



Michaelchurch Escley Primary and Preschool Outdoor Learning and Forest School Handbook



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1. What is Outdoor Learning at Michaelchurch?

At Michaelchurch Escley Primary, we believe that outdoor learning is a powerful tool that enriches children's education. By taking learning beyond the classroom, we allow children to engage with the natural environment, which fosters curiosity, creativity, and a deeper connection to the world around them. Outdoor learning offers hands-on experiences that support intellectual, social, and emotional growth while promoting a love for nature.

Outdoor learning is not limited to specific sessions like Forest School—it is woven throughout our curriculum. Whether through science, where children study local ecosystems, or maths, where outdoor activities help them understand measurements and patterns, the outdoors becomes an extension of the classroom. This holistic approach ensures that children not only learn academic subjects but also develop resilience, problem-solving skills, and the ability to work collaboratively.

2. What is Forest School at Michaelchurch?

2.1 Forest School Vision Statement

We are proud of our Forest School at Michaelchurch Escley. At Michaelchurch we offer a unique teaching and learning experience in an everchanging environment, capturing children's curiosity, stimulating their senses, building their self-confidence and nurturing their well-being. Children learn new skills and then apply these as they navigate their own learning journeys and develop a deeper connection with nature. Forest School takes a holistic approach to learning and the benefits are intellectual, physical, cognitive and emotional.

Our school motto – BE CURIOUS!

2.2 What is Forest School?

Forest School is an educational approach that takes learning outdoors, allowing children to experience nature firsthand. It began in Scandinavia in the 1950s and spread to the UK in the 1990s. It's based on the belief that playing and exploring in nature leads to children developing self-esteem, independence, and better social skills.

At Forest School, children engage in activities that let them explore the natural world. They learn to take risks, problem-solve, work together, and develop practical outdoor skills like building shelters, identifying plants and wildlife, and using tools safely.

2.3 The History of Forest School

The origins of Forest Schools extends as far back as the 19th century. Philosophers and educators including Montessori, Steiner and Froebel all promoted the importance of children accessing the outdoor environment and the importance to children's wellbeing and education. Montessori explains the importance by suggesting being in the outdoors can "satisfy the psychological needs of the body" (Montessori 2017) by allowing children to breathe fresh air, treasure living nature and develop respect for plants and animals.

This ethos did continue into the 20th century with the introduction of the scouts and outdoor education centres for children to experience the outdoors first hand. But as education developed, the idea that more classroom-based lessons were more important for preparing children for the adult world developed and less thought and consideration was given to letting children explore and understand the outdoor environment.

Fast forward another 20 years and the concept of Forest Schools as we know it was introduced in England. The idea of Forest Schools was first introduced and used in Scandinavia in the 1980 because of insufficient indoor space for children of pre-school age. In the early 90s a group of nursery nurses and lecturers visited a variety of different settings in Sweden and discovered the benefits of a more outdoor based education than the children were receiving in England.

On their return to the UK these practitioners decided to develop their own form of outdoor education programs and training and called it Forest Schools. Forest schools is now nationwide and is adopted as a form of education in many counties across the UK.

2.4 Principles of Forest School

The Long-Term Principle: Forest School is a long-term process of frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaptation, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School. At Michaelchurch, across the school children have a weekly two-hour forest school session on a Friday afternoon.

The Nature Principle: Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world. At Michaelchurch, we use our 'Spinney' and local area.

The Risk Principle: Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves. At Michaelchurch, we promote an understanding of risks so children can confidently take them when they feel ready.

The Holistic Learning Principle: Forest School supports the development of resilient, confident, independent, and creative learners. At Michaelchurch, we aim to enhance physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic skills.

The Leadership Principle: Forest School is run by qualified Practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional Practice. At Michaelchurch, we continuous provide training and professional development opportunities to staff. Some staff are Level 3 Forest School trained.

