

# Transformative learning in nature

*An educational pilot programme at Hazel Hill Wood*

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I am an arts and nature education practitioner, working with children and adults to promote connection, health and wellbeing. Working in an education outreach role for Hazel Hill Conservation Woodland near Salisbury, I co-ordinated the Transformative learning in nature programme for local groups in 2015/16, which aimed to build resilience and wellbeing through dedicated time in nature. [www.louisaclarkartsed.co.uk](http://www.louisaclarkartsed.co.uk).

*Louisa Clark*

Through my work as a collaborative project facilitator I try to invigorate and accompany individuals and groups to grow into their full potential. I took over the co-ordination of the Transformative learning in nature programme from Louisa Clark early this year.

*Daniel Körner*

*The following article addresses the more and more recognised positive impacts of outdoor and nature education activities for children and youth. As an example of such educational work, the Transformative learning in nature pilot programme at Hazel Hill Wood in Wiltshire and three visits of local groups at the wood are presented. A closer look is taken at the specific activities with the children in and with the wood, and learnings, outcomes and feedbacks from both the children as well as the respective carers is discussed.*

## Introduction

The positive benefits of time in nature, especially for children, has been widely researched in the last two decades and more and more actions are taken to accommodate these findings. We find activities of naturalising outdoor learning environments and an increased inclusion of outdoor activities into curricula across the country (eg Nicol *et al*, 2007). Spending time in nature has been proven to have a wide range of health benefits both for people with specific conditions like ADHD (see Taylor *et al*, 2001) as well as generally for every human being, young and old (see [www.childrenandnature.org/](http://www.childrenandnature.org/) research-library for a collection of research articles on this theme).

Some of the biggest and best researched benefits of connecting children and youth with nature are:

- positive stimulation of social interaction between children (Moore, 1986, Bixler *et al*, 2002)
- higher scores on tests of concentration and self-discipline. (Wells, 2000, Taylor *et al*, 2002)

- children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including co-ordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Grahn *et al*, 1997, Fjortoft and Sageie, 2000)
- buffering the impact of life's stresses and helps them deal with adversity (Wells and Evans, 2003)
- positive impact on cognitive development by improving children's awareness, reasoning and observational skills (Pyle, 2002).

In this article we want to introduce the work with young people that has been done over the last two years at Hazel Hill Wood, a conservation woodland retreat centre in Wiltshire.

The outdoors at Hazel Hill Wood provide a wide array of opportunities to create transformative learning experiences and bring some of the above benefits into the children's lives. Some require careful design and facilitation, whereas others simply arise from being outdoors.



## The Transformative Learning in Nature pilot

Hazel Hill Trust is a registered charity which took over the ownership and operation of Hazel Hill Wood in July 2015.

The overall aim and vision of the Trust is to promote wellbeing, resilience and sustainability: for individuals, society and the natural world. Enabling people to engage more deeply with nature, especially woodlands, is a major means of fulfilling this aim. A key focus is to extend the benefits of the wood to different groups, particularly local ones, and to this aim the Transformative Learning in Nature (TLiN) education pilot was launched.

The TLiN pilot ran from October 2015 to May 2016. Its main objectives were to engage local groups with the wood and cause positive impact through conservation and wellbeing activities, and to evaluate this work to develop a case for future sustainable funding for projects and programmes that aligned with local priorities, groups and organisations.

Key outcomes for the programme were that participants would:

- become more confident spending time outdoors in nature
- start to spend more time outdoors, using time in nature in a positive way to help cope with stress
- find better ways to cope with challenging situations in their lives.

It also sought to teach participants new conservation and creative skills and knowledge, and connect with local groups for future visits.

There was not originally a focus on age range or background for the local groups approached, however participants were mostly young people, ranging from 5 to 14 years old (the only exception was a group of older men from the Alzheimer's Society who visited for conservation work and social cohesion time). The rest of the visiting groups included two primary schools, a young carers group, and the local guides and brownies group. All the groups fed back that the experience had been a positive one, with at least three very keen to continue a relationship with the wood.

The visits varied in duration, from a half day to an overnight, and were led by members of the Hazel Hill education team and education freelancers, bringing a wide range of skills and activities including conservation, bushcraft, wellbeing, mindfulness and creativity.

To measure impact, and help shape future programmes, each visit was evaluated, with the methods tailored for each group.

## Group outcome

As the groups taking part in the pilot mainly involved young people, we have been able to see the impact of the time spent in nature. Details of each group follows, looking at their preconceptions, experience on the day, and where available the impact. This work is ongoing and benefits may take time to be seen. However, we are sure that this work of connecting young people to nature, will have positive outcomes to their wellbeing.

The groups covered here are: Young Carers – Youth Action Wiltshire, Winterslow C of E Primary School, and Pitton and Farley Guides and Brownies.

### Young Carers – Youth Action Wiltshire

The Wiltshire Young Carers Service sits within Youth Action Wiltshire, and has been running since 1999 with over 500 young carers across the county. The small Salisbury based group was approached about TLiN and was very keen to make a connection.

