

Developing Forest School and outdoor activities with home educating families

Introduction

There are an estimated 50,000 children in the UK who are educated at home, and in most areas they have no formal provision of activities. The Forest School approach is ideally suited to home educating families as it is based around child led experiential learning. Home educating families have specific circumstances and needs that are distinct from other groups and it is vital to understand and address these needs when running activities. This paper summarises a report on a project providing Forest School sessions to home educating families in mid-Wales in 2009. The report, funded by the Forest Education Initiative (FEI), aims to provide a case study and learning experience for other Forest School practitioners, outdoor educators and home educating families who are considering running such activities with home educating families.



In summer 2008, Forest School practitioners in the Dyfi Valley, mid-Wales, were approached by home educating families to run sessions specifically for home educated children. As a partnership between Mentro Allan, a community project which exists to promote outdoor exercise, several of the home educating parents who formed a group called Outside Education, and the Forest School practitioners, funding was applied for and received from the FEI and Keep Wales Tidy. Along with contributions from Mentro Allan and the participants this enabled the partnership to run a series of six Forest School sessions and two conservation and networking days.

From research, observations and evaluation carried out as part of this project the key characteristics of home educating groups were found to be that:

- there is likely to be a wide age range of participants;
- at least some of the home educating parents will be present in the sessions and;
- some of the participants may not be accustomed to being part of a large group.

Feedback from the sessions

Feedback from the sessions indicated that all of the children and parents who were part of the sessions gained a great deal from the experience. Some comments about the sessions are quoted below:

A photograph of a group of children and adults sitting around a fire in a forest. The scene is outdoors and appears to be a Forest School session. The image is overlaid with several speech bubbles containing feedback comments.

Learning new skills: knots, lashing, string making etc

New friends

Using tools safely

Sense of involvement in ongoing project and group of peers

Watching children enjoy the woods

The storm

Doing things we would not do at home

Confidence and social skills

Dens

Balancing

Watching the children learning and working together

Lovely feeling of peace to take home after a morning outside

Sitting around a lovely fire

To be outside

The space

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Development of the Outside Education group

During and outside of the sessions, the Outside Education group met and formed a strong core group of home educating parents who, motivated by the Forest School sessions and supported by Mentro Allan, worked towards establishing ongoing activities for home educating families. This included developing a regular timetable of activities every 2 weeks and looking into how to fund such activities including using parental contributions and fundraising from other sources. The group applied for funding to run further Forest School sessions and other activities, as well as identifying lower cost provision from other sources such as Wildlife Trust and RSPB. The plan included a reasonable parental contribution of between £2 and £3.75 per session.

Findings from the case study

Several suggestions have been made for meeting the specific needs of home educating families relating to the key characteristics found:

Mixed age groups

A mixed age range is a fundamental part of home educating families groups, as there are usually no other child care options parents will need to bring children of different ages. In this situation the group was split between 1-6 year olds and 7+. However, even within these groups there was considerable range in age, experience and capability. In the case of these sessions group chose a structure which was:

- a younger group, age 1-5yrs, with parents and 1 Forest School leader
- an older group, age 6+ years with parents and 1 Forest School leader
- 1 Forest School assistant who would manage the Forest home, keep the fire going and manage hot drinks and food, and provide fireside activities for the older group.

Other suggestions relating to working with a mixed age group include:

- A choice must be made between providing sessions for mixed age groups or providing activities that are challenging to older children and require more focused attention.
- Ground rules should be set around rough play and older children given the responsibility to model appropriate and safe play to younger children.

Parental involvement in the sessions

Parental presence and involvement is also a fundamental part of working with home educating families. The reasons for this include that parents have made the active choice to have a key role in their children's education, that some children are not comfortable or willing to be part of a group without a parent present, and that group activities with other home educating families are an important source of support and inspiration for parents. Parental involvement in and ownership of activities is also crucial to the ongoing sustainability of a project.

Suggestions for working with parents in the group include:

- Parental involvement in the sessions enriches and expands the possibilities of sessions, giving more adult supervision and bringing ideas and activities to the sessions.
- Parents have different reasons for wanting to be present at the sessions, and it is valuable for the group running sessions to understand what these are and to include parents in the planning and delivery of sessions where appropriate.
- If parents become significantly involved in the sessions they should be given the opportunity to take on the role of volunteer with appropriate insurance and CRB cover.
- There should be the option for children to attend sessions without their parents as for some this is an important part of the experience.

Participants with little experience of working in a group

Some of the participants were not used to being part of a group and didn't want to share thoughts and feelings in circle time or engage in group discussions. However, as the sessions progressed, all of the children participated in practical tasks such as helping to carry equipment in and out of the woods, collecting firewood and group games.

Suggestions for including all participants in the group include:

- Group work should include both verbal experiences, such as circle time and discussion, and practical group tasks such as helping to carry equipment, collect firewood and cooperative games.
- It is important that participants have the option of stepping out of group activities, particularly speaking activities, if they find it uncomfortable, but that they are welcomed to join in at any point if they want to.
- Discussion and explanations should be kept concise and appropriate to the age of the participants.

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