A Woodland Games Guide 2014

Our village play area, the ‘Camp’, has a wooded slope where there are about 30 trees of varying sizes and varieties. We have rope swings and hammocks amongst the trees and dens within the bushy trees. We have built timber steps that help us to climb up the slope into the woodland amongst the places where we scramble up the muddy banks and tree roots.

There is also a flat part to our play area where the grass and heather is rough and bumpy. At one end we have made a large doughnut shaped mound with several tones of soil that sprouts fresh grass. And at the other end we have bench seats, herbs and fruit bushes where the grown-ups sit.
Illustrations: ‘bird’s eye view’ of camp, poster and children’s drawings of ‘Camp’

With ‘Play Wales’ trained play workers and the help of ‘Dyfodol Powys’, we have held several organized ‘play days’ at our ‘Camp’, where children of different ages from in and out of the village come to play. A play session will typically involve the following:

**Fire**

We often make use of a fire wok within the supervised semi-circle of bench seats away from the trees where the adults sit to bake coils of bread dough on sticks or to toast marshmallows. To boil a kettle for hot beverages, stew blackberry and apple crumble in a pan and sausages on a griddle. We have also learnt that by wiring together two metal sieves, it is possible to ‘pop’ pop-corn over an open fire. Our play day will often end around 2pm, so we incorporate what we have cooked into our packed lunch.
Water

We bring on to site several containers of drinking water which are used for mixing ingredients for the messy play, filling the kettle, washing up, washing hands, cleaning the camping table down, making the bread dough and for filling buckets to keep next to the fire as a safety precaution.

Tent

As a wet/windy weather alternative, we put up a tent close to the bench seats, where we provide balls of wool, sticks, clay, paint, paper, pens, etc. for messy art and crafts. We also have a large bag of dressing up clothes, scraps of material and some musical instruments. The tent proves attractive for younger children who would like to stay close to their grown-ups, but equally draws in all ages when the weather proves challenging beyond the comfort of the branch and bracken built woodland dens.
Messy wet play

A particular favourite for toddlers and all ages alike outside of the tent, is a large plastic tray full of a sloppy, globular, liquid/solid, fascinating ‘corn flour and water’. You have to try it to really understand it!

We also provide a bucket full of bubble mixture, rope wands and plastic bats (to blow giant bubbles through) made to this recipe:

12 parts water
1 part washing-up liquid (Fairy Liquid is best)
1 part corn flour
1/8 part baking powder

Illustrations: playing with corn flour and water, swishing bubbles through a plastic bat, a rope wand to make giant bubbles through.

Stuff

Then dotted about is various stuff as well as the permanently installed rope swings, hammocks and dens already mentioned:
Large plastic barrels (on flat ground) – great for rolling about and getting in and on (supervision needed)

A large length of rope – tug of war, marking boundaries for games, general play.

Large plastic sheets – impromptu shelter, general play.

Animal soft toys – children in pairs or threes, can take in in turns to hide the soft toys within the woodland, think up clues to help the seekers.

Hairy camouflage clothing – become almost invisible by wearing camouflage, within a large designated safe area, how quickly can you hide in ten seconds?

**Hanging Out/Chymdeithasu**

The play days are unpredictable in their shape and size, we have an attendance of between 10 to 30 children. Typically more than half of the group is under 7 years of age and the others are aged between 7 and 12. The age range varying the type of games and play that take place.

The younger children wait to be accompanied by to an adult or older child before they venture out into the woodland as the slope can be quite cumbersome and daunting away from the grown up hub. But once accompanied in amongst the older children, the rope swings, hammocks and the scrambling and sliding up and down the banks proves very exciting.

The older children spend time ‘hanging out’ by the rope swings/hammocks or in their now well established dens, where we have so far observed them playing invented ‘role play’ type fortress games, using pine cones as treasure and heavens knows what else! – These games are very much owned by the children, the adults are only invited in at the last straw when there is an upset.

The play days provide a good opportunity for the varying aged children to feel sustained and supported in using both the permanent and temporary play stuff provided, exploring the possibilities for play and adventure within the site, with the warm knowledge that an adult and refreshments are at hand! Having a play leader and play stuff present has helped to launch a community into a social outdoors, of fire, wind, earth, mud, rain, trees, climbing, grazed knees, etc. Where with each visit whether through a play day or not a ‘culture’ is being developed specific to our ‘Camp’ where the children and adults alike are gaining confidence to carry on from where they left off into the outdoors.
Playing contributes to the wellbeing and resilience of human beings - particularly young ones. Having welcoming places, enough time and the company of others to play with every day, is of great consequence to all children and young people - as adults we need to foster environments that support this.

The Welsh Government Play Policy (2002) defines play as follows:

*play encompasses children’s behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children, but also for the society in which they live.*

**Freely chosen** means that children themselves choose when, how and what to play. As such it is not part of a set programme and does not have any steps that need to be completed.

**Personally directed** means children themselves decide the rules and roles they take within their play.

**Intrinsically motivated** means that play is undertaken for its own sake, and not performed for any reward, certificate or status.

Play is difficult to define - it is many different types of behaviour and interactions with others and/or with environments and objects.