, nature offers us all new wonders to remind us of the ever-turning cycle of life, from the transforming magic of the first winter snowfall to the beauty of spring blossom, from the warmth of summer sunlight on the skin to the scrunch of fallen autumn leaves underfoot. These are just some of the joys that nature shares with us, connecting us to the cycles of the Earth as it did for our ancestors.

At our own Forest School groups we see how each season has a rhythm all its own that in turn affects the mood and energy of children and adults alike. After the rush of life that invigorates and awakens us in spring, we feel ourselves slowing down to savour the more relaxed pace of summertime. Autumn, with its shortening days and deepening colours, brings on another change of mood, with all the excitement of kicking leaves; then comes winter, a season of crisp fresh air, running around and wrapping up warm until spring when the cycle begins once again.



Today our modern lives are often estranged from the natural world and what should be an inherent connection may feel more like something we need to rediscover and reclaim. It is well documented that today's children, especially those in developed







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countries, are playing outside far less than their parents and grandparents did. These societal changes are being partly fuelled by a combination of disappearing open spaces, increasing traffic and the lure of indoor technology and virtual reality as well as heightened parental expectations of what a "safe" environment looks like. But while the outdoors may seem like a dangerous option these days, it's a lack of outside activity that is the primary cause of obesity – one of the biggest threats to the health of our children today. This loss of freedom to roam, coupled with the increasing pressures on children such as target-driven school life, 24-hour social media and, for those in the city, cognitive fatigue from constant urban stimulation, has also resulted in serious mental health issues arising among 5–16 year olds.

Most of us instinctively recognize the many ways that being outside in a natural environment can enrich our lives: we might find we sleep more deeply after spending time walking outdoors or notice a lift in mood after breathing in a few lungfuls of fresh air. Studies have highlighted a multitude of health benefits to being outside: sunlight and soil micro-organisms boost the body's levels of serotonin, the chemical linked to feelings of wellbeing, while Vitamin D, essential for bone and muscle health, is also provided by the sun's rays. Running across uneven terrain and climbing trees helps children develop muscle strength and become more coordinated. Mental health professionals also acknowledge the benefits of maintaining a relationship with nature. In ecotherapy, for example, nature has been found to be a restorative influence in the lives of patients who engage, without judgement or artificial time limits, in outdoor activities such as conservation work and







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gardening. Forest School is an inclusive grassroots movement that can help to redress some of the issues affecting our modern-day lives – it aims to connect participants with nature and offers opportunities to develop and grow away from the indoors, busy streets and pervasive technology, which, though not all bad, are now a constant presence in our lives.

WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL?

Forest School is defined by the Forest School Association as "an inspirational process that offers *all* learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees." Forest School sessions are now offered in a huge range of settings from city parks to rural forests, by many different providers including mainstream schools, specialist outdoor kindergartens, holiday and after-school clubs and agencies countering addiction and social exclusion, but all have this in common: they take place in a natural environment where the qualified leader aims to provide a nurturing space that supports the learner's wellbeing. The activities offered provide different experiences that can help foster traits such as resilience, confidence and emotional intelligence that will support the learner throughout their lives. Within this framework the participants are given ownership over their journey to follow their interests and develop their own learning at their own pace.



At Forest School, children run and make a noise, get their hands dirty and are exposed to manageable risk (essential for healthy development). To fully embed learning and develop a sense of

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community, Forest School sessions have a high adult-to-child ratio and take place, with the same group, on a regular, long-term basis.

We use a variety of locations for our own Forest School, and repeated visits make each of these sites familiar to our groups. This helps children feel a sense of belonging and gain confidence by allowing them to get to know each other and the boundaries (both physical and behavioural), as well as where their basic needs can be met – where they will eat and where they can shelter (in dens or under tarps, for example), the location of the toilets and hand-washing facilities. From this basis, interests can be freely followed and deeper learning of practised skills explored and mastered. Unlike tightly regulated and confined school classrooms, the open surroundings of Forest School sites allows children greater personal control over social interactions, as there is freedom for all to move around and consciously choose the space they occupy, which helps relationships build in a more relaxed atmosphere.