The Community Principle: Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning. At Michaelchurch, we follow child-led session where children's ideas shape the planning and activities.

2.5 Forest School Routines

At Michaelchurch Escley, we follow a structured plan to ensure every Forest School session runs smoothly and safely, while keeping it fun and engaging for the children. Here's what you can expect from a typical session:

Before the Session:

- The leader carefully plans the session and prepares all necessary resources.
- A risk assessment is carried out on the day, checking factors like weather, ground conditions, and temperature to make any adjustments if needed.
- First aid kits, medication, and all safety equipment are made ready for the session.

During the Session:

1. Getting Ready: Children put on their outdoor clothing and boots, ready to head out.
2. Walk to The Spinney: We walk to our Forest School site for the session, observing and discussing what we see in nature along the way.
3. Base Camp: Once at base camp, we gather in a circle to talk about the day's rules and safety points.
5. Activities: The Leader introduces the main activity or reminds the children of previous ones. Children are then free to choose what they'd like to explore.
7. Snack Time: If it's snack time, we return to base camp for a snack and drink. Wet wipes are provided to clean hands first.
8. Reflection: At the end of the session, we gather to discuss what we enjoyed and learned, giving the children a chance to share their experiences.
9. Heading Back: After counting all the children, we return to school. The children then change out of their outdoor clothes and wash their hands thoroughly.

After the Session:

- All equipment and resources are tidied away, ensuring the Forest School area is left as we found it.
- If we had a fire, we make sure it's fully extinguished.
- All tools are counted and safely stored away.

3 Preschool

At Michaelchurch Escley Preschool, we are deeply committed to fostering a love for the outdoors in our youngest learners. As part of this commitment, the preschool children participate in weekly Forest School sessions that align with the values and guidelines outlined in this handbook. These sessions provide a rich, hands-on learning experience where children can explore the natural environment, cultivate curiosity, and develop essential life skills.

Our preschoolers love getting outside, and we believe that regular outdoor education is invaluable for their emotional, social, and intellectual development. By immersing them in nature, we support their ability to problem-solve, take calculated risks, and build resilience—essential components of our ethos.

4 What do we do at Michaelchurch?

At Michaelchurch Escley, children experience a wide range of activities at Forest School, such as:

Exploring Nature: Identifying plants, wildlife, and learning about ecosystems.

Shelter Building: Working as a team to create shelters using natural materials, building dens, nests and habitats.

Tool Use: Learning to use tools safely under supervision, like saws and knives.

Campfires: Building and cooking over a fire, while learning fire safety.

Crafts and Creative Play: Using natural materials to create art and engage in imaginative play.

Outdoor Learning at Michaelchurch is woven throughout our curriculum covering a broad and breath range, such as:

Science: Studying ecosystems, plant growth, seasonal changes, weather patterns.

Geography: map reading, identifying landforms, finding the source of a river, understanding the effects of extreme weather, exploring the local area and identifying features.

History: Exploring local history and landmarks, re-enacting historical events like battles, visualise timelines, drama, making crowns to become historical kings.

English: Creative writing, storytelling, drama, phonics

Art: create art inspired by different artists, using clay, charcoal, using a range of media

DT: building structures, creating seasonal dishes over a fire learning about food production, seasonal availability and local produce.

5 Where do we do this?

Some of our Forest School sessions take place in 'The Spinney', a dedicated woodland area located just off our main field. This fenced, natural space features a variety of engaging environments for the children to explore. Inside, you'll find a sheltered area, a log circle for gatherings, and a carefully managed fire pit, where our campfires and cooking activities happen. A stream meanders through the site, forming a shallow pond with a pontoon for the children to observe and interact with the water safely. The Spinney is rich with trees, wildlife, and natural resources, making it a great place to be curious!

