



Forest School and Nature-Based Education

An Exploration Into “Home”

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Forest School is an educational approach that has existed worldwide since the late 1950s, with over 10,000 Forest School programs in the United Kingdom alone. In Forest School, children spend anywhere from a half day to a full day outdoors in various urban and near-urban parks, natural spaces adjacent to or on school grounds, or natural playgrounds and outdoor classrooms. Thus, children attending these programs have the opportunity to learn in a natural environment on a regular basis.

Forest School is both a pedagogical approach and a program of delivery. Although the approach has many different names (Nature Kindergarten, Outdoor School, Waldkindergarten, Rain or Shine School, etc.), two main features separate it from other outdoor and environmental education programs. While it can be a part-time or full-time program, and can take place in a variety of contexts and environments, with varying age groups, and in different climates, all these programs provide *regular and repeated access to a natural space*, as well as *child-directed, emergent, and inquiry-based learning*. The key aspect of the approach is that children have opportunities to build an ongoing relationship with the land, to a dedicated educator, to one another, and to themselves through this educational lens.

The activities that happen in Forest School also vary, depending on the season, climate, and landscape; what animals may have visited the night before; what trees have blown down in the wind; what provocations the educator elicits; what tools and loose parts are available for building and creating; what children are attending the program and how long they've been together as a group; and, most important, what interests the children. Sometimes, children will work independently, finding solace in their own world and their creations and ponderings. Other times, children will work collaboratively to create something, problem solve, support one another, and dream of a bigger and better world. Forest Schools are often described as a “magical” thing to witness, as they are often a working model of collaboration, communication, trust building, and consensus building.

To paint a picture of a typical day in a Forest School, I invite you into the forest in Huntsville, Ontario, Canada, where a vibrant group of students and teachers play, learn, and explore. They are building a foundation for lifelong learning and a strong connection to the land, becoming future stewards of the earth that they will inherit. Petra Eperjesi, kindergarten teacher and founder of the Outdoor Kindergarten, documents a season's worth of defining and exploring "Home" through a child-directed, community- and place-based lens.

The concept of "Home" is a large one. What constitutes a home? Is it a place where we sleep or a place where we belong? Is it a place where we gather with family and friends, or a solitary space to find refuge from the world? Is it a structure with angles, windows, walls, and special features? Through the experience of constructing shelters, little homes in the forest, children have the opportunity to get their hands dirty in the experience of building while also philosophizing about some of these broader questions. Through this process, the children learn to consider the natural environment as their "Home," as a place where they feel comfortable, a place they will live in, and a place that they will care for long into the future.

A Seasonal Exploration of "Home": Shelters and Teepees at Tawingo Outdoor Kindergarten

October and November in Outdoor Kindergarten at Tawingo were entirely devoted to our inquiry into homes and shelters. As we all know, kids love to build forts! In fact, David Sobel identifies fort building as one of the seven modes of play common to children around the world. The homes and shelters inquiry theme arose out of this interest in forts and special places.

During the summer, I started to think about how the inquiry might work—where we could start and where the children might take it. In my experience, inquiry at the kindergarten level works really well when it is project-based. I find that the production of something concrete (though not prescribed) gives shape and lends momentum to the inquiry process for very young children. With that in mind, I connected with some of my colleagues who also use inquiry-based teaching with their students. Jessica Lindsay-Sonkin, a kindergarten teacher at Albert College in Belleville, Ontario, mentioned that she had previously issued this challenge to her students: Can you build a shelter under which you can all fit?

We issued that same challenge to our students, the K-pals (ages 3-5), at the beginning of October. They accepted the challenge with excitement and were eager to start building right away. This was our first great

learning moment—builders cannot just jump in without a plan! We also learned about finding the delicate balance between action/experience and reflection necessary for rich inquiry.

Over the course of the next two months, we went on a "location scouting mission" to find our building site, which we proposed to our parent architects for their "evaluation." They inspired us to do a site drawing based on close observation.

Just before Thanksgiving, we met with a representative from Habitat for Humanity, who showed us how they build houses, and let us try on some safety equipment! We then made "Welcome Home" signs and cards for future Habitat families.

After we established the building site for our shelter, we focused on the building materials we would be using, and designed and carried out experiments to determine whether mud would make a strong foundation, and what combination of sticks, leaves, grass, and pine needles made for a more weather-resistant roof.

We built mini shelters for imaginary creatures, explored a group of caves—shelters for animals—on a hike, and read many books about building and architecture, including a series of books about aboriginal homes, such as wigwams and teepees. We discussed the various shapes we saw in those types of structures, and then met with a parent engineer. The parent taught us about the strength of triangles and arches, and led us on a hunt for a flat roof around the Tawingo property. We only found one, and, indeed, that was the only roof in danger of caving in!

Ultimately, the K-pals decided that their structure should be a teepee. With the help of some more parents and other Tawingo staff members (who had experience building teepees, in fact), we were able to measure 15 teepee poles (one for each K-pal), work together to drag the poles to the building site, and erect the initial tripod frame. We then added the support poles, cut an enormous tarp into the semi-circular "skin," and wrapped the

teepee. The last step was to spread straw over the floor of the teepee, and anchor the "skin" with "stick stitches."

Working on the teepee has provided so many rich learning opportunities, right up to the very end. Much of the learning was anticipated, but we also made some surprise connections (the best kind), including one to aboriginal art. A parent suggested that we invite the K-pals to paint the teepee, which led us to investigate with the students how teepees were traditionally painted. We learned that the walls of teepees were usually covered by images of things that were important to the people living inside. The K-pals then planned what they would paint by drawing pictures of what is important to them—their families, the sun, and the teepee itself!

We brought our shelters inquiry to a close with a big celebration—a Tee Pee Tea Party!—to which we invited all the special people who helped in its construction. This was an enjoyable and satisfying ending to a fulfilling learning exploration.

