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FOREST SCHOOL TRAINING

In this resource, we focus on the training required to become a Forest School practitioner, considering how this training can be tailored to prepare practitioners for working with neurodiverse groups and made more accessible for neurodivergent trainees.

In the UK, those who wish to lead Forest School sessions must complete Level 3 Forest School training.

Level 3 is designed to qualify the trainee to become a Forest School Leader, able to set up and run a Forest School programme. Level 3 covers how to facilitate groups in a learner-centred way, and how to manage a Forest School site sustainably. It also covers the practical skills required of a Forest School Leader.

—Forest School Association

Course content may vary slightly depending on the training provider, and trainees have the option to choose a provider that best suits their needs. While some courses include neurodiversity topics and are led by neurodivergent trainers, this is not consistent across all providers. This resource draws on the experiences and advice of trainers and neurodivergent trainees to help course providers create neurodiversity-affirming training programmes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEURODIVERSITY IN FOREST SCHOOL TRAINING

Forest School programmes inevitably involve working with neurodivergent participants, as neurodiversity is a fundamental aspect of human diversity. Neurodivergent people participate in Forest School at every level, including as practitioners, and training should reflect this. Neurodiversity-affirming practices must be integrated into training, allowing trainees to learn from the approaches modelled by their trainers and the structure of the courses themselves.

Dr Samantha Friedman underscores this point:

When considering the intersection of neurodivergence and Forest School, I don't believe that it is possible for practitioners to deliver Forest School sessions that are high-quality and true to the original ethos of the practice without being neurodiversity-affirming. The heart of the Forest School ethos—considering people holistically, promoting autonomy, following the learner's interests, needs, and choices, and authentically building trust between practitioners, learners, and the environment—aligns perfectly with the neurodiversity paradigm, which sees all ways of being and functioning as valid.

However, not everyone who arrives at Forest School is ready or willing to align with this ethos

immediately. In such cases, Forest School training can play a crucial role in building confidence and reshaping practitioners' approaches. Information on neurodiversity must be embedded throughout the training, guiding best practices at every level. A one-off lesson on neurodiversity is insufficient, as it does not reflect the ongoing nature of neurodiversity experiences within Forest School.

Neurodiversity-affirming Forest School training should be developed from the ground up, ideally in partnership with—or entirely by—neurodivergent individuals. This approach ensures that all aspects of understanding Forest School practice are viewed through a neurodiversity lens, rather than overlaying neurodiversity onto existing training methods. Crucially, neurodivergent contributors should be appropriately paid and credited for their work. Trainers should also embody principles of autonomy, trust, respect, and understanding when leading neurodivergent trainees.

As Dr Friedman highlights, the principles of neurodiversity-affirming practice closely align with the Forest School ethos. Realising this potential requires practitioners to create environments where individuals feel safe to express their needs, bringing us back to the “Triangle of Trust”. Integrating these practices throughout Forest School training ensures that the core principles of learner-centred practice, flexibility, trust, and attentiveness to individual needs are consistently applied.

Wem Southerden, a practitioner, trainer, and co-host of The Forest School Podcast based in Devon, provides an exemplary model of neurodiversity-affirming training in practice:

As a Forest School trainer, I believe neurodiversity should be embedded in training. The Forest School Principles of “Holistic Learning” and “Community” guide us to meet participants where they are and consider their needs and preferences. This extends to training—addressing neurodiversity within future Forest School groups, considering the needs and preferences of trainees, and recognising our own as trainers.

Forest School can be a rare environment where neurodivergent participants, including leaders, feel safe to be themselves in a world that can often feel unwelcoming. It is vital to raise awareness among trainees of the unique conditions that make Forest School neurodiversity-affirming, so they can carry these qualities into their practice.

In our training, neurodiversity is not confined to a special “session”—it is woven throughout the course. We discuss it daily. Practical examples include introducing PPE with options like headphones and latex gloves, considering participants' sensory needs, and discussing emotional responses to group games to inform planning. When teaching tool use, we emphasise inclusive language and demonstration techniques.

Our approach to neurodiversity is non-judgemental and non-pathologising. We view neurodiversity as an essential lens through which to understand the needs of any group. We address micro-aggressions or misunderstandings by guiding adults to consider others' needs and recognise that behaviour is often a form of communication, reflecting a deeper human need.

As neurodivergent trainers, we model transparency about our own needs and feelings, encouraging others to express theirs. Whether a trainee prefers a specific seat around the fire circle or requests a change in the sequencing of activities, we strive to accommodate these needs.

Our training mirrors our Forest School sessions as closely as possible, offering activities that cater to different sensory profiles and support nervous system regulation. We provide hammocks, swings, scramble nets, ear defenders, and gloves, use a low-arousal approach, employ declarative language, and maintain unconditional positive regard for participants.

We believe assessments should be as neuro-inclusive as possible, offering options such as

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recorded video discussions instead of written essays, using dyslexia-friendly fonts, and setting coursework deadlines throughout the course, supported by regular meetings.

While we still have much to learn as trainers and as a wider Forest School community, events such as conferences and meetups that include sessions on neurodiversity are invaluable. Books by neurodivergent writers and advocates, as well as social media, have been great resources for us. Reaching out to organisations run by neurodivergent people, especially those that avoid a medicalised or pathologising lens, is also beneficial.

Including neurodivergence in the Forest School principles under ‘Holistic Learning’ would ensure that the topic is consistently addressed in Forest School training, helping leaders and communities become more neurodiversity-affirming.

Wem’s experience highlights the deep connection between teaching about neurodiversity and designing accessible training for neurodivergent trainees. Creating a neurodiversity-affirming environment in training not only benefits neurodivergent individuals but also models the approach trainees need to facilitate Forest School sessions that meet the diverse needs of all participants.

CHALLENGES IN FOREST SCHOOL TRAINING

As more people identify as neurodivergent, the pool of practitioners sharing their experiences of training and working in Forest School settings continues to grow. We interviewed neurodivergent practitioners and trainees about their experiences with Level 3 training to identify common challenges that trainers should address. Several recurring themes emerged:

- *Need for ongoing support:* Many felt that training programmes would benefit from more consistent support following the initial intensive training week. Proactive check-ins from trainers to discuss progress and address any obstacles were seen as valuable. Monotropic thinkers, in particular, may require assistance in refocusing on their training when other commitments and interests arise. Trainees noted that once their attention shifts, it can be challenging to re-engage with their training, leading to feelings of disconnection.
- *Flexibility in training:* Some trainees found the training structure to be inflexible, particularly regarding written assignments. Assignments on less interesting topics or areas where trainees already had extensive knowledge were particularly difficult to complete. Participants expressed a desire for training that recognises existing competencies and allows them to focus on learning new and relevant skills.
- *Social dynamics during training:* During the intensive training week, some individuals experienced difficulties with social interactions, including challenges related to circle time activities and attitudes expressed by other trainees. These social dynamics can impact the overall training experience and highlight the need for inclusive and supportive environments.

