

Learning and Child Development Policy

Our concept

Into The Woods is an outdoor nursery, and the children are outdoors in the woods almost all of the time. The nursery was conceived in this way because it is our belief that children develop best in an enriched, varied natural environment like the woods.

Our ethos

- We believe that children should be given the time, space and right environment to explore, investigate, experiment, set their own challenges and play.
- We have high expectations of our children and believe they are capable of high-level problem solving, assessing risk, creating and imagining their own challenges and objectives, and resilience and persistence throughout their learning journey.
- We believe that if children set their own challenges and direct their own learning they will be more motivated and engaged and their self esteem will flourish.
- We believe children should be listened and spoken to with respect, in a way that values their opinions, understanding and feelings.
- We believe that children are individuals and should be given the opportunity to learn at their own pace.
- We believe they should learn how to play and work collaboratively with each other and how to be strong independent individuals.
- We strive to develop an understanding and respect of the natural environment in all our children.
- We believe that as adults working with young children, we have many opportunities to learn from them.

How our approach achieves this

We believe that with sensitive support and quality interactions from our practitioners, all the above happens naturally in the woods. The environment is full of open ended resources: leaves, sticks, logs, mud, water etc, which provide endless opportunities for creative and imaginative play, investigation, problem solving and critical thinking. We provide the children with very few man-made resources and no toys. We only add a few open ended resources such as ropes, containers and some tools. Without closed resources to direct their thinking and their play, the children readily invent their own games, design their own activities and create their own role play scenarios. The few limited resources that we do provide give the children the opportunity to practise other key social skills such as taking turns and sharing.

The woods are quiet and calm and being in a natural environment has a positive impact on children's well being. There is a feeling of space yet the woods are at the same time intellectually stimulating – it is a rich, fascinating environment that engages the children.

We encourage children to have a positive attitude towards making mistakes and trying different ways to problem solve. We strive to develop a growth mindset within the children and the staff where a belief that everything is achievable eventually.

The combination of this environment with our experienced, highly skilled practitioners provides the perfect environment for **language development**. Because it is quiet the children can be heard and can hear others. Our high ratios of adults to children means we are able to give children time to talk, listen and respond in real conversations. We create 'communication friendly spaces' (ECAT) such as dens, tents and the mud kitchen

in which the children talk together.

Adult-led and child-led activity

At Into The Woods much of the learning is child-led, with sensitive interactions from our skilled practitioners supporting the children in setting and working towards their own goals. The daily routine at Into The Woods is structured so that the children are interrupted as little as possible. In this way we give children the time needed to invest in developing their own ideas and achieving their own aims. As well as developing their ability to think critically and creatively, this leads to greater self esteem, confidence and motivation to learn.

Each week there is a planned learning focus with adult-led activities. These adult-led activities are carefully planned to develop the children's skills and follow interests and schemas. We aim as much as possible to develop skills that the children can go on to use independently when setting and solving their own challenges. For example, a group of children might learn with an adult how to dig clay from the roots of a fallen tree and then use it to make a model. Then the children will be able to use these skills to access the clay to, for example, make paint for mark making. We encourage all children to participate in adult-led activities and ensure that all children take part in a range of activities during their time at Into The Woods. However, the children are not obliged to take part in every adult-led activity we plan, and indeed if they are engrossed in an activity of their own devising we will not interrupt them. We are also mindful about when to join in, or comment on their play as we want to be careful not to influence them too much.

We believe that children who learn in this way develop key skills that will enable them to succeed at school and beyond.

Children's decisions

We aim to give the children as many opportunities as possible to make their own decisions and have an influence over their nursery. Each session we start with a planning meeting when the children choose the activities they would like to do. We have a reflection time at the end of the activity, session or day when the children 'tell the story' what they have done and what they would like to do next time. We also reflect in the moment whenever possible. We have votes on which camp we should go to, which book to read, or which area to head to on a walk. We ask the children for ideas for improvements to the nursery, for example, in terms of what they would like to see more or less of.

