

Layston C of E First School

Forest School Handbook 23-25



Eileen Ballard created this Forest School handbook as part of her Forest School Level 3 training in October 2021, amending the original Forest School handbook from 2013. Eileen Ballard and Susie Betley have reviewed this handbook 2023. It contains an overview of the Layston Forest School, including ethos, policies and procedures and will be reviewed and amended in response to:

- changes to risk assessments, routines and standard procedures as a result of reviewing sessions and programmes
- changes in good practice
- changes in legislation.

All supporting adults with a regular role in Forest School will read this and reviewed in summer term 2025 alongside the FS policy.

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Welcome to Forest School at Layston C of E First School

We are very fortunate at Layston to have our own Wild Wood area at the top of the school fields. Classes and groups from the whole school, Reception to Year 4, enjoy Forest School sessions outdoors each week.



What is Forest School?

Forest School is a long-term outdoor education process that is holistic and learner-led. It allows children to develop through healthy engagement with nature. Children are encouraged to engage in problem solving and self-discovery, all within a natural environment in a hands-on and thoughtful manner. Many topics are cross-curricular and opportunities are given to develop personal skills, which may include risk assessing, climbing, use of tools and collaboration.

We build Forest School on six principles:

- 1. Forest School is a long term, repetitive learning process.*
- 2. Forest School empowers children to take responsibility for their own learning and development.*
- 3. Forest School promotes holistic, individualised learning and development.*
- 4. Forest School offers opportunities for pupils to take supported risks appropriate to their confidence and ability.*
- 5. Forest School is planned and facilitated by a qualified Level 3 Forest School Lead (overseen by the deputy head teacher/MH Lead).*
- 6. Forest School uses a natural outdoor space.*

Our aim

Through Forest School at Layston, we aim to teach children to enjoy spending time in and connecting with nature without leaving a trace that they have been there.

Forest School sessions:

- * Promote the well-being of all children (see Green Therapy section)
- * Increase their knowledge of and respect for nature and sustainability
- * Provide opportunities for holistic development and spiritual connection within beautiful natural surroundings
- * Develop the children's knowledge and proficiencies in Science, Geography, Art and PSHRE for example, as well as developing their linguistic and mathematical abilities through a variety of outdoor learning experiences see **Forest School Curriculum Map**.



*RE in Forest School -
Celebrating Easter with
Christingle activities.*



*Literacy in Forest School -
Reading together.*



*Maths in Forest School -
Spotting and sequencing
Numbers.*



EYFS in Forest School - celebrating Chinese New Year festival.

The Layston Forest School site

Thanks to the foresight of a group of parents more than 60 years ago, an area of native trees was planted near the school. We now enjoy an established Wildwood area at the top of the school field boasting mature cherry, ash, hazel, alder, willow and horse chestnut trees, surrounded by many thriving shrubs and other plants.

Our Wildwood boasts a wildflower meadow, paths through the trees, a fenced off wildlife pond, a large brash pile and a log circle with space for a campfire, in addition to an allotment and a willow tunnel nearby on the school field.

All children are welcomed warmly into the Wildwood during their weekly Forest School sessions.



The benefits of Forest School

From the very first session, Forest School aims to increase each child's self-confidence and independence. These skills are essential for children to maximise their learning in Forest School. The learning happens not in the confines of four walls but in the open natural Wildwood.

Other benefits of regular Forest School sessions include:

- Developing social skills and collaboration
- Developing communication and language skills and increasing awareness of others
 - Increasing understanding and knowledge of nature and sustainability
- Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, through positive engagement and taking more risks
 - Giving children time to reflect on their own learning and have fun
- Giving children time and space to play, play is the natural way that children learn.



Green Therapy

The Forest School Lead, Eileen Ballard, and Mental Health Lead, Susie Betley, have worked together to develop a Green Therapy document (below) to identify the benefits of Forest School in supporting Mental Health and Well-being for both pupils and staff.