TAILORING TRAINING TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Throughout *Forest School and Autism*, we emphasise that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. Responding to people’s needs is an ongoing, dynamic process that begins with creating a safe

space where individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves. This principle applies equally to training environments.

Training programmes can model inclusivity from the outset by creating environments that cater to diverse needs. This approach prepares trainees to incorporate an awareness of neurodiversity into their practice holistically rather than treating it as an add-on to be considered only when working with specific individuals whose needs have been identified beforehand.

We spoke to Dr Hanna Venton-Platz, a clinical psychologist working for Spectrum Gaming, about strategies for ensuring training meets individual needs. Hanna suggested:

I think the approach would need to be highly tailored, starting with an intake form that allows individuals to express any anticipated needs or support requirements, regardless of whether they have a formal diagnosis. This is crucial, especially considering the long waiting lists for diagnoses. I believe the individual should lead the process.

If I were running a course, I would want to meet with each person beforehand to thoroughly understand their needs and create a provisional plan. This plan would cover the training, assessment, and longer-term work, ensuring that both the individual and I have a clear understanding to refer to if any challenges arise during the process.

The key is to establish ongoing negotiation and acknowledgement of those needs and supports.

This initial dialogue helps neurodivergent trainees determine whether a particular course provider is the right fit for them. It's important that trainees feel empowered to express their needs and trust that any unexpected requirements emerging during training will be accommodated. Trainers can demonstrate acceptance and support by offering personalised structures, regular check-ins, and flexible deadlines as needed.

Trainers should not assume that all trainees will feel confident advocating for themselves. Offering choices to the entire group, such as various methods for demonstrating understanding—written essays, interviews, or videos—can foster an inclusive learning environment. Recognising existing competencies and allowing trainees to focus on areas where they wish to grow enhances motivation and engagement.

NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING TRAINING IN PRACTICE

Dr Samantha Friedman suggests that neurodiversity-affirming training should be developed from the ground up, ideally led by neurodivergent individuals. Achieving this requires strong relationships between trainers and trainees, as well as collaboration within the neurodivergent Forest School community. Through reflection, conversation, and partnership, we can establish neurodiversity-affirming training across our community, recognising that this is a collective responsibility we all share.

Practical steps for neurodiversity-affirming training

To move toward a more inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming approach in Forest School training, trainers and providers can consider the following practical steps:

- *Ongoing reflection and adaptation:* Regularly assess and adapt training methods based on feedback from trainees, particularly neurodivergent participants. This ensures that training

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remains responsive to diverse needs and continues to align with neurodiversity-affirming practices.

- *Inclusive curriculum design:* Integrate neurodiversity throughout the curriculum rather than treating it as an add-on. This might involve including practical examples and discussions that highlight neurodivergent perspectives, ensuring that all trainees gain a deep understanding of how to support the diverse needs of learners.
- *Flexible assessment methods:* Offer multiple forms of assessment to accommodate different learning styles and needs. Allowing options such as video submissions, practical demonstrations, or oral presentations can help ensure that all trainees can showcase their knowledge and skills in a way that suits them best.
- *Personalised support plans:* Develop individualised support plans in collaboration with each trainee at the start of the course. These plans should be flexible and revisited regularly to address any new needs that arise during the training process.
- *Creating safe and supportive spaces:* Foster a training environment where all trainees feel safe to express their needs and preferences. This can be achieved by modelling openness, respect, and understanding in all interactions and by encouraging peer support among trainees. Initial group sessions should facilitate discussing inclusive language and attitudes, explaining how trainees can opt out of group activities if they feel uncomfortable, and creating awareness of different listening styles (e.g. some people will need to move or stim, and some may not be comfortable with eye contact).
- *Utilising neurodivergent expertise:* Involve neurodivergent practitioners in the design and delivery of training. Their lived experience and insights are invaluable in shaping a training programme that is genuinely neurodiversity-affirming.
- *Promoting self-advocacy:* Encourage trainees to advocate for their needs throughout the course. Cultivate an environment where trainees can build the confidence to express their needs.
- *Continuing professional development:* Trainers themselves should engage in ongoing professional development focused on neurodiversity and inclusive practices. This might involve attending workshops, reading current research, or participating in discussions with neurodivergent communities.

LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE OF FOREST SCHOOL TRAINING

The future of Forest School training lies in its ability to evolve and embrace the diversity of its participants. As our understanding of neurodiversity continues to grow, so too must our training methods. By fostering a culture of inclusivity, where all ways of being and learning are valued, we can ensure that Forest School remains a space where every individual—whether trainee or participant—can thrive.

For both trainers and practitioners, it is crucial to recognise that your work does not end

with the completion of a training course. Instead, it is an ongoing journey of learning, reflection, and adaptation. By committing to this continuous process, we can help to build a Forest School community that truly meets people where they are and supports them in their unique learning journeys.

CONCLUSION

This resource has explored the vital role of training in shaping a neurodiversity-affirming Forest School practice. By integrating the principles of inclusivity and flexibility into every aspect of training, from curriculum design to assessment methods, trainers can equip future Forest School leaders with the skills and understanding necessary to create environments that welcome and support all participants.

The journey toward a fully inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming Forest School community is one that we must undertake together. Through reflection, collaboration, and a commitment to continuous learning, we can ensure that Forest School remains a place where everyone—regardless of neurotype—feels valued, supported, and empowered to learn and grow.



KEY POINTS

- ▶ Level 3 Forest School training is required to lead sessions and covers learner-centred facilitation, sustainability, and practical skills.
- ▶ Neurodiversity is a core human difference and must be integrated throughout Forest School training—not treated as a separate topic.
- ▶ Courses should be designed and delivered by neurodivergent individuals to ensure authenticity and alignment with Forest School values.
- ▶ Neurodiversity content and trainer experience vary across providers; consistency is needed to ensure inclusive standards.
- ▶ Training must model safe, inclusive environments that support trainees' autonomy, expression, and needs.
- ▶ Trainers like Wem Southerden embed neurodiversity in daily practice with inclusive tools, flexible formats, and sensory-aware activities.
- ▶ Individualised support plans should be created at the start of training, accommodating diverse needs without requiring formal diagnoses.
- ▶ Flexible assessments (e.g. videos, discussions, demonstrations) help trainees show understanding in ways that suit them best.
- ▶ Trainees report needing better ongoing support, more flexibility, and improved handling of social dynamics during intensive sessions.
- ▶ Trainers should not assume trainees will self-advocate—offer choices and accommodations to everyone proactively.
- ▶ Trainers must engage in ongoing professional development focused on neurodiversity and inclusive practices.
- ▶ Creating a neurodiversity-affirming Forest School is a shared, evolving responsibility requiring reflection, collaboration, and commitment.

