

## Woodland Play

An evaluation of GfL's Woodland Play project work with 6 primary schools



21<sup>st</sup> Feb 2012

Grounds for Learning, c/o KSB, Wallace House, 17-21 Maxwell Place, Stirling. FK8 1JU

T:: 01786 477190

W:: [www.gflscotland.org](http://www.gflscotland.org)

W:: [gfl@lfl.org.uk](mailto:gfl@lfl.org.uk)

# Contents

Contents.....	1
1. Introduction .....	2
2. Project Summary.....	2
3. Report Structure .....	3
4. Are children’s lives enriched? .....	3
Summary .....	3
Social skills & Behaviour.....	4
Peace and quiet .....	5
Creativity and imagination.....	5
Enjoying school and playtime .....	6
Risk and Confidence.....	6
Physical Activity .....	7
Learning .....	7
5. Does children’s appreciation and understanding of woodlands increase?.....	7
6. Do children become more confident to explore and enjoy other local woodlands with their families and friends?.....	9
7. Is woodland play a practical option for schools that have woodland in or adjacent to their grounds. ....	10
7.1 Support from Parents.....	10
7.2 Support from Playground Supervisors / Teachers .....	12
7.3 Support from Pupils .....	12
8. Will other schools be inspired to offer woodland play? .....	13

# 1. Introduction

Across the UK, schools are re-discovering the importance of play and its ability to impact on some of the most significant aspects of child development.

They're also discovering that natural environments and materials offer some of the richest play opportunities.

While many schools are now developing their playgrounds to provide these 'natural play' spaces, hundreds of schools already have access to a wonderful, but un-used, woodland playground right on their doorstep.

The aim of our Woodland Play project was to find out how woodlands in or adjacent to schools could be made accessible for regular play. With support from Inspiring Scotland and the Forestry Commission, we embarked on a 2-year project with 6 Scottish primary schools that recognised the potential of their woodlands for play but who needed help to turn their aspirations into reality.

This report summarises the approach we took, the lessons we learned and the impact of these projects on children and schools. It is supplemented by 3 other key evaluation resources:

- A [short film](#), which tells the story of 3 of these schools
- A short case study for each school, available [here](#)
- A [Woodland Play booklet](#), which summarises the practical lessons learned by the project schools for the benefit of other schools that are interested in this approach.

## 2. Project Summary

We began by visiting 6 schools across Scotland that were already using their neighbouring woodland for regular break-time play to learn more about how they were making this possible.

Between March 2010 and Dec 2011, we worked with 6 other primary schools spread across East Dunbartonshire, Edinburgh, The Borders and South Lanarkshire. Schools received the following support:

- GfL staff time: to facilitate planning sessions, carry out staff training and provide ongoing advice and project management support.
- £3000 to pay for woodland work, external staff training and play materials / resources.

### 3. Report Structure

The rest of this report is structured by reporting progress against the 6 anticipated project outcomes described below.

<b>Short Term</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Around 1500 children in 6 primary schools will have new and regular experiences of woodland play during their break times.</li><li>• Children’s lives will be enriched in diverse and complex ways, including; opportunities for creativity, imagination, socialising, relaxing, enjoying nature and being more active.</li></ul>
<b>Medium Term</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children’s appreciation and understanding of woodlands will increase.</li><li>• Children will be more confident to explore and enjoy other local woodlands with their families and friends.</li></ul>
<b>Long Term</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Other schools that have woodland in or adjacent to their grounds will be inspired to offer woodland play and have access to a range of practical solutions and ideas to help them do this.</li><li>• Woodland play will be established as a practical option for schools that have woodland in or adjacent to their grounds.</li></ul>

### 4. Are children’s lives enriched?

Our methodology was based on collecting feedback from children, parents, teachers and playground supervisors on how they felt about the new woodland play experiences. This was collected through workshops, film, supervisor log books and short questionnaires. Quotes from this range of material are presented to below to illustrate the different kinds of benefits for children.

