A Brief History of Forest School

The idea of Forest School originated in Scandinavia, where outdoor living and learning is totally embedded in society. There is a strong belief that nature and movement are essential to a child’s overall development and wellbeing. Most children, through their school years, spend one day per week engaged in learning activities outdoors, appreciating how to care and respect the environment while also looking after themselves and others. The current manifestation of Forest School originated in Sweden in the 1950’s when a retired soldier started to teach children about the natural environment through stories, songs and practical hands on experiences. This idea was adopted by Denmark in the 1980’s as a solution to the lack of buildings available for the number of nursery places required. The philosophy of the Forest School was based upon the desire to provide young children with an education which encouraged appreciation of the wider, natural world and which would encourage responsibility for nature conservation in later life.

Forest School was introduced in the UK, in 1995 when a group of lecturers and nursery nurses from Bridgewater College, Somerset had visited a Danish Forest School. Children freely exploring their environment were seen to grow in confidence, take responsibility for their own learning and show a greater appreciation for the natural world in which they live. These practitioners were so impressed with this ethos/approach and its effect on children that they developed a programme. Forest School has been rapidly developing in the UK, where trained and accredited Forest School leaders devise a learning program tailored to children’s interests and individual needs. Children are allowed to work at their own pace and the repetitive nature and routine that is embedded allows the children to build their confidence and self-esteem. Research has also shown that children with emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties especially benefit from the Forest School approach.