'Green Therapy' - the Benefits of Forest School for PSHRE & Mental Health & Well-being Eileen Ballard & Susie Betley Nov 22	
5W2WB - Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Connect with environment through changes in seasons and weather ✓ Observe & explore the Wild Wood environment ✓ Getting muddy, soil is good for the soul ✓ Playing in nature with their friends, talking and sharing ✓ Planting and then cooking food ✓ Forest Art - Andy Goldsworthy ✓ Being exposed to fresh air and sunlight
5W2WB - Take Notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Noticing seasonal changes ✓ Noticing and naming feelings as we try new challenges, developing emotional literacy ✓ Cloud watching/mindfulness - reduces stress and anxiety ✓ https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2022/09/science-secrets-forests-nature-well-being-happiness-anxiety-stress/
5W2WB - Keep Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Experiencing fire - safety around fire, the beauty of fire, cooking with fire ✓ Learning how to risk assess - Is this tree safe to climb? How do I know? ✓ Links to NC/EYFS curriculum - changing seasons, weather, life cycles, identifying habitats, plants, animals (RSPB Big Bird Watch, pond dipping...) ✓ Developing physical skills - gross motor (e.g. balance, walk, jump, climb, saw, swing, dig) and fine motor (e.g. peel, whittle, cut, thread, tie, plant) ✓ Developing personal and social skills through collaboration, cooperation, negotiation, sharing, turn taking, waiting, listening, engaging, building resilience, having a go, and trying things out
5W2WB - Give	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Caring for our environment ✓ Building habitats and beetle banks ✓ Making bird and hedgehog feeders ✓ Sharing with our friends, helping others, cooperating and collaborating
5W2WB - Be Active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Climbing trees ✓ Digging in the allotment ✓ Swinging on swing & in hammock ✓ Making art & crafts ✓ Balancing on logs ✓ Exploring ✓ Brash pile 'trampoline'

The ecological impact

We carefully weigh the impact of Forest School activity on the environment against its benefits. The fully trained Forest School leaders ensure that we sustain each area of the Wildwood carefully, with any negative impacts reduced or mitigated where possible. Layston Forest School strives to be self-sufficient, using local resources for craft activities and varying the location and focus of each session to allow time for nature to regenerate. We leave sticks, stones and leaves from the Wildwood in the wood, to provide homes and food for nature. The fire will be contained in a fire bowl, which will enable the site to be unaltered when extinguished. Children will be educated not to pick up anything that is living without leaders' reflection. Pupils are encouraged not to pick plants. We have a **Three Year Woodland Sustainability Plan** - please see Forest School policy for more details.



A typical Forest School session

The children arrive at school dressed in their Forest School clothing. The Forest School Leaders meet the children at their classroom. Forest School sessions run all year in all types of weather. Time is spent getting prepared, when necessary, dressing in waterproof trousers and jackets (provided by school) and wellington boots. Each week offers new challenges and opportunities. The Forest School Leader places high importance on the cyclical process of careful planning and observation. This feeds into what happens in each session. We take note of children's interests and plan these into future sessions.

As well as helping maintain the school grounds by planting up containers, raking leaves and building the beetle banks, other Forest School activities include:

- Climbing trees • Pond dipping • Building dens • Exploring
- Finding mini-beasts • Building aerial rope walkways • Outdoor games • Storytelling
- Sowing seeds and later in the year harvesting vegetables • Making fires suitable for cooking
- Using tools to complete outdoor crafts.

An important part of Forest School is play. At Layston, we value the importance and benefit of unstructured play, knowing that it supports healthy development, independence, curiosity and a love of learning. The swing and hammock are very popular and encourage children to take turns as well as have fun.

At the end of the Forest School session, the children return to class to change. The waterproof clothing is hung up to dry and wellington boots are swapped for shoes, then the children return to their classroom.

Clothing

The school uniform policy clarifies expectations for all uniform including for Forest School. We cover legs and arms in the Wildwood even in warm weather due the presence of thorns, brambles and nettles. School provide waterproofs and worn when Forest School leaders decide it is appropriate e.g. in wet, cold or muddy conditions. Parents need to apply sunscreen to pupils before school and provide sunhats as necessary in hot weather as well as additional layers of clothing when it is cold. On Forest School days, pupils arrive at school wearing the following clothing:

Warm weather	Cold weather
Plain long-sleeved T-shirt (long sleeved grey T-shirts with school logo are available if desired) Plain dark leggings, lightweight trousers or school green jogging bottoms (no jeans) Stout trainers Sun hat	Plain long-sleeved T-shirt (long sleeved grey T-shirts with school logo are available if desired) Green sweatshirt Plain dark leggings, lightweight trousers or school green jogging bottoms (no jeans) Wellington boots (to be left in school) Clearly named woolly hat and gloves and spare dry socks School coats and any additional layers required

Supervision of pupils

Whenever a Forest School session takes place there will always be a Level 3 qualified leader present as well as at least one other teaching assistant or experienced volunteer. The leader will have up-to-date outdoor first aid training and will be equipped with an emergency first aid kit. Each session will be carefully organised so that there are enough adult helpers to supervise any tool-based work or activities involving risk. The site used for Forest School has good mobile phone signal so that in the event that either the group needs to be contacted or the group needs to contact the school this can take place. In the event of an emergency, school procedures will be followed. Children are encouraged to use the toilet prior to each session. However, there is also easy access to school toilets when needed.



Play

A focus of Forest School pedagogy involves giving children choice and time for unstructured free play. Play means exploring, investigating and using their imagination. We prioritise play during Forest School, as it offers huge benefits to children. Play is a child's natural method of learning.