#### Summary

In summary, the feedback indicates that this kind of regular free play in the school woodlands benefits children in significant ways:

- Developing social skills and encouraging pro-social behaviours
- Giving children times and places for ‘peace and quiet’ – away from the business and noise of regular school life.
- Fostering greater creativity in play
- Helping children to enjoy nature. There seem to be 3 themes here: developing their understanding of nature, developing an emotional connection with nature and getting involved in stewardship of nature.

- Parents suggest that for some children, the woodland play experience in school has developed into greater interest in the outdoors out of school. In some cases, parents reported that this change encouraged greater family use of the outdoors.
- Encouraging greater physical and social confidence
- Providing different opportunities for physical activity, especially important for children who don't enjoy sport.
- Using the woodland for play has helped some schools to make more use of the woodland as a stimulating learning resource during class time.
- And finally, giving children experiences that they really enjoy, which impacts positively on their emotional wellbeing and general attitude to school life.

## Social skills & Behaviour

Our surveys suggest that boys and girls both enjoy woodland play in equal measure.

Children are taking on different roles from the traditional playground. **Head teacher**

Children who are not always part of a group find it easier to be included in the woods. **Teacher.**

Disputes over moving sticks sometimes have required a negotiation. **Supervisor.**

They have learned new skills and really developed team building and co-operation. **Parent.**

There's not as much moaning and groaning. **Supervisor.**

There are no trivial squabbles. **Supervisor**

I feel in the playground the children than prefer their own company, that like to be on their own often don't have much to do. Out here, the wee solitary soul can dig in the ground, they can move the leaves, they can shift stones, build their own wee dens, animal houses. Leading them, possibly, into interacting with other groups around about because they'll come to see what they're doing or they'll go to see what they're doing. It is a far bigger opportunity for the children that find it difficult to interact with their peers to find a way in. **Teacher.**

When the children are in the woods playing together their behaviour is a lot better. They're engaged, they're enjoying themselves, they have things to do, they're working together as a team, morale is really high. Whereas normally, if they were maybe playing football, not in the woods, there's disputes, they're just better in the woods having fun and enjoying themselves. **Local Authority Team Leader.**

## Peace and quiet

I love to find a closed off little area and read my book. **P7 Pupil.**

I feel so relaxed in the wood. **P7 Pupil.**

This is something that can provide relaxation and a little bit of release from the classroom environment. **Head teacher.**

It's a nice quiet area and its nice to listen to the birds singing. **Pupil.**

I just go there to get away from things. **Pupil.**

When I want peace from everyone I'll go into the woods and just listen to the birds and the wind whistle. **Pupil.**

When I'm in the woods it makes me feel calm and relaxed. **Pupil**

I like how its peaceful and quiet, but not silent. **Pupil**

I like finding places where I can just sit and chat to my friends. **Pupil**

When I want peace from everyone at school I will go into the woods. **P7 pupil**

When I'm in the woodland I feel free and hidden. **P7 pupil**

Alot of people go there just to get away like me. **P7 pupil**

I usually play in the woods with some of my friends. Sometimes I just like to go and sit down for a while for peace and quiet or when I don't feel that good. **P7 pupil**

When I'm in the woods I feel like I'm free. I care for the woods but I'm not really outdoorsy. **P7 pupil**

## Creativity and imagination

It's more exciting than the fixed play areas - there's more imaginative play. **Parent**

Imaginative play seems 'easier' for older children in this setting - away from the traditional playground situation. **Head teacher.**

Children are 'allowed' to be children and to express themselves. **Head teacher.**

The P1s think there are dinosaurs in the woods. **Supervisor.**

It encourages her imagination. **Parent.**

He makes up stories about what goes on in the woods. **Parent.**

Out here with nothing added to the woodlands, there's a whole wealth of opportunities but they need to use their imagination to make it come alive for them. **Teacher.**

