

Linking positive outcomes for young people with sustainable development

Case Study 9, March 2010

ru-ok?, Brighton & Hove YOT, Sussex Wildlife Trust

'Forest School' Project

Young offenders and substance misusers experience outdoor learning



The organisations

- ru-ok? is a specialist substance misuse service in Brighton and Hove for under 19's.
- Brighton and Hove Youth Offending Team (YOT) is a multi-agency team, aiming to make an impact on reducing levels of youth crime in the area and improving the life chances of young offenders.
- Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) is the largest conservation organisation dedicated to conserving the natural heritage of Sussex.

Programme setting, partners in development, reasons for commissioning

Brighton and Hove Youth Offending Team and ru-ok? worked in partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust to engage a number of young people in a Forest Schools project during 2008 and 2009 as part of the menu of support being offered by case workers.

Funding, duration

The YOT and ru-ok? each funded 50% of the programme costs in 2008 and 2009.

Who is the programme for?

Both the YOT and ru-ok? sent young people on the Forest School, with members of staff from the participating services.

as long as it takes

Purpose and objectives

The Forest School provided the opportunity for young people to receive a very different type of intervention to those often offered. Objectives included:

- engage the young people in diversionary activities that would give them new experiences in their local environment.
- develop the young people's confidence and self esteem by enabling them to complete new activities and work co-operatively.

Structure, flow and activities

The Forest School approach involves a group exploring a local woodland on a regular basis, typically ten visits over ten weeks. During that time the group will get to grips with all sorts of woodland activities that will help to build an understanding and appreciation of the woodland.

The fire circle is central to all that happens at forest school. The fire is the focal point for discussing the day's activities and a place for socialising. The activities are always hands-on and will often require the use of tools such as bow saws and fixed blade knives. As a group becomes more comfortable with living and working in the woodland the programme becomes more learner led, a journey of discovery directed by the participants.

For the young people from 'ru-ok?' and the YOT, the process was similar. They started with a taster day in April 2008 and the programme continued for ten weeks from May – July. The project included two groups – a morning group of five mainly younger, school aged young people and an afternoon group of four older teenagers. Both groups took place in Stanmer Park in Brighton and were of 2 hours duration.

The SWT project worker who worked with these young people described the project as follows:

“Young people have come out to a woodland site on a weekly basis for 10 weeks, and engaged in a whole range of activities based around a campfire setting. The activities have included:

- *fire lighting skills and fire management*
- *using tools to make items from natural materials - wood, fibres*
- *cooking over the fire*

The strength of the programme lay in the setting, which was, on the surface, very informal. The youngsters would essentially be joining in with the staff, who happened to be in the wood and engaged in activities themselves. They were allowed to use the same tools as us, cook with us and be part of the group. There was freedom for them to choose to do other things, sit around the fire and chat, or make up their own ideas for things to do.

During the first year, attendance was excellent, even in bad weather, and great strides were made in terms of relationships between the young people, and with the staff from SWT, YOT and ru-ok?”

The preparation that the case workers needed to do for the Forest School was partly familiar although there were some differences, including the experience itself:

- They carried out a risk analysis process for each young person, and the potentially 'risky' situations that are part of practical 'routine' forest school activities, such as, working with fire and edged tools.
- Case workers were going through the new experience of the forest school alongside the young people.

- Stanmer Park, the venue for the activities, is close to the edge of Brighton – although partly covered in woodland, it is not a remote woodland setting. However it provided the environmental features necessary for the experience to be valuable to the participants

Outcomes and impact achieved

The evaluation undertaken by the Youth Offending Trust in 2008 found from those involved the overriding feeling that it was a positive and worthwhile experience. The evidence for this is:

- Observed changes in behaviour of the young people.
- Reported improvements in the wellbeing of the young people from parents during the time the project ran.
- The fact that every young person involved for a consistent period of time asked for it to continue.
- All the young people demonstrated an improved ability to work co-operatively or independently with greater confidence.
- There was evidence that the young people responded positively to reasoned interventions when their behaviour became potentially dangerous.
- There were no major incidents of aggression or dangerous behaviour throughout the whole project.
- The 'distance travelled' by all participants was noticeable.
- The Sussex Wildlife Trust, YOT and ru-ok? are all prepared to run the project again

Reasons for success

Some of the elements that made it successful were:

- The project was well organised and co-ordinated with the services taking responsibility for their young people, supplying support in situ and providing a co-ordinator. This enabled the Sussex Wildlife Trust to focus on the events of each session and the engagement of the young people.
- The young people were able to develop a sense of ownership of the project because of the inclusive and invitational way in which Sussex Wildlife Trust managed it. Certain young people also recognised that the project was in danger of being spoiled by the irresponsible behaviour of others and were concerned about this.
- The dynamics of the groups worked. This was not a given at the start as they were selected individually. The morning group were put together as they were school aged but did not really know each other. The afternoon group was even more disparate.
- Each young person had their own personal sense of achievement and this was sensitively recognised and encouraged by the trainers. Some young people needed to work exclusively with good adult role models of their own and the opposite sex, some needed to be allowed to develop a personal skill independently, some to be encouraged to interact positively with other young people.
- Trainers were able to detach the behaviours of the young people from their internal motivation – hence the fact that although some of the young people were persistently negative, this was less indicative of their involvement than the fact that they turned up to every session!
- The focus on the environment, the place, and the activities on offer and not on self improvement or the addressing of 'issues' actually allowed the young people some emotional room to become self managing and to make the relationships they needed in a neutral environment.
- The environment and activities were also new to everyone, which gave them all the same challenge. The young people themselves created any sense of competition that was evident. This made it a 'safe' environment.

Lessons learned from the 2008 Forest School

Ways forward for a further run of Forest School activities with a similar population of young people:

- Service staff who shared the activities with the young people to spend time with each young person and draw some evaluative comments from them – both about their involvement and what they felt they got out of it and also about the way they think the project could be improved – including ways in which young people would like to continue to develop their personal and physical skills.
- A final evaluation to be collated including feedback from all parties involved. This can then be used to inform and enthuse possible funding agencies and participants for the next project.
- The project to be repeated at the same time next year in the same format. Services to start identifying participants a bit earlier and more effort to be made to get them to the taster day. Also ensure funding is in place.
- Discuss the possibility of targeting particular schools for a shorter Autumn Term project in 2009 with joint funding and staffing to address perceived needs – particularly at the start of Year 10, but with the specific outcome of keeping young people in school.
- Provide an opportunity for the project to be re-named, as 'school' puts some young people off. Ensure involvement of young people in this process.
- Build something into the last session to enable young people to have personal feedback about the achievements they have made. Evidence shows that verbalising and reflecting back positive achievements helps people to internalise them.

Evolution of the programme

The Forest School ran successfully again in the summer of 2009. With the youth workers more familiar with the forest school process, there was more awareness of allowing the space for young people to lead on content and choices during the sessions.

Contact

ru-ok? www.areyouok.org.uk
Sussex Wildlife Trust www.sussexwt.org.uk

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Anna Gianfrancesco from ru-ok?, Mary Hinton from the Brighton and Hove YOT, Katie Riley from Sussex Wildlife Trust for discussions, written responses, and sharing documents and reports.