Rules for behaviour

Forest School follows the expectations for positive pro-social behaviour as laid out in the school's Behaviour policy. High quality relationships are fostered, consistent positive expectations modelled and rigorous, thoughtful planning occurs. Forest School Leaders communicate with Class Teachers before and after each Forest School session, with opportunities for the handover of relevant details regarding the children.

As Forest School is essentially child-led, children are asked how they think they should behave and what rules they feel should be put in place to keep everyone safe. In Forest School agreements are discussed and made concerning aspects of behaviour and safety.

These are a selection of agreements chosen by the children:



- We care for all living things and take particular care of our Wildwood; we do not pick flowers or plants
- We do not eat anything we find ('Don't pick, don't lick, it might make you sick.')
- We stay within the boundaries of the Wildwood during our Forest School session
- When the 'cuckoo call' is heard, we come in quickly and safely to the log circle
- We don't walk through the fire circle, rather we move around the outside of it
- There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes. We agree that we should be dressed appropriately for the weather

• If a child shows persistent difficult or dangerous behaviour in the Wildwood a child may be asked to end their Forest School session early and return to their classroom with an adult. We explain the reason carefully and follow-up discussions take place with all involved at the end of the session as a therapeutic response. Individual Therapeutic Plans (risk reduction plans) can be written if required.

We complete these in consultation with class teacher, child and parent/s.

Communication regarding Forest School

Eileen emails the weekly planning across to all class teachers on a Monday morning. We share basic information with children and adults prior to each session. Children are encouraged to listen carefully to instructions and safety procedures linked to the day's activities. There will always be time for questions from the children. All adults attending will have read a copy of the Forest School handbook.

If an adult cannot attend the session, they must give as much notice as possible. If a replacement cannot be found the session will need to be cancelled due to inadequate adult-child ratios. The Forest School Leader will have a mobile phone for emergency use. Parents will receive reminders and notifications regarding Forest School through Tapestry, email or the school website.

Hazards and risks

As with any natural setting, there are many hazards and risks in the forest. Knowing what these are enables staff and helpers to minimise them so everyone stays safe. Insurance for Forest School activities is included within the school's insurance policy with HCC Insurance.

Hazard	Where it is found	How it is mitigated
Injury from falling deadwood	In the canopy and shrub layer	Site inspection prior to every Forest School session to remove deadwood. Forest not entered during strong winds. Children reminded prior to tree climbing to test branches.
Scratches from thorns and low branches	In the field layer	Thorns and low branches cut back from pathways. Warn everyone by pointing out risky areas. Close supervision.
Sickness or poisoning from eating berries, fruits and flowers	In the field layer	Teach children not to eat anything from the Wildwood 'Don't pick, don't lick, it might make you sick.' Wash hands at handwashing station or on return to class.
Trips, slips and falls	Ground layer	Daily check prior to sessions with removal of obstacles in pathways. Warn children of the dangers. Remind them to look where they are walking or running. Close supervision.
Insect stings	Throughout the forest	Daily check for nests prior to sessions, with verbal warning given to children on avoidance of specific locations.

How and when we assess risks

At the start of the day when there is a Forest School session, the site to be used is visited and a risk assessment is carried out by a fully trained Level 3 Forest School Leader. If the site is deemed unsafe then an alternative site may be used or a school-based activity may be carried out. A decision is always made on the day. General risk assessments for Forest School are completed termly, taking the change of season into consideration. Each activity will also be risk assessed.

See appendices for examples of daily checks, seasonal and activity risk assessments.



Fire

A campfire is a wonderful and memorable part of Forest School. During all campfire activities, the Forest School Leader will ensure that there is a bucket of water next to the fire in case of emergency. The Forest School Leader will have full knowledge of, and will pay regard to the contents of risk assessments relating to lighting a campfire. The Forest School Leader who will be cooking food over the campfire will be responsible for demonstrating how to handle foods safely and hygienically.

Tree climbing

We instruct children on safe tree climbing practice. They are encouraged to climb only within their comfort zone. A maximum of two children will be in any one tree at the same time. An adult supervises any tree climbing.



Use of tools

Tools will be introduced by the forest School leader when they feel it is appropriate taking into consideration the age and development stage of the pupils. They may include palm drills, hammers, bow saws and potato peelers. Tools are kept safely locked in a secure building in the Forest. Forest School leaders maintain the tools and give clear tool talks and demonstrations prior to use. Tools are used safely with a ratio of one adult to one child.



Cooking pancakes on the fire...

Using a palm drill to make holes.



Volunteers

Volunteers who are willing to uphold the Forest School ethos and are DBS checked are very welcome and appreciated. Some tool-based tasks and more risky activities are only possible with a higher adult to pupil ratio.