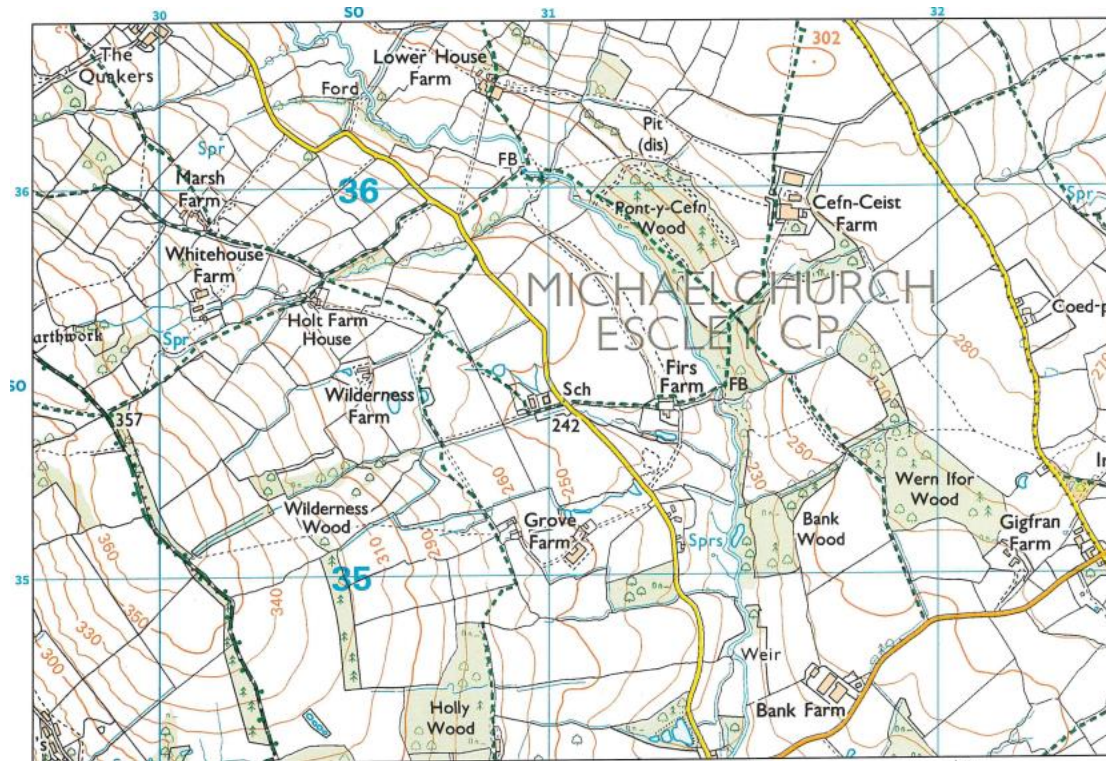
OS Map

Grid Reference – SO3092835419



In addition to our on-site sessions at The Spinney, some of our Forest School adventures take place off-site in the surrounding local area. A firm favourite with the children is our visits to Elkie's Wood, a beautiful woodland just a short walk away. Rich with towering trees and diverse wildlife, Elkie's Wood offers a larger

space for exploration and deeper connection with nature. Other features in our local area include ponds, streams, hills, wildlife, and wood blocks. Please see the map below of our local area.



6 Essential Equipment List

- Medication for children for example inhaler, EpiPen.
- Mobile phone with school numbers on and school radio
- First aid kit
- A bigger first aid kit stays in the forest school resource shed in the Spinney on and can be transported to the local area if needed in an incident. It includes items such as sleeping bag, thermal wrap, carrier bags for wet or dirty clothes.

7 Clothing List (for everyone - staff, children, adult helpers)

- Woolly hat/sun hat
- Gloves
- Jacket/waterproof coat
- Fleece/sweatshirt (tops must be long sleeved)
- Long trousers
- Spare socks
- Stout shoes/wellies/boots
- An emergency change of clothes and a bag for dirty/wet clothing

10. Toileting Considerations

- Children will be encouraged to go to the toilet before leaving school

- Once in the Spinney the children will be allowed to use the toilet facilities in Escley Side Hall, or at school, depending on the age of the child either by themselves, in a pair or with an adult.
- Alternatively, the children can have a 'Wild Wee' when on off-site sessions.