NEURODIVERSITY AND FOREST SCHOOL MOVEMENTS IN THE UK AND ITALY

Grassroots movements often emerge from the lived experiences and pressing needs of the communities they represent, fostering organic growth and profound change. The Forest School movement in the UK and Outdoor Education initiatives in Italy, alongside the growing neurodiversity movement, exemplify such grassroots efforts that have developed through bottom-up approaches, responding dynamically to local challenges and aspirations.

In the UK, Forest Schools—with their emphasis on outdoor, learner-centred education—have grown alongside a parallel recognition of neurodiversity, although the systematic integration of neurodiversity principles into practice is a more recent development. In Italy, learner-centred Outdoor Education encompasses a broader range of place-based pedagogical approaches, shaped by national educational structures and cultural traditions. Here too, neurodiversity perspectives are beginning to influence practice. In both countries, the neurodiversity movement complements Outdoor Education by emphasising that differences in thinking, learning, and sensory experience are part of natural human diversity. This perspective encourages educators to design flexible, responsive environments, making inclusion not just a policy goal but a practical, lived dimension of forest and outdoor pedagogy.

This resource explores how these movements—rooted in distinct but complementary philosophies—are beginning to intersect in the UK and Italy, with particular attention to the integration of neurodiversity principles into Outdoor Educational practices. Originally written as a chapter for the second edition of *Forest School and Autism*, this text offers a standalone exploration of historical, cultural, and pedagogical trajectories that illuminate the ongoing convergence of these grassroots initiatives. While key concepts are introduced contextually here, readers seeking more detailed theoretical frameworks, practical strategies, and assessment tools can refer to relevant chapters in the book.

UK FOREST SCHOOL AND NEURODIVERSITY

The Seed

In the second edition of *Forest School and Autism*, we mentioned the origin story of UK Forest School. The journey from Bridgwater College to Scandinavia—where the group visited forest kindergartens and observed their practices—is repeated in almost every book and article as a key formative experience shaping Forest School principles.

What's less well-known is that not everyone in the Bridgwater College group was from the

Early Years department. The college had a policy that if residential groups included students of diverse genders (at the time, only two options were considered), the accompanying staff needed to reflect this. The Early Years team needed to find a male staff member. As Sara Knight explained to us when we met in 2023, this requirement led to inviting Gordon Woodall, a lecturer teaching in the Construction department, to join the group. This was to have far-reaching implications for UK Forest School.

Coming from a background outside of early years practice, Gordon Woodall recognised the potential for Forest School to be used by people of all ages, particularly those less suited to mainstream academic settings. His realisation meant that from the outset, UK Forest School wasn't viewed as exclusively for early years groups. This early recognition of Forest School's potential beyond early years parallels concerns later raised by Maja Antonietti in Italy about who has access to Outdoor Education experiences.

In 1993, the same year the Bridgwater College group journeyed to Scandinavia, autistic advocate and speaker Jim Sinclair delivered a groundbreaking presentation at the International Conference on Autism in Toronto. Titled "Don't Mourn for Us", the speech boldly challenged the dominant narrative that framed autism as a tragic condition in need of a cure (Sinclair 1999). Speaking to an audience largely composed of professionals and parents, Sinclair called for a radical shift in perspective, demanding that autistic people be accepted and valued for who they are. This powerful message laid the foundation for what we now recognise as the Neurodiversity Movement.

Spreading from the grassroots

Forest School and neurodiversity advocacy are both grassroots movements that, in the UK, originated around the same time. They've gradually developed and intertwined.

When the Bridgwater College group first began developing their interpretation of Scandinavian outdoor practices, Gordon Woodall saw the potential to extend these principles beyond early years education. From its inception, the UK Forest School movement was envisioned as an inclusive approach, particularly suited for individuals who struggled to thrive within traditional academic settings.

If Forest School had solely focused on early years, it would still have been a space for neurodivergent children. Early years groups naturally encompass the range of neurodiversity, and practitioners play a crucial role in observing and supporting children's development. However, Woodall's influence expanded the reach of Forest School, offering it to Bridgwater College SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) students early on, demonstrating the inclusive nature of Forest School practice.

In 2003, Woodall left Bridgwater College and began running the Burnworthy Outdoor Education Centre in the nearby Blackdown Hills. The groups there included teenage school refusers and neurodivergent students—some with diagnoses and some without. One of the Burnworthy groups deserves particular mention. A group of autistic adults supported by the National Autistic Society attended Burnworthy in the early 2000s; as children, some of these men had belonged to the original cohort attending the Sybil Elgar School in West London, the first school in the world specifically for autistic children. Neurodivergent participants are a significant part of UK Forest School's origin story.

The strands of UK Forest School

As word spread about Forest School, prospective practitioners came from a variety of backgrounds, bringing different perspectives and skill sets. Dr Sara Knight (2022) likened the Forest School

movement to a “mycorrhizal network”, emphasising the multitude of connections. It’s impossible to fully capture the richness of these connections in a brief history. Each connection is a crucial part of the network. All of the people who quietly (or not so quietly!) ventured into the woods to provide Forest School are essential to this story. They did inspiring work while being mindful to leave no trace.

We’ll consider only some of the strands that come together in UK Forest School and how they’ve intersected with neurodivergent participants, but we hope that our brief outline will give readers an idea of how things developed.

As we’ve seen, from the outset, UK Forest School was intentionally delivered to groups with additional needs. As Forest School spread across the UK, settings that worked with learners who needed an alternative to classroom-based learning were among the early adopters of Forest School.

SEND, PRUs and alternative provision

From the outset, UK Forest School intentionally served learners who struggled in conventional classroom settings. The UK offers specialist provision to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This can be either in specialised settings or additional support provided within mainstream settings. Bridgwater College’s SEND students were among the early cohorts of Forest School participants, and SEND schools soon began to set up their own Forest Schools.

Other early adopters were Pupil Referral Units (PRU) and local authorities seeking alternative provision for young people whose school placements were breaking down. This cohort consisted of young people whose needs weren’t met in mainstream settings, and as we saw in the example of Gordon Woodall’s work at Burnworthy, this included neurodivergent pupils.

Some of the practitioners who worked with these groups are significant figures in the development of UK Forest School.

Jon Cree is well-known to anyone familiar with Forest School in the UK. Jon was the founding chair of the Forest School Association and is the co-author with Marina Robb of *The Essential Guide to Forest School and Nature Pedagogy* (2021). He runs specialised training and workshops and is widely respected in the UK and abroad. Jon worked for 20 years at Bishops Wood Outdoor Centre, providing Forest School. A great deal of his work was with young people who needed alternatives to mainstream education and with SEND schools, including one of the largest SEND schools in the West Midlands.

Therapeutic practice

Alongside educational settings, therapeutic approaches began to intersect with Forest School, offering targeted support for neurodivergent learners.

Forest School is sometimes used as a targeted intervention, so various types of therapists began to incorporate their practices into Forest School sessions. The first record of this is found in *Forest School for All* (Knight 2011)—the chapter “Autism, Art and Nature as Relational Aspects of Forest School”, written by Kevin Burrows, describes using Forest School and art as an intervention for autistic young people.

