

Adventuring and Emotional Exploration - Looking for trouble?

Exploring the opportunities for adventuring and emotional exploration in the forest

An extended version of this article by Deb Wilenski is available in the current issue of *Early Years Educator*, available online at www.magonlinelibrary.com/toc/eyed/current. It was first presented as a keynote at the Cambridgeshire County Council Forest School Conference, March 2015.



Meeting the wild, connecting the classroom

Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination's Footprints programme has been exploring the wild outdoors with young children, their families and educators for almost ten years. But these projects don't just happen in the wild. For every morning in the woods we spend an afternoon back in nursery or school, developing children's own ideas and explorations through creative experiments and expression: drawing, modelling, discussing, acting out inventions and fascinations that have begun in the woods. In nursery rooms and gardens, in school classrooms and yards, we have seen wild creatures come to life, magic doors open into strange worlds, giant trees appear that are *bigger than earth*. Imaginative adventuring and daring take us out into the woods, but they also lead us back inside again, becoming strong elements of everyday learning, for children and adults alike.

Why go to the woods?

So many of us are now taking our children into wild places, this question may seem surprising. Surely the benefits are obvious? But it is worth thinking about the particular qualities of wildness we find in woods and forests, and what these offer to young children.

Woods and forests are places of emotion and imagination; they are never just one kind of place. They are beautiful, intricate, physical spaces, but also shift in atmosphere and feeling depending on the time of day, the time of year, who you are with, what you read last night, what you are wishing for or remembering. It's hardly surprising then that forests should be the perfect place for children to explore the biggest of ideas and feelings: danger and security, truth and illusion, magic and transformation, life and death. And if our projects are anything to go by, this deep and daring exploration begins straight away...

Dead daughters and fighting bears

On their first visit to the woods a nursery class from Histon Early Years Centre spent a long time running round looping paths, losing each other, bumping into each other again and laughing. After twenty minutes or so three girls came out of the woods into an open area of grass, and began playing a game which was much harder to figure out. One girl lay down on the grass, the other two walked together to the edge of the woods, waited there a short time and then returned, at which point the girl lying down got up and one of the other two lay down in her place.

I was intrigued and moved closer. This is what I heard:

Pretend I was in the house. And you came and you saw my bike lying down, and I was dead.

When the two girls returned the dead daughter came alive again, and they swapped over, saying: *Now you and me were her mum.* An important part of the game seemed to be lying down, looking up at the sky. It was very calm and contemplative. Coming so quickly after the chasing game in the woods, the dead daughter play was striking in its emotional daring, the way it explored an extreme edge of experience. There was a marked contrast too between the seriousness of the game, and the calm ease of the children.

In other projects our first visits have been equally momentous. Here is Katie, age 5, telling her friend Cherish what she has been doing on her first visit to Bramblefields Nature Reserve:

Cherish, guess what I seen? I seen a hairy bear. It was up there in those trees. I went in the far away forest. I saw hairy bears over there – they were climbing on my head. And guess what I did? I foughted them. I killed them. I killed the bear with my gun. And when I came home guess what I found? I found no-one, 'cos they were all hiding.

Think of the narratives that are set in forests, fairy stories and folktales. Many are emotional adventures, travelling through feelings of growing anxiety, stark fear, an act of courage or cleverness or generosity, and the relief of home-coming. *Hansel and Gretel, Brother and Sister, Baba Yaga*, lesser known tales like *The Iron Stove* and *The Many-furred Creature*, all follow a similar pattern. The forest is a place of danger, but it is also a world in which you can become your true self and rewrite your own story.

And so it is for children too. Many educators have remarked how children are different in the woods. Shy children become leaders. Energetic, expressive children find time for quietness. Different friendships form and new interests flourish. I have known children who rarely speak at school find their voices in the woods; children who do not write begin to write down their own stories; children who are often on the periphery become central to dramas in the wild.

Opening doors in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park

It is a cold January day. Snow has fallen overnight. Lots of snow. Most primary schools in the area are closed. Ben Wilson and his class of thirty four-year old children walk into the woods where they have been many times before, but on this first day of our project together, the whole world has changed. Bryony and Harvey walk deep into it:

Harvey: *We're in the secret forest. This is someone's house. It's someone creature's house. Someone's going to come in here and say 'get out of my house!'*

Bryony: *Hide!*

Harvey: *We're really in a wood aren't we...*

Bryony: *We're lost!*

Harvey: *Yeah we are a little bit aren't we?*

Bryony: *They're trying to find us. Hide!*

The children's conversation, just minutes into the wood is already full of rich ideas and emotions: secrecy, trespass, fear, daring, being lost, being found, companionship, courage, playfulness, drama. We stay in the woods for almost two hours and in the afternoon we want to make room for the morning's ideas and experiences to grow.

I am working with another CCI artist, Caroline Wendling, and we meet with Ben over lunchtime to make a plan for the afternoon. We decide to offer the children very simple materials – dark and light paper of different sizes, a clear space to work on the floor, chalks and wax crayons.

We share Harvey's idea of the *secret forest* with the rest of the class. Ben invites the children to imagine the woods at night and to bring this imagination into their drawings.

The secret forest does indeed appear, but so do many other places; a forest of giant pink trees, a fox's den under the stars, a map of rabbit holes, a beanstalk that reaches to the moon. Doors begin to open between children's imaginations as they become intrigued by each other's drawings and join their stories together.

The following week, Edward finds *doors* in the woods where two trees meet and in the spaces between trees. We note important conversations, photograph significant places, and then spend our afternoons re-visiting them through light and projection, drawing on different scales, storytelling and modelling. Many more doors appear: mouse-holes, magic doors, a 'Rock 'n'Roll door' you can go through to dance and sing.



Daring, powerful learning

Throughout their explorations the children were learning many valuable things: how to keep warm and dry in the woods, how to negotiate social relationships, how to work with their powers of invention, imagination and creativity.

But there is more. There is also what can be described as learning in the metaphysical domain. In this domain, children are learning about themselves, who they are, what they can do, where there is a place for them in the world, where to go next. It is learning full of daring and power. No wonder Kian, one morning in Hinchingsbrooke told us: *My name is Kian and I am going to jump over the whole world.*

We invited Robert Macfarlane, writer and researcher into landscape, language and the human heart, to write a foreword for CCI's *Fantastical Guide*, the publication that grew from our project. He was fascinated by the children at Hinchingsbrooke and their adventuring into worlds within worlds. His words make crystal clear the creative power in the children's explorations, and the value of bringing imagination into the wild:

...seen through the eyes of these four- and five-year-olds, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park ceases to be 170 acres of meadow, woodland and marsh, lying 2 km west of Huntingdon and bounded on one side by the A14. It is instead a limitless universe, changeable in its textures, and endlessly replenished in its originality. It is a wild compound of dream, spell and substance.