Forest School Policy

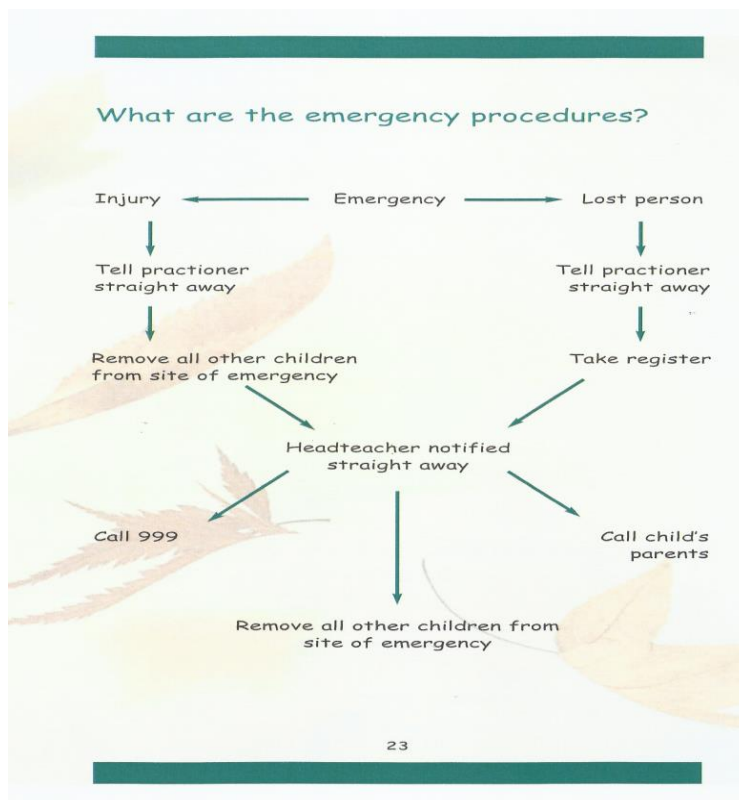
As with any educational establishment there are many policies written to keep children and adults safe. These policies are available on the Layston School website, including our Forest School policy.

Health and Safety

Forest School follows the school Health and Safety and First Aid policies. Level 3 Forest School Leaders hold an updated outdoor paediatric first aid qualification. A first aid kit and accident forms are stored in a secure location within the Wildwood and are easily accessible. Adults record all accidents within the Wildwood on an accident form detailing who observed and dealt with the injury, and the top copy sent home to the parents.

In the event of a head injury, staff carry out observations and record the incident. We phone the school office promptly from the Wildwood so that a text message may be sent home. Depending on the severity of the incident, parents may need to come in to collect the child. Forest School Leaders are aware of all children attending Forest School sessions who have individual health care plans, including the need to carry an adrenaline auto-injector to treat anaphylaxis and those who have any known allergies, or asthma inhalers. See policy for more details.

In the case of a major incident or missing child, we follow the flow chart below:



Safeguarding

Forest School follows the school's Child Protection policy. We aim to make the Wildwood a safe place and a nurturing environment where children can learn. Adults at Forest School observe pupils for outward signs of abuse, changes in behaviour and failure of children to develop. We report any concerns that arise during Forest School sessions promptly to the DSL (Designated Safeguarding Lead) or the Deputy DSLs.

Dealing with a disclosure

We deal with any disclosures made during Forest School promptly and discreetly. Confidentiality will be maintained but staff will not promise secrecy/not to tell anyone, and will explain to the child that they need to tell the DSL (Mrs McMurrrough) as she need to make sure they are safe. Staff always follow the Child Protection policy and the information is passed promptly to the DSL or deputy DSLs in the DSL's absence (Mrs Betley ort Miss Wilcox).

Inclusion

Forest School welcomes all pupils. We aim to use the beautiful natural environment around school to create a stimulating space for learning through a variety of age-appropriate activities. Whilst in Forest School we will ensure that opportunities for learning and development are available to all. Discrimination of any kind is not acceptable, no child or adult will be discriminated due to age, gender, race, religion, background or ability including SEND. We aim for all children to feel appreciated, and welcome their ideas and contributions to Forest School.

In terms of accessibility, the site is a Wildwood and consequently the ground is uneven and rough. We make reasonable adjustments wherever possible to include those with mobility issues.



Complaints

Should you wish to raise a concern regarding Forest School please speak to the Forest School Leader, the class teacher or head teacher, in person, via telephone or email. Please see Complaints policy.

Further information

If you are interested in reading more about Forest Schools, please explore the following links:

<https://www.greenlighttrust.org/>

<https://forestschoollassociation.org/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/oct/31/forest-schools-flourish-as-youngsters-log-off-and-learn-from-nature>