Home education

Another early strand came from home-educating families, whose experiences highlight how Forest School could accommodate different learning preferences and social needs. Some families choose to educate their children outside of mainstream schools due to their personal preferences, but others choose this option because their child needs an alternative after mainstream schools haven’t

worked out. This type of education suits some neurodivergent children (and parents) much better, as it removes many of the social rules and pressures from education, allowing young people to study in a far more learner-centred way.

A recurring theme

Looking back at the literature from the early years of Forest School, a recurring theme emerges: children who struggled in their classrooms thriving in the woods. Some of these children are identified as being neurodivergent, in particular ADHD, but there's no quantitative data about this. We also need to include a caveat: anecdotal reports might be biased against mentioning children who struggled with Forest School, finding the social and sensory demands overwhelming. Nonetheless, the records from this stage of Forest School's development consistently show that *some* children thrived in the woods in ways they couldn't in a classroom. A clear indication that the problem lay in the environment, not in the child. Taken together, these strands reveal a gradual recognition that learning environments—not only individual characteristics—shape children's experiences, a principle that aligns closely with emerging neurodiversity perspectives.

All these different strands contributed to the construction of the Forest School movement. In 2023, Dr Mel McCree described to us this process as a cauldron of communal soup, with various practitioners adding their unique ingredients. At this stage, the Forest School community mirrored the broader societal attitudes toward neurodiversity and the cultures within the settings where practitioners worked. While these attitudes varied, some practitioners explicitly promoted the social model of disability and the concept of “Forest School for all” (Hopkins 2011).

At this time, Forest School practice was presented as an approach that could meet divergent needs, but it was mainly framed as neurotypical practitioners creating learning communities to include neurodivergent learners. However, this was about to change.

While these early observations suggested Forest School's potential for supporting neurodivergent learners, the theoretical framework for understanding this support was still developing. Simultaneously, a parallel movement was gaining momentum that would fundamentally reshape how society understood neurological differences.

Neurodiversity advocacy

The reframing of autism that Jim Sinclair had advocated in his “Don't Mourn for Us” speech was developing and spreading. The internet allowed people to find affinity groups and network much more easily, and a grassroots movement centred on autistic rights began to form. Autistic people began to collectively reshape the autism narrative. Building on the foundations laid by disability activists, people began to organise. The concept of neurodiversity was born in these discussions and was later named by Harvey Blume and Judy Singer. Activists began to advocate not only for a difference in how autism was conceptualised but for material change that would improve people's lives.

We describe the neurodiversity paradigm in the second edition of *Forest School and Autism*. Dr Nick Walker's work is perhaps the most visible expression of this political reframing of the autistic community, but behind it lies the hard work and dedication of a generation of activists and advocates. This work is ongoing but is beginning to bear fruit as consideration of autistic lived experience is widely accepted as playing an essential role in research, policy, and practice.

Neurodivergent voices emerge

The first research paper to specifically focus on the autistic experience of Forest School was published in 2017: “Forest School is muddy, and I like it” (Bradley & Male 2017) examines the experience of a group of autistic children with learning disabilities who accessed Forest School through their inner-city SEND school. The paper is notable for centring the lived experience of the children as well as interviews with their parents and accompanying staff. Bradley and Male created a platform for the children to describe their participation in Forest School in their own words.

The first edition of *Forest School and Autism* was published in 2018 with the hope that it would encourage a conversation about autism in the Forest School community. It was immediately evident that practitioners really wanted to learn more about autism. Around the same time, the Therapeutic Forest was founded by a team of NHS therapists in Manchester. They deliver vocational training to provide Forest School practitioners with therapeutic knowledge to enhance their practice. Their course includes a module about autism, and they approached a young autistic advocate, Andy Smith, to present it.

Although there was clearly a desire to learn about autism in the Forest School community, up until this point, autistic voices weren’t at the centre of this conversation. When Andy Smith began giving presentations for the Therapeutic Forest, his combination of lived experience and knowledge had an immediate impact on the practitioners who attended.

This growing recognition of the need for autistic voices in Forest School discourse reached a key moment at the 2019 Forest School Association (FSA) Conference. Building on the momentum created by early research and advocacy efforts, the conference marked a significant shift toward platforming neurodivergent perspectives at the national level.

FSA Conference 2019

In 2019, the Forest School Association National Conference was held in Surrey, notable for its various workshops covering SEND groups, partnerships with CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), and well-being. FSA Conference Director Sarah Lawfull suggested including a keynote presentation on Forest School and autism, creating a platform for neurodivergent speakers to address the entire conference. The keynote was split between Andy Smith and Stay Up Late, a Brighton-based project exemplifying the social model of disability. Andy Smith and former Stay Up Late ambassador Andrew Walker brought neurodivergent lived experiences to a packed hall of delegates.

In an interview with us in 2023, Sarah Lawfull described the impact that Andy and Andrew had on the assembled Forest School community:

For many of us, this was the first time we had heard autistic adults talking about their experiences of growing up being disregarded, of feeling “other”. Conference delegates were in tears as Andy Smith described the pain of masking and how his diagnosis came as a relief. His honesty and courage challenged us to think deeply about our practice. Many of us have been inspired to engage more deeply and become allies of our autistic colleagues and the young people we work with.

Neurodivergent voices were also prominent in the workshops. Jessica Brocklebank and Sonia Cox led an outstanding session educating practitioners on identifying and overcoming barriers to autism-accepting Forest School. Their workshop included recordings of autistic learners to ensure representation.

2019 was also notable as the year that Emily Clark, a practitioner working at a SEND school in Hampshire, successfully lobbied the FSA to make the criteria for becoming a “Recognised Provider” more inclusive to the needs of neurodivergent participants.

This platforming of neurodivergent voices at national level in 2019 occurred just as similar conversations were beginning to emerge in Italy, though within a different institutional context.

Informal advocacy

The concept of neurodiversity should not be seen as a recent strand in Forest School’s mycorrhizal network. As we’ve mentioned, the social model of disability, neurodivergent learners, and the desire to provide “Forest School for all” have been present from the beginning.

Forest School, in practice, encourages informal advocacy. For example, at the 2018 FSA Conference, a workshop titled “Sensory Processing and Forest School” was enhanced by Chris Hunt’s contribution. Chris introduced himself to the workshop as “autistic and proud” and shared his lived experience, greatly enriching the workshop.

While the extent of informal advocacy in Forest School learning communities over the years is unquantifiable, we can trace the development of a culture that supports the acceptance of neurodiversity.

The learner-centred approach naturally focuses on participants’ individual experiences and embraces human diversity. Furthermore, the movement’s grassroots nature encourages community involvement, making it easy for anyone to contribute to the discourse. This enables Forest School to respond to the emerging needs of the broader community.