We've been working with the Primary 6s, just standing back and watching teamwork, the co-operation and just getting down to that level where a bunch of Primary 6 girls invite you across to show you the den that they built and offering you a cup of tea. It really shows that it's quite liberating for them, they're out the classroom, they're out the traditional playground situation and they can be children again: it's just great to see that. **Head teacher.**

### Enjoying school and playtime

We're really glad that we did this project because we can see it on the children's faces when they come out: they're not walking to the woodland, they're running to the woodland, they're desperate to come here and play. Obviously teachers are excited about it as well because they can see the enjoyment the children have. **Head teacher.**

My child describes his experience of playing in the woods as fun. **Parent**

Very positive experience. Lots of chat about what they have been doing. **Parent**

They talk about it at meal times. **Parent**

My children have relished the opportunity to play and learn in the wood. **Parent.**

She can't wait to tell me what she has been doing and how much she enjoyed it. **Parent.**

The whole school would love it if we were allowed to play in it every day. **Pupil.**

We were having so much fun I thought I was out of school. **Pupil.**

They're in school all day, in a classroom and they have to keep their voices quiet and they have rules to follow and then they come outside and they still have rules and there are boundaries that they are allowed to go within but they can shout and they can run wild. **Parent.**

### Risk and Confidence

My child has become more confident and is more willing to take risks. **Parent**

I'm particularly pleased that the children are actively involved in risk assessing. **Parent**

He is much more confident in this environment. In a classroom he can become shy. **Parent.**

Some of the children who don't particularly shine academically in school are definitely leaders outside and the role is reversed for them, it's just a wonderful opportunity for them to take on a different role and for their classmates and peers to see them in a different light. **Teacher.**

### Physical Activity

The natural environment helps him physically as he doesn't enjoy most sports but he loves to climb trees! **Parent**

What I like best is jumping over all the fallen trees and running in and out of the trees. **P7 Pupil.**

The grow in confidence in their physical ability with the climbing and moving around on the uneven ground, you do notice an improvement over the weeks as they're out here. **Teacher.**

### Learning

We have much more scope for bringing the children out and using the grounds for learning and for fun as well. **Head teacher.**

They learn while they play. **Parent**

Some of the children who don't shine academically in school are definitely leaders outside. The role is reversed for them. **Teacher.**

## 5. Does children's appreciation and understanding of woodlands increase?

Pupils and parents consistently reported that this was the case. Comments suggest four main themes.

1. Positive emotional experiences (see also quotes under 'peace and quiet' above)

I love hearing what the birds tweet and fallen leaves getting crunched when you step on them. **Pupil.**

When I got from the playground into the woods the scent was very different. **Pupil.**

When I closed my eyes and dragged my hands on the floor of the woods I could feel the wet grass and the brittle leaves. **Pupil.**

I like the buzzards. **Pupil.**

“I love it when birds tweet and the sun when it shines through the tress. I love the fact that you can just run around in it and smell the fresh air.” **P7 Pupil.**

## 2. A developing understanding of nature

She has knowledge of plants, trees and creatures because of playing in the woodland. **Parent.**

They have an increased knowledge of nature and interest in outdoor activities. **Parent.**

She tells me about all the animals that live in the woodland. **Parent.**

He’s becoming more interested in the creatures that live in wood. **Parent.**

She’s more aware of wildlife – the names of different plants. **Parent.**

He talks more about wildlife and different types of trees. **Parent.**

## 3. Awareness of and involvement in environmental stewardship issues.

The grass is full of bits of glass. We have found a lot of bottles of buckfast and beer. Even old cushions. **Pupil.**

I would like to help the school with picking up the rubbish. **Pupil**

I don’t like the dog poo. **Pupil.**

Hopefully my son will get lots more opportunities to play in our brilliant school woods and this in turn will help; him care for his world. **Parent**

## 4. General appreciation of ‘the outdoors’

He’s showing more interest in the ‘great outdoors’ **Parent**

It allows the freedom to explore nature. **Parent.**

It’s really good because it gets us out into nature. **Pupil.**

But let’s not romanticise!

