



An evaluation of the Penhaligon's Friends Tree Haven Project

March 2014



"He had a sparkle about him I hadn't seen in a while"

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	4
Part 1: Introduction	6
Bereaved children and the need for intervention	6
Nature Workshops and the Forest School Model	6
Part 2: Methodology	8
Emotional Literacy checklists	8
Qualitative data	9
Part 3: Evaluation Findings	10
Emotional Literacy	10
Adaption strategies	11
Environmental awareness	13
Self awareness	13
Part 4: Conclusions and Recommendations	17
References	18

Acknowledgements

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Summary

This report describes the evaluation of work done by Nature Workshops on behalf of Penhaligon's Friends. It gives a brief description of what we do and a summary of evidence to date that highlights the health and well-being benefits of being in woods to the young people who took part. The report examines the impact of a series of Nature Workshops sessions to a group of nine bereaved children currently receiving support from Penhaligon's Friends. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, the report provides a case study of how our model can benefit children who have been bereaved.

The aims of the Tree Haven Project were:

1. To strengthen the emotional literacy of a group of bereaved children
2. To improve adaptation strategies of individuals and the ability of the family to function in terms of loss and restoration orientation.
3. To increase their awareness of the natural environment and encourage the development of protectiveness towards nature regarding wildlife and animals.
4. To provide free time to have a 'break' from pain of grief in order give the opportunity to develop the children's sense of self and resilience.

Nine boys aged between 7 and 15 years old accessed a programme of activities for 24 hours in natural woodland facilitated by a trained Forest School Leader, with support from an Assistant Session Leader and two Bereavement Volunteers. In keeping with the ethos of Forest School the group was invited to take part in a series of sensory-based activities in the woods and provided with a safe environment to explore natural play. Photographs of the sessions can be viewed at the dropbox link below: [https://www.dropbox.com/home/Penhaligons Friends Aug 2013](https://www.dropbox.com/home/Penhaligons%20Friends%20Aug%202013)

To evaluate the effectiveness of the sessions Emotional Literacy Checklist (ELC) questionnaires were conducted with the children, their parents and teachers before and after. These measured the children's emotional development in relation to self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Parents were also interviewed before and after the sessions and their comments recorded. The results from the ELCs showed an increase in overall emotional literacy of the children, with the most improvement in self-awareness. The comments by parents overwhelmingly highlighted how increased confidence of the children was a key outcome of the sessions. Some parents noted that their child had become more self-reliant and thus able to cope better with their grief.

The sustainability of this project was built into the initial plan and is now coming into fruition with one member of Penhaligon's Friends staff being trained as a Level 3 Forest School leader, providing the capacity for more projects of this kind. In addition 2 further days of activities were arranged with 20 children coming out to woods near where they live. Furthermore, the artwork created by the children is

being exhibited at Fannie and Fox gallery in Penryn, along with photos from Nature Workshops activities and more artifacts the children and young people made.

Part 1: Introduction

Bereaved children - the need for intervention

20,000 children are bereaved each year, and research identifies a wide range of support is needed to meet their specific needs. Feelings tend to become more powerful if not acknowledged or even denied and may lead to the child lacking confidence, clarity and determination in life.

Penhaligon's Friends has identified the need to expand their services for bereaved children and their families. They report 333 family referrals and 548 children referred to them in Cornwall in the period 2011/2012. An increase by 30 families and 72 children with regards to the previous year. Although much support is given to families, schools and professionals the growing numbers together with the charity's own research, through data collection, reports and discussion, highlights the need for children to engage in a variety of creative activities to explore the issues associated with bereavement, one of the areas being 'bullying'. Local and National Research found that lowered self esteem with associated mental health problems is greater in parentally bereaved children, possibly attributed to loss of positive interactions with a significant other and harsh parenting from a depressed surviving parent. Often more responsibility is placed on the child following bereavement either intentionally or as a result of the loss. They may have to care for their parent both emotionally and physically, or take on the role of the deceased if it is a parent. At risk of complications arising from altered eating and sleep. Feelings of isolation may develop through this or because of having 'no one to talk to, or indeed detaching from life as a result of emotional shock. Challenging or regressive behaviour is noted within school or the family as a response to the loss due to emotional immaturity, potentially posing more stress on the family.