As the autistic community developed the concept of neurodiversity, advocates worked to bring these ideas into the wider community, changing how people understand themselves and society. Despite governmental austerity policies making access to support more difficult, grassroots organisation has been instrumental in changing perceptions of neurodivergence and paving the way toward a more inclusive society. The UK Forest School movement was well positioned to accept and integrate these ideas.

A neurodiverse community

The boundaries around who is or isn’t neurodivergent are not fixed but continue to evolve. They shift reflecting a complex interplay of scientific developments, changing social attitudes toward difference and deviance, economic influences, and the rise of neurodivergent self-advocacy (Eyal 2010; Nadesan 2013). According to the Nuffield Trust, between 2019 and 2024, there was a five-fold rise in people waiting to see an autism specialist and a 51% increase in prescriptions for ADHD medication (Morris 2024). One of the reasons for this increase is the number of people identifying their neurodivergence later in life. This is partly due to changes in how neurodivergent conditions are perceived and increased awareness but is also down to a historical bias in the diagnostic process that overlooked women and racialised people.

The increase in late identification is visible in most people’s social circles and is reflected in the UK Forest School movement. Despite being framed in the past as an approach that could benefit neurodivergent learners, the fact is that the Forest School community was always neurodiverse on every level. The people who became practitioners included those drawn to the outdoors because they found indoor work uncomfortable or unsatisfying, individuals with a strong sense of social and environmental justice, and those who needed a little more freedom and flexibility in their careers.

Kieran Rose, a well-known UK autism advocate, was a Forest School practitioner before embarking on his career in advocacy. Kieran describes his experience:

I qualified as a Forest School Practitioner in 2005 and had to travel to and stay in Sheffield for a week in hostel accommodation, which at the time was a huge thing for me. I distinctly remember “outing” myself as autistic when we had to introduce ourselves to the group (about 20 people), the responses I got were mostly ones of surprise, but were also very accepting—which was quite a unique experience as predominantly, my previous episodes of disclosure had been hugely negatively life-impacting, particularly at work.

Anecdotally and retrospectively, I was surrounded by neurodivergent people—from the other delegates to the trainers. People who were recognisably autistic, ADHD, and more. Identifiable from their communication, behaviours and mannerisms, lifestyles, the challenges they talked about, and much more. Definitely, people who hardcore leaned out of societal norms and typical ideals. It felt safe, and I felt at home.

The benefits brought by neurodivergent practitioners

The shift in societal attitudes resulting from the work of autistic advocates has led to increasing numbers of long-standing practitioners identifying their own neurodivergence and explaining the benefits this brings to their practice:

As a neurodivergent person, who wasn’t diagnosed until I was an adult, there are times when I can recognise a struggle in students, which may not always appear to be obvious to others. It is common for neurodivergent people to mask areas of difficulty. I masked and coped for such a long time, that I can now often spot similar behaviour from others. Even when the young person cannot perhaps verbalise or recognise why they are struggling. I am then able to implement subtle changes to allow them to relax and make the environment more comfortable. (Binnie 2022)

Binnie also reflects that her own neurodivergence can be reassuring to parents, who then know that she understands autism and ADHD on a deep level, won’t be judgemental, will be able to readily identify and provide support, and knows to celebrate even the small achievements.

The emergence of practitioners who openly discuss their own neurodivergence has contributed to the development of an understanding of neurodiversity within their learning communities. This has created the potential for Forest School to develop genuinely neurodiversity-affirming approaches—that is, practices which recognise and respect neurodivergent needs—rooted in participants’ lived experiences (Dundon 2023).

Additionally, many practitioners have neurodivergent family members and bring their valuable experiences into the discussion. This shift is evident on social media, both in the broader Forest School discourse and in groups specifically established to discuss neurodiversity. A great example is The Forest School podcast; as well as featuring episodes specifically about neurodiversity, hosts Wern Southerden and Lewis Ames mention neurodivergent needs in general discussion in a matter-of-fact way that normalises diversity.

Emerging research

The intersection of Forest School and neurodiversity is beginning to attract increased research attention. Dr Samantha Friedman published with co-authors “A new adventure: A case study of autistic children at Forest School” in 2022. In 2024, the FSA organised a Research Symposium

to bring together academics whose work focuses on Forest School. In addition to contributions from Dr Friedman, Felicity Cooper, Lauren Bourne, and Dr Sinead Mullally all gave presentations centred on autistic experiences of Forest School. It is worth noting that much of this research is being led by academics who are neurodivergent themselves.

Platforming neurodivergent voices

The FSA continues to provide a platform for neurodivergent people to share practice, not only at conferences but also online. Stefania Donzelli and Wendy Binnie have both contributed articles to the FSA blog. Wednesday webinars have included presentations about “Sensory circuits” and “Neurodiversity and Forest School”. Sarah Lawfull has worked hard to create platforms for neurodivergent people within the FSA, bringing together discussion groups and organising workshops.

The ideas shared by neurodivergent people have enriched the Forest School community. An advocate who has had a particularly strong influence on this book is Fergus Murray. Fergus is a teacher, autistic advocate, and community organiser. They have spoken at the 2022 FSA conference but have also made a significant contribution to the development of neurodiversity-affirming practice through their posts in online Forest School groups.

UK Forest School is best understood as a grassroots movement. Practice develops through the sharing of ideas within the community. The Forest School movement is a neurodiverse community; we should take pride in this. As we move forward, we can create “Forest School for All”. We’ll leave the last words on the UK to Kieran Rose:

While I no longer practice, I am still connected to the Forest School community and regularly consult to and train Forest School organisations. So many more practitioners either have diagnoses of various different things or self-identify with neurodivergence.

They speak to not only the liberating effect this knowledge has had on themselves in terms of self-understanding and being able to recognise and meet their needs, but also to how this knowledge has increased their ability to understand, validate, role model, relate to, connect with, and identify with the many neurodivergent children and young people they support. Experiences from their own childhood, development, and upbringings are not far removed from the experiences of the generation they are now supporting. The stigma, lack of safety, invalidation, and trauma felt by both is shared and relatable.

Due to this, it makes sense to me that more and more pockets of knowing neurodivergent communities are forming safe islands in the natural sensory environments of the woods.

While the UK Forest School movement has evolved organically alongside neurodiversity advocacy over three decades, other countries are experiencing this convergence more recently and under different conditions. Italy’s Outdoor Education movement exemplifies how similar grassroots principles can emerge within distinct educational and cultural frameworks, offering both parallels and contrasts to the UK experience.

FOREST PEDAGOGY, OUTDOOR EDUCATION, AND THE RISE OF NEURODIVERSITY IN ITALY

Like the UK, Italy has witnessed the emergence of Outdoor Education as a grassroots movement, yet its trajectory reveals how educational structures and cultural contexts shape the integration of neurodiversity principles. Whereas the UK Forest School movement developed alongside

neurodiversity advocacy from the 1990s, Italy's Outdoor Education developed later and engaged with these ideas at a different stage, creating both opportunities and challenges.