Fifteen young people came, ranging from five to eight years old. The perspectives from the youngest age to the eldest were quite different, however staff fed back that all were looking forward to the visit, with many enjoying being in nature but not getting much time to spend outdoors due to their caring commitments. They were excited to try something new and go on an overnight visit as a group; some of them had never been away from home before.

The group wanted an overnight stay as this would really give the children some space from their caring responsibilities, and a chance to immerse themselves into the natural environment.



## Activities

On the day, after an introduction, lunch, and a game, the first activity was a conservation one; to plant several holly bushes, and during this to learn how woodlands work. Then, after a break, the group went on a mini beast hunt, made insect houses and looked for footprints in the wood. After this the children worked on evaluation, drew pictures and played indoors while the staff prepared food. After supper, the group went out to the roundhouse with torches, and a fire was lit. Stories were told in the circle, with each child making up a bit of the story.

The following day the group took part in a natural art activity by foraging in the wood and making mobiles and stick people from what they found. The final session was about resilience tools and using nature to become calm, followed by a short relaxation/mindfulness activity.

## What was most successful?

The children were very excited to be at the wood and wanted to play and explore, but also really enjoyed the activities that were offered to them. Some of the most successful were the active ones, such as the mini beast hunt and looking for footprints in the wood, as they got to release a little energy and be outdoors. The storytelling game in the evening was also a huge success, with their creative ideas coming to the forefront. Making the mobiles and stick people was a favourite activity too, and gave the group some quieter time for relaxation.

## What could be improved?

With such a span of ages, excitement and behavioural needs in the group, some of the more focused and indoor activities were quite challenging to deliver. More time outside for free play and exploration would be great, balanced with staff responsibilities for safety and care.

## Outcomes

*'The best thing was for them to have the chance to be young people with nature. Thank you for a brilliant residential, they all had a wonderful time.'*

Alan Burke, group co-leader

Many of the children said they most enjoyed the bug hunt and making insect homes, planting the holly, playing games in the woods and the storytelling. The majority said they wouldn't change anything, and that they'd like to do more of the same, plus to climb trees! They loved the sleepover, although a few missed home, which wasn't expected, but they were quite young and for some it was a first trip away.

## Winterslow C of E Primary School

Winterslow is a small school close to the wood. We contacted the head teacher about taking part in the pilot and although they hadn't visited the wood before, they



were immediately interested. The school was scheduled for the first to visit in the TLiN programme, choosing to bring one class of children aged 7/8, for two half days.

None of the children had visited Hazel Hill before and, along with the teachers, were excited to get out of the classroom and into the woods for the morning. The majority said they already enjoyed spending time outside in nature, although a couple said they felt a bit scared of woods and forests generally because they were dark, and 'scary things' may be in there.

When asked what they were looking forward to and what they thought they'd see or do at Hazel Hill a lot said they wanted to build dens, see animals, particularly owls and foxes, make a campfire, climb trees, learn about surviving in the wild, and for one, find a fairy village!

The teachers mentioned that they hoped the visit would inspire the children's imaginations and story-writing skills. They also wanted the children to spend some quiet, reflective time in nature, supporting their ability to cope with stress and increase wellbeing.

## Activities

In the conservation activities, they practised how to safely make fires in the roundhouse, went on an animal hunt, and found out about sustainable living. They also learnt the names of the trees around them and discovered how the forest and nature is interconnected.

The wellbeing/creativity activities brought them into a circle where they introduced themselves and became their favourite animal. They then took part in a sensory walk into the woods, and learnt about being quiet for relaxation, and to have more of a chance to see wildlife. After this they created mini forest dens for little animals or fairies.



### What was most successful?

The children seemed to really respond to Hazel Hill staff and enjoyed meeting new people. They were very keen to get involved in the walks, fire lighting, and den building, and playing a 'build a tree' game at the end of the session. Working with two smaller groups worked well, keeping the energy focused. Also, the timings of the sessions worked well.

### What could be improved?

It would have been good to have more time for the children to explore further in the woods. They only ventured into the Heartwood for the mini den building and from comments made at the time would have benefited from a longer walk and adventure into the 'wild'.

### Outcomes

*'It has been magical watching the children being free, exploring and imaginative.'*

Lynn Fortis, Year 3 teacher

After the visit, the children wrote stories called *The Night the Woods Came Alive*, inspired by the animal/fairy dens they had made. Developing imaginative writing was a direct educational outcome for the school, and they were all really pleased that this had been achieved. They also created 'how to behave and respect the woods' posters.

The teachers felt the children had benefited from time to be still and use all the senses to experience the natural environment around them. Using natural materials to be creative and working collaboratively with others were also key outcomes.

### **Pitton and Farley guides and brownies**

This local guides and brownies group is well-established and attended by local girls aged 7 to 14. The group hadn't visited the wood before, but responded to the opportunity with enthusiasm. Due to the size of the whole group, it was agreed that the 16 guides would come one day, and the 18 brownies another.

