

Parents and Toddler Outdoor Play



Being a parent of three young boys has given me reason to consider the opportunities they have to be outdoors, what they do to connect with the natural environment and how important this might be.

I particularly remember one occasion with my oldest son when he had just started walking. We had a couple of hours to kill together and I decided we'd go for a little walk in the woods. Within a couple of minutes of setting off we came across a puddle and my wellie-clad toddler gleefully splashed through it. He then walked back to it and with a grin of satisfaction went through it again and again... and again. Rather than deciding that this was enough and urging him further on the walk "to find more puddles!" I just stood and watched. I stopped counting after 25 repetitions. We didn't actually make it past this fascinating puddle.



a good deal of excitement. However they are comfortable and relaxed being in a natural environment and it is an everyday experience, that just being outside doesn't raise the same level of exhilaration as it does in some of their outdoor deprived peers.

It is my belief that before we can begin to understand the natural environment and start to appreciate the importance of it

and eventually feel connected to it, we need to reach a level of familiarity where we no longer distracted by the novelty of it. We can still find ourselves in awe of it at times, but we are doing this from a rich background of experiences that allows us to feel part of it and not overwhelmed and separate from it.

Modern lifestyles are clearly conspiring to increase our separation from nature from a young age. By the time the time they reach adolescence it may already be too late for some to recover from certain aspects of what has been termed 'Nature Deficit Disorder'. I believe an immersion in the outdoors needs to start at an early age and become an ongoing relationship if we are to get the most from it and become properly connected with our natural environment.

As parents, we wanted our children to benefit from what we saw as the advantages of an 'outdoor lifestyle'. Since birth our children have spent a lot of time outdoors in all seasons and we have found that it is often more fun to share these experiences with another family or families. We had moved to the Forest of Dean and were dismayed to see so few other young children out in the woods enjoying one of Britain's best woodland environments. We wanted to do something about this missed opportunity for both our own young children and others. My wife Rachel had been disillusioned by traditional parent and toddler groups and became determined to create an outdoor-based one of her own. She found two other likeminded mothers and set up Forest Tots

I'm guessing that my one year old was no more OCD than is normal for one year olds, but how often do we have the time and patience to indulge children to this extent? I have no idea why it was so important, what he was learning and why it needed so many repetitions, but it did. It was also clearly great fun and I was just happy it meant he wasn't crying for his Mum. Later as I reflected on the day I realised how much more successful the day had been for both of us than had I tried to entertain him with a plastic toy.

As a professional I work with children, mostly aged 8-14, in the outdoors and it is often apparent how disconnected they are to the natural environment. Occasionally this can even manifest itself in a dislike or even fear of being out in the woods. More often it is simply shown by an over excitement and joy at being outside. As leaders we think to ourselves what a wonderful thing the outdoor environment is for children, and of course we're right, but our learnt expectations of young people's reactions is perhaps naïve. Possibly some of their reactions are symptomatic of a deprivation.

These young people could be behaving like a person who has just been let out of prison. They're experiencing something they don't often have and are revelling in the novelty. By comparison, my own three young boys now often display almost bored indifference to being outside. This not completely true – reaching the top of a hill or the discovery of a particularly good fossil or exotic looking insect can raise



a parent and toddler (P&T) group based entirely outdoors. We were able to help them by offering the Outdoor Education Centre garden as a venue, rent-free for a year to help them get established.

Forest Tots quickly became a success and started attracting up to 20 families at a session during the summer months. It got local authority funding for its ground-breaking work and effectively became a 'beacon' group for the Parent & Toddler Association (PATA). It is one of probably only four such toddler groups in the country and was the inspiration for one of these others.

After two years of operation it is perhaps worth sharing some of the key issues with a wider audience.

To start with let's be honest – Forest Tots isn't everyone's cup of tea. There have been plenty of parents (mostly mothers, as is the case with most P&T groups) who have come once and not returned. They have obviously not felt comfortable with what it involves. It is interesting to note that their toddlers on the other hand have generally had a great time at this one off visit. They've got muddy and possibly completely soaked to the skin in the stream - what more could a toddler wish for?! Mum on the other hand was possibly not so happy with this outcome.

This theme perhaps extends into another group of fair-weather parents who come in the warm

sunshine but stay home if the weather is bad. A few hardy families however last in all weathers and this is part of their reason for coming – it forces them to get out even in the cold and rain and make the commitment to be outdoors with others.

