



Woodland play

How using an area of woodland within or adjacent to your school grounds can enrich children's outdoor play experiences



Learning
through
Landscapes



Across the UK, schools are re-discovering the importance of play and its ability to impact on some of the most significant aspects of child development. They're also discovering that natural environments and natural materials offer some of the richest play opportunities. While many schools are now developing their playgrounds to create natural play spaces, hundreds of schools already have access to a wonderful, but unused, woodland playground right on their doorstep.

We wanted to find out how woodlands in or adjacent to schools could be made accessible for regular play. We've visited schools that have been doing this for years and worked with others that have recognised the potential of their woodlands for play but who needed help to turn their aspirations into reality.

This booklet shares what we've learned along the way. Not only does it illustrate the unique range of experiences and benefits offered by woodland play to children of all abilities, but also how schools have managed the practical issues that might otherwise have prevented them from making the most of this wonderful resource.

Visit www.youtube.com/schoolgroundsuk and you can hear directly from some of the schools involved by viewing our short film. You will also find detailed case studies of each school included in the project at www.ltl.org.uk.

Our mission is that every child benefits from stimulating outdoor learning and play in their education.

No woods?

Many schools are now developing their existing playgrounds to create natural play spaces with natural resources. Find out by viewing our short film at www.ltl.org.uk.



nurture creativity and imagination

'Out here with nothing, there's a wealth of opportunities but the children need to use their imaginations to make it come alive for them' **Teacher**

'We're making this house. We've got a living room and a bedroom' **Pupil**

'In this setting – away from traditional playground situations – imaginative play seems easier for older children' **Teacher**

increase knowledge and skills

'They can get close to nature, acquire new skills and appreciate and understand the natural environment' **Teacher**

'They learn while they play' **Parent**

'Some of the children who don't shine academically in school are definitely leaders outside. The role is reversed for them' **Teacher**

Woodland play can...



develop physical and emotional health

'They grow in confidence with their physical ability through climbing and moving around on uneven ground' **Teacher**

'It helps him physically as he doesn't enjoy most sports but he loves to climb trees. The benefits of fresh air and physical exercise are huge' **Parent**

'This can provide relaxation and some release from the classroom environment' **Teacher**

improve behaviour and social skills

'When children are playing in the woods, their behaviour is a lot better. They're engaged, they're enjoying themselves, they have things to do, they're working together as a team, morale is really high' **Teacher**

'There's a group of boys who've been furiously building a den – they've been working cooperatively. To create that in the classroom would be very difficult' **Teacher**

'I like building dens because you have to do tons of problem solving and work with your friends' **Pupil**



offer endless fun!

'There's more things to do. The playground can be fun – but not as fun as the woods' **Pupil**

'We can see it on the children's faces. They're not walking to the woodland, they're running. They're desperate to come here and play' **Teacher**

'It's liberating for them. They can be children again' **Teacher**



What is woodland play?

While all play has benefits for children, play in a woodland setting offers different and unique opportunities. Outdoors among the trees and shrubs, free from an adult's gaze, there is a strong sense of freedom that stimulates more imaginative and creative play. There are numerous and ever-changing natural resources and features which – unlike man-made equipment – are non-prescriptive, their uses limited only by the child's imagination. And the play is in the child's control, rather than part of an adult's agenda. Children can run, climb, skip, hide, jump, take risks, get wet, explore nature, build dens, get dirty, dig holes, invent games, pretend, talk with their friends or just sit and contemplate.

Small or large, a woodland area offers incredible value to your school grounds. Lenzie Moss Primary has only a small strip at the edge of their grass football pitch. Previously out of bounds, the parent council, gardening group and eco-committee worked together with a ranger from the local nature reserve to develop the area, encourage