St Monica’s Nursery

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Forest School Handbook

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**St Monica’s Nursery**

**Mission Statement**

To provide a safe, supportive and enabling environment to allow children to play, learn and develop to their full potential. Working in partnership with parents to provide an all-round holistic support system for our children. Enabling them to build the knowledge and skills they need, to be resilient enough to fulfil their dreams and live as confident, successful and caring individuals.

**The Forest School Ethos**

Forest School is a unique educational experience and process that offers children the opportunity to succeed and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or other natural environment.

The Forest School concept originated in Scandinavia and was originally aimed at pre-school children. It was found that children who had attended forest school seemed to benefit in many ways. They arrived at school with strong social and communication skills, had the ability to work in groups effectively, displayed high self-esteem and generally showed confidence in their own abilities.

Since being adopted in the United Kingdom the approach has been used to deliver learning programmes to groups from pre-school age to young adults and across all abilities. Research has shown that the benefits identified in the original forest schools appear to benefit learners at all levels.

Forest School sessions at St Monica’s Nursery give opportunities for and encourages children to:

* develop their personal and social skills
* develop their language and communication skills
* improve physical motor skills
* work through practical problems and challenges
* develop practical skills
* use tools to create, build or manage
* pursue knowledge that interests them
* build confidence in decision making
* evaluate risk
* explore connections between humans, wildlife and the earth
* reflect on learning and experiences
* regularly experience achievement and success
* learn how to manage failures
* discover how they learn best
* improve their concentration skills
* become more motivated
* understand the benefits of a balanced and healthy lifestyle

**Forest School at St Monica’s Nursery**

At St Monica’s Nursery, Forest School sessions take place within the school grounds. The area is fully fenced and includes a small area of woodland, hedgerows, recently planted orchard, new woodland planting, grassland and a willow dome.

Forest School sessions are currently run by Mrs Lightfoot who is a qualified Level 3 Forest School Practitioner.

**Staff**

Mrs Emma Lightfoot – Paediatric first aid and outdoor first aid, Level 3 forest School Leader

Mrs Vicki Johnson – Support Staff, Paediatric first aid

Miss Jessica Brown - Support Staff, Paediatric first aid

Mrs Katy Mannion - Support Staff, Paediatric first aid

**What do the children do?**

Children taking part in Forest School sessions are given an opportunity to participate in activities in a natural setting on a regular basis. The setting provides a safe environment for them to learn and explore. Activities take place throughout the year and in generally in all weathers.

Whilst the sessions may provide opportunities to learn and understand more about the natural world, they also provide opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills.

There are opportunities to learn practical skills that there is often little opportunity to learn in formal school settings or even in the home these days. For tasks such as tree climbing, tool use, fire lighting or cooking there might be an element of managed risk. However, by giving children these opportunities they ultimately become better equipped to manage risk and as a result can grow their self-confidence.

Opportunities for reflection and to share experiences are provided and these help with the social and emotional development of participants. Group size plays an important role in this area, smaller groups allowing, eventually, more in depth reflection to take place and greater social interaction.

The Forest School leader should be seen as a facilitator. Although activities are well planned, they should essentially be child led. There should be flexibility in the planning to allow children to pursue their interests, planning being used to scaffold their interests. In order for this to happen, leaders need to have a good understanding of practical skills and an ability to match or adapt activities to learner’s interests. Most importantly they need to have a good understanding of the site where the sessions take place and the opportunities it can present.

Activities for Forest Schools are diverse and numerous but it should be reminded that we are trying to create independent learners who are inspired to try out their own ideas, explore their own interests and to attempt new ideas.

The following will give some indication of the type of activities that might be undertaken:

* Den and shelter building
* Fire lighting
* Tool use
* Wildlife studies
* Habitat development
* Playing team and group games
* Sensory activities
* Tracking games
* Cooking on an open fire
* Rope and string work
* Art and sculpture work
* Woodland and traditional crafts
* Story telling
* Drama
* Imaginary characters
* Physical movement activities

**Forest School Delivery**

Forest school sessions at St Monica’s Nursery generally follow a common pattern.

* At the start of each session there will be a short input during which children are reminded of the expectations that are in place for forest school and, any new safety information is relayed. The theme or focus for the sessions activities is then introduced.
* A short starter activity usually then takes place.
* The main activity follows. Activities are commonly offered that link into the interests of the children wherever possible. Where tools will be used there would be a high emphasis on safety. If the activity requires a high ratio of supervision the group may be split.
* ‘Free time’. A key element of the Forest School approach is the opportunity for children to explore a natural environment and pursue their own direction of learning. Therefore in each session an opportunity for children to pursue their own interests is included. Quite often children will continue with the activity they have started or will continue with something that has sparked their interest in a previous session. Although it is ‘free time’ there are guidelines in place to ensure the safety of all, which participants soon become familiar with.
* Finally the group is brought together for a period of reflection. This may involve a review of whatever guided activities have taken place or their independent activities. Whilst this is very much a child led activity it may be guided by the Forest School leader when necessary.

**Risk Management**

Forest School aims to develop children’s self-esteem, independence and motivation to learn in a safe environment. The Forest School Leader will therefore be responsible for conducting appropriate site and activity risk assessments prior to each session. A five-step approach is adopted whereby the following steps are taken:

* Identify hazards and risks.
* Decide who may be harmed and how.
* Evaluate the risks and decide if existing controls are adequate or whether more should be done.
* Record findings, including daily amendments to standing risk assessments based on site visits and observations.
* Review assessments on a regular basis.

Participants, including staff and volunteers, will be informed of potential hazards and methods of working in order to minimise their risk further. When possible all participants will be involved in the risk assessment process as part of their learning.