Visiting a Forest School throughout the year, groups see how "their" space changes, and they develop an intimate understanding of each season and the effects of the weather on a natural environment. We have noticed how, during the warmer months, the children's attention is always more drawn toward the animals and plants that surround them. In colder months, we find it is the elements that take precedence: they love jumping into and cracking ice-covered puddles, making fire and leaning into strong winds. Each season provides wonderful moments of discovery and interaction that have a positive, lasting effect on every child's sense of belonging and stewardship over the various Forest School sites.

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PLAYING THROUGH THE YEAR

In this book we offer a wide range of Forest School activities to tie in with spring, summer, autumn and winter. In choosing the activities, we were inspired by what nature offers in each season, as well as by the festivities celebrated at different times of year, and, of course, the weather. It's in spring, for example, that brambles are at their most pliable and the nettles start shooting up, so now is the perfect time to make cordage from bramble vines (see page 27) and soup from the tender nettle tips (see page 18). In summer, the intuition game (see page 66) allows children to be still and relax in the heat of the day and get a sense of their intuitive awareness (like that of the creatures all around them); while making and using walking sticks (see page 80) will encourage them to tap into the ease and carefree happiness of being in nature on a warm summer's day. In autumn, children can collect fallen leaves of every hue and make a rainbow from them (see page 114), as well as gather apples and nuts to bake over a fire (see page 120). And winter is a perfect time for observing animal tracks left in snow or mud (see page 144), as well as warming up around a fire and making charcoal sticks for outdoor art (see page 158). From our own Forest School we know how coming together around a fire can create a joyful sense of community and transform what could otherwise be a cold, grey day into a place that's fun and welcoming.





For each season we have also designed a day out that combines a range of activities – energetic games, calmer crafts and social tasks (such as foraging, cooking, fire-making or den-building). This could be used as the basis of a party, playdate or some other type of extended Forest School session.

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BUILDING A SESSION

This book is not a replacement for the full experience of going to Forest School (if your child has not done this already, please do consider trying it out!), but it does offer a taster of some of the wonderful Forest School activities we use. It's written for anyone who wants to spend more time outdoors with the children in their care, whether you are a parent, a guardian, a teacher or a youth worker; we also hope it will be a handy resource for Forest School leaders. Whoever you are, the aim is to emulate a Forest School leader by being fully present, enthusiastic, encouraging, inspiring and observant, helping out with an activity when needed and demonstrating new skills when the time's right, but allowing the learning to be led by the child. A Forest School leader will also reflect on how each session went for each child and encourage children to reflect on their own experiences. This information shapes future sessions with the aim of providing opportunities for each child to grow and develop as a whole – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and socially. Learning outcomes are provided within each activity and may be useful for planning.

Each seasonal chapter offers a range of different activities, some high energy, some requiring more focused participation. The more familiar you become with the activities, the easier it will be to switch between them as needed. For example, you may have a group where not all the children know each other. It is a warm spring day and the energy level is high, so a team game (such as Mammoth, Hunter, Mouse, see page 32) would be a fantastic ice breaker and way to start. Once some of that initial energy has been released, the children's attention can then be turned to crafts, which





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lend themselves well to the warmer seasons. Their nimble fingers could be put to work making a sistrum (see page 36), for example, that can later be used for a group sing-song, further building a sense of trust and community, and shared happy memories for all.



In Forest School, each session has a clear beginning and ending. Before we start, the boundaries of the play area and the rules regarding safety and care for each other and the environment are established with the whole group. We also point out where the toilets are, where food will be kept, where we can wash our hands and shelter. In groups, it can be helpful to sit in a circle during this opening time, taking it in turns to share thoughts and feelings.

You can also use this time to gauge the mood and energy levels of the children before deciding on the most appropriate activity to do first. You can either ask them directly how they feel (especially if you are looking after young children, just one child or a small group) or, with larger numbers (especially older kids), you could suggest they rate their feelings on a scale of 1 to 10. This often encourages children to share their feelings. The same technique can be used at the end of the session, when we like to round off the day by inviting the children to share how they now feel and provide an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences. As well as helping the children to process the day, this encourages them to play an active role in their own learning. And these discussions are a fantastic way of allowing you to gain insight into what worked and what could be adjusted about each activity, providing a valuable guide for future sessions. Remember, however, these are only invitations to share and some children may be too shy at first.