The seed of the Scandinavian forest kindergarten reached Italy in 2013, bringing Outdoor Education to nurseries and preschools in the city of Bologna and leading to the first Italian book on the topic: *La scuola nel bosco* (Schenetti, Rossini, & Salvaterra 2015). The movement has since grown along network-like paths, pursuing multiple goals: enriching school provision, offering alternatives for home-educated children, creating opportunities for free-time activities. Generating a rich mosaic of educational experiences, this rhizomatic development has given birth to several national organisations, each reflecting ongoing debates about terminology and identity within Italy's distinctive educational landscape. Such timing—some two decades later than the UK's initial Forest School development—meant that Italy's Outdoor Education movement encountered neurodiversity perspectives at a different stage of maturation, both in terms of the educational approaches themselves and societal understanding of neurological differences.

If we imagine Forest Pedagogy and Outdoor Education and their spread as a journey, let's ask ourselves who is joining us on this journey: who has access to the experience of being in nature, and who does not?

These questions were raised by Maja Antonietti (2019), Professor of Special Education at the University of Parma, during the first Forest Pedagogy Conference in Milan in 2019. Her intervention invited practitioners to reflect on who is included and who is excluded in the development of Forest Pedagogy in Italy. To underscore the importance of these reflections, Antonietti cited the example of Germany, where, over the years, disabled children have not participated in forest kindergartens. This was, to our knowledge, one of the first public discussions on inclusion in Italian Forest Pedagogy and Outdoor Education.

Fast forward to 2023: the second Forest Pedagogy Conference dedicated significant space to neurodiversity, featuring a workshop and a panel on outdoor inclusion and participation. One of the central goals was to promote inclusion as the participation of everyone—rather than the integration of some. This distinction matters, and in the Italian context it matters particularly: for historical reasons, the two terms are often used interchangeably, producing a confusion that is not merely linguistic.

From integration to inclusion

For over forty years, the Italian school system has promoted “integration”. This term refers to incorporating students with disabilities or special educational needs into regular classrooms, providing the necessary support to help them access the standard educational experience. Unlike the UK's system where students often choose between mainstream and specialised schools, Italy abolished segregated classrooms in the late 1970s, promoting full integration of disabled students into regular settings.

It is within this framework that, from the mid-2000s onward, the term inclusion began to circulate and was gradually adopted in policy and official documents—shifting the focus toward the adaptation and transformation of the entire educational system to embrace the diversity of all students. This approach involves making changes to the general curriculum, teaching strategies, and school organisation to ensure participation and a sense of belonging for everyone (D'Alessio 2011).

Today, despite adopting the language of inclusion, the Italian school system continues largely to operate within an integrative logic, producing what has been described as a “conceptual opacity”

(Medeghini 2018). At the same time, recent political proposals have reintroduced debates around segregation, bringing previously abandoned models back into public discussion.

This opacity has prompted scholars to look for greater conceptual clarity. Fabio Bocci (2021), Professor of Special Pedagogy at the University of Roma Tre, draws a distinction between two ways of understanding inclusion: as a product and as a process. In the former, it functions as a fixed context—closer to integration—into which those who deviate from the norm are inserted. Attention remains focused on the individual, on what is perceived as lacking and in need of compensation. In the latter, it is conceived as a dynamic process in which the environment adapts to the emerging needs of each person, shifting the focus to contextual barriers.

Two images from educational practice clarify the difference. Inclusion as a product resembles a craft activity with a predetermined outcome: a fixed structure into which children with “special” needs must fit. Inclusion as a process recalls an invitation to play with open-ended materials: there are no predefined results, and the environment evolves in response to participants.

This tension—between integrative legacy, regressive pressures, and inclusive vision—runs through Outdoor Education in Italy today. Yet the flexible character of outdoor learning makes the inclusive perspective increasingly visible: outdoors, there is no single standard of participation, every experience can be transformed and shared in different ways, making it clearer that it is contexts—not people—that need to change.

A period of change (2019–2024)

If Antonietti’s intervention in 2019 had drawn attention to inclusion in the outdoors as a previously neglected question, the following years brought a deepening and broadening of the discussion through a plurality of actors: the growing participation of neurodivergent children and young people, the neurodiversity movement, concrete initiatives for the accessibility of outdoor spaces, academic research, and increasing attention to social justice.

The growing participation of neurodivergent children and young people has made inclusion a concrete and urgent concern. Families seeking more flexible and responsive contexts have increasingly turned to outdoor projects, bringing with them diverse needs and expectations. Practitioners have noted a significant presence of children with autism, ADHD, and dyspraxia, even in the absence of official data. In response, a range of practical questions has emerged: how to support different communication styles, address specific sensory needs, and reshape environments rather than simply adapting individuals. Such concerns have gradually entered professional exchange, giving rise to new spaces for dialogue around neurodiversity and outdoor inclusion—among them NEA Rete, founded in 2022 and discussed later in this article.

Alongside this grassroots momentum, the neurodiversity movement in Italy began to gain visibility. The establishment in 2018 of Neuropeculiar—an association explicitly grounded in the principles of the neurodiversity paradigm and the social model of disability—represented a turning point. As Scavarda and Cascio (2025) observe, no previous organisation had adopted these perspectives so explicitly. Its advocacy work, though not focused on the outdoors, contributed to spreading the social model of disability and a shared language on neurodiversity, which gradually influenced Outdoor Education as well.

Concrete initiatives also emerged to make outdoor spaces and experiences more accessible, through different but converging approaches. Some focused on physical accessibility: the Associazione Foresta Modello delle Montagne Fiorentine, for example, organises courses on the use of aids such as the joëlette in wild environments. Others, such as the Fondazione Tetra-bondi promotes adapted sports in public spaces, making visible the participation of people with

non-conforming bodies and minds. In both cases, the emphasis is on making direct experience possible. Together, these initiatives signal a broader understanding of inclusion—one that extends beyond neurological difference to encompass physical accessibility, reflecting a growing attention to disability in its multiple dimensions.

Academic interest grew in parallel. Several publications on inclusion in the outdoors emerged during this period, alongside broader research on inclusive educational contexts for early childhood. The launch of university courses dedicated to the theme—the first promoted by Lumsa University in 2022, the second by the University of Bologna in 2023—signalled institutional recognition of inclusion in Outdoor Education.

Taken together, these heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory processes are shifting the focus: from individual needs to systemic barriers. To understand how these changes are reflected in everyday practice, it is useful to look more closely at what happens on the ground.

Practices on the ground

All these developments—the growing participation of neurodivergent children, the spread of the neurodiversity paradigm, the emerging attention to social justice—did not automatically translate into shared understandings of inclusion. An unpublished exploratory study conducted by Donzelli and Castellini (2022) reveals the complexity beneath the surface.

The study involved 25 practitioners accompanying outdoor educational experiences—predominantly forest kindergartens in northern Italy, though also outdoor self-directed education projects and summer camps. Participants had diverse backgrounds: many came from state schools, others had roles as support staff in services for disabled children. Among the neurodivergent children discussed, the majority were autistic, with varying levels of support needs.

Participants were interviewed about the inclusive strategies they adopt, with the aim of understanding how the meaning of inclusion is constructed in the field. Both approaches were present, sometimes in the practice of the same person—reflecting how deeply the integrative legacy runs, even among those committed to change.

Several accounts reflect an understanding of inclusion as a product in which attention is primarily directed toward children who display behaviours perceived as disruptive or difficult to manage, such as fight, flight, or freeze responses, withdrawal, or activities considered excessively repetitive. These behaviours are often interpreted as expressions of individual deficit. At the same time, a contradiction emerges: while the focus remains on deficit, diagnostic labels are approached with suspicion, as potentially stigmatizing categories. Language similarly tends to emphasise perceived lack. An autistic girl who shows clear and specific preferences is described as “rigid,” while a boy who later receives an ADHD diagnosis is portrayed solely as unable to concentrate. Educational interventions are largely oriented toward suppressing “problematic” behaviours and replacing them with more desirable ones, without engaging with their underlying causes. Approaches to inclusion often privilege continuous one-to-one support: neurodivergent children are seen as requiring constant adult accompaniment, while strategies based on environmental transformation are rarely considered. Sensory needs are acknowledged only in obvious situations—such as excessive noise—without a deeper understanding of perceptual differences. Spontaneous play is often seen as less appropriate, while intense interests are framed as “narrow” and used, if at all, as external rewards.

In approaches aligned with inclusion understood as a process, the focus shifts toward participation and a sense of belonging for each child, regardless of diagnosis. Behaviours that are difficult to manage are interpreted as signs of stress, indicating a mismatch between individual

resources and environmental demands. Greater attention is given to the child's internal perspective: a child who constantly seeks adult support is not seen as "dependent", but as expressing a legitimate need that finds in relationships a form of support. Language becomes more nuanced: "rigidity" is reframed as attentiveness and sustained concentration, while "restricted interests" become gateways to new discoveries. Educational aims are no longer centred on suppressing behaviours, but on developing awareness of needs and diverse ways of participating. In terms of strategies and tools, some accounts describe moments of co-designing the base camp, where children collectively decide how to organise spaces for those seeking either calm or stimulation. Others report environmental adaptations or a growing recognition of different play styles. It is also notable that support is sometimes understood as reciprocal: each child may, at different moments, both receive and offer help.

Overall, the study highlights profoundly different ways of understanding how children engage with outdoor learning environments. The findings, while limited to a specific context, suggest an ongoing shift that may be more widespread: many practitioners are moving toward more inclusive practices, though often without a fully articulated theoretical framework. This points to a clear need: stronger conceptual tools to understand and consolidate this shift. It is here that the neurodiversity paradigm enters the picture—not as an abstract framework, but as a lens that makes visible what deficit-based approaches tend to obscure.

The neurodiversity paradigm in Outdoor Education

We have seen that many practitioners are moving toward more inclusive practices, yet often without a theoretical framework to fully understand their meaning. The recent introduction of the neurodiversity paradigm in the Italian landscape—alongside a growing attention to the social model of disability—responds to this gap, and proves particularly significant when considered against the backdrop of how the relationship between nature and disability has been understood until now.

As Elena Malaguti, Professor of Special Pedagogy at the University of Bologna, told us:

The intersection of autism and Outdoor Education is something recent. In Italy, the intersection between nature and disability is mainly or only understood in terms of rehabilitation—pet therapy or therapeutic horticulture. The focus is on quality of life. This is based on the biomedical model. In contrast, in the US and UK, besides the biomedical model, we see the critical autism studies approach.

This highlights why the introduction of the neurodiversity paradigm represents a significant departure from dominant ways of conceptualising the relationship between nature and autism in Italy. Unlike rehabilitative approaches, a neurodiversity-affirming interpretation of Outdoor Education not only constitutes a novelty in itself, but also makes it possible to more clearly recognise the inclusive potential of outdoor settings: personalised learning, autonomous exploration, and creative engagement with the environment can be understood as concrete ways of valuing different modes of learning, communicating, and participating. The features that make outdoor environments particularly enabling—flexibility, multisensoriality, freedom of movement, and autonomy—can thus be seen as principles of educational quality that are relevant for all learners.

However, recognising these principles is not sufficient if access to outdoor experiences remains unequal. In recent years, Italian debates have pointed to a material barrier: forest kindergartens run by associations, while offering meaningful experiences, tend to remain accessible only to

certain families, while in public schools chronic underfunding limits the possibility of sustaining practices that require adequate staffing ratios, co-presence, and ongoing professional development. A further risk is that Outdoor Education becomes framed primarily as a means of developing individual skills rather than as a practice grounded in cooperation, equity, and shared access to common goods (Raimo 2021; Pavesi & Dal Lago 2021; Lorenzoni 2021).

The neurodiversity paradigm addresses these tensions by explicitly shifting attention to the role of environments in enabling or constraining participation. Responsibility is thus relocated from the individual to the context. The question is no longer how to prepare some children to function in rigid environments, but how to design environments that are accessible to all. This shift redirects attention toward equity, belonging, and shared access, reframing Outdoor Education from a specialist practice into a matter of social justice.

This theoretical reframing, however, needs to be translated into everyday practice through sustained communities of dialogue—spaces where ideas can be shared, discussed, and collectively developed. In the UK context, such spaces emerged organically within the Forest School Association. In Italy, this work is still in progress, and one of the most significant initiatives in this direction is NEA Rete, which we present in the following section.

Work in progress

Translating these ideas into everyday practice requires processes of dialogue, experimentation, and continuous learning—including uncertainty, mistakes, and adjustment. NEA Rete was founded in 2022 out of a desire to bring together and place in dialogue experiences, knowledge, and practices related to inclusion in outdoor educational contexts.

The network brings together professionals from diverse backgrounds—education, training, and therapy—working across a range of settings, including public schools with outdoor projects, forest kindergartens, summer camps, outdoor learning environments, and therapeutic services. Its pedagogical references span Forest Pedagogy, wilderness pedagogy, and play-based approaches. A shared commitment to the neurodiversity paradigm and the social model of disability runs throughout the network.

NEA Rete relies on volunteer work and provides an open forum for sharing experiences, reflections, and tools through periodic meetings and study groups. Topics addressed include the balance between spontaneity and predictability, the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication outdoors, and the application of Universal Design in the planning of outdoor spaces. The network is also actively involved in public discussions about education at the local and national level.

The following accounts offer an insight into how the neurodiversity paradigm can translate into concrete choices in everyday practice.

