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## Initiatory Exploration of Forest School Programs

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# Initiatory Exploration of Forest School Programs

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**Purpose: To provide an introduction to Forest Schools and to complete further investigation of variables researched by a UTC longitudinal study.**

## What is Forest School?

Forest schools are an alternative approach to education that integrates traditional curricula into outdoor learning (Coates & Primlott-Wilson, 2019). Forest schools are based on a constructivist approach that incorporates more experimentation and problem solving rather than instruction and testing (O'Brien, 2009; Harris, 2017). Learning can be based on collaboration with other peers and team-work or focus on each student's ability to gauge risk and overcome new challenges (Harris, 2017). Forest schools also prioritize safety with the use of low teacher-student ratios (Maynard, 2007).



*A creek for forest school exploration.*

Forest schools also emphasize learner-oriented strategies rather than task-oriented activities (Harris, 2017). Activities include, but are limited to, building dens, starting fires, and using tools to utilize the natural environment (Coates & Primlott-Wilson, 2019). The curriculum that is generally used by forest school programs are fluid, and therefore learner-led so that the children may use their own curiosities of nature to learn (Vogel, 2017). These schools allow for learning in several different subjects and promote students' holistic development (Harris, 2017), which Vogel (2017) explains that social, physical, intellectual, communicational, and spiritual developments are a part of this approach.

## What are the different forms of Forest School?

Forest school programs come in all shapes and sizes. Some programs are integrated into public school classrooms (Coates & Primlott-Wilson, 2019). A forest program in Green Bay, WI has established a public school approach where the program is tuition-free as the state provides funding. This program utilizes purposeful play through in-nature experiences, mainly for the Kindergarten-aged students (Ashmann, 2018).



*A pond for science and wildlife exploration.*

In contrast, some forest school programs are primarily in the form of a private school sector. The Wonderschool ideology offers two different program structures-half day or full day. The half day is from 8am to 12pm, and roughly costs \$1,000 per month, whereas the full day lasts from 8:30am to 3pm, and roughly costs \$2,000 per month. The programs that are highlighted on the Wonderschool webpage are California programs typically for children aged 3 to 5 years old (Vogel, 2017).

## Goals of Forest Schools

Forest schools aim to further develop students' problem-solving and collaboration skills, as well as increase confidence, self-motivation, and self-esteem (Coates & Primlott-Wilson, 2019). A common goal of these programs is to use exploration and imaginative play in nature in order to develop a greater appreciation of the natural world, to therefore improve awareness, reasoning, and observational skills of children during development (Ashmann, 2018). Another goal is to promote and instill pro-environmental attitudes, which might not be offered to children unexposed to forest schools (Maynard, 2007).

## Benefits of Forest Schools

Forest schools promote children's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). In particular, forest schools improve self-confidence, self-regulation skills, gross and fine motor skills, emotional control, collaboration with peers, and creativity and imaginative play (Dell, 2018). Forest schools also increase resiliency by teaching children to adapt and problem solve in new and stressful situations (Vogel, 2017). Children enrolled in forest school programs also exhibited academic improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics compared to same-aged peers (McCree, 2018).

In addition, forest schools facilitate children's language and communication development through practices such as storytelling, listening, and nonverbal communication (O'Brien, 2009; Vogel, 2017). Forest schools also benefit children with special needs by increasing concentration and motivation and decreasing stress (Ashmann, 2018; Harris, 2017). Children with ADHD are able to concentrate better on tasks after being in contact with nature, because outdoor learning decreases stress and increases their motivation to learn (Ashmann, 2018; Harris, 2017). The mother of a special needs daughter described that due to her daughter's involvement with a public forest school in Green Bay, WI, her flexibility, balance, and stamina improved because of the physical activities that took place in the curriculum (Ashmann, 2018).

## Gender Differentiation

Gender differences in activity preferences exist in forest schools (Austin, Knowles, & Sayers, 2013). Boys prefer construction activities, such as making dens, paths, and campfires. Boys also prefer active games including hiding, chasing other peers, and climbing trees. Girls preferred the social aspect of forest school (Austin, Knowles, & Sayers, 2013). Girls enjoyed talking around the campfire or doing activities with friends. They also preferred more creative activities, such as using leaves and branches to make art. Both boys and girls exhibited sadness leaving at the end of the day and a dislike toward being cold and wet, which suggests that there is not a prominent gender difference in dislikes (Austin, Knowles, & Sayer, 2013).



*An indoor classroom for brief class meetings.*



*A student-built teepee out of sticks found in nature.*

## Conclusions

Forest school programs are a unique and advantageous alternative to traditional education. An initiatory exploration of forest schools through previous literature examined the different forms, goals, benefits, and gender differences within forest schools. This project also aimed to explore the social justice aspect of forest schools; however, little to no information was found and future research is needed to address this question. A further limitation is minimal longitudinal research found on special needs benefits of forest school programs.

## References

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