

Wild Together

learning and growing untamed

Forest School is not a set of prescribed activities to be ticked off. Children are in the woodland for new experiences, to take calculated risks, find flow and learn at their own pace.

The Forest School lead should have a range of resources available to support and extend their sessions, paper, pens, twine, hole punches, tarps, for example.

Date: Winter Solstice - The Returning Light

Duration: 3 hours - this is merely a suggestion, you know your children and setting, you could make this plan last much longer.

Ratio: 5-7 yrs 1:6

Focus: Seasonal Change, Light and Darkness, Tradition, Kindness

Important: RBAs and policies must be up-to-date, in place and tailored to each activity before starting.

1. Arrival & Settling - a consistent welcome routine helps younger children and those with SEND feel secure, reduces anxiety, and supports a smooth transition into Forest School.

- Sing the welcome song as you enter the woodland and gather at the welcome circle.
- Greet children and check the group feels ready to begin.
- Go through your Forest School rules.
- Take a short perimeter walk, noticing winter signs and changes in light.
- Ask, 'What do you notice about the sun today?'

2. Folklore story - folklore connects us to the woods and seasons, offering a playful way for all children to engage and belong - even those who might, otherwise, struggle to join in.

- After the perimeter walk, gather the children back to the welcome circle.
- Tell The Returning Light story, introducing Fenn and Elda and the Longest Night.
- Use props: a clay bowl or wooden cup, a bundle of evergreens, a lantern or ember symbol.
- Reflect and ask, 'Why did people mark this night?' and, 'Why did Fenn need Elda's help?'
- Encourage quiet, thoughtful listening and allow a moment of silence before continuing.

3. Activities on offer - children are free to choose their level of engagement, they don't have to take part in the planned activity, as learning happens best at its own pace and through self-directed exploration.

Lanterns of the Returning Light

- Create lanterns using jars, natural materials, chalk pens, tracing paper or recycled materials.
- Use wool or twine to wrap leaves, berries, sticks, or other natural materials around the jar.
- Use tea lights or battery versions to create a warm glow inside the lantern.

Stone Sun Markers

- Arrange stones or sticks into simple sun or circle shapes on the ground.
- Talk about ancient people marking the turning year.

Wild Together

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4. Snack & Fire - fire is a lovely but not necessary part of Forest School. If having a fire it must be introduced slowly and whilst following your own policies and RBAs.

- Gather around the fire circle or designated area to explain that it's time to come together for snack.
- Children to wash hands at hand washing station.
- Solstice Fire Snack: Baked Apples:
 - Apples are pre-cut into thick wedges by adults.
 - Each child places an apple piece into a foil 'boat'.
 - Sprinkle lightly with cinnamon.
 - Adults place foil boats on a grill or at the edge of the fire.
 - Cook until apples are soft and warm.
 - Allow to cool slightly before eating.
- Serve hot chocolate.
- Talk about the traditions of food and folklore, 'In winter, people cooked fruit to make it warm and sweet. On the Longest Night, warm food helped people feel safe and ready for the return of the light.'
- Reflection prompts:
 - 'Why do warm foods matter more in winter?'
 - 'How does sharing food help a group?'

If there is time the children may continue with their activity or move on to 5. Mindfulness and Goodbye.

5. Mindfulness & Goodbye - closing with mindfulness helps children calm their bodies, reflect on their experiences, and make a smooth transition back to the classroom or home. This activity can take a little time to settle into. You may need to pause and remind the group to slow down and really listen. It often helps if an adult, or one of the children, shares what they notice to help everyone tune in to the space together:

- The children can sit or lie comfortably.
- Say, 'This is the Longest Night, the sun is at its weakest, but tomorrow the light begins to return.'
- Guide slow breathing, listening to the sounds of the woodland.
- Invite the children to share a thought of kindness or warmth.

SEND adaptations for mindfulness

- Shorten the exercise.
- Don't insist the child join in with the others, perhaps they would like to go first or last or just tell the person / adult next to them.
- Allow movement, natural fidgets, or pacing.
- Adults or peers may model participation.

KS1 Curriculum Links

Science: Seasonal change, light and dark.

English: Listening to stories, speaking and reflection.

Art & Design: Working with materials creatively.

