

# Adventure into the Woods: Pathways to Forest Schools

By Kelly McKinney

“Go outside and play.” These words from my parents, and parents of another generation, fuelled my abilities for adventure. These words got my brother, my sister, our dog and me out of the house to roam, learn and discover in the woods.

From a socio-economic standpoint, my childhood could be considered disadvantaged. However, I grew up with privileges that are becoming ever more precious, valuable and controlled. When I was young my parents divorced but I feel that positive benefits and experiences happened in nature as a result. Both of my parents moved to houses that backed onto the Red Hill Valley in Hamilton, Ontario. My dad joined a divorce support group where fathers decided to do regular activities together with their kids. We went on picnics in nature every weekend. We gathered regularly at Christie Conservation Area, Confederation Park, Gage Park or the Valley.

As a child I had the ability to roam and adventure in green space. Every day as a child I had the ability to lead myself in the 700 hectares of forest that was my backyard. (In 2007 the Valley was greatly severed by the construction of the Red Hill Expressway).

The ability to explore in nature alone is not a common activity for children today. A telling study from Sheffield, England (Derbyshire, 2007) highlights the way our capitalist, corporate and industrialized societies have limited the roaming abilities of children. Take a moment to reflect on your own “roaming radius” as a child. How far were you allowed to go, or how far did you allow yourself to go, acting as your own guide, making your own decisions and leading yourself on your own adventure? Ask a grandparent or elder how far they could travel as a child and what their landscape looked like.

**“Have you ever heard of Forest Schools?”**

This question was asked of me several years ago by a woman of Latvian heritage, Dr. Astrida

Neimanis; this query initiated a personal learning adventure. I was watching this woman’s children some afternoons after my undergrad and she appreciated that we spent a lot of our time in the forest along Hamilton’s Rail Trail. Before that, I had never heard of forest schools, forest kindergartens or nature preschools, but the idea was instantaneously welcoming, somehow familiar and certainly appealing. (I will use the initials “FS” in referring to forest schools; this primarily relates to specific early years programming for ages two to six).

Subconsciously this question reconnected me to the happy learning and play outside in the forest of my childhood. Her descriptions of forest preschools present in and originating from Scandinavian countries caused yearning within me. From here I began an adventure to become familiar with FS models to learn how to implement them in the urban community that I am part of.

During teacher’s college last year in the Queen’s OEE program, I ventured to the UK for an alternative practicum, taking a Forest School Practitioner Course through Archimedes Training. I will complete the course in May, and I have spoken with people learning about and leading forest schools in several different ways. There is eager conversation about the potential of growing forest schooling in Canada; Carp Ridge Forest Preschool & Forest Kindergarten outside of Ottawa presents an inspiring example.

Definitions of FS can be debated, and practitioners have different expressions to defining what these are. Sara Knight, a Forest School Practitioner and academic researcher in the UK, mentions that at an emotional level, practitioners and participants know what FS is, and because it is so special, people feel very protective of it. “To put into words and try to describe it is to threaten the magic” (Knight, 2009).

### Forest school reconnects children with ability to roam outside in nature.

Imagine a learning environment where children are prepared to be outside for the majority of the day, and where they are entitled to play and make (a majority of) their own decisions. Trained practitioners ensure for safety, considering a variety of factors, to create an environment of trust so children can explore to develop their capacities.

Some cultures mainly fuelled by capitalism have greatly severed connections to nature; many parents and educators can simply not imagine a forest school. In contrast, *friluftsliv* is a term that expresses Scandinavian cultural traditions and legal rights of spending time outdoors with family and friends for recreation but also to restore a personal balance with the aid of nature. Translated the term means, “open air life” and it promotes and preserves that every family has easy access to natural landscapes with a right to roam in them (Knight, 2009).

Unfortunately, I cannot think of a similar, encompassing word in our culture. Fortunately, *friluftsliv* does resonate with the intentions that dominant memories of my early years — experiences that are so powerful in shaping identities, behaviors and attitudes.

Forest schools have gained popularity throughout Europe and the UK. There are schools in other parts of the world that share FS principals, although some might not call themselves a forest school. The FS learning environment happens in a special place. It doesn't necessarily have to be in a forest or wooded area, but it is an outdoor place that is specific for the school and known to participating children as the site for child-led activity, experiential learning, respect for the environment and trust. Play and learning on the site happen on a regular basis but firstly the location has to be assessed for appropriateness of human usage. More children in the UK experience FS in addition to national curriculum throughout the Foundation Stages or elementary years. Participation could happen every day

depending on parents' needs and wants for preschool care. There could be great potential for this type of learning as a part of Ontario's play-based, full-day kindergarten program. However the program happens, it has to occur consistently and at a minimum, kids should participate once a week. When children attend FS in this way, they adapt to the uniqueness of the program and gain comfort in the forest. Practitioners can then make informed assessments about growth and development in children.

I have facilitated an informal FS program with a group of children in a “high-risk,” urban neighbourhood since August 2011. Luckily, we are a short walk to our site. We don't even cross a road to get to a four-acre woodlot owned as city park space. The lot is surrounded by three local schools and 34 acres of sports fields, black walnut trees and a playground.

The first time I encouraged the youth to show me around their neighbourhood forest (although really, I had already thoroughly assessed the forest, contacted the city staff about our presence there and noted some hazards), a young girl, with wide eyes said to me, “We can't go in there; there are killers in there!” I could tell that she was slightly nervous but also curious and excited about the possibility of exploring something new. With the safety that we provided, she quickly forgot her warning and felt confident about adventure.