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A BRIEF GUIDE

Before you try out an activity, bear the following points in mind:

- The activities are suitable for a wide age range (from pre-school children up to about the age of 12), with a different level of adult guidance needed for different age groups. Assess the individual capabilities of each child before you start and adjust accordingly.

- For each activity we've suggested a list of kit, but also bring a first-aid kit and hand-cleaning supplies, if not available nearby.

- If an activity requires more than one child to take part, the ideal number is always stated in the activity.

- Activities can take place in all weathers (except high winds in woods), so make sure children have suitable clothes for the weather – waterproof clothing and suitable boots can make the difference between a fun day out and a miserable one!

- Make sure there are enough adults present to allow children to engage in achievable, challenging activities in a safe space.

- Demonstrate any tricky techniques at the start of each activity, then let the children attempt each step, offering positive encouragement, and only assisting if required.

- Let kids work things out for themselves, if they want to. We've designed the step-by-step instructions and diagrams to be as simple and easily grasped as possible.

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Play Safe



Any activity that involves foraging for wild food, tool use or fire does contain an element of risk, but by referring back to the guidelines below as you work through this book and implementing the basic safety procedures outlined, you will be more than ably equipped to avoid any potential mishaps. Above all, the activities in this book are designed to be interactive, educational, inspirational – and fun.

TOOL USE

Whether an adult is using tools alone or children are handling them under adult supervision, follow manufacturers' guidelines and the safety procedures outlined below.

The age at which children are able to use tools under adult supervision varies, so assess each child individually. If you are confident that the child is capable, allow tool use. However, close adult supervision is still required. As a general rule (apart from knife work when one-on-one is advisable), have one adult watching a maximum of four capable older kids and a higher adult-to-child ratio with younger ones for safety.

For extra protection when using tools, a gardening glove can be worn on helper hands but not on the hand holding the tool (as this can lessen the grip). Stress that all tools must go back to an adult when they're no longer being used, at which point they should be stored out of the way with all security catches on as necessary.

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Before embarking on using any tool, ensure a capable adult has demonstrated its use in full to every member of your group following the guide below:

- Tell everyone the name of the tool that they will be using and what it is used for.
- Show everyone the cover (if it has one), how to take it off and put it on or how to open it and close it.
- Show them the handle and the cutting edge of the tool.
- Demonstrate how each tool works.
- Show how best to position hands in order to use it safely and cleanly, and how to carry it safely: covered or closed at your side, with the blade pointing toward the floor, and no running!
- Explain about the safe working zone: this is a circle the diameter of the tool used and the tool user's outstretched arms. If anyone (apart from your partner) comes inside the circle, tool use should stop until the zone is empty again.

How to use a sheath knife

It's worth going over the instructions for a sheath knife in detail, as this is an advanced tool, and is used often in this book. Show the knife to everyone, pointing out the blade cover and handle. Show how, by placing one gloved hand at the tip end of the blade, you are able to pull the cover off and then clip it back on. Once off again,

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point to the blade and its cutting edge. Explain that it is a great tool for carving wood. If possible, sit off the ground, on a stump for example, and with a gloved hand put the wood you are carving to one side of your body. With the knife in the other ungloved hand, cut the wood away from your body. Point out that you always carve away from your body and have no limbs underneath or hands in front of the blade. If sitting cross-legged on the floor, either carve to one side of your body or place elbows on knees and carve away from your body here – again, making sure there are no limbs underneath or in front of the blade. (This technique also works with potato peelers and is good practice as a precursor to knife work.)

FORAGING



Being able to positively identify edible wild foods is vital as many plants are poisonous. Always take a field guide with you or use your smartphone to access a website with pictures of edible plants, and choose to forage wild foods that can be easily identified. Always check if any of your group have any allergies before foraging for wild food, particularly nuts. Always pick wild food away from pollution sources such as roads, dog-walking spots and sprayed farm margins.

Conservation



We share this planet with many species who rely on the natural larder as their only source of food. With this in mind, think sustainably, spread your foraging over as large an area as possible, and never over-harvest or uproot any plant. Follow local regulations about what you can and cannot pick and, if necessary, check with the landowner first.



