

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: 7-11 yrs 1:8

Focus: Turning Points, Light and Darkness, Tradition, Community

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: low light, bare branches, frost, still air.
- Ask, 'How does the woodland feel at this time of year?' and, 'What feels different from autumn?'

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.
- Pause mid-story to reflect, 'Why do you think people marked this night?' and, 'Why might the elder guide the boy rather than do the task herself?'
- 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.
- If using chalk pens encourage designs that represent returning light, protection or hope.
- Use tea lights or battery versions to create a warm glow inside the lantern.

Stone Circle Markers

- Use stones, sticks, and natural materials to create a small ground-based circle or marker.
- Children may align stones toward the winter sun or create symbolic patterns.
- Link to ancient Solstice monuments.

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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:
 - Core apples partway through, leaving the base intact.
 - Fill the center with: 2 tsp oats, a pinch of cinnamon, 1 Tbsp raisins.
 - Wrap each apple tightly in foil.
 - Place apples in the embers or on the edge of the fire.
 - Cook slowly for 20–30 minutes, turning occasionally with fire gloves or tools.
 - Apples are ready when soft all the way through.
 - Wait a while before serving, the apples will be very hot! Eat with a spoon.
- Serve hot chocolate.
- Talk about the traditions of food and folklore, 'In winter people used what would last. Apples stored well, and cooking them made them sweeter and easier to share. On the Longest Night, warm food mattered. It helped people feel safe and reminded them they could make light and warmth together.'
- Reflection prompts:
 - 'Why do warm foods matter more in winter?'
 - 'How does sharing food help a group?'
 - 'What do you notice about the smell and taste when food is cooked on the fire?'
- 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.
- Invite children to imagine a small, steady ember inside them, not bright, but patient and strong.
- End with a quiet moment of gratitude for warmth, shelter, or community.

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.

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KS2 Curriculum Links

ENGLISH: Reflective writing inspired by folklore and symbolism.

SCIENCE: Earth's tilt, seasonal change, light and darkness.

ART & DESIGN: Working with natural and recycled materials to express meaning.

HISTORY: Ancient traditions and how communities marked time.

PSHE: Emotional awareness, resilience, belonging and empathy.

DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY: Structure, balance, and material choice.

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.
- Tracing paper, chalk pens, sharpies.
- Tea lights or battery versions.
- Stones, logs, objects for stone 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, oats, raisins, 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).

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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.
- Movement cushions or pacing allowed in circle time.

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The Returning Light

On the Longest Night, when the sun lay far beneath the rim of the world, the people of the valley gathered at the edge of the woods. This was the Stillness, the moment when the sun paused before turning home again. The old ones said that on this night the boundary between the living world and the hidden world grew thin.

Each year, someone was chosen to walk the Returning Path, a narrow track deep into the midwinter forest. This year the task fell to Fenn, a boy known for steady hands and quiet courage. Beside him stood Elda, an older woman of the village, keeper of the hearth and memory of the old ways. Fenn would carry the embers. Elda would guide him to the place where the offering must be made.

Fenn held a clay bowl wrapped in wool, inside it the last glowing embers from the village hearth. These were not for warmth. They were the sign the people sent to the sun, a small fire to call the great one back.

They set out together along the path marked with holly and pine. The evergreens kept their colour when others had fallen, so they were believed to guard the way. The forest was silent except for the crunch of frost. From time to time, Elda paused and raised her hand. Fenn waited. The old ones said that on this night ancestors walked close and that some pauses were to let them pass.

At last they reached the Clearing of Stones, older than any tale still told. In the centre lay a shallow hollow, blackened by countless midwinter fires. This was where the ember-offering must be placed.

Fenn knelt and set the clay bowl into the hollow. Elda stepped back. He uncovered the embers. They glowed faintly, a thin thread of red in the deep dark. Fenn breathed on them once, twice, three times. The light brightened and a narrow plume rose into the cold air.

If the ember-thread rose straight, the sun would see it. Tonight it climbed true.

The clearing seemed to shift, as though the stones themselves exhaled. A faint warmth moved across Fenn's face, too slight to name yet unmistakable. The turning had begun. The sun had taken notice.

Elda nodded, satisfied. Fenn covered the embers with earth, gave thanks in the old way and stood. The shapes in the trees had gone. The Stillness was lifting.

They walked back along the path. In the distance they could already see the first glow of the midwinter fire being lit in the village. There was no cheering. Midwinter was serious work. But when Fenn and Elda stepped into the circle of light, shoulders loosened and faces softened.

Bread was shared. Stories were told. Holly was hung above the threshold to guard the returning light.

So it was each year.

*When the sun was at its weakest, the people kept faith on its behalf.
And every year, the sun returned.*

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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.