One of the parents writes: *"It's during the wintery weather that I most value FT's, when otherwise we would probably opt to stay indoors. Having others to get blown about with and wet with makes being outdoors all the more fun!"*

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Another mum also takes up this theme *"It is definitely the winter months when Forest Tots becomes a life saver for me, getting me and the girls out, knowing I will meet a like-minded soul to share the afternoon with."*

Despite this, during the winter months only a hardcore four or five families come each week, the others presumably put off by the weather. Things are now a little more comfortable for them since we built a roundhouse shelter for them in the Centre garden. Play is still predominately outside but at least there is somewhere out of the wind and rain to change a nappy or do a full change of clothing if they become soaked. As long as they are clothed properly for the conditions, the Toddlers (and their parents) still have a great time. It seems however that it is the adult's perception of the weather and associated enjoyment that prevents more families continuing to come.

Possibly another off putting aspect for some parents is 'risky play'. This is something that is a key element to the ethos of Forest Tots. Toddlers are allowed to wade into the stream and pond, clamber over logs and under bushes and prod sticks into a raised bonfire. Surprisingly, for some, no toddlers have yet burnt themselves and there have been no notable accidents. Indeed it is probable that more accidents occur in the confined spaces of an indoor playgroup where toddlers bump into one another. (*)

One parent who has been bringing her daughter for two years states: *"One of the things that has really stood out for me at forest tots is the acceptance of risk and in turn allowing the children to assess and manage the risks of the site. There aren't many places where very young children are given the freedom to explore and learn about their environment in a relaxed way."*



Another similarly says of her three year old daughter: *"It's been great to see her interacting with the outdoors with no fear and being allowed to run free range within the site."*

Forest Tots isn't trying to be Forest Schools and there are some differences. Plastic toys are allowed – they make great things to float down the stream and provide a 'transition' to attract some toddlers (and their parents) into playing outdoors. Some sessions have a loose structure with some props and ideas to facilitate activity but the overall philosophy is child centred free play within the available outdoor environment.

Just as with my puddle and toddler experience you don't actually need much to keep toddlers fully engaged and exploring their outdoor environment. The small shallow stream in the Centre grounds is probably the biggest draw and I would suggest is almost indispensable to the success of Forest Tots. Water play appears to hold a massive attraction to toddlers that they don't tire of week after week. It also links well to peripheral activities such as a 'Mud Kitchen' with pots and pans and just playing with mud generally.

So what do the toddlers get from these activities?

Mum Debbie states: *"I suppose it's the opportunity for them to be children in a world which often limits them (with all good intentions to protect them) while denying them the opportunity to develop the skills to protect themselves."*

Sally says the following regarding her two year old son: *"We found that traditional playgroups in church halls and alike were restrictive. He couldn't run around, climb and explore instead he played with the same toys every week and had to remain calm and quiet. Since joining Forest tots he has not only had a*



tremendous amount of fun but is actually calmer because he can be himself."

Georgia believes her son gets to *"see that the natural environment is FUN!"* and that Forest Tots is *"an exciting place to play, with no (or far fewer) rules."*

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Helena comments: *"It's hard as an adult to quantify what she gets out of it - apart from sheer unqualified joy! She's enjoyed playing in the stream, pond and bridges, with the slopes and ropes and especially in mud! She's gained confidence from this in both her own abilities and her ability to persuade others to join in!"*

This limited case study of an organised outdoor play group for parents and toddlers is encouraging in terms of the perceived benefits but it also brings to attention the fact that there is a very little provision of its type available and presumably very little demand. The evidence suggests that many parents are put off attending such a group by their own perceptions of the outdoors and the weather. Could this be because they didn't have enough experience of being outdoors from a young age themselves?

Overall I'm still left with as many questions as answers. How much outdoor play do most toddlers or children get? How much of this play is in a natural environment as opposed to just outside in a garden or play park for example? Why don't more families get outdoors regularly together and what is the situation likely to be twenty years from now? What are the long term effects of not engaging in play in a natural environment during childhood? What are the political implications for the natural environment in coming generations if as a society we lose our connection with the natural world? There's a PhD thesis in all of this for someone someday.... ■

Author Biog



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Photographs by Rachel Healey

Forest Tots <https://sites.google.com/site/forestofdeanoutdoorplaygroup/home>

Getting insurance wasn't initially straightforward as some potential insurers wanted 'the leader' to be Level 3 Forest Schools. It took a bit of work to explain that the supervision of children in any P & T group is a cooperative exercise between parents rather than a 'led' activity as in nursery situations. In the end insurance was found and the necessary risk assessments and safety policies etc. put into place.

It is worth mentioning the influence of the group beyond a few local families. The website and Facebook page have had many international 'Likes' and reaches several hundred people on each post. Social networking may well yet prove to have the greatest overall influence and Rachel has subsequently also set up a closed Face Book Group called "Everyday Outdoor Play 2013" which has many followers who share what they've been up to outdoors as a family. This mutual sharing of ideas and experiences acts as useful inspiration and helps motivate us and other families to find new ways to enjoy the outdoors.