The Nature Workshops Model

Established to be part of the wake up call on climate change and social justice, the 'Nature Workshops' take people of all ages and abilities out into the natural world in woods, on beaches and at sea in order to learn new skills, attain knowledge about the great outdoors, and build confidence and self-esteem. In sessions run by experienced Forest School Practitioners, children have adventures, learn how the earth works, how to use tools, make fires, build dens, learn about themselves, each other and they have fun. Nature Workshops stays true to the Scandinavian model of Forest School, and believes that by bringing up children to appreciate the value of the natural world they will grow up with a clear unequivocal desire to protect and conserve it.

"Forest School is an inspirational process, that offers all learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees." (Forest School Association UK)

The evidence is growing about the profound and positive effect Forest School has on the way children and adults relate to each other and the world around them, particularly with regard to building confidence and self-esteem. The key features that when combined set Forest School apart from other outdoor education approaches are:

- The use of a woodland or 'Wild' setting, with the use of boundaries and strict safety measures enabling flexible child-led learning in a low-risk environment.
- Learning can be linked to the national curriculum whilst set within a different context and using innovative learning styles. Children are thus encouraged to develop their innate curiosity and motivation to learn.
- The freedom to explore using multiple senses with creativity and imagination being encouraged. The focus is on the 'whole child' (not just their academic ability) and how they can develop their own learning styles at their own pace whilst maximising the benefits from each experience they discover for themselves.
- Regular contact for the children over a significant period of time (psychologists suggest the minimum number of hours required for change to occur is 21 hours).
- A high adult to pupil ratio (maximum group size is usually twelve).

Nature Workshops has worked with a range of groups in Cornwall in the past three years, from children to adults, particularly those experiencing learning, emotional or behavioral difficulties. An evidence base to show the positive effects of using the model is emerging. The skills of measuring the impacts both qualitatively and quantitatively have been developed. In addition there is the potential for others to learn the skills to deliver sessions with accredited Forest School training.

Part 2: Methodology

The programme of activities that the children took part in was situated entirely outdoors in Idless Woods, near Truro. The children thus had a total of 24 hours over 5 days in a natural environment, with activities based around the use of all-natural materials. Tool use, fire making and cooking and regular mini-treasure hunts aimed at familiarising them with the plants and species around them were some of the activities which took place. Each day the session was designed and built on the children's interaction on the previous day.

Data was gathered on site with the participants. Also before and after the events took place with the parents and one member of staff.

Three methods were used to collect 2 types of data:

- quantitative data from Emotional Literacy Checklists (ELC)
- qualitative data from parents and staff interviews
- qualitative data generated from the participants activities

Quantative data from Emotional Literacy checklists

Definition

'Emotional literacy may be defined as the ability to recognise, understand, handle, and appropriately express emotions.' Sharp (2001:1)

Standard Emotional Literacy Assessment checklists were used before and after the sessions to provide a baseline and a means to evaluate any changes in emotional literacy. In order to gain a fuller profile, questionnaires were given to each participant, their parents and their teachers.

The assessment used covers five key areas of emotional literacy addressed in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) curriculum including:

- Self-awareness - the capacity to recognise feelings as they happen
- Self-regulation - the resilience to self manage emotional reactions
- Motivation - perseverance and determination to work with emotions to overcome challenge
- Empathy - emotional sensitivity to other people's feelings
- Social skills - handling relationships with self-confidence and social skills to work collaboratively

NB Quantative data is available from six parents out of the nine children.

Qualitative data from parent and staff interviews

Interviews with parents and staff from Penhaligon's Friends were conducted before and after the Forest School sessions in order to gather a more detailed and in depth picture of each participant's experience. The interviews consisted of the same open-ended questions:

- 1. What do you think the child will get / got out of the sessions?**
- 2. What do you think they will enjoy / enjoyed the most?**
- 3. What do you think they will find / found the most challenging?**
- 4. Any other comments?**

An interview with the Assistant Session leader was also conducted in order to assess the children's responses during the sessions.

Qualitative data from participants' activities

One of the final activities of the sessions was designed to highlight the children's self awareness and awareness of each other. It took place at the end of the sessions so that the children felt comfortable with each other and more confident in themselves through previous activities. They were shown a series of African tribal symbols each with a personality trait attached to it, and invited to choose which best suited them. They were then asked to paint the symbol with mud ochre they had previously collected onto canvas, thus representing their personality and 'who they were'.