Elisabetta Pepe, active in NEA Rete, is a teacher at the Peep Laghetto preschool of Istituto Comprensivo 8, Vicenza, which since 2016 has integrated outdoor education, Forest Pedagogy, wilderness pedagogy, and experiential learning. She describes how being outdoors has transformed the school's idea of inclusion:

This new way of doing school, outdoors, has led us to move beyond the 'everyone does everything' and 'we need to do this' mindsets, encouraging us to align with more natural yet highly complex rhythms. It has deepened our engagement both in how we use bodily intelligence and in our educational practices, shifting from a top-down transmission of knowledge to a more collaborative, horizontal model of co-education and shared growth. Over the years, the diverse and sometimes unexpected needs of the children have required us to think about more varied forms of support

and facilitation. The focus on sensory experiences has been central. We have given legitimacy to each child's modes of discovery and made visible the sensory challenges that can sometimes limit experiences and create conditions of discomfort.

Laura Meduri, a psychomotor therapist and pedagogical coordinator of a nature-based project in Tuscany, describes how participation in NEA Rete has supported her work:

Being part of NEA Rete has kept me constantly connected to the theme of neurodiversity, drawing methodological insights and reflections from different contexts. Listening to different case studies has helped me bring back examples, connections, and tools to my team. Through the network, I introduced tools like visual schedules and the educational co-responsibility agreement; in turn, I shared within the network the psychomotor observation tools I use.

Sofia Longoni, an educator with experience in forest kindergartens and public schools, explains how the outdoor approach can inform any educational context:

Working in a forest kindergarten based on an emergent curriculum requires continuous observation of children's needs, interests, and competencies. Starting from the observation of what exists—including and especially what is unexpected—has allowed me to focus on what is present rather than what is missing. I believe this approach is valuable in any educational context, because it allows us to attribute value to less common needs, divergent strategies, and often overlooked competencies, even when working indoors.

Luisa Dipierro, educational designer of a nature education project in Liguria, highlights the value of collaboration between professionals with different ways of perceiving and learning:

From the start, NEA Rete has brought together neurotypical and neurodivergent professionals from various fields to collaborate. In this way, it has moved beyond the common tendency to 'other' those who perceive and interact in ways that differ from expectations. The perspectives of neurodivergent participants have enriched the entire network. Over time, I have seen the group become increasingly skilled at listening, addressing each other's needs, and offering support. This growth has had a profound impact on my work in nature and as a counsellor. I have gained knowledge about the diversity of human sensory experiences, the concept of double empathy, and the many strategies we can put into practice to make environments more accessible.

These accounts reveal a growing awareness of how environments can enable or disable—an awareness increasingly present in training sessions and exchange meetings, even those not specifically focused on neurodiversity or inclusion. In these contexts, the presence of neurodivergent professionals enriches collective discussion, bringing personal experiences and perspectives. In Italy too, grassroots advocacy—grounded in the sharing of concrete experiences—is gradually moving practice in this direction.

In terms of practice, those working in the field are exploring different paths. Since 2024, NEA Rete has established as a priority the inclusion of all outdoor education approaches, on the understanding that responding to the variety of needs requires an equally varied range of tools. Alongside this, more focused initiatives have emerged: in 2025, at the European Outdoor Education Network conference in Rimini, a poster was dedicated specifically to neurodiversity and Forest

Pedagogy. The multiplication of spaces for reflection—some broad, others more specialised—speaks to both the vitality of the movement and the complexity of building shared languages.

The tension between theoretical elaboration and material conditions remains open. These experiences develop within a system where continuing professional development is voluntary and unpaid, where access to woodland remains unequal for economic and geographic reasons, and where proposals to reintroduce differential classes return cyclically to political debate. The accounts collected here show what it is possible to build through voluntary work and mutual exchange—but they also raise questions about how this knowledge might become widely shared. The neurodiversity paradigm offers a framework for rethinking inclusion, but its translation into practice remains, for now, an open construction site.

CONCLUSION

In this resource, we've tried to give a brief overview of how grassroots community movements can intersect and adapt to emerging needs. In the UK, this has occurred through gradual co-evolution over three decades, with increasing recognition of neurodivergent leadership and self-advocacy within Forest School communities. In Italy, encounters are more recent, building on the country's integrative tradition while pushing beyond its conceptual limitations toward inclusive approaches, as seen in collaborative networks like NEA Rete.

Although we've only discussed the UK and Italy, these intersections happen throughout the global Forest School movement. We encourage other communities to record and share their experiences. It's a shared social history which doesn't recognise borders.

The convergence of the Forest School movement and the neurodiversity movement represents a significant step toward creating educational spaces that are truly inclusive and responsive to the needs of all learners. Both movements, grounded in grassroots advocacy and the lived experiences of their communities, offer a powerful example of how bottom-up approaches can drive meaningful change. By integrating the insights of the neurodiversity movement into Forest School practices, educators and practitioners are developing innovative methods that celebrate diversity, promote inclusion, and adapt to the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals. This evolving synergy enriches the Forest School experience and contributes to a broader societal shift toward recognising and valuing neurodiversity. As these movements continue to grow and influence each other, they pave the way for a future where education is more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse ways people learn and experience the world.



KEY POINTS

- ▶ *Grassroots synergy:* Both the Forest School movement and the neurodiversity movement emerged from grassroots efforts, responding to community needs. Their principles, though distinct, are complementary and have begun to intersect, especially in education.
- ▶ *UK Forest School and neurodiversity:* The UK Forest School movement was inclusive from its inception, serving neurodivergent children early on, particularly those not thriving in traditional classrooms.
- ▶ *Inclusive evolution:* Forest School's intertwining with neurodiversity has fostered environments that better accommodate neurodivergent learners and practitioners.
- ▶ *Therapeutic interventions:* Forest School became a platform for various therapeutic

interventions, including for autistic and neurodivergent learners, blending nature-based learning with therapeutic support.

- ▶ *Grassroots advocacy for neurodivergence*: The neurodiversity movement, as advocated by figures like Jim Sinclair, significantly influenced the reframing of neurodivergent experiences within educational and Forest School settings, challenging deficit-based models of disability.
- ▶ *Autistic representation*: The rise of autistic advocates in Forest School, like Andy Smith, increased the presence of neurodivergent voices in educational practices, leading to more neurodiversity-affirming environments. Increasingly, practitioners are identifying their own neurodivergence.
- ▶ *Italy's Forest Pedagogy and Outdoor Education*: The inclusion of neurodivergence in Italy's Forest Pedagogy is more recent, with growing recognition of the need for inclusion beyond simple integration, especially in response to the rise of the neurodiversity movement.
- ▶ *Inclusion vs. integration in Italy*: Italy's educational system traditionally focused on "integration" of special needs students, but Forest Pedagogy and Outdoor Education are pushing toward a more inclusive approach that adapts the system for all learners, especially neurodivergent ones.
- ▶ *Challenges of neoliberal Influence*: Both in the UK and Italy, there are tensions between the neoliberal framing of Outdoor Education (as a tool for employability) and a more holistic, inclusive approach that values neurodiversity and learner-centred methods.
- ▶ *Future directions*: The synergy between the Forest School and neurodiversity movements is creating more inclusive, learner-focused environments, reshaping educational landscapes to better support diverse ways of learning and experiencing the world.

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