

**THE OUTDOOR APPROACH - LEARNING,
LISTENING AND LAUGHING
BY JAMES KITNEY**

Hello, my name is James. Firstly, I want to thank you for taking time out of your day, juggling (what for many can feel like) the frantic and distracting mediums of everyday life. But, perhaps the title of this blog 'The Outdoor Approach' has drawn you in to wanting to discover more. I hope my words, memories and reflections can leave you feeling something – inspiration, direction, a sense of comfort or even something as simple as to make you smile.

A little bit about me:

I guess you could say my journey started way back in 2009, embarking on a thrilling (slightly scary) journey into university. Now, I know what you're thinking, it must have been a course in Childcare, Environmental Studies or something so directly related like Outdoor Education but no, for me it was Dance, Theatre and Professional Practice. This course allowed me to truly discover myself, provide time to steadily grow but also flourish and become firm in my beliefs. It also allowed me to teach, share and listen to others and understand their way of doing things. Graduation came and I was ready to tackle and take on the world! What's that quote again... 'dance like nobody is watching' well, that was me!

Years had passed, jobs came and gone and although I was happy and steady, something was missing.





Missing my friends and connections made in the West Midlands during my time at University, I reached out to a very dear friend who was a Headteacher at a small Primary School and just like that I became a Learning Support Assistant. I spent many happy years at this setting, helping children develop, discover and enjoy their learning experiences. Some 6/7 years later and a new opportunity arose, the chance to train and become a Forest School Leader. For days, I tossed and turned, battling the pros and cons in my head. I had no need to be ambitious or seek another challenge but I thought what the heck and gave it a go. I was absolutely ready and genuinely feeling quite excited by this next chapter in my life but unfortunately Covid struck. A most terrible and turbulent time for us all and without delving too much into it, I do think it's important to state that I struggled, both mentally and physically. I hope for all of you reading this that through such a dark time, you were able to find something of light and love. For me, it was my Forest School training. My reignition and joy of the outdoors.

I feel like a little boy again:

The training was exciting and engaging, we had no time for pleasantries, formalities and to showcase who we were and what we knew, it was all about getting stuck in and being hands on. We had to work together, go back to basics, use the environment around us, adapting and adjusting to its constant change and unpredictability. Honestly, I felt like a little boy again, the big open world and my adventures awaits!



If there's one thing most of us are guilty of, it's growing up. Soon, memories of my childhood came rushing back. From, sitting in puddles, climbing trees, conker collecting with my parents and sister, pooh sticks on an old rickety bridge and even just long welly walks, followed by a cup of delicious hot choc. Sounds great, right?



Here I was, training and learning again. I had the opportunity to revisit and relive these moments but more importantly, it was a chance to share and give it to others. So, this was it, training completed and off I went. Sessions started off structured and with lots of direction, meticulous planning, organisation and with an overall goal to achieve. Yes, all very important and the pinnacle of educational and development learning needs but what about the children - can we be led by them? Whilst still having the fundamentals, being safe, having a plan, following rules and setting out to achieve a goal, I took moments to listen, follow the child's lead and be willing to adapt.

The power, beauty and impact of the great outdoors

Ofsted encourages to make good use of outdoor learning and to include evidence of it in their inspections. Ofsted believes that outdoor learning can: Improve learning, motivation, personal development, improve behaviour, address educational inequality and tackle social mobility. (Gov.uk)

If we relate this to the benefits of outdoor learning and principles of Forest School: Healthier bodies, minds, environment, future and communities.

My approach still has the rudiments of forest school, my title is a Forest School Leader but for me, I consider myself to be an outdoor facilitator. I offer the chance for children, young people and adults to simply be themselves, feel comfortable, safe and just experience. We should never disregard the notion of routine, I stress the importance of being free and for sessions to have a sense of flow and not be regimented. However, routine can offer a sense of grounding and instinctively make us feel secure in where we are. For me, its not just about being in the space. The getting ready is just as important. Showing your face, offering a warm welcome and sharing that ritual with the children is key. Throwing on our coats, zipping up our suits, squeezing into our wellies; the gear to make us feel ready for the challenge ahead. If we're dressed suitably then nothing can stop us! The children can also begin to make connections to the weather and seasons, different clothing for different occasions. Already we've established a foundation and so, our minds and bodies are mentally and physically ready for the next step. Journeying together to the site, you are a collective, a body of beings, ready to tackle the space together.

As we enter the space, the children are buzzing and brimming with excitement. It's absolutely wonderful to witness such elation from something you've helped to shift and mould. We all start seated on a log around a 'fire circle' and it is a place of familiarity and stature. We never sit on the same log for no log is special or identified as being a possession. Here we begin what I have created and called 'sticktastic' time. Making sounds, creating music and singing have always brought such uplift and happiness in my life. Through 'sticktastic' time or what we call getting 'sticky' presents an opportunity to be expressive, be heard and have a voice and in doing so boost confidence and reveal an understanding of creating something special together. Not to mention it encourages us to use sounds, exercise vital muscles in our mouth and tongue and give a sense of rhythm, rhyme and timing. After a few rounds of classic nursery rhymes, songs I've created and even ones in different languages, we end with our very own 'Welcome to Forest School' song. Perhaps you can create one with your groups too.



Straight away we begin our exploration of the outdoors, navigating and noticing what is around us by way of playing a game. 'Blend In' is our absolute favourite and grants the children (and adults) enough time to 'blend in' with their surroundings. Already our imagination is sprung into action, can we be a tree, the floor, a log or part of our forest hut. It gives them a chance to be still, silent and be absorbed in whatever it is they are being.

Every time we play, we notice something new, something different. By starting with a game, it introduces a playful and more relaxed presence into our learning.



Already, in the space of 10/15 minutes we have established routine, been vocal and encouraged to use our body and voice, brought a sense of play and being physical and we've only just begun. Next, we're onto our activity, our objective for the day. Yes, I do have a plan, the plan is created and there for record but it is just one ingredient of many in this 'broth of learning'. We may have a story to tell, create something from natural items, indulge in culinary mastery over in the mud kitchen, step, jump, crawl and shift over obstacles and much more but the one thing we have to do and will always remain absolute in my practice and ethos is... enjoying it.

Let's take a moment...

A close-up photograph showing a person's hands, wearing a green long-sleeved shirt, holding a small, dark, oval-shaped beetle. The beetle is positioned in the center of the palms, facing towards the fingers. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting with a wooden log and some greenery.

I'm not saying that being outdoors is better but I invite you to go outside now, have a look around, plant your feet firmly on the ground, take a deep breath in and breathe out. Let Mother Nature take you to where you need to be.