

All about...

outdoor nurseries

Settings based on outdoor learning are growing in popularity – and providing focused, creative provision inspired by their individual environments. *Nicole Weinstein* takes a look at some of the different approaches on offer around the UK and the benefits for children



PHOTOS ON PAGES 19 AND 22 AT LITTLE FOREST FOLK, WIMBLEDON JUSTIN THOMAS

Outdoor nurseries are on the rise across the UK. This year alone, five have opened in London, with another five opening in Scotland, including the third in a social enterprise ‘chain’ of outdoor settings, called Stramash.

Also known as forest kindergartens, nature nurseries or forest pre-schools, no two outdoor nurseries are the same. Some have buildings, others have shelters. Some are semi-nomadic, such as two of the well-established outdoor nurseries like The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery in Fife and the Woodlands Outdoor Kindergartens in

Glasgow, while others stay largely on-site, such as Little Explorers at Highway Farm in Cornwall.

What all have in common is their focus on learning outdoors and the fact that children spend the bulk of their time there – 90 per cent of the day all year round as a rule of thumb.

Forest school, by contrast, is a specific approach to outdoor learning that usually takes place as a series of weekly or fortnightly sessions over a period of time, such as a term. The lead person is also required to have a Level 3 forest school qualification, whereas there is no specialist qualification for working in an outdoor nursery. Nor-

Children spend about 90 per cent of their time out in nature at outdoor nurseries

mal statutory rules apply when it comes to ratios and qualifications.

GROWING POPULARITY

Juliet Robertson, an early years consultant specialising in outdoor learning and founder of Creative STAR Learning Company, has been tracking the growing popularity of these outdoor settings.

Based in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, Ms Robertson says, ‘It’s an exciting time to be in early years education. Outdoor nurseries are not only on the rise – they are here to stay. The evidence of their effectiveness is not just born out of research, but can be ▶

EYFS BEST PRACTICE

seen when visiting a well-run establishment and how engaged and motivated children are. I think it's the dawn of a new way of educating, which is not just environmentally sustainable but about ensuring children have a healthier and more holistic start to formal education.'

She has been struck by the varied backgrounds of the founders of some settings. As examples, she says, 'Cathy Bache, who runs The Secret Garden in Fife, was originally a drama teacher. Woodlands Outdoor Nursery in Glasgow was set up by a physiotherapist parent. Stramash and Highway Farm were originally set up by outdoor educators who became interested in play.'

Practice, too, is varied – and evolving. 'Because no two outdoor nurseries are the same, the evolution seems to be context-specific and meeting the

needs of the children at each nursery,' continues Ms Robertson.

'I also think the outdoor learning is becoming more focused. By this, I mean it's not all about toasting marshmallows and playing with sticks and getting muddy. Outdoor nurseries have moved beyond this sort of stereotype into purposeful active, creative learning establishments.

'For example, this summer, three Swedish trainers, including Siw Linde – who founded the first outdoor "Rain or Shine" nursery in Sweden, are offering training in Wales, England and Scotland based on the Skogsmulle approach, which uses a fantasy character to help children learn about and cherish nature.'

Practitioners are also spreading best practice by networking, particularly through Facebook, sharing ideas and providing informal support. For

'Because no two outdoor nurseries are the same, the evolution seems to be context-specific'

example, there is a Forest Kindergarten Teacher Network.

But there is one grey cloud on the horizon. 'The big concern,' concludes Ms Robertson, 'is whether primary schools are able to build on the positive start made by outdoor nurseries and the totality of this unique way of learning in the early years.'

CASE STUDIES

LITTLE EXPLORERS OUTDOOR PRE-SCHOOL, REDRUTH, CORNWALL

Setting: Private nursery, part of Highway Farm Activity Centre.

Opened: January 2011; activity centre started in April 2006.

Size: 0.6ha (1.5 acres) of field.

Number of children: Sixty on role; each day there are 12 three-year-olds in one timber classroom and 16 four-year-olds in another.

NATURE TO NURTURE, LIVERPOOL

Setting: Private nursery.

Size: 2ha (5 acres).

Opened: September 2014.