In a few weeks the kids developed a rapport with the forest that has grown stronger. They became aware of their surroundings, the pathways and obstacles. We organized a community-wide cleanup of the park before leaves began to fall. At “forest school” or “Fridays at the Forest Park,” we share stories and pictures in the soil, we make mini shelters and play our favourite hide-and-seek games. Youth have come to identify, understand and respect the diversity of species that live in the mini forest of their urban environment. These “at-risk” youth are engaged, cooperative, content and honest personalities and their talents have emerged. Even in “bad weather” there is little reluctance to spend time outside.

On days with heavy winds we won't go into the forest, but rather to the open sports field, a perfect atmosphere for kite flying.

**There are many child-led adventures that happen at forest school. Children's and practitioners' experiences are vast and dynamic.**

Activities in FS can include imaginative play, shelter-building, construction and crafts with materials in the environment. Children inquire and learn about species identification and can record and document in a journal. There are hide-and-seek games, scavenger hunts and art in various forms, including visual art, music, storytelling, drama or dance. Depending on experience and setting, practitioners may include fire-building, cooking, wood carving projects and use of tools in everyday FS activities. These same activities are seen as unfathomable for school boards constantly imagining lawsuits and liability issues. But still, introductions to formal curriculum — literacy, math, science, etc. — can be made in all activities and the practitioner can encourage this while keeping activities child-led.

**The early years are a time of natural discovery** when little bodies want to gain greater understanding of their capacities and their environment. Exploring may pose risks, but experienced and trained caregivers/practitioners control harms and mitigate risks in order to maximize learning. Young people form thousands of connections in their brains and bodies during this time. These learning circuits, so tied to emotion, can certainly affect us for our whole lives. Doctors, educators and addictions specialists tell us this and they also tell us that symptoms associated with health disorders can be alleviated with access to relaxing, nourishing green space and exercise.

As a child in the woods and in nature with my family I — and therefore my brain — experienced being happy, smart, brave, intrigued, successful, silly, helpful, cooperative, caring, in awe, encouraging, respectful, lost, confused, capable, creative. I learned how to take appropriate risks. My physical body enjoyed exercise as I learned

how to be speedy, how to balance, climb a tree, cross a river and swing on vines. I formed these connections in my early years in nature and I am able to work from and with such feelings today.

At a very young age, without assistance, I knew how to travel up and down a long, steep, hill. My siblings and I had regular practice ascending and descending because we had to travel on this hill to enter or exit the Valley. (Sadly this place, now only a memory, became an on-ramp for the expressway.) We could travel on the hill if it were totally slick, muddy, slippery or frozen. Legs bent and engaged . . . digging feet in sideways to find their footing. In the last few years, working with urban youth who have little access to the forest, I have come to realize that my body and brain were trained at an early age to be agile. It is initially difficult for some youth to be successful with hill-climbing or hiking because they have not practiced so they might not have strong connections with these actions in their brains. There is a learned technique to walking on ground that is not flat or concrete.

In a classroom setting there is no lesson or grade for "hill climbing," but physical ability and agility are assessed as knowledge. The walls of an early-years classroom greatly restrict children's abilities to roam, learn about their bodies and engage in nature and our communities with our many senses. These are privileges that we have had for thousands of years.

But also, outcomes and studies of preschoolers engaging in forest school do show smooth transitions into classroom settings. A variety of studies and experience from Europe show that children who participate in this type of early-years program have higher retention and success rates with formal curriculum, less occurrence of attention deficit/behavioral disorders and obesity and greater cooperation with classmates. Overall, FS is a place for learning and adventure, to safely test one's boundaries and abilities while continuously building upon new skills and invigorating oneself with quantifiable and often immeasurable knowledge.

A Forest School instructor I spoke with in the UK commented on some critiques of Forest School training bodies. We discussed how some communities have traditionally and continually raised their children outside and in the forest. Why should they be trained or receive a certification to do “preschool” if they have inherently always done this?

But with urbanization and global shifts away from and against nature, so many of us have lost historic abilities to survive in, play in and enjoy the forest, the beach or the wetland, especially as children. For many cultures, colonization has eroded this traditional ability. So there is a need for FS training. Training ensures that participants are protected from the real threats of the forest and that the forest is protected from the threat of human presence. Foresters and practitioners learn to thoroughly and continually assess the environment, looking for hazards and ways to neutralize and avoid human impact. We need to keep an ecological balance of our enjoyed green spaces if we expect to benefit from them in the future.

**Overall, FS presents an opportunity to reconnect with green spaces and a roaming, adventurous, childhood so near becoming extinct.** There are a variety of factors necessary for forest school to happen and varying definitions and implementations of how it can occur. The learning connections that we make in the early years can affect us in formal education settings, in our relationships and in our life. Friluftsliv or regular time in nature such as at forest school would likely alleviate some of the problems associated with my urban area. Kids would at least be more likely to “go outside and play,” providing the opportunity to learn the measurable and immeasurable ways that nature can provide for us.

Additional Benefits of Forest School:

- Increased self-confidence and self-belief for freedom, time and space, to learn, grow and demonstrate independence.
- Increased awareness of the consequences of their actions on other people, peers and adults, to work cooperatively.
- More sophisticated written and spoken language, prompted by children’s sensory experiences at FS.
- A keenness to participate in exploratory learning and play activities; an ability to focus on specific tasks for extended periods of time.
- Improved stamina and gross motor skills through free and easy movement and by making things.
- Increased respect for the environment, interest in natural surroundings; observational improvements.
- Teachers and other adults see children in different settings, which improves their understanding and helps identify learning styles.

(Archimedes Training, 2011)

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