11. Extreme Weather

At Forest School, we embrace all types of weather, but safety always comes first. We try to get out whatever the weather however, there are at times when we cannot do this due to safety concerns. Here's how we manage extreme weather conditions at Michaelchurch.

Sunny Weather Conditions

Sun Protection: Children should wear long-sleeved tops, trousers, and sun hats to protect their skin from the sun.

Applying Sun Cream: Before heading to Forest School, children apply their own sun cream. Each child's sun cream is labelled and can be brought to the session for reapplication if needed.

Backup Sun Cream: If a child forgets their sun cream, we keep school sun cream on hand to ensure they are protected.

Staying Hydrated: We encourage children to bring water bottles to keep hydrated throughout the session.

Seeking Shade: The Spinney offers natural shade from trees, and a tarpaulin shelter is set up at base camp. We teach children the importance of sun safety and encourage them to use the natural shade during the hottest parts of the day.

Rain or Cold Weather Conditions

Cold Weather Gear: Children will be dressed warmly in layers, including waterproof coats, gloves, hats, and long trousers. Waterproof boots or wellies are essential to keep feet dry.

Staying Warm: We ensure children stay warm by keeping them moving with physical activities like den building or exploring.

Managing Wet Conditions: In rainy weather, we continue the session unless conditions become unsafe (such as heavy flooding or excessive mud). Children should wear waterproof jackets, trousers, and boots to keep dry. If needed, we will adjust the activities to ensure they can be done safely in wet conditions.

Back-Up Plan: If the rain becomes too heavy or the temperature drops too much, we may shorten the session and return to school early. We will always keep an eye on the forecast.

Windy Weather Conditions

High Winds Precautions: If wind speeds are above 39 mph, Forest School sessions will be cancelled due to the risk of falling branches and unstable trees. We prioritize the children's safety and will not allow outdoor activities in dangerously high winds. We will do an alternative activity linked to a Forest School theme however indoors.

Monitoring Wind Conditions: If moderate winds are forecast, we will continuously monitor the weather during the session. In areas with trees, we educate children about the risks and remind them to stay clear of trees or branches that appear unstable.

Alternative Activities: If strong winds occur unexpectedly during a session, we will gather the children and move to a sheltered area or return to school if needed.

Snowy Weather Conditions

Dressing for Snow: Children need to be dressed in multiple warm layers, including waterproof jackets, snow boots, hats, scarves, and gloves to protect against the cold and wet.

Managing Snowy Conditions: Snow can make sessions even more fun with activities like snowball games, tracking footprints, and learning about how the environment changes in winter. However, we ensure children are kept warm through regular movement and fire if appropriate.

Icy Conditions: If the ground is too icy and poses a risk of slips and falls, we may adjust the activities to safer areas or cancel the session if conditions are hazardous.

Shortened Sessions: In very cold conditions, we may shorten the session and return to school early to ensure all children stay safe and comfortable.

12. Roles and Responsibilities

All staff and volunteers will have familiarised themselves with this handbook and signed the declaration (see appendix 3).

Leader

- Help the children prepare for the session, checking they have appropriate clothing, footwear etc.
- Responsible for dynamic risk assessment on the day of the session for example weather and ground conditions etc.
- Responsible for making sure the correct resources are taken to the session i.e. First Aid Kit, phone and radio, medication for children or staff.
- Plan and run the session
- Responsible for completing Risk Assessment for each activity and making sure relevant safety procedures are followed (use of tools, fire).

