

St Ronan's Primary Woodland play

Local authority

Scottish Borders

Roll and type

340 - Primary and nursery

Timescale

1 year

“They
can be
children again
and it’s just
great to see
that”





“It’s liberating.. they are out of the classroom, out of the traditional playground situation and can be children again” sums up the benefits staff have noticed after opening the large strip of mature woodland that runs along one edge of the school. Others benefits include better cooperation, the ability to “shout and run wild”, support for quiet children in making friends and the ability to “express themselves”.

Before the project the woods were used for structured activities including nature trails, forest schools, and shared play sessions with twinned classes. The size, location on the periphery of the grounds and proximity to a main road however meant that they had never been opened up for free play at break times. By taking it slowly and trialling free play during class time with additional support from the teachers they are working towards this as their goal.

After observation of and consultation with the children it was decided that they did not need to make any major changes to the area and that all children - even those they thought may need support - were actively engaged with the resources available.

Two overlapping circles, one green and one orange, containing text. The green circle is on the left and the orange circle is on the right. They overlap in the middle.

“I like making obstacles for bugs”

Top tip
Take time to trial ideas first

This approach, of concentrating on changing practice over changing the grounds has brought to light the importance of good communication with everyone who uses the woodland – both in and out of school.

The school discussed the need to leave small trees/branches removed for regular maintenance with the local authority. They are now left as open ended resources instead of being removed to be chipped off site.

Larger trees were used by the Community Justice Team to repair the nature trail and create an official entrance. This not only allows for access in all weathers and reduces erosion but provides a natural boundary to demarcate where children are allowed to play – away from the road, fences and car park. In addition they repaired and created new seats for a whole class, small groups and individuals, natural play features such as a balance beam, climbing pyramid and a bespoke A frame to encourage large scale den building.

The school's play policy will be part of information given to community users of the wood outwith school hours such as race organisers or after school clubs. The importance of this was highlighted after organisers of a local race, unaware of the climbing value of low level branches, removed these along the route. Future routes can be designed with this in mind!

Specialist visiting staff such as the visual impairment service are kept informed to enable them to give specialist advice to improve access.

Top tip

Ensure everyone knows about your ethos and aims.

“they grow in confidence in their abilities”



The woodland is very popular and adds to the rich variety of environments the children have access to throughout the day. The woods provide the pupils with an opportunity to work and interact with each other in a different way. Staff have been surprised at the high levels of engagement and imaginative play – with a group of boys “furiously building a den” showing high levels of cooperation on a task that would have been difficult to replicate in a classroom. In addition supervisors have seen children who find it hard to interact with their peers in other situations grow in confidence. They have something to keep themselves occupied if they choose to play on their own but the woods provide a “far bigger opportunity... to find a way in” and join in with games. The children access the woods on a rota – with one class being in the woods for a whole week at a time to ensure enough time to games, and dens to develop.

The school have a number of plans to increase the access to the woodland for free play and hope to recruit an additional supervisor for the area and train all supervisors in forest school techniques.

“You can do a lot of things, there is not just one thing you can do in it”



Grounds
for
Learning

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