The nursery community

We support children to work and play co-operatively and develop an empathy for others. We encourage a sense of community through group activities, and a respect for all children and adults in the nursery.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Into The Woods follows the EYFS, which is the Government's statutory framework that sets the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. In terms of learning and development, the EYFS has two main strands – what children learn (prime and specific areas) and how children learn (characteristics of effective learning).

The following section gives a few examples of how we cover the aspects of the Development Matters section of the EYFS.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning

At Into The Woods we place a real emphasis on The Characteristics of Effective Learning as we believe the development of these fundamental skills brings huge benefits in terms of how the children feel about themselves and how they continue to learn and develop in the future, and will ensure that they are ready for school and beyond.

Because we encourage children's independence, allow them to lead their own learning and make their own decisions as far as possible, and give them an environment full of open ended natural resources and the time and space to make the most of them, the development of Characteristics of Effective Learning is excellent at Into The Woods and a real strength of the setting. The children are used to solving problems, finding other ways to do things, being resilient when things don't go to plan the first time, and assessing their own risks. These are things that they do all the time, every time they come to the nursery.

Characteristics of Effective Learning
<p>Playing and exploring – engagement</p> <p>Finding out and exploring Playing with what they know Being willing to 'have a go'</p>
<p>Active learning – motivation</p> <p>Being involved and concentrating Keeping trying Enjoying achieving what they set out to do</p>
<p>Creating and thinking critically – thinking</p> <p>Having their own ideas Making links Choosing ways to do things</p>

Prime Areas of Learning

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

PSED is our priority. We understand that children need to be happy and relaxed at the setting before they can learn. We place a lot of importance on the relationships built between the staff and children, especially their key person. Children find the natural environment less stressful because there is more space and it is quiet and calm. Children build confidence and self esteem as their ideas and views are valued and there is never a wrong answer or a wrong way of doing things. Children can only succeed with our ethos.

Physical Development

This happens naturally and to a very high level. Children spend most of the day physically active, running, climbing trees and steep hills, rolling down hills, balancing, digging, carrying, on long walks. They develop very good cardiovascular and muscle fitness. The children learn about the effect of exercise on their bodies as well as healthy eating and controlling their temperature.

We also provide plenty of opportunities to develop fine motor control development. For example, tying knots, threading, using tools, mark making, moulding clay, etc.

Language Development

Language development in the Early Years is fundamental. It underpins learning in all other areas and is crucial to the development of Characteristics of Effective Learning. At Into The Woods we have created a

Area of Learning and Development	Aspect
Prime Areas	
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Making relationships
	Self-confidence and self-awareness
	Managing feelings and behaviour
Physical Development	Moving and handling
	Health and self-care
Communication and Language	Listening and attention
	Understanding
	Speaking
Specific areas	
Literacy	Reading
	Writing
Mathematics	Numbers
	Shape, space and measure
Understanding the World	People and communities
	The world
	Technology
Expressive Arts and Design	Exploring and using media and materials
	Being imaginative

provision which gives children the very best opportunity for language development. As mentioned above, the high staff ratios and calm, low-noise environment mean that children can hear and be heard more easily, providing the best environment to develop their listening and attention, and speaking. This, coupled with the high degree of child-initiated, creative activity, means that they develop their ability to hold proper conversations and use language to help them achieve their own aims. Our practitioners understand the importance of proper conversations, selective open ended questioning and narrating and giving children time to answer and space to think before they respond. To develop the children's understanding and language skills, and to encourage critical thinking.

Literacy

Pre-phonics learning

We tune into the wide range of sounds we hear in the woods – listening to and distinguishing environmental sounds is a great basis for learning phonics later on. The woods is the perfect place for this kind of learning – it's calm and quiet, which facilitates tuning into specific sounds. Also, we look at the signage in and around the woods, beginning to read them by isolating and identifying specific sounds (phonemes).