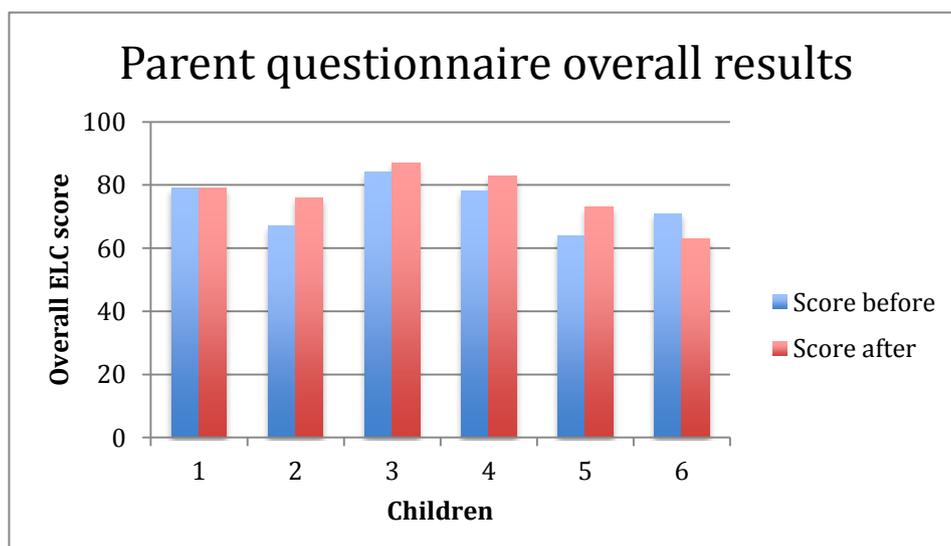
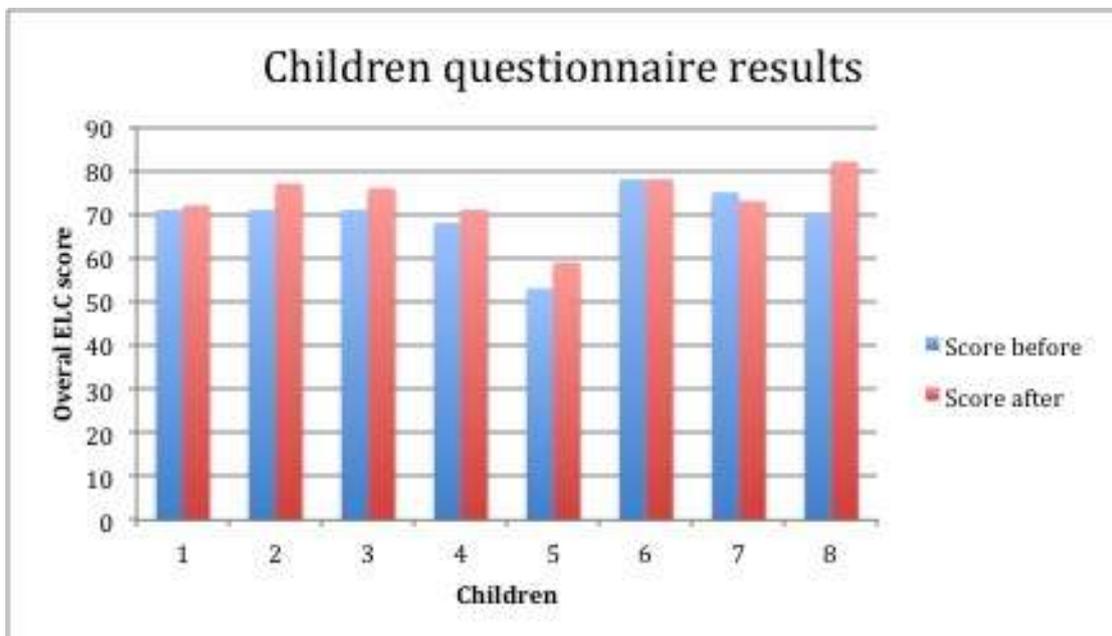
Part 3: Evaluation findings

The findings of this evaluation are categorised using the initial aims of the project:

- Improvements in emotional literacy
- Improvement of adaptation strategies
- Increased awareness of the natural environment and protectiveness towards nature
- Development of sense of self and resilience

Emotional Literacy

The ELC questionnaire results were used to assess changes in emotional literacy. The results show improvements in emotional literacy for three quarters of the children.

