

Forest schools end cotton-wool culture for children

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Outdoor "forest" schools, a popular fixture in Scandinavian education for decades, are taking root in Britain in a backlash against the culture of mollycoddling.

Children at forest schools spend the entire day outside whatever the weather, climbing trees, playing in ponds or outdoor dens learning to deal with the risks they present. Supporters say it makes children more confident, imaginative and ready to start proper school when the times comes.

In Denmark and Sweden, they are part of mainstream state education system, with 10 per cent of schools following the model.

One Nordic-style forest school has already opened in Britain. The Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery in Fife offers year-round outdoor play complete with "wild toileting".

But a nursery and after-school club in Liverpool has developed a new "natural play" model that it believes can be taken up by nurseries and junior schools in both urban and rural areas.

Sandfield Natural Play Centre lets children roam around in a few acres of

land, playing, eating their meals and even taking their naps outside.

It has just been awarded an "outstanding" rating by Ofsted and been named 'Nursery of the Year' by the National Day Nurseries Association.

Suzanne Scott, 44, bought the nursery, which is set on six acres of land, when it was a conventional indoor-play centre. Despite having no formal early-years training, she felt compelled to transform it.

She visited Denmark and was amazed by the forest schools there. "I was overwhelmed. I couldn't get over the feeling that it was the right way to go, to give the children the freedom to be out all day, sliding down mudhills, pond-dipping and climbing trees and warming up by the fire pit, with all those elements of risk," she told *The Times*.

"When we first started and just had a few plastic climbing frames it was a challenge to get the children to go outside at all in the winter. Now we can't get them back in at the end of the day."

She admits it was a challenge to convince some parents, who were worried about their children getting continual colds, having accidents or coming home covered in mud.



BETHANY CLARKE FOR THE TIMES

Children exploring the outdoors at Sandfield Natural Play Centre in Liverpool

"What persuaded them in the end was the children. Even in the early days the children were coming home and saying how much fun they had and how they couldn't wait to come back the next day."

There are literacy lessons to confirm to the early-years curriculum, but they generally use what is outside, such as sticks in sand, to draw letters.

Moves by the Government this week may make it easier for children in mainstream nurseries to spend more time outdoors. It has slimmed down the Early Years Foundation Stage to just 17 goals from 69, which means a lot less paperwork for staff.

Catherine Prisk, head of Play England, said she expected many more nurseries and junior schools to embrace all or parts of this new model. British parents were slowly becoming aware of the lack of spontaneous fun in their young children's lives, she said.

"The thing that really resonates with parents is memories of their own playing. They want their children to have the same experiences. If a child is given only a safe environment to play in, they will create their own risks. If they are presented with something more risky, they take more care," she said.