

# Defining Forest School

## Part 1- Why visit the same land many times

by Sonja Lukassen, Lead Educator of Ottawa Forest and Nature School

One of the essential principles of Forest School is that children have the opportunity to visit the same natural space many times. We hope for at least 6 times, we strive for even more.

I've had a number of people suggest that if we decreased the number of visits for each group that more groups would be able to take part. Why not 3 visits? Then we could double the number of public school classes we work with. Lots of children have a really great time and form strong memories by going on field trips for one day. Why not offer the Forest School approach of interest-led, risky, outdoor play for one day only? Imagine the number of children we would be able to work with.



Waiting patiently for fish to bite.

These arguments are true. I have fond memories of one day visits to natural spaces as a child. I remember the smell of the rain in the mud, the feel of the sun on my back, the sound of the grasshoppers jumping around. I know wonderful people who offer one day, outdoor programming to school children. Some of it is directly, explicitly linked to curriculum, some of it isn't. I know educators who ensure that their classes' field trips are always outdoors, rain or shine or snow. I love that. My children love that. We all need for this type of programming to continue, to increase, to happen more, in all kinds of weather.

The Forest School Approach strives for something a bit different. A simple answer to the question of why we insist on regular and repeated visits to the same space is that

we hope that children (and the adults who accompany them) will form a relationship with, and feel a connection to, the land. Doing that takes time.



We've all experienced the joy of meeting a new wild space, be it a field, forest, or shoreline, for the first time. The fun of following unfamiliar trails, of discovering nooks and crannies, of getting to know a climbing tree, of picking the perfect place to build a fort, and then building it.

What a great feeling, then, to be able to return to the same space, to reconnect with that tree or that fort, to realize that the unknown trail now feels comfortable and familiar.



A favourite jacket-hanging spot.

Regular visits offer the children who are more hesitant and unsure the chance to sink in. I recently spent 6 consecutive Wednesdays with 6 year olds in nearby-nature. We met at school, dressed for the weather, and walked to nearby green space to explore, play and learn (oh, the learning that is constantly going on!). One boy spent the whole first day watching his peers. He stood and watched, followed and watched, sat and ate and watched.

The second day he joined them in climbing “the tree”. From the tree he noticed a hefty log below, jumped down, and flipped the log over. Then he did it again. And again. And again. His actions fascinated some classmates so they joined him. A lot of dead wood got flipped over that day.



*A search for worms.*

The next week he started his time in the forest by flipping logs. One friend noticed that there were critters under and near the logs- worms, centipedes, potato bugs, snails. He started collecting worms in a basket and making a habitat for them. This inspired the original log-flipper to also collect specimens. He gathered worms on a curved, broken piece of bark. He covered the worms with soil and carried them around. When he sat to eat, the wormy bark sat beside him. When he flipped more logs, the wormy bark was right beside him. At the end of our forest time this child mindfully chose a friendly spot to leave the wormy bark.



*A few of the “tools” we offer to help inspire and deepen play.*

The next week we knew what additional tools to bring to inspire and support this discovery. With bug jars, magnifying glasses, and field guides in a basket, this child and 2 friends set off investigating, flipping logs, gathering specimens, inspecting them, and trying to identify them.

This play continued throughout all 6 of our sessions, and many other children came in and out of this discovery as they witnessed the passion and determination of the log-flipper and his friends.

These children cared about the worms and snails. This boy now knows the smell of wet spring soil, the feel of it between his fingers and under his nails. He knows the difference between a red wiggler and an earthworm, is on the lookout for millipedes. I

am certain this child watches the snails climb up and down the sides of the aquarium in his classroom, that he is mindful of the worms on the sidewalk when he walks home in the rain. The boys now know where to find information to help learn more about these creepy crawlie creatures, if they choose to seek it out.



It is a gift as an educator to be able to say to a group of children, “We’ll be back. It’s time to leave now, but we will be back.” It is a pleasure to be able to say at the start of a day, “What do you want to do today? Do you want to continue with your play from last week, or would you like to try something new?” It is a delight when a child says, “Remember how hard it was to climb that tree the first day? I think it’s easy now.” or “There was so much snow and ice here when we started, and now there are leaves on the trees. This is same land but it is so different.”

This land is no longer just the place where the distant trees grow and a neighbour walks their dog. It has become their play land, and they care about it and it's creatures. They have a relationship with it. That took time.