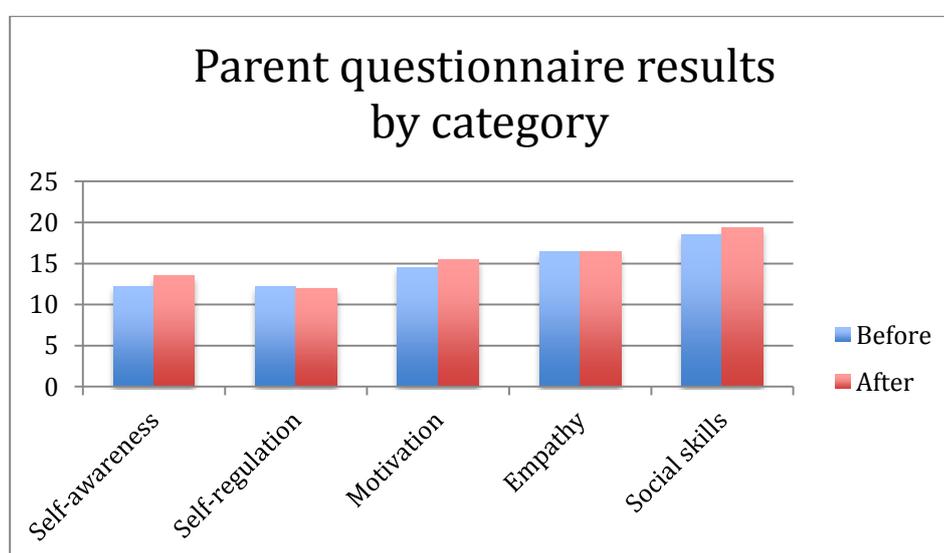


The summary of results:

- 75% of the children reported an improvement in emotional literacy, three of them significantly (one by 17%, one by 11% and one by 8%). One child's overall score decreased, and one remained exactly the same.
- 66% of the parents reported an improvement in emotional literacy among their children, two of them significantly (one by 14% and one by 13%).

The reported changes on average were:

- 6% improvement in emotional literacy reported by the children
- 4% improvement in emotional literacy reported by the parents



The results of the parent questionnaires show that the five key areas of emotional literacy (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills) either stayed the same or improved. The findings from the emotional literacy checklist suggest that on average the children most strengthened their self-awareness, motivation and social skills.

Adaption strategies

Findings from the parent's questionnaires show a significant increase in the children's confidence and ability to socialise with others.

"He is a lot more confident. He definitely enjoyed the group; he's met up with them all since. So much more confident now to be away from me." (Parent)

"(He) loved it, really enjoyed. It was good for his confidence." (Parent)

"He made some new friends and did some hands on stuff." (Parent)

"I was quite surprised, he said he loved being with the other kids and mixed really well. Overall got a lot out of it, I was a bit worried but he was fine." (Parent)

"He got a lot out of them, in what they did. Loved it! Absolutely loved it." (Penhaligon's Friends staff member)

"Could tell as the day progressed that he was making new friendships." (Parent)

The Assistant Session Leader's observations highlight the effect of specific activities such as den-building on the children's sense of pride and from then on their confidence:

"From the den building onwards a sense of pride developed. Creating something that they could put their identity on meant they really came into their own.

They really got into it, their imagination and games came from then, they made up their own activities, making bows and arrows and swords, using potato peelers to peel bark off hazel twigs, and weaving together with bits of twine..... They came up with the best ideas when they got into it!" (Assistant Session Leader)

(What he enjoyed most) "Definitely the fire-making and the den-building." (Parent)

The effect on the family was highlighted; there was some suggestion that the sessions helped the children to cope better with their grief. Being outdoors for so many hours being active made the children physically tired helping their sleep patterns.

"The break from the family definitely did him good as a way of forgetting... The endorphins though of the activities meant he came home every evening full of chat, filthy and exhausted. Which then meant he got a good night's sleep which also meant he coped with life better." (Parent)

"He has spoken a little bit more about dad since,. However he still hasn't really shown me any emotion about it. He's still the same - quiet, misbehaving at home. But he has begun to talk about dad which is a step." (Parent)

Increased awareness of the natural environment and protectiveness towards nature

"He loved all of it. He's very much into bush-craft and all that Ray Mears type stuff. Dad was in the military, He loved cooking on the fire- making it then putting it to use." (Parent)

There was consistent feedback that the children enjoyed being outside, the practical activities, being dirty, and the skills they learnt.

