

Forest schools in Canada: What are they and what are the benefits?^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Forest school sounds like a strange concept: a band of Lost Boys-like children cavorting around the woods perhaps, or more realistically, a school for learning forestry techniques. But forest schools are actually a European concept around early education that's gaining traction across Canada, even in parts of the country with less-than-hospitable weather.

To put it simply, forest schools take the learning outside: children do a lot of the activities they might do in regular childcare or an early education environment, but they do them all outdoors. The open-ended play and learning that are key features of a lot of modern daycares and pre-schools happens outside, where kids can learn by counting mushrooms, observing plants, or lifting up rocks just to see what's living underneath them.

The areas of focus for forest schools are ones that most parents would agree are valuable. Kids are encouraged, through interaction with nature, to learn and develop socially; to be physically active and emotionally fit; to develop self-confidence; to learn respect for their neighbourhoods and environments; and to enjoy nature in safe and age-appropriate ways.

Forest schools began in Denmark in the 1950s and have been around as a formal concept since 1993, and now there is a growing body of research that backs them up as a legitimate and valuable learning environment for kids. So what are some of the benefits for children?

Confidence

Having the ability to explore freely outside — within a controlled environment, and under the supervision of educational professionals — lets kids learn at their own pace and explore as they are comfortable.

Children also get experience in both being self-sufficient and working as part of a team. Research from 2006 found that outdoor play can help children develop self-confidence, among other benefits.

Sensory development

It's hard to avoid engaging your senses when you're outside — especially in Canada. Kids get the opportunity to not only observe nature with their eyes but to really engage with it, with all their senses.

Sensory play is important for childhood brain development and helps children develop and make sense of their relationships to the world around them.

Physical skills

In addition to simply spending a lot of time outside, kids in forest schools typically spend their days in environments that provide a lot of varied and natural opportunities to move their bodies in different ways.

They might climb logs, for example, or crouch down to explore things on the ground. One literature review found that time outside supports healthy development for children.

Creativity and problem solving

This is another benefit that makes sense. Children allowed to explore freely, in ever-changing natural environments, are going to have to get creative with play and use their problem-solving skills to deal with weather, natural barriers, and other factors of the outdoors.

But there is research here as well, including a 2005 study that found that play in nature is important for children in developing their capacity to solve problems, be creative, and grow intellectually.

Forest schools are increasingly an option across Canada, including in places where you might think the weather would make them unpopular.

Programs can run anywhere from \$25 for one class to \$600 for a semester to \$100 per week for a four-month program.

Here are a few from across the country, though a quick online search will bring up more options near you.

Maplewood Forest School: This forest school, located in Guelph, Ont., runs forest school programs through schools in the general area. Maplewood is the first forest school in Canada to offer programs for both pre-school and school-aged children, and its year-round activities link to several parts of the official Ontario school curriculum.

Common Digs Forest School [3]: Associated with Forest School Canada and the U.K.'s Forest School Association, this Calgary, Alta. forest school provides an educational experience based on Alberta's provincial framework for early learning and childcare, in woodland and wetland environments.

Alderwood House School [4]: Southern British Columbia's climate is a friendly one for outdoor childcare and education, and this Richmond program caters to children from infancy on up. Its infant program gets even the youngest kids outside regularly.

Wild Island Forest Programs [5]: St. John's, N.L., a windy and wet city, doesn't seem like an ideal place for a forest school, but Wild Island's kids go outside in all kinds of weather — and like it. An elementary-aged school environment is currently in development, as well.

For more information on forest schools, visit **Forest School Canada** [6] via the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada.

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