Although they didn't really know what to expect, both groups were very excited about coming to Hazel Hill. Most of the girls already spent quite a bit of time out in nature. Many said that they had dogs which they walked in woods, and some had ridden horses or bikes in woods. Most also lived in villages so were out in nature regularly, and a couple said that they enjoyed spending time 'out in the wild'. When asked what it was they thought/felt about woodlands and forests, the girl responded, 'We love them and think they are important for nature'.

Nicki, the group leader, was keen for the girls to learn more about conservation and biodiversity in the wood, along with sustainability, as these were areas that they hadn't experienced previously. Nicki also asked that a small group of the older guides took part in an extra activity to gain their challenge badge.

### Activities

The guides started with animal tracking and time in the woods, learning about the animals, insects, birds, trees and plants that survive there. They also learnt about conservation and sustainable living, including off-grid practices like the compost toilets. In the afternoon they built shelters in the woods, and then made outdoor collages with natural materials found on the ground. They finished with an outdoor game.

For the challenge badge, a small group of the guides took part in extra conservation activities and learnt about the maintenance of the woodland.

The brownies started their day by learning about compost toilets and off-grid living. They then made fires using knives to scrape birch bark as a natural firelighter. These resulted in building quite big fires, which was exciting for the girls and a new experience. They then went on an animal hunt, and learnt which animals live in the woods by being led to find their droppings. Following this the group made bug homes and outdoor collages. To end the day, they also played games in the wood.

### What was most successful?

The guides said they most enjoyed their shelter-building, and the brownies loved making the bug homes and their animal hunt. All the girls fed back that they really enjoyed being outside for the day in a quiet environment and finding out about the animals and bugs that lived in the wood through the trails and tracking. Both groups also enjoyed the games and natural picture-making.

### What could be improved?

The main feedback was that more time would have been good for exploring further in the woods and more activities, games and free outdoor time.



## Outcomes

*'The girls all really enjoyed the freedom of wandering around the woods without being overly restricted to paths.'*

Nicki McCarney, group leader

Many of the girls said that they wouldn't change anything about their visit, other than having longer, with some adding they would have liked an overnight stay, marshmallows around the fire, and to see more animals. The guides also said they were interested in a 'survival-themed' day in the wood, and the brownies would love to do some pond-dipping and shelter building.

## Conclusion

Working with these three groups of on the Transformative Learning in Nature pilot has given some great insight and tangible outcomes of the benefit of time in nature for young people. Taking learning, exploration, creativity and wellbeing outdoors, seems to only enhance its impact, and offer much more to the development of the whole person and the group. We will be staying in touch with these groups to monitor the impact, and look forward to welcoming them, and others, back to the wood to build on this work.

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## Conferences to look out for

### Plant medicine: does nature have more tools for modern health needs?

Thursday 8 June 2017, London

- An opportunity to join an international line up of physicians, researchers, clinicians, and pharmacists, to introduce a new evidence base for potential health service benefits of herbal medicines, culinary spices and plant food ingredients. The day will focus on practical, safe and effective self-care prospects. [www.collegeofmedicine.org.uk/events/#!/event/2017/6/8/plant-medicine-conferencedoes-nature-have-more-tools-for-modern-health-needs](http://www.collegeofmedicine.org.uk/events/#!/event/2017/6/8/plant-medicine-conferencedoes-nature-have-more-tools-for-modern-health-needs)

### Social prescribing: from rhetoric to reality

Monday 8 May 2017, London

- Social prescribing, sometimes described as community referral, allows primary care professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services. But does it work? And how does it fit in with wider health and care policy? This one-day event, run in partnership between The King's Fund, the Social Prescribing Network and the College of Medicine, seeks to answer these questions. The Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt MP, will give you his views on social prescribing and how he plans to support it. [www.kingsfund.org.uk/events/social-prescribing](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/events/social-prescribing)

### Transformative innovations in health: a gathering of change-makers

Saturday 18 November 2017, London

- The neatness of medical science is unravelling. 20th century medicine focused on smaller and smaller parts with astonishing success: triumphant in infections, deficiency diseases, with surgical excisions and transplants, intensive care and anaesthetics. But 21st century medicine is confronting whole person (indeed whole society) problems: chronic degenerative and inflammatory diseases, stress-, environment- and lifestyle-mediated diseases, addictions and psychological disorders. Bio-technical single-solution approaches won't cure them. If, as has been said, the future is already with us but unevenly distributed, where might we find seeds of the new paradigm? This working conference, jointly hosted by Westminster Centre for Resilience, the Scientific and Medical Network and the BHMA, will bring change-makers together to celebrate the future. Speakers and workshops to be announced soon so keep an eye on:

[www.centreforresilience.co.uk](http://www.centreforresilience.co.uk)  
<https://explore.scimednet.org>  
<https://bhma.org>