Additional staff/ adults

- Help the children prepare for the session, checking they have appropriate clothing, footwear etc.
- Bring resources for snack time to site i.e. food, drink, water for hand washing if applicable.
- During session supervise the children by the stream
- In case of an emergency supervise the children when 3,2,1 Come Back is used to gather children
- In the event of illness or injury to the Forest School Leader follow the emergency procedures set out in this handbook.
- Take the children to the toilet when required

13. Legislation Related to Policies and Procedures

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- Children's Act 1989
- Liability Insurance
- Equality Act 2010

14. Links to School Policies

Our policies are designed to reflect all aspects of our community including Forest School. These are available upon request from our school office and on our school website www.michaelchurchprimary.co.uk

The key policies are:

- Michaelchurch Escley Privacy Notice
- Educational Visits
- SEND Policy
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Prevent, Extremism & Radicalisation Policy
- Behaviour Management Policy
- Equality Policy
- Accessibility Plan
- Lock down Procedures

15. Rules of Forest School/ Outdoor Learning:

- Look after your Forest School
- Do not pick anything growing
- Do not put your fingers or anything else in your mouth
- Stay within the boundaries

No Pick, No Lick and Stop at the Boundary

16. Fire Procedure

Campfires are an important part of Forest School and are used in many sessions. We aim to ensure that all children and adults participating in Forest School sessions with fires will do so safely and with as little risk to their health as possible. We have an established fire area and train pupils how to approach and leave before lighting a fire.

Fire Circle Rules

- We do not run around the Fire Circle.
- We do not walk across the Fire Circle to get to the other side.
- We only enter the Fire Circle when instructed by the leader or adults.
- The fire will not be lit in windy or tinder dry conditions.
- All children and adults will be given clear guidance about how to behave and move around when the fire is lit.
- Related safety equipment, including heat-proof gloves, a fire blanket, a burns kit and a 5-litre bucket of clean water covered with a clean towel will be kept within close range of the fire.
- The fire will always be attended, it will be fully extinguished using the bucket of water and all traces removed by the end of a session.

17. Tools Procedure

- The leader will ensure that are safely stored in a locked cupboard in school when not in use.
- The leader will ensure that the tools are safely stored in the designated tool area on the Forest School site when in use.
- The tools will be used in the designated tool area, and no one will be allowed to walk around with tools.
- The leader will always make sure tools are clean and sharp before using them. They will be cleaned after the end of each session.
- When using tools with children it will only be with the leader and staff that are trained.
- Correct and safe use of sharp tools will be demonstrated to the children.
- Knives/saws/bill hooks will be closed/locked/sheaved immediately after use
- Tools will be counted when handed out and counted back in again once the activity has finished.
- Gloves will be worn on the 'unworking hand' to reduce the risk of cutting
- Safe working distances ('Blood Bubble') and the following ratios will be used when working with different tools:

1- Staff to child ratio of 1:1 for bow saws, bill hooks and knives.

2- Staff to child ratio of 1:2 for potato peelers.

Tool Rules

- Listen carefully to the leader's instructions before using any tools.
- Only use tools as directed
- Only one tool may be used at a time.
- Keep a safe distance from others when using tools, remember your 'blood bubble'.
- Use any required safety equipment, such as gloves or goggles, as directed when handling specific tools.
- After using a tool, return it to the designated area immediately.
- If you're unsure how to use a tool or feel uncomfortable, ask for help from the leader.
- Never get distracted while holding or using tools. Safety is always the priority.

18. Emergency and Incident Procedures

Minor Incident

- Pupil/adult assessed by trained first aider
- Treat as required
- Complete first aid log online as soon as possible
- Inform parents/carers using usual school procedure i.e. phone call /email of accident form home

Serious Incident

- The children will be called to gather by a designated member of staff with, '3,2,1, Come Back' while the leader assesses the situation, the nature and extent of the injury/accident.
- Leader / First aider will attend to any casualties.
- In serious cases, the Emergency services will be contacted. The School Office will be contacted by phone/ radio to make phone call to the emergency services.
- School Office to inform parents/carers with full information of the incident.
- When safe to do so the remainder of the group to be taken back to class until the emergency is dealt with.
- One member of staff from school will meet the ambulance at the school entrance and direct the crew to the incident site.
- If the injured party is taken to hospital, one member of staff will go with them and the injured party's emergency contact will be updated by the School Office.
- Complete incident report forms (RIDDOR, Ofsted/first aid log) in line with the school policy.