"He definitely enjoyed being outside. He enjoyed all of it - the whole lot." (Parent)

"(He enjoyed) ...all the things they made, the new skills such as cooking on the fire" (Parent)

"Overall it was a positive experience. He liked getting dirty." (Parent)

"He enjoyed Den building and the Fire -Lighting" (Penhaligon's Friends staff member)

" (He most enjoyed)....making fire, eating outdoors was nice for them." (Parent)

It is clear that the children enjoyed being in the natural environment, however, further assessment would be required to establish whether the children have retained knowledge of wildlife and whether the sessions have encouraged them to spend more time outside in and protect the natural environment.

The photographs on dropbox show the use of natural materials and the woodland setting in which the sessions were based:
[https://www.dropbox.com/home/Penhaligons Friends Aug 2013](https://www.dropbox.com/home/Penhaligons%20Friends%20Aug%202013)

Awareness of and respect for the natural environment was incorporated holistically into the structure of each day, with an emphasis on leaving no trace of themselves or the fire at the end of each session. Every child embraced this ethos fully during the sessions.

"On the 4th day they were really starting to get into it, they knew what they needed to prepare for the fire and went about collecting the different sized sticks without being asked. They helped with everything, and were good at packing away at the end of the day. It was a shame to end when it did as they were just starting to really understand the environment and the structure of the days."

(Assistant Session Leader)

Development of sense of self and resilience

The Emotional Literacy checklist results show that self-awareness was the area in which the children improved the most, with an average 19% improvement in the results. Two activities at the final part of the sessions were aimed directly at improving the children's sense of self, connection to their feelings, and a connection

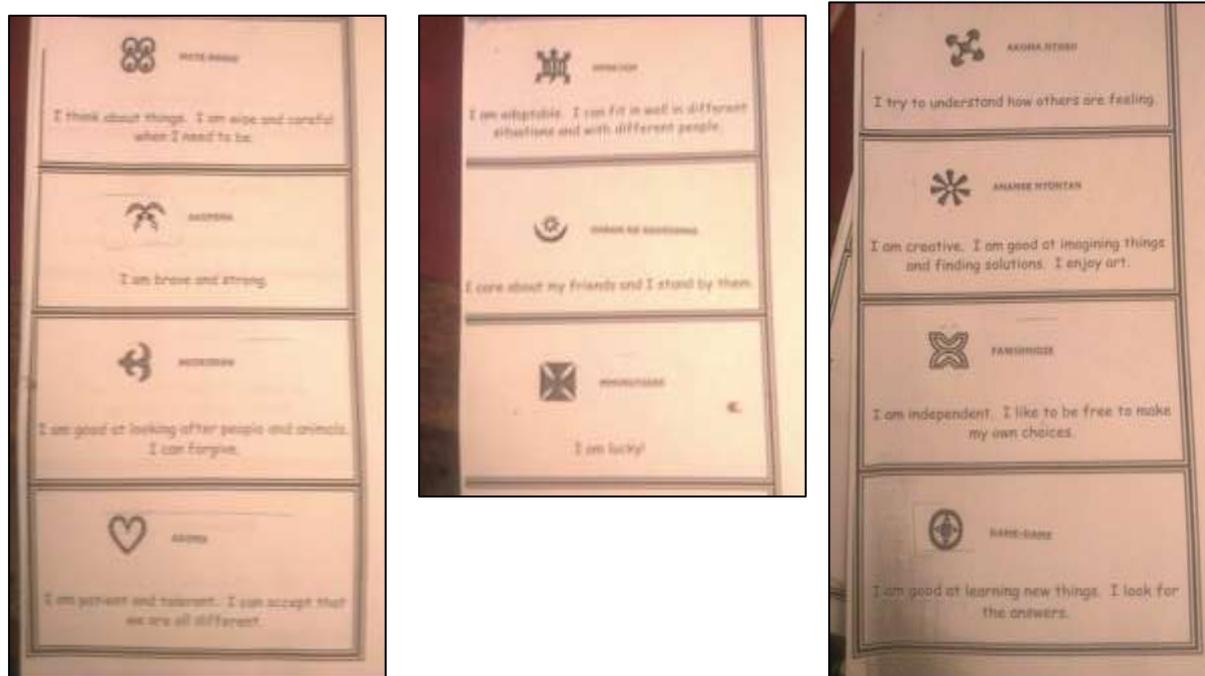
to deceased loved ones. One involved painting symbols that signified their own personality traits, and the final task involved writing down personal wishes to either keep or burn on the fire. The interview with the Assistant Session Leader confirms that every child fully engaged with these activities.