**Clothing**

As children are potentially outside in all weathers they need suitable clothing. Long sleeved tops and bottoms are advised. Wellingtons or walking boots and waterproof over trousers offer greater protection in wet weather conditions. Hat, gloves and scarves are useful throughout the winter months. During the summer period sun hats and sun cream

**First Aid**

The Forest School Leader, Mrs Lightfoot, has been trained in Forest School First Aid. This course is focused on the delivery of appropriate first aid in an outdoor setting.

A first aid kit is available on site during each session.

**Emergency Procedure**

Prior to any Forest School session participants are briefed what they will be expected to do in the event of an emergency situation. The site is fully fenced and enclosed

The procedure is as follows:

In the event of an emergency on the Forest School site the following steps will be taken.

* Immediate safety of other group members and self assessed.
* Attend to casualty and make as comfortable as possible.
* Make sure the group is safe sending them to the semi-circle bench area with a member of staff. At same time send a member of staff to the school for assistance.
* Administer First Aid
* If necessary, contact emergency services.

**Policies**

Our Nursery is like all educational establishments has a wide range of policies in place. These can be accessed via the school web site at <https://www.stmonicasprimary.co.uk/page/st-monicas-nursery/115192>

**Health and Safety**

A full risk assessment is conducted of the forest school site and is reviewed before each sessions adding any amendments for activities for that session.

Children are encouraged to take some responsibility for their own safety, but this is closely monitored by staff.

**Behaviour**

When taking part in Forest School sessions we require and expect high standards of behaviour. Children are allowed a certain amount of autonomy, but in an environment which allows children to encounter a level of managed risk good behaviour is paramount.

The Nursery behaviour policy has now been updated and is called self-regulation through co-regulation. This policy can be found on our website

<https://www.stmonicasprimary.co.uk/page/nursery-policies/117240>

**Safe Use of Hand Tools Policy**

The use of hand tools is an integral part of the Forest School experience

Before using tools with participants the tools will be introduced, their use explained and then children will receive instruction as to how to use them safely. A tool script is used when introducing new tools and as an aide memoire when participants use them. The form of script is easily adapted if other tools are introduced.

The following tools are amongst those most likely to be used with children as part of our Forest School sessions.

* Bow saw
* Loppers
* Stick peeler
* Sheath knife
* Bill Hook
* Mallet

Tools are used under close supervision. We use the ratio of 1:1 or 1:2 depending on the risk apposed by the tool used and the activity being carried out.

The Forest School leader will be responsible for overseeing safe use and maintenance of all tools. When not in use the tools are stored in a secure setting. A full list of all tools is kept with the tools and a separate list carried when tools are taken out on site. This allows the tools to be counted out and in.

When using any items it is essential that appropriate personal protection equipment is used. These may include gloves, hard hats, safety boots and high visibility jackets dependent on the task. The Forest School leader is able to advise further.

Basic risk assessments have been completed for each tool. However, as with any risk assessment it is advisable to review and modify as appropriate dependent upon the individuals involved and specific conditions.

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**Managed Fire Safety Policy and Procedure for Forest Schools**

Campfires are an important part of Forest School and are used in many sessions. The Forest School leader will aim to ensure that all children and adults participating in Forest School sessions with fires will do so safely and with as little risk to their health as possible.

**Location**

There will be an established fire area which will be the only area where fire will be permitted. The Forest School leader will establish the area.

The site will be chosen so as to avoid tree roots, peaty soil, deep leaf mould and uneven ground etc.

The fire pit will be central to the area and surrounded by logs or bricks to help prevent the spread of fire.

**Seating Arrangements**

Children will be seated approximately 1.5 metres for the fire circle this area being outlined by seating logs and foam mats. Exit points will be created at regular intervals around the fire circle and logs.

When the campfire is in use, participants are not permitted to access the area immediately surrounding the fire without permission.

All participants will be taught how to change seats by standing, stepping back over the log and then walking around the outside of the seating area. They must never cross the inner area.

Participants will be advised how to deal with fire smoke in an appropriate way. Where there is an obvious wind direction seating in the line of smoke will not be used. Wherever possible, asthma sufferers will be seated in positions well away from the line of smoke.

**Safety**

When a fire is being used there will be a fire first aid kit available in addition to the standard first aid kit.

A fire bucket containing water will be available on site and its position indicated at the start of the session.

Either a fire blanket or a wet towel will also be made available and its position indicted.

A container of fresh clean water will be available to immerse for immersing a burn should it be required.

Before a fire is lit participants must demonstrate that they are able to follow instructions.

Weather conditions should also be considered. High winds or very dry conditions would mean that fire lighting does not continue.

Participants working with the fire should ensure that long hair is tied back and loose clothing is fastened or secured.

Only adults are permitted to light fires.

When children are invited to add fuel to the fire this will only be undertook with adult supervision.

Sticks/wood must be placed, not thrown, from the side of the fire. The hand should never go over the fire. A fire glove should be used.

Plastics are not to be burnt.

Fires should never be left unattended.

**Extinguishing Fires**.

All fires must be extinguished at the end of the session.

Whenever possible, fires should be allowed to burn out naturally. With careful management this is easily achievable.

If larger logs have been used these should be separated out from other ashes.

The fire must be doused down with water. It is advisable that ashes are stirred once doused in case there are any hot spots remaining. A good indication that the fire is fully extinguished is when all smoke and steam has ceased.

It is advisable to remove a build up of ashes from the site.

**Managed Fire Risk Assessment**

A risk assessment has been prepared for fires bases around this method of management. However, as with any risk assessment it is advisable to review and modify as appropriate dependent upon the individuals involved and specific conditions.