
The Danish Forest School approach

The Danish education system is renowned for its innovative teaching methods and informal learning environments, which promote creativity and critical thinking among students.



The practice of using the outdoors as a part of the education and all round development is not a new phenomenon in Denmark. But it has only been recently that an international interest has been taken in understanding the benefits to children.

The Danish Forest School has come about through a number of influences such as:

- » The pedagogical theories that have influenced present day practice
- » The training and role of educators working in early years settings (educators are called pedagogues)
- » The physical environment of settings
- » The organisation of early years settings
- » The research that highlights the long-term benefits of children being outdoors.

The Danish Forest School has been inspired by the work of pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel, who opened the first kindergarten in 1840. In 1854 a Danish headmaster opened a play and preparatory kindergarten for young children in Copenhagen—believing that childhood is a special time when children develop their character and knowledge. He believed that education for young children should be child-centred to match their developmental characteristics.

For Froebel, the kindergarten was a garden for children to flourish and grow.

From those early beginnings seven pedagogical principles of practice have developed.

1 A holistic approach to children's learning and development

This approach is concerned with the development of every child's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, creative and spiritual potential. It seeks to engage children in the learning process and encourages personal and collective responsibility.

2 Each child is unique and competent

Every child is unique and competent in their own way, and the way they think, feel and interact with others reflects this. Some children are outgoing, while some are shy; some like physical activities, while others love stories and music. To view the child as unique and competent is to view their potential. Children need an environment to flourish and grow their positive self-esteem.

3 Children are active and interactive learners

Children's active engagement in the learning process and their engagement with others in interactive activities or engagement with materials forms the dynamics for knowledge and understanding. Through active learning children

are constantly changing, adjusting, and rearranging meaning and understanding of things.

4 Children need real life, first hand experiences

Children are observers and explorers by nature and through real-life, first hand experiences they develop an understanding of themselves and the environment they are in. A child's all round physical, emotional, linguistic, cognitive and sensory development is fostered through first hand experiences.

5 Children thrive in child centred environments

This environment takes into account children's daily lives—including the need for restful areas, places for children who need sleep-time and creative areas. There should be an interconnectedness between indoors and outdoors, and an understanding that children need to be in harmony with the environment.

6 Children need time to experiment and develop independent thinking

Children need time to play and explore and experiment with their ideas and knowledge. They need to try things out, make mistakes, try something else, repeat their play, and consolidate ideas.

7 Learning comes from social interactions

Children experience positive social relationships through daily interactions with responsive and affectionate adults. This helps children develop self-confidence, to communicate and master challenges in their world.

There is no one type of 'forest school' in Denmark. Each setting varies depending on where they are situated (rural, semi rural or urban) and according to the people using them (pedagogues, children and parents)—no two are the same.

There are kindergartens in the woodlands, which are referred to as forest or nature kindergartens. In these settings the natural surroundings provide the starting point for activities inside or outside—either the whole or significant part of the day, every day or all year round.

Sometimes things are discovered and investigated by the pedagogues and children in the natural outdoor surroundings. At other times things may be brought inside the kindergarten for full discussion and investigation. Most of these forest and nature kindergartens are relatively small with 20-30 children and four to five pedagogues, though a few are much larger with 100 children.

Not all kindergartens in Denmark are specific forest or nature kindergartens—many just use the outdoor area they have available. But even in these kindergartens the children are outside for a significant part of the day, all year round.

To find out more about the Danish forest schools read Jane's recently published book (second edition) *Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach*, published by Routledge.



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Jane has been a lecturer in pedagogy, communication and leadership at the Aalborg University and at the University of West Jutland. She is now an independent consultant, trainer and Director of Inside-Out Nature—specialising in courses in Denmark and worldwide on how to develop pedagogically appropriate practices in outdoor learning environments. She has also presented at conferences and written about how children develop their skills and competencies in the outdoors.



An example of practice

It was nearly lunchtime and the children were hungry; they had a long walk in the forest and it was time to go back to the kindergarten. Suddenly the children found some bones beneath a tree and all thoughts of lunch disappeared.

They searched around the area and found more bones and brought them to the pedagogue. They talked about what kind of animals the bones were from and the pedagogue pointed out different features of the bones. Judging by its skull it was a big bird. The children named all the big birds they could think of and the pedagogue talked about the other bones: 'This is a thighbone, look at its shape. You have bones like this too; feel your thigh – can you feel the bone inside?' Nikoli was thrilled, 'I can feel my thigh bone'. The other children started to investigate their own bodies and started asking the pedagogue about the other bones in their bodies. 'Where is this one from? Have I got that kind of bone too?' The children asked what had killed the bird and scattered the bones. The pedagogue talked about the other animals in the forest and that most likely a fox had killed the bird for food. The kindergarten has stuffed animals—fox, badger, different kinds of birds etc. The children rarely see these animals but see their tracks and know about their habits. The pedagogue and the children put all the bones they found into a bag for closer inspection at the kindergarten.