Reading – We develop the children's reading by understanding reading, telling and acting out stories every day. Hearing stories and learning how stories are structured is one of the best ways to support the children to learn to read themselves.

Writing – The woods is the perfect place to develop early writing skills. The whole wood is a blank canvas for mark making (the first stage of writing) on the ground, on the bark of a tree or even on a large leaf. Sticks, clay, mud and water are the perfect materials and the children are presented with many opportunities to use them in this way, with support and guidance from our practitioners. Also we develop the children's phonics through songs and games.

Mathematics

Mathematics is used by the children in many different ways throughout the day. Concrete, real examples of size, quantity and shape are the best way to give children a good grasp of mathematics. At Into The Woods we develop mathematical understanding by encouraging the children to use maths in their problem solving.

Number – The children are counting all the time in the woods: counting our leaves in our buckets, counting how many conkers we need for each mud cake, counting the tadpoles in the pond, counting how many swings our friends are having on the rope swing, counting how many children are in our group today, counting how many apricots each child can have at snack time etc

Shape, space and measure – Practical measuring and learning about shapes happens all the time as, with support, the children use and develop these skills as part of many of the creative and problem solving activities they undertake. For example, *What size/length stick do we need to make a bridge across the stream or to make a bow and arrow? Who has the longest stick? How heavy is this log? How many children does it take to hold hands around this tree trunk?* Using a stick to measure: *How deep is this puddle?* And through talk the children learn about the different shapes in the woods around them. We look closely at the shapes of trees and leaves and the pattern on bark and the children use them to identify the different trees in the wood. Outdoors, in the woods, the passing of time throughout the day and the changing of seasons are very evident. We encourage the children to notice the signs of change and they develop a good understanding of time and seasons.

Understanding of the World

At Into The Woods children learn a lot about science through investigating, first hand, the natural world around them: animals, plants, the weather, the water cycle, evaporation, shadows, forces etc. At Into The Woods an area of learning we sometimes get asked about is technology – how do we teach it. Technology at Into The Woods is not often about digital devices. We do carry smart phones with us at all times and the children use them whenever they want and become very competent with them. However we have other forms of technology that the children do not use so much at home such as real tools (saws and hand drills), pulleys and binoculars and the children build up their skills in the use of these forms of technology. Use of this type of technology is excellent at developing the children's Characteristics of Effective Learning – the unusual and exciting nature of the tools, and the fact that they can be tricky to master, means that in success

has a real positive effect on their self esteem and confidence and their resilience. And the technical skills they acquire and the results they can produce lend themselves well to being applied in the children's own creative and problem solving activities – eg, using a saw to make a stick the right length, or a drill to make holes to tie objects together.

Expressive Arts and Design

We believe that the natural environment is the very best place for children to express themselves artistically. Because of our wealth of open-ended resources the children are not only free to be creative and use their imaginations, they are required to do so. Choosing to not provide closed resources and toys that usually have specific purposes means that the children must create with what they have and decide the purpose for the material or object they select. In role play, for example, a fallen tree in our camp has been a spaceship, a builders yard, a pirate ship, a factory, many different shops and restaurants with leaves as money or tickets, a video game (in which climbing up onto different height branches meant receiving more points), and many other things the children have decided on themselves. Visual art and design is also much more creative, as the children use found and selected objects and materials to create works of art in the woods. Sometimes this is adult-led, for example clay modeling of tree spirits or making journey sticks, but more often it is child initiated and truly creative with the children starting with sticks, mud, leaves, stones, string etc. This in turn encourages the design and planning aspects, as the children work out how to achieve a particular result without pens or brushes.

In summary

Our aim is that all children who have been to Into The Woods leave as confident and resilient children who are creative and imaginative problem solvers, high-level thinkers and talkers, who show a respect of the natural environment, and who are motivated to learn and are ready for their next adventure.

Policy review

Last reviewed: November 2020

Last modified: November 2020

Next review date: November 2023