

# Exploring the effectiveness of ‘Forest School’ on the health and development of pre-school aged children

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## About the research

Young children spend far less time in natural environments than they did in the past. This is largely due to changes in the socio-cultural and political climate of the UK. Forest School is one approach to reconnecting children with nature, in the context of these changes.

Forest School is an educational practice, emerging from Scandinavia, that aims to immerse children in a woodland environment for the benefit of their holistic development.

The aim of this research was to conduct a literature review of the current evidence base on the effectiveness of Forest School on health and development indicators of pre-school aged children. The project also considered the accessibility of Forest School, including who accesses the programme and the barriers to accessing Forest School. The work was supplemented by the views of practitioners and stakeholders involved in Forest School.

Eleven studies were included in the review. Studies were of both an empirical and anecdotal nature. Studies showed an association between children engaging in Forest School and cognitive, social and emotional development.



## Implications for policy and practice

- Forest School has the potential to offer a creative and innovative solution to public health problems.
- To maximise the benefits of Forest School, the principles and philosophy of Forest School should be followed as closely as possible. For example, Forest School is a child-centred practice so time should be given in Forest School for unstructured play.
- Practitioners should follow a ‘self-appraisal’ methodology so that they can evaluate the effectiveness of their own practice.
- Parents should be engaged and involved with the Forest School process and should have the opportunity to attend at least one session. This way Forest School can encourage families to lead a healthy lifestyle, filled with opportunities for learning.
- Forest School should work alongside schools so that sessions can be planned in accordance to the needs of particular children.
- Much work needs to be done to determine the accessibility of Forest School. Forest School is a promising intervention but if it is not accessible by all then it will exacerbate social inequalities.

## About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

This project is funded by/ supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (Grant Reference Number PD-SPH-2015-10025). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.



**Key findings**

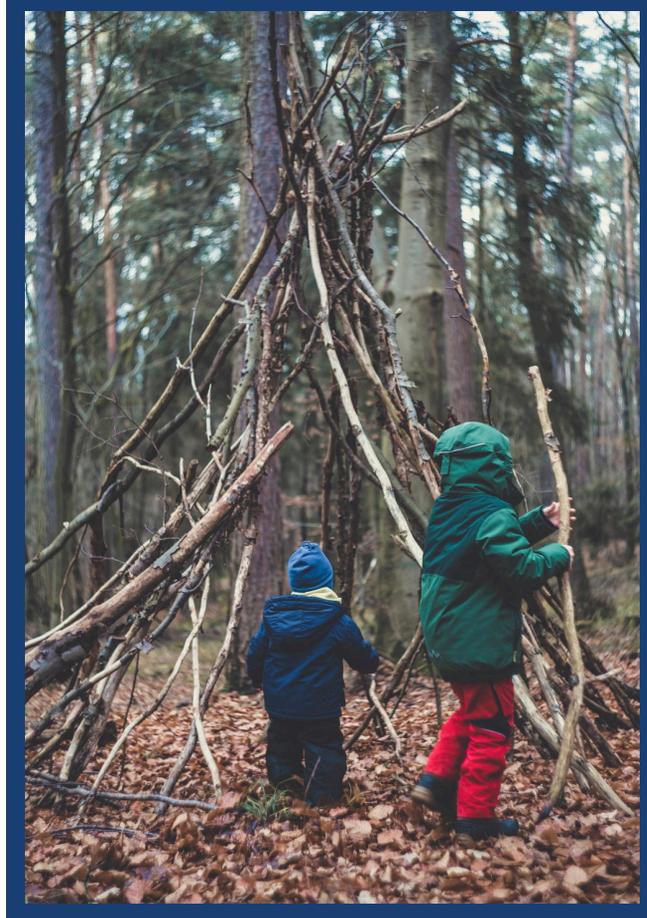
Forest School is effective at improving the holistic development of pre-school children. The studies included in this review showed that Forest School was related to improvements in:

- Social and emotional skills, including: developing children’s confidence, independence, self-esteem, and team work.
- Language and communication skills
- Cognitive development including: creativity and imagination, problem solving, and decision making
- Awareness of the environment, for example asking questions on where puddles come from and why they disappear.
- Academic achievement

There was no evidence on the impact of Forest School on physical activity levels of pre-school aged children.

None of the included studies explicitly discussed accessibility to Forest School, and very few studies provided demographics of the included children. There was, however, evidence to suggest that Forest Schools take place across multiple regions of the UK.

It is evident through the literature and discussions with practitioners that more work needs to be done to improve access to Forest School, especially for children in urban areas, disadvantaged children and children of ethnic minorities. When funding and provision is in place for these groups, research has shown Forest School is effectively engaged with.

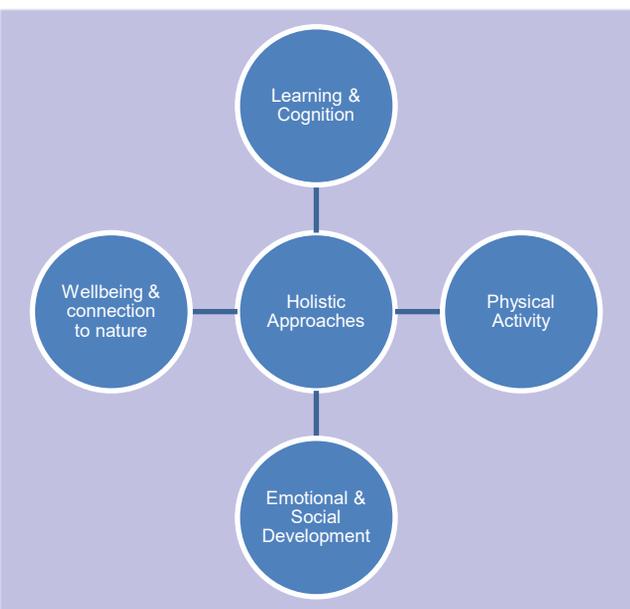


**Further information**

This work forms part of the [NIHR School for Public Health Research's](#) work on [children, young people and families](#).

**Contact the researchers**

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