I don't like the bugs and bees and wasps. **Pupil**

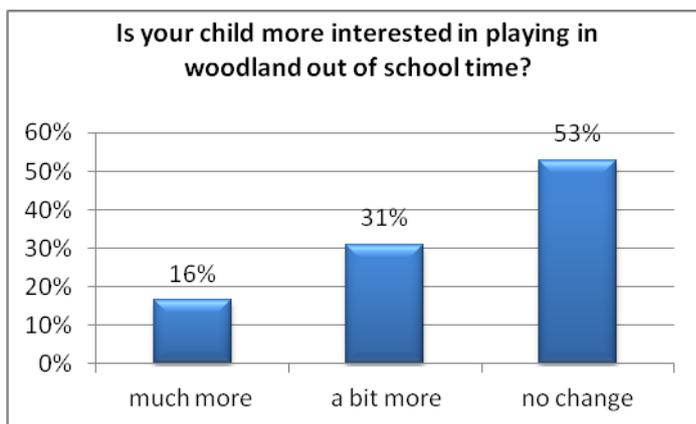
I don't like it when I get stung by nettles. **Pupil**

It is interesting but not surprising to note that these comments were much stronger and more frequent for schools that were using their adjacent woodlands for play than in our parallel project where schools were developing natural play features in their playgrounds. This highlights the strategic importance of adjacent woodlands in helping children to connect with the natural world.

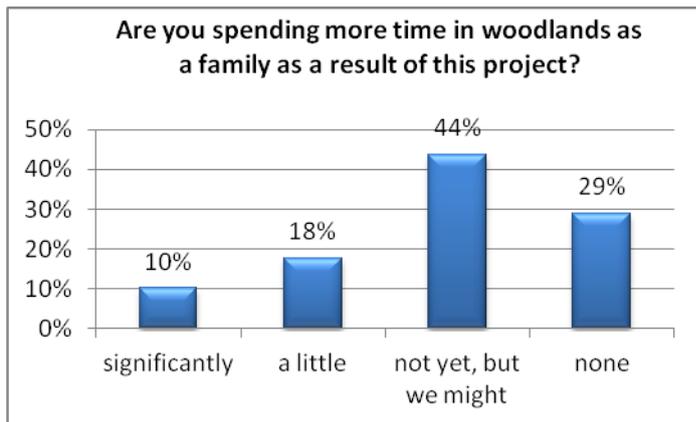
We had also hoped to find some evidence of this through a before and after creative writing / drawing exercise<sup>1</sup>. In practice, a number of schools did some creative writing after the children had spent time in the woods but none carried out the same exercise beforehand.

## 6. Do children become more confident to explore and enjoy other local woodlands with their families and friends?

Parents suggest that this is sometimes the case. Feedback from 90 parents in 4 schools is presented below.



<sup>1</sup> Methodology briefly described on p22 of <http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/UserFiles/Documents/GoPlayOEF.pdf>



We've built a den in the garden as a result of their new found love of outdoor play – they plan on staying outside overnight. **Parent.**

He has shown more interest in playing outdoors. **Parent.**

He's very keen to climb trees on the way home from school. **Parent.**

She now suggests things to do when we are out. **Parent**

She's so much more interested in taking our dog for a walk. **Parent**

Its given them an interested in other woods and forests we explore. **Parent**

## **7. Is woodland play a practical option for schools that have woodland in or adjacent to their grounds.**

Yes! The 6 project schools are now all regularly providing woodland play opportunities for their children, varying from every day to weekly.

More details on how they are dealing with the various practical issues of supervision, risk, weather, mud, storage, cost and building support among parents and staff – are given in our woodland play booklet and online film.