"They wrote down wishes and burnt them in the fire - it was a very personal experience. Some included mention of their parents, but they only showed them if wanted to."

".....Not one of them didn't enjoy it or got bored."

In terms of **self-awareness**, the activity using African tribal symbols supports the ELC results above. Each child was invited to choose one or more personality traits to paint taken from a list of symbols (examples below). They used mud they had foraged for earlier that day, and willow to weave frames to sew them to. It was unknown how the children would react to this introspective work; however, every child participated fully and completed the task, not only being able to choose traits for themselves but also for each other.

"It was nice to do it on the final day as the boys knew each other by then and there was a comfortable feeling in the group. They went through and choose one that was like them, and they kept saying 'this one's like you!' to each other. Some chose two that they liked and joined them together." (Assistant Session Leader)



(Examples of the African tribal symbols and their related personality traits)



This artwork is being exhibited at Fanny and Fox art gallery, Penryn for a month from April 2014. Nature Workshops has promised to give the artwork back to each child as they each requested to keep their work.



In terms of **resilience**, there was suggestion in the parent's comments that levels had improved:

"He is a little less worried about death; more confident in him self that he still can be brave and have fun even though dad is no longer here." (Parent)

"He really loved it, but it brought up emotional stuff. His behaviour became challenging immediately after, thinking about his brother. It was worth it, the emotional fall is not to be underestimated." (Parent)

The children's resilience was tested as some struggled with the behaviour of one of the group during the beginning of the sessions. However, Parent's comments highlight that despite not liking the situation, their enjoyment of the activities and experience as a whole encouraged them to keep going.

"...found the behaviour of one of the other boys towards his brother difficult, which resulted in an incident. He was tolerant of the boy for a long time, and he did try to make up with him." (Penhaligon's Friends staff member)

"... there was one boy whose behaviour was difficult. (He) almost didn't want to go back but he was enjoying the activities so much he didn't let the boy get to him. He was a little anxious to begin with, but overcame it by the end of the first day. He had a sparkle about him I hadn't seen in a while." (Parent)

"..... was challenged by activities but not necessarily a bad thing. He found the behaviour of one of the other kids challenging, though he was not directly involved." (Parent)

"...I think (he) has become more tolerant of other people" (Parent)

Part 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that the children who took part in the Nature Workshops sessions enjoyed the experience a great deal; particularly the practical activities, being outside in the woods, and getting dirty.

They received a relatively short series of sessions, however, the evidence suggests that despite this some of them experienced a significant improvement in their emotional literacy. Self-awareness, social skills and motivation were the areas that showed the most improvement in the ELC results. This is supported by the evidence of a high engagement in all the activities, particularly those that focused on self awareness and awareness of others. Outside factors that may have also affected this improvement are unknown, however comments from parents and the assistant session leader support the view that the sessions had a positive affect on the group.

The evidence suggests that the confidence gained by the children may have helped some of them to cope with their grief. Being outside and physically active increased endorphins and promoted sleep, according to the parents who highlighted these as being an effective coping strategy by some of the group.

An increase in confidence in many of the children came out through the comments of the parents. This may well have been developed due to the children having the freedom, time and space to learn and demonstrate independence within the woodland setting. The den-building encouraged a sense of pride and belief in the children's own abilities, and was by far the most popular activity of the whole experience. Developing a sense of self worth and strengthening autonomy was a key feature of the sessions, and the evidence suggests that the children embraced the sense that it is still ok to have fun and that they could use their initiative and imagination. Continued appraisal would be required to show whether the project has had a lasting effect on their confidence and self esteem.

Research shows that more time spent outside with nature increases one's respect for and desire to protect the natural environment. The fact that the group got a high level of enjoyment from being outside and the practical activities using natural materials suggests that they will continue this love of nature, and hopefully the new Level three practitioner at Penhaligon's Friends can provide more opportunities to go out into the woods and deepen the connection to nature.

The behavioural problems encountered with one child challenged the whole group, yet the resilience of the rest of the group shone through as they continued to come to the sessions and remained positive.

Recommendations:

1. Penhaligon's Friends use their newly qualified Level Three Practitioner to take more children out into the woods for Forest School-style sessions. Pre and post intervention questions over time will help to measure the young peoples appreciation of and protection for the natural world.
2. Where possible, make sessions a regular occurrence so that children continue over time to increase their resilience, confidence, and self esteem.
3. Continue evaluation and self-appraisal to track children over a longer period of time to see whether any improvements last in the long term after the child has stopped attending.

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