

Blog

December 2025

Caroline Crew, Childminder

Fingers, Feet, Sticks and Mud

INTRODUCTION

Caroline Crew is a childminder with nearly 19 years of experience, a qualified sleep practitioner, and a Level 3 Forest School practitioner in training. With a background in outdoor education, Caroline brings a unique blend of professional insight and practical know-how to early years education. Her ethos is rooted in Forest School principles, and she's currently transitioning her provision in to 2.5 acres of woodland to further enrich her practice.

Caroline is a qualified EYSENCO and believes passionately in the benefits of outdoor physicality for neurodivergent learners and all children with SEND. Caroline recognises that for those children who, for example, have ADHD, a physical curriculum is the key to highly aspirational learning.

If you are an early years practitioner and you've wondered whether you can take your practice beyond the confines of your home or a church hall, this blog is for you.



Caroline Crew
Childminder



WHAT DOES OUTDOOR LEARNING AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT LOOK LIKE FOR CAROLINE?

“In our setting, we’re out all the time in the woods,” Caroline explains. “We use public parks and woodland spaces to encourage independence and physical development.” Her approach is child-led, allowing children to explore, climb, and create without adult limitations. “We’re not helicoptering them,” she says. “We let them figure out when they’re ready.”



Caroline believes that this open-ended approach is more likely to be effective when children are given time and space to develop their physical skills naturally. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), physical development in the early years is closely linked to self-regulation and resilience—skills that Caroline’s children demonstrate daily (EEF, 2021). Through a physical outdoor curriculum, children can naturally employ their own creativity and collaborate happily with each other. Caroline recalls a recent adventure:

‘Sometimes we’ll just have a walk and stop in a woodland place where the children are happy to just play with sticks. We give them the time and space to make up their own little games. The other day, I just took two plastic cauldrons with me and the children went finding acorns and beach husks. And then they were making potions and finding sticks for broomsticks.’

Caroline reflects on how gross and fine motor skills are seamlessly integrated into woodland play, as children can move from climbing a tree or swinging in a hammock, to using spray bottles and mud painting.

Caroline’s practice supports children to engage in rich, physical and imaginative play that builds coordination and creativity. “Even our nine-month-old is commando crawling through leaves,” she laughs. The EEF highlights that high-quality early years environments should offer opportunities for physical exploration and problem-solving (EEF, 2021). Caroline’s setting exemplifies this, with children learning to trust their bodies and make decisions independently.



WHAT ABOUT THE PARENTS

Parent buy-in is crucial. Caroline notes, “At first, some parents worry, but once they see the benefits, for example, raised immunity, increased vitamin D and higher levels of resilience, they’re 100% in.” Ensuring that children are equipped with waterproofs and wellies, supports the children’s safe explorations and enables parents to see the impact of appropriate outdoor clothing.

Children in Caroline’s care show increased independence and resilience. “They don’t need directing all the time,” she says. “They’re better in the woods than at home.” This aligns with research showing that outdoor learning can improve focus, emotional regulation, and social skills.

WHAT'S STOPPING YOU?

Caroline’s message is clear: “Don’t be afraid. Go out and try it. Let the children take the lead.” She recalls a practitioner asking, “Are we allowed to just go out and set these things up?” Her response: “Who’s stopping you?”

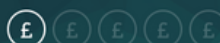
If you’re a childminder or early years practitioner, you too can consider taking your learning outdoors. Start small—visit a local park, bring some mud kitchen equipment, or let children simply explore sticks and leaves. Equip yourself with waterproofs and boots and let go of the fear. As Caroline says, “Why be in a church hall when you can be outside in the woods?”

REFERENCES

Physical development approaches

Moderate impact for very low cost based on very limited evidence

Implementation cost ?



Evidence strength ?



Impact (months) ?



Self-regulation strategies

Moderate impact for very low cost based on very limited evidence

Implementation cost ?



Evidence strength ?



Impact (months) ?



[Education Endowment Foundation \(2021\) Physical Development Approaches.](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/physical-development-approaches) Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/physical-development-approaches> (Accessed: 15 December 2025).



[Education Endowment Foundation \(2021\) Self-Regulation Strategies.](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/self-regulation-strategies) Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/self-regulation-strategies> (Accessed: 15 December 2025).