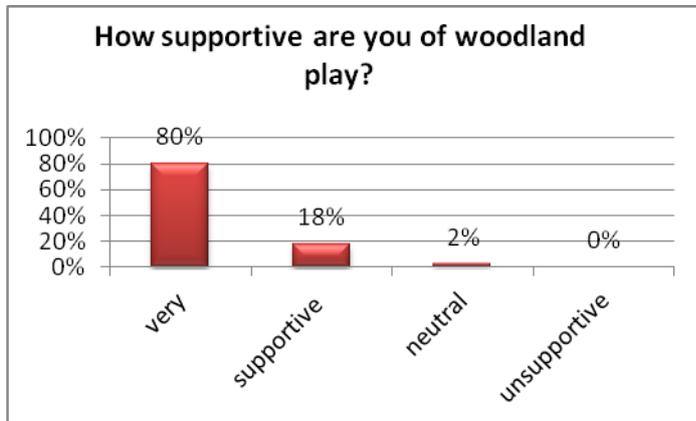
An indicator of how practical this approach is, is the degree of support expressed by parents, teachers and supervisors.

### **7.1 Support from Parents**

Many of the quotes presented above suggest that there is strong parental support.

Feedback from 90 parents from 4 schools re-enforces this view. Interestingly, schools often

cite parental concerns as a barrier to developing outdoor play. The experience of this project suggests that, when consulted and informed, parents are overwhelmingly supportive.



Most of the responses to our questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive.

Fantastic resource and should be used by the children as much as possible. **Parent**

Keep it up! ☺ **Parent**

This should be great for those who do not get this experience at home. Well done. **Parent**

I think using the woods during class and play time is a really positive and exciting thing for children to do. **Parent.**

A great addition to school life. **Parent.**

I'd love to get involved. Could parents come for a play in the woods too? **Parent.**

Interestingly, many parents who expressed concerns or worries, still said that they were supportive of the school providing woodland play.

School clothes get covered in mud and he has had bruises / scratch to his face from the trees. More supervision may be required. **Parent (supportive).**

I'm concerned about the busy main road and people wondering into the woodland. **Parent (supportive)**

He fell in the woods, which caused a gash to his knee. This needed four visits to the doctors. I was concerned that it could have been worse, e.g. to his face. **Parent (supportive).**

Could provide areas for children to hide which could cause issues such as bullying etc. **Parent (supportive).**

It borders a busy road. Unsure if the wall provides a safe barrier. **Parent (supportive).**

The only comment from a neutral parent related to litter:

Far too much rubbish in the woods. **Parent (neutral).**

## 7.2 Support from Playground Supervisors / Teachers

The role of playground supervisors in enabling creative, free play in woodlands is crucial. If woodland play is to have wider applicability across the UK, then we need to demonstrate that playground supervisors both value these forms of play and feel comfortable in supervising in a less controlled environment.

All supervisors / teachers recognised the value of these experiences for children (see their quotes above). At the end of the project, most agreed that they were now comfortable supervising woodland play, although some still had some anxieties. The most commonly cited concern is the inability to see all their children at one time, something which presents a significant challenge to current supervision culture.

Interestingly, in one school, supervisors had initially expressed a belief that it would be 'illegal' to let children play out of sight in the woods. At the end of the project, all 4 of them expressed confidence in supervising play in the woods.

Children don't pester supervisors! **Supervisor.**

There's more space in the playgrounds as some children are playing in the wood. **Supervisor**

## 7.3 Support from Pupils

Not surprisingly, there was overwhelming support for the woodland play from pupils, well expressed in the various quotes above. When we asked 104 pupils from 1 school (over 4 age groups) about the impact of the weather on their desire to play in the woods, just over half reported that they were happy playing out in any weathers. Supervisors report that boys and girls have equal enthusiasm for the woods and that they are enjoyed by older as well as younger pupils.



Not surprisingly, there were a very few negative comments.

I don't really like the woods because its very boring and there's nothing to do. **P7 pupil.**

## 8. Will other schools be inspired to offer woodland play?

We have only just completed our booklet, film and case studies, and so it is too early to know whether this project will help encourage other schools to develop similar approaches.

Key to making this happen, will be sharing the learning from this project with a range of others, who can use it to reach a wide schools audience, particularly the Forestry Commisison, Forest Schools practitioners and Forest Education Initiative clusters.