Key principles of play and their relevance to Forest School

The Play England charter for children’s play emphasises the significance of play for children and contained within the charter are the play work principles. These principles highlight that a child’s development will be accelerated and enhanced by them having access to a wide range of environments and opportunities for play. Below are the key principles of play as taken directly for the document (www.playengland.org.uk/playworkprinciples) alongside an evaluation of their relevance to Forest School.

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| 1 – All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities. | The Forest School approach to learning allows lots of time for learners to develop through play with a sizeable part of each session devoted to it. The focus is on the holistic development of a learner with their overall well-being being paramount. |
| 2 – Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons. | At Forest School children are given plenty of time for ‘free play’ allowing them to pursue an interest of their choosing. Whilst resources are at times provided (items for mud play for example) the children are free to use them as they wish so that they are in ‘control’ or indeed to not use the resources and follow their own agenda. Play can be ‘personally directed’ by staff making careful observations on a child at play therefore being able to plan further sessions with their interests and ideas in mind. |
| 3 – The prime focus and essence of play work is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education. | A leaders role at Forest School is to facilitate play, providing resources and an environment which enable a learner to make their own choices as the leader takes a ‘step back’ allowing a leaner to develop whilst as previously mentioned the leader observes to aid future planning. |
| 4 – For play workers, the play process takes precedence and play workers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas. | During ‘free play’, activities that are adult-led are optional for the children. They have the choice to take part in these activities or explore their own interests. |
| 5 – The role of the play worker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play. | Forest School leaders make the most of the woodland environment where natural resources are readily available to be utilised. Each Forest School is of course unique with its own features whether that is pond areas, slopes, hedgerows or trees for example or other ‘created’ areas such as a story telling chair, mud play area or space suitable for den building. Leaders also encourage learners to make the area ‘ their own’ for the session – that could be by displaying the ‘group’ flag for example or hanging mobiles made by learners around the area. |
| 6 – The play workers response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice. | A Forest School leader will have an ‘up to date knowledge of the play process’ including an understanding of play type’s classification. Reflection is an integral part of Forest School for a leader with time spent reflecting with learners to hear their opinions on how a session has gone, what ideas they may have to develop a session etc and also self-reflection as part of the planning process when asking “what went well?”, “how can it be extended or developed further”, etc. |
| 7 – Play workers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people’s play on the play worker. | Staff have a responsibility to react and respond to the requirements and interests of the children at Forest School and also the maintenance and protection of their site. They take into account the changes to the site and environment after use or as a result of various weather conditions. |