History: How people lived and marked time long ago.

PSHE: Kindness, belonging, emotional awareness.

Wild Together

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Resources

1. Arrival

- Visuals for rules.

2. Folklore

- Story script.
- Props for story (lantern or ember symbol, evergreen branches).
- Story mat/blanket for gathering children.

3. Activities:

- Glass jars., twine or wool.
- Twigs, leaves, holly, pine, evergreen, natural resources.
- Chalk pens.
- Tea lights or battery versions.
- Stones, logs, objects for sun circle.

4. Snack & Fire

- Fire circle setup: fire bowl / pit, fire gloves, water bucket, fire blanket, burns kit.
- Hand washing station: water container with tap, soap, towel.
- Age appropriate knives & chopping boards, bowls/plates, cups, spoons.
- Apple: apples, cinnamon, foil.
- Hot chocolate / alternative warm drink.
- Bin for waste.

5. Mindfulness

- Blanket, mats, or log circle for sitting/lying comfortably.
- Fidget sticks / stones for children who need sensory support.
- Timer (sand timer; visual timer; or soft bell sound).

SEND adaptations – the above can be personalised for children depending on their stage of development. This is not an exhaustive list and all children are individuals, however, I have drawn on my experience of working with children with PAD (Pathological Demand Avoidance), ASC (Autistic Spectrum Condition) and SPD (Sensory Processing Differences). Many of these suggestions overlap, some oppose each other and others are just good practice.

- Folklore - allow movement during story, extra props available for children to touch.
- Offer choice, 'Would you like to be part of the story just listen this time?'
- Frame tasks as shared discoveries, 'Shall we find out what the wind sounds like today?'
- Use humour and curiosity to reduce anxiety.
- Allow other forms of participation, ie observing or helping an adult.
- Encourage co-creation, the adult can model curiosity and experiment alongside the child.
- Provide a defined spaces for various activities to limit noise overlap.
- Visuals: communication boards, now and next, visual timetable.
- Physical alternatives, larger resources, things that are sealed or in zip lock bags.
- Lidded cups, chunky-handled knives at snack.
- Opt-out or observer role always available, 'You can watch first and join later.'
- Re-phrasing ie: 'shall we check the area is safe?' for the boundary check.
- Sensory support: ear defenders, glasses, additional layers, suitable fidget toy.
- Sensory retreat space available (hammock for example).
- Buddying encouraged for social/emotional support.
- Sit-spot/mindfulness time, extend gradually.

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The Returning Light

Long ago, before clocks and calendars, people watched the sun to understand the year.

In winter, the sun seemed to sink lower each day. The nights grew long and cold. People knew there would be one night longer than all the others. This was the Longest Night.

In one village lived a boy called Fenn. He was chosen to carry the embers from the hearth on the Longest Night. The embers were small pieces of fire, kept safe and glowing.

An elder woman named Elda walked with him. Elda was the keeper of the old knowledge. She knew when the time was right.

They followed a narrow path into the winter woods, marked with evergreen branches. These trees stayed green even in the cold and were seen as a sign of life.

At a circle of stones, older than any house, Fenn placed the embers into the hollow at the centre. He breathed gently on them and the glow grew brighter.

The people believed this light was a message to the sun. A sign that the world was waiting.

The forest was very still. Then Elda spoke softly. 'The turning has begun.'

Fenn covered the embers and they walked back to the village.

From the next morning on, the days slowly began to grow longer.

The sun had turned.

The light was returning.

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Welcome and Closing Songs - sung to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

Welcome, welcome one and all,
Hear the trees and birds that call,
Step so softly, look around,
Magic waiting to be found,
Welcome, welcome one and all,
Hear the trees and birds that call.

Goodbye, goodbye one and all,
Hear the woodlands gentle call,
Thank you earth and trees and sky,
Thank you all, we wave goodbye,
Goodbye, goodbye one and all,
Hear the woodlands gentle call.

I like to sing our welcome and closing songs as we walk to and from the site entrance rather than waiting until we're settled in the circle. It helps the children transition, focus, and mark the change in space and mood. Of course, this depends on your site layout and group dynamics, what works beautifully in one woodland might not in another, so it's about finding your own rhythm.