Number of children: Sixteen on role.

Time outdoors: Seven hours a day for three days a week and three hours on Fridays.

Ratios: 1:5.

Staff qualifications: All have a Level 3 in childcare and forest school training.

Nature to Nurture is Merseyside's first outdoor nursery, located in Croxteth Country Park in central Liverpool. Although the park is in an area of deprivation, the land itself houses a stately home, a farm, riding stables and a walled garden with allotments and a wide diversity of animal habitats.

Managing director Julie White says, 'We are fortunate to be able to incorporate all of these experiences into the programmes we deliver, so that the children receive a learning experience like no other.'

'The company launched in 2012 and initially started with woodland birthday parties and family sessions and as we moved into 2013



The nursery is based entirely outdoors, with children setting up camp and conducting their own risk assessments each day

we decided to introduce toddler programmes. They are designed to get families with young children out into the woodland and familiar with this type of environment.

'Families are then able to see for themselves the difference in their children's confidence and physical skills. We are completely outdoors with no building and our first winter has most definitely highlighted that there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing.'

'We set up the camp at 8.30am with washing facilities, shelters, a hammock and a tepee. Children undertake their

own safety risk assessment of their play spaces with the staff. They look for broken glass, litter and dog poo and also check that the red and white tape – the boundary – is intact.

'When we are off on walks around the park, they know to move to the side if there is a bike and to cross their arms and look down if there is a loose dog. Parents tell us this awareness of safety has also filtered into their everyday lives as they are always looking for dangers around them.'

'Having limited resources means that the children think more imaginatively and



instead of parents having to entertain them, they are now able to think for themselves and play imaginatively with anything they find.

'On windy days we take the children to museums or art galleries. Last week we watched a daddy longlegs emerge from the larvae. We filmed it and posted it on the online learning journeys. This is nature at its purest.'

Ms White has plans to extend the nursery to full-time provision and is looking to rent out a building on the site.

● www.naturetonurture.co.uk



Opening times: 8am-6pm. Some children stay until 1pm, some until 3.30pm and some for after-school club, which finishes at 6pm.

Time outdoors: 90 per cent of the time, in all weathers.

Ratios: Three-year-olds – 1:6; four-year-olds – 1:8.

Staff qualifications: Six staff; one qualified early years teacher; two qualified to Level 6 management childcare; and three to Level 3.

One thing that sums up the creativity and ingenuity of this outdoor nursery and activity centre is the way that the after-school children arrive at the setting. They cross a field behind their school, climb over the stile and slide down into the nursery field.

I entered the nursery via the slide, which was great fun, and the rest of the visit didn't disappoint. This is a magical place, where I would have loved to have spent time as a child.

The site was once an empty, grass field, but now shrubs, willow and trees have been planted there, creating tunnels, hideaways and sheltered spaces where children can enjoy messy play in the mud kitchens or make dens in the construction area. The first thing that struck me is how 'real' the place felt. There are nettles, gorse, brambles, real tools and some of the climbing equipment has been made by the children themselves, with wooden pallets.

First, I headed for the dedicated area for four- to five-year-olds, which is called Tevi, the Cornish word

meaning 'to grow'. On the way, I passed a group of children engrossed in water play and a Hobbit House, which the children decided to build in the hole where the old trampoline sat.

This is separated from the rest of the site with a gate, and here there is a mud kitchen, a builder's yard, a sand and water area, a fairy and elf garden, a shed named The Bear Lair containing bark chips and marking-making materials, a woodland area with a treehouse, and a dinosaur land. The spaces are cleverly zoned off and there are little, magical areas where children can be out of sight and free to play and learn and be at one with nature.

Maga, which means 'to nurture' in Cornish, is the area for three-year-olds and is laid out in a similar way. The children start and end their day in the two cosy, eco-friendly timber huts and they spend the rest of their days outdoors.

Daily, the children collect eggs from the hens, feed and care for the rabbits and tend to the herbs and plants in the growing area. There are also two sheds kitted out for arts and crafts and tool work.