If the Forest School Leader is injured or becomes ill, the designated member of staff will follow the procedure above.

Emergency Contact Numbers: **Ambulance/Police/Fire Brigade: 999**

School Office: 01981 510208

19. Missing Child

Please follow our Missing Child procedure. [Missing Child](#)

20. Lock down Procedure

Lock down procedures should be seen as a sensible and proportionate response to any external or internal incident which has the potential to pose a threat to the safety of staff and pupils in the school.

- If the school building needs to follow the lock down procedure the leader will be contacted by radio/phone.
- In consultation between staff inside the school building and the leader it will be decided whether it is safe for the Forest School group to return to school for lock down or whether to evacuate the children to the nearest safe place.
- Depending on the nature and location of the incident Forest School may need to evacuate to Royston's Farm or Elkie's House.

- If the lock down incident occurs in or around the Forest School site, the Forest School Leader will contact the School Office by radio/phone and take the appropriate action.

21. Dynamic Risk Assessment

This is for unexpected risks that might happen during a session. In the event an unexpected risk occurring the children will be called back to base camp using '3,2,1 Come Back' and the appropriate action taken.

These are examples covered by dynamic risk assessment, see appendix 1.

Weather: If the weather changed during the session for example if there were sudden high winds, storm or if the temperature dropped the children would be recall to base camp and we were return to school.

Stranger appearing in Forest School: The children would be called back to the Forest School Leader and the school's Lock down Procedure would be followed.

Injury to Forest School Leader or other adult: The Emergency/ Incident Procedures would be followed (see relevant section of this handbook).

Emergency: The Emergency/ Incident Procedures would be followed (see relevant section of this handbook)

22. Insurance

The Spinney is on the school site and is covered by the school's insurance:

Zurich Municipal
Zurich House
1 Gladiator Way
Farnborough GU14 6GB

Phone: 01252 387920

Declaration of review date:

This handbook will be reviewed by leaders at Michaelchurch Escley Primary School.

The next review date is September 2026

Appendix 1: General Risk Assessment/Risk Benefit for Forest School

Hazard	Risk Benefit	Frequency (1 to 5)	Who	Severity	Management
Stream running through The Spinney	Awareness of surroundings. Learning opportunities: frogspawn, tadpoles, frogs, crayfish	5	Children adults	5	Awareness through involving children in safety briefing. Adult assigned to stream area each session.
Trip hazard Roots, logs, tree stumps, animal holes	Gross Motor Skills: Balance Awareness of insects etc. that live around the logs, animals that live in the holes Learning about tree rings	5	Children adults	3	Awareness through involving children in safety brief
Fallen tree	Learning about why the tree has fallen, creatures that live on the tree, benefits of climbing: gross motor skills, embodiment, benefits of shelter building	2	Children adults	2	Awareness through involving children in safety brief
Brambles, nettles	Awareness of surroundings, learning about plants.	5	Children adults	2	Awareness through involving children in safety brief
Foxgloves	Awareness of surroundings, learning about poisonous plants.	3	Children	4	Awareness through involving children in safety brief. No pick, no lick rule embedded in sessions.
Slope	Awareness of surroundings, embodiment, gross motor skills,	5		4/5	Awareness through involving children in safety brief. Modelling of how to safely walk up and down slope. Suitable footwear
Branches sticking up or at eye level	Awareness of surroundings.	3	Children adults	3	Awareness through involving children in safety brief
Dead wood in trees	Awareness of surroundings.	3	Children adults	3	Awareness through involving children in safety brief. Change boundaries to make sure nobody goes underneath dead wood

Date:

Signed:

