

Shaping a balanced perception of forestry from a young age

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RFS Teaching Trees

Ask any class of children “Should we cut down trees?” and you’ll get the same answers. “No, cutting down trees is bad. We need trees to breathe”, or “Deforestation is wrong, we need homes for the animals”,

But dig a little deeper and you’ll discover that the nearest that most classes have come to learning about forestry is when they learned about the destruction of the Amazon. Children are passionate about the environment and climate change, they want to do the right thing, most have just never considered the contribution that sustainable forestry and woodland management makes to our economy and to tackling climate change rather than exacerbating the problem.

Teaching Trees Programme

The Royal Forestry Society’s Teaching Trees programme has been working with schools across England and Wales for over 20 years. Our team of Education Officers teach children about the value of well managed woodlands and, increasingly, the contribution that sustainable forestry can make to tackling the climate emergency.

In an average year, we welcome around 10,000 children on a visit to a local woodland. They take part in a wide variety of activities and games which introduce them to woodlands



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and woodland management. For a surprising number it may be the first time that they’ve ever been in a real woodland and they expect to see bears, wolves and even monkeys as their ideas are based on stories and films, not real-life experience. Thanks to a number of grants and generous donors, we keep our visits entirely free and even offer travel bursaries to schools from the most disadvantaged communities who may not be able to afford the cost of coach travel to a woodland.

Getting the message across

One of the simplest ways for us to communicate the importance of sustainable forestry is to take a basket of objects with us that are made from wood or wood products. Once the children have been welcomed to the forest with a few warm-up and exploration games, we’ll ask them to see if they can find some objects that we’ve hidden in the learning area and which shouldn’t normally be in a woodland. As they spread out, they’ll find things such as a wooden spoon, some children’s toys, a piece of timber for building and some curtain rings. We’ll ask them what they think the items are for (never assume they know!) and then what they would be made from if they weren’t made from wood.

We talk about the importance of wood as one of the lowest carbon options for building new homes and the way in which carbon can be locked up for hundreds of years with items made from sustainable timber. Not only a low carbon option, we also talk about which would last longest in landfill and the harm that microplastics can cause to our ecosystems. Sustainable forestry might not be something that children knew about but low carbon and biodegradable solutions are things they have heard about at school.

As well as talking about timber in general, we also talk about the importance of locally grown, ethical timber providing jobs in the local area and having a smaller carbon footprint than wood that has been shipped from thousands of miles away. In our “Forester’s Challenge” we work with the children to calculate the volume of timber being grown in the woodland that they are visiting and how much they might be able to harvest from a thinning operation. In this way, we encourage the children to perceive foresters as ‘tree farmers’. They understand the ethics of growing wheat or oats to eat, they might have visited a local farm shop or have parents who seek out independent suppliers for other household items. We talk about why it’s important that forestry happens in their local area and that the timber they need isn’t just shipped in from thousands of miles away. Foresters as tree farmers then cease to be part of the problem of deforestation and part of the solution to sustainable production tackling the climate emergency.



TEACHING TREES

Teaching Trees is paid for by generous donations from our supporters. You can help to keep Teaching Trees free for the schools who need it the most by making a donation or purchasing one of our gifts for a friend or loved one. To support our work and help children understand the importance of forestry, please visit www.rfs.org.uk/support-us/donate



People working in a forest (Illustration by Annie, 6)

GET INVOLVED

How can the industry communicate this message to more schools?

On a weekly basis, we'll see messages in social media asking if anyone knows how they can find a woodland local to them to use for education. If you have a woodland that you would welcome visitors to, try emailing local schools or post through community social media groups to see if anyone is interested in visiting your woodland with their own staff and children. You'll need to have public liability insurance in place and conduct a site survey to check that there

aren't any dangerous trees before the children arrive but the rest can be up to the school. Many schools now have trained forest school leaders on their staff and would love the opportunity to explore somewhere beyond their school grounds with their children. Alternatively, if you're in one of the areas of England and Wales where we have an Education Officer, do get in touch if you'd like to offer your woodland for use.

www.rfs.org.uk/learning/teaching-trees-age-3-14/where-are-we/meet-the-team/

If you'd like to diversify your business and lead educational groups in a woodland yourself then there are a range of training courses to choose from to

equip you. We offer accredited Outdoor Learning Practitioner training courses where you can learn how to teach all ages in a woodland environment and with activities as diverse as maths, art and even philosophy. This course also covers how to risk assess a woodland for use by school groups and the steps you'll need to take to make it safe and enjoyable for all. If you'd like to lead activities including tools or fire then we'd recommend choosing a trainer approved by the Forest School Association to deliver Level 3 Forest School training. Details are available here:

www.forestschoollassociation.org/find-a-forest-school-trainer/#!directory/map