Co-owner Martin Besford says, 'There are covered areas within our outdoor space to provide shelter from the harsh summer or winter weather. There are sheds that are also open all the time and children often use the resources in them to enhance their role play. For example, if they are playing pirates, they might pop in to make

The Little Explorers site is arranged in separate zones with different themes

'We encourage a sense of wonder, freedom and adventure in life'

a telescope and then take it outside to carry on with their play.'

The nursery has partnerships with schools in Iceland, America, Ireland and recently also in Lithuania, where it has helped support the first outdoor nursery in the country.

The nursery is part of Highway Farm Activity Centre, a private business but also a community interest company, which means that other groups, such as Cornwall's Community Childminding Network, also access the nursery site. Mr Besford says, 'This allows us to apply for funding from the council to buy growing beds, or the new campfire, and to improve the facilities for such groups.'

One thing that stands out at this setting is the staff's confidence and experience in outdoor learning. Mr Besford says, 'No one has a forest school qualification here because that is not what we offer. We run and promote outdoor learning. We deliver training and consultancy to other settings and schools in Cornwall, the UK and now internationally, promoting outdoor learning. The main area people need help with is the campfire element, developing their outdoor spaces and grounds and risk assessment'

Highway Farm received an 'outstanding' from Ofsted in June 2015.

- www.highwayfarm.com
- <http://nosuchthingsasbadweather.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/highway-farm-very-special-place.html>
- <http://creativestartlearning.co.uk/developing-school-grounds-outdoor-spaces/the-hobbit-house-at-highway-farm>

LITTLE FOREST FOLK, WIMBLEDON, SOUTH LONDON

Setting: Private nursery.

Opened: January 2015.

Size: 1.4ha (3.5 acres).

Number of children: Ninety-three children on roll, up to 30 a day, aged from two to five years.

Time outdoors: 90 per cent of the day.

Ratios: 1:4.

Staff qualifications: Eight staff, all Level 3 early years qualified or to degree level; two Level 3 forest school leaders and two staff undergoing Level 3 forest school training.

One of London's first outdoor nurseries offering full-time nursery education from 8am to 6pm, Little ➤



Forest Folk is now planning a major expansion after winning the Big Venture Challenge, a National Lottery award.

Co-owner Leanna Barrett, a trained chef, opened the nursery because she couldn't find any local outdoor nurseries for her own children. 'We started with ten children and we now have 93 children on role,' she explains. 'We're struggling to cope with enquiries, and they are all from word of mouth.'

Each morning, parents drop off their children at the Scout hall near Raynes Park train station, West Wimbledon, and they pick up them at the same place between 4pm and 6pm. The children then make their way to an area within the Fishpond Wood nature reserve at Wimbledon Common, which Little Forest Folk has leased from the council.

This area is fenced off and gated so that no one from the public can enter. Inside, there is a geometric dome in case of really bad weather. Some children also sleep in it. The frame of the dome is up at all times, but the canvas comes off each day.

Ms Barrett says, 'We base the success of our nursery around our children and their families' happiness. We encourage a sense of wonder,

freedom and adventure in life and see our role as merely enhancing their play rather than dictating their learning. We are a child-led, play-based setting where laughter and giggles are the order of the day.

'Our children are permanently active, whether it be running across a meadow, climbing a tree or wriggling under brambles. We love seeing the way their engagement in learning is improved by being permanently in motion. We want to spark their curiosity and encourage their creativity so that the children can learn to become self-motivated, confident, enthusiastic and independent little thinkers.'

'We want them to see the joy in nature and life and love to watch how engrossed they become in their fantasy play with sticks, leaves and stones. We want to teach children how to think, not what to think, and live by the Plutarch quote that "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled".'

'At the end of the day we are parents, keen to create an inspiring experience

for our own and other children. We want them to have the childhood they deserve to have.'

Now, as a winner of the Big Venture Challenge, Little Forest Folk can look to expand its model of provision. An intensive 12-month programme, the challenge helps ambitious social entrepreneurs to raise between £50,000 and £500,000 by providing access to business support and potential investors.

'The award has been invaluable to us,' says Ms Barrett. 'We are getting help in all aspects of the business. We have a venture manager, a marketing expert, are getting legal advice to help with lease agreements, and have ongoing mentoring.'

'There are ambitious plans to open a large number of outdoor nurseries across the country, including in primary schools.'

'However, for now, we are looking at opening two more in the South East by the end of next year. It took us a long time to get opened because we had no registered premises and we had no prior experience of running nurseries.'

● www.littleforestfolk.co.uk

● *Big Venture Challenge*, <https://unltd.org.uk/bvc/entrepreneur>

FOREST KINDERGARTEN, SEVENOAKS, KENT

Setting: Private nursery.

Size: 0.4ha (1 acre) of woodland, set within hundreds of acres of National Trust farmland, woodland and fields.

When it opened: January 2014.

Number of children: Thirty on role; up to 15 each day, aged three to five.

Time spent outdoors: Purely outdoors, 9am-2pm, five days a week.

Ratios: 1:5.

Staff qualifications: Three staff members: one Level 3 forest school leader, one qualified teacher and forest school leader, and one part-time teacher. Three teacher-trained volunteers – one a forest school leader.

Forest Kindergarten is based in Ide Hill, close to the commuter town of Sevenoaks, and families travel for up to an hour to attend. Its only permanent structure is a bell tent, which is used to store a basket of books and occasionally for shelter and rest, as it has lots of cosy cushions and blankets.

Owner Caroline Watts says, 'I previously worked as a forest school leader, providing sessions for local schools and nurseries in Kent, but it



Forest Kindergarten takes its children on walks to explore woodlands, as well as offering learning through creative play

'It's amazing to see how much children learn and flourish when they are immersed in nature'

see how much children learn and flourish when they are immersed in nature.

'They develop and learn creatively and naturally. We see what happens spontaneously and then review what's happened. We bring music-making by making our own drums and sticks; we do a lot of imaginary, explorative play, natural art, and construction around building dens and structures with logs and natural materials.

'We also go on long, wandering walks, exploring the fields, woodland and the farmland, meeting the community on our adventures.

'We incorporate areas of the curriculum like numeracy and language into everyday life, for example, counting at snack time; we make paint out of natural berries and dandelions, and children use the clay from the ground to make models.'

Ms Watts has been so inundated with requests about how to set

became more and more obvious to me that the children wanted to be outside more than a few hours a week. So, I decided to take the forest school back to its roots in Scandinavia and set up an outdoor kindergar-

ten where children could be outdoors all day long, learning where they learn best: through nature, and play.

'In the past 18 months we have gone from five children to 30 and we are full for next year. It's amazing to

CHERRY BLOSSOM PRE-SCHOOL, LEWISHAM, SOUTH EAST LONDON

Setting: Managed by the Pre-School Learning Alliance.

Opened: April 2015.

Number of children: 24 per session.

Time outdoors: 95 per cent of the time.

Ratios: Five staff.

Staff qualifications: All Level 3 in childcare; one forest school Level 3 leader.

After 20 years on a school site, Cherry Blossom Pre-School has recently made the transition from 'indoor' nursery with a heavy focus on outdoor learning to an outdoor nursery in nearby Beckenham Place Park.

Val Pope, executive manager for Pre-School Learning Alliance Lewisham, explains, 'The school wanted to expand so the council found us these premises, as it knew we wanted to focus on outdoor learning.'

The setting's new parkland home is a 'wonderful enclosed space', fenced off, surrounded by mature trees and with a bespoke building set up as a nursery, with an office, kitchen and playrooms. 'But we mainly

use it to store our resources,' says Ms Pope, 'because the children choose to be outdoors all day. Outside, there's a mud kitchen and a forest school site and it's near the river.'

Parents' commitment to outdoor play and a well-planned transition have meant that the majority of families have moved with the setting to its new premises. 'The parents value outdoor education and have been extremely positive about the move,' says Ms Pope. 'It hasn't been difficult to win over parents because we've always been outdoors a lot during the sessions. Now we're just outside the whole day.

'A lot of preparation has gone into the transition. Parents and children are able to access the site easily as it is near a car park and has lots of paths leading to the site. Children also spent a month attending stay-and-play sessions with their parents before attending the setting alone in May. Now parents can see the differences in their children – they are sleeping well, have better

appetites and are calmer.'

But the transition continues. 'Although we operate as an outdoor nursery and are outdoors 95 per cent of the time, we are not yet spending all day in the woodland,' Ms Pope explains.

'We consider this a stepping stone to becoming a fully-fledged outdoor nursery a year from now. We are working within the park to expand what we're offering. Everyone – the parents, the staff and the children – is so enthusiastic about making this happen.'

For those looking to make the same transition, she advises, – 'If you are a bit nervous about going the full hog and opening an outdoor nursery without any indoor base, I would advise taking a more gradual approach as we have, to ease in the parents, children and staff.'

The Lewisham branch of the Pre-School Learning Alliance has a dedicated outdoor learning co-ordinator and an outdoor learning practitioner who are trained in forest school and beach school and



The site is enclosed with a bespoke building on-hand

work with settings across the borough to deliver outdoor learning. They are currently developing River School at the Cherry Blossom site.

September will also see the opening of Camelot Pre-School in Lewisham, also focusing on outdoor learning, and both settings will move towards becoming full outdoor nurseries over the next year.

• www.pre-school.org.uk/lewisham



up an outdoor nursery, the practicalities involved and how to get Ofsted on board that she has set up the Forest Kindergarten Association (www.forestkindergartenassociation.co.uk), a website that aims to bring together outdoor nurseries, share good practice and be the UK voice for forest kindergartens.

She has also set up the Forest School Kindergarten Discussion Group on Facebook, which has more than 500 members across the country and abroad. Forest Kindergarten received an 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection in May 2014.

● www.forest-kindergarten.co.uk

COWGATE UNDER 5S CENTRE, EDINBURGH

Setting: A 57-place council-owned nursery in central Edinburgh.

Size: 10.5ha (26 acre) wild site.

Opened: 2011.

Number of children: Up to 14 children access the site daily, arriving at 10am and returning by 4pm. Children from 18 months old can choose to go.

Time outdoors: All day, 10am-4pm

Ratios: 1:5.

Staff qualifications: Three have forest school, beach school and outdoor training.

Cowgate's outdoor adventures started with forest school sessions on a World Heritage Site plot of land next to Edinburgh Castle and near the nursery, after negotiating access with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The experiences

proved so enriching for the children that the centre decided to set up an all-day outdoor kindergarten.

Centre head Lynn McNair explains: 'The forest school site is a wonderful plot of land and we still use it, but the skills that our children were coming back with were so rich – and we knew they needed more than six-week blocks of play. So, our next move was to set up the dedicated nature kindergarten, which is a 20-minute coach ride away on a site facilitated by Scouts and City of Edinburgh Council. The children call it Stickland and it has proved immensely popular, with a waiting list of 300 and attracting visitors from around the world.'

'Words cannot describe the joy that our children get out of being able to freely explore the site. There's a stream, a forest, an amphitheatre, long wavy grass, a bank to climb up, trees, an open fire pit for cooking, deer in the distance and a heated Mongolian yurt, which we use to regroup, store items or children can access any time they want to rest. We go in all weathers, even high winds. It's a very spiritual place, for children and practitioners.'

'Our whole philosophy is based around the work of Froebel. He introduced the term kindergarten and believed everything can be taught through nature. So, for example, the children explore mathematical concepts by putting sticks in the river to see how deep it and if they can cross, and there's lots of writing in sand.'

'One of the main differences of our nature kindergarten is that our

Cowgate uses a free-flow approach and has much focus on sustaining the environment (above); North London Forest School provides tools such as drills, saws and magnifying glasses for exploration (below and right)

children have a choice over whether or not they want to attend. Another key difference is that we are not prescriptive in what the children can and can't do. We don't impose adult experiences on a child. We are risk-aware, but don't limit how high the children can climb a tree, for example.

'We start from a position of trust in the child's abilities, capabilities and their richness. When they arrive at Stickland, they are asked, "What shall we do today?" rather than being presented with specific experiences that are planned, like they are in forest school. It's a very child-led approach and there's a lot of free-flow play and a lot about sustaining the environment.'

'For us, forest school seems like a distant memory. What we have developed instead is beyond what I thought was possible – and it's thanks to dedicated staff, willing parents and support from the community and council.'

● www.cowgateunder5s.co.uk

NORTH LONDON FOREST SCHOOL NURSERY, LONDON

Setting: Private nursery.

Size: Forest school activities based at Belsize Wood Nature Reserve, a 0.7ha (1.7 acre) wooded area, Camden.

Opened: November 2014.

Number of children: Sixteen children, a mix of two- to four-and-a-half-year-olds.

Time outdoors: All day (8.30am-4pm) from April to November; 50 per cent from November to April, depending on the weather.

Ratios: 1:4.

Staff qualifications: One qualified teacher, a forest school leader





Level 3 and five part-time staff – a qualified teacher, another with a BA in early years, a Level 3 practitioner and two nursery assistants.

North London Forest School is the first outdoor nursery to open in the borough of Camden. Owner Luana Munteanu, who has been running forest school sessions in north London for the past two years and has been a nursery teacher for ten, says that the demand from parents for outdoor learning has ‘rocketed’.

‘The borough has been very supportive and offered us a local site to use during term time. It’s a secure site that is only open to the public at weekends and they let us use a shed nearby to store some essential resources. We also have an indoor registered premises minutes from Hampstead Heath. Before we secured the outdoor site, we used the nursery as a base and spent most of the time in the local woodland. We also use it more during the winter months.’

‘I think that the rise in outdoor nurseries in the capital has a lot to do with the health issues that inner-city children face. We offer the free entitlement and have a mixture of children coming from all backgrounds – from professional families to those who struggle financially.’

Each morning before the children arrive, the nursery staff clear the site of any hazards and set up an area with a

tarpaulin, a picnic area, a tent where children can rest and a toilet tent. Resources such as a mud kitchen to engage children in imaginative play, spades, cameras, magnifying glasses, string, storybooks and factual books about wildlife and plants, tools, like drills and saws, are also provided. The area has a pond, which has tadpoles in spring – useful for learning about life-cycles, as are the birds when they lay their eggs, and the children often find chicks, dead or alive.

In the nature area, there are logs, trees, slopes to climb and slide on, and a sensory garden rich in wildlife. There are designated areas for specific activities – for example, a digging area, a climbing area and drumming area, a den-making area, a shrub tunnel, a small meadow where children can observe butterflies and an area where children can collect berries.

The children are free to move around the different areas accompanied by an adult. They are encouraged and reminded to ask an adult to accompany them on their ‘journeys’ around the nature reserve. The adults communicate with each other using walkie-talkies.

‘In terms of risk,’ explains Ms Munteanu, ‘we control the main hazards by removing dangerous objects like glass, and teach the children to be careful with nettles and spiky thorns and not to put things in their mouth.’

‘There are cones around the pond



MORE INFORMATION

- ‘All about... forest schools’, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1151422/eyfs-best-practice-all-about-forest-schools
- *Dirty Teaching: a beginner’s guide to learning outdoors*, Juliet Robertson (2014), Independent Thinking Press
- The Secret Garden in Fife, www.secretgardenoutdoor-nursery.co.uk
- The Stramash chain of outdoor nurseries, www.stramash.org.uk/info/outdoor-nursery
- Woodlands Outdoor Kindergarten in Glasgow, <http://woodlandoutdoorkindergartens.com>

and around the areas that they are not allowed to walk on, such as newly planted beds and wildlife habitats. All children wear high-visibility bibs and there is an emergency procedure where they go to the nearest member of staff if they hear the whistle.

‘We help them understand the concept of being safe, but at the same time develop their own inner feeling of how to keep safe. If they have bumps or falls they are comforted, encouraged and supported to become resilient. This environment fits in well with the characteristics of effective learning. It offers opportunities for the children to become active learners, to think for themselves, to develop initiative, to create games and play with what is available, and to develop close relationships.’

‘In terms of keeping a record of the children’s development and plan from what we observe, we use iPhones to take photos of the children daily and we upload them to the online parents system to keep the parents informed about learning.’

● www.nlforestschoolnursery.com/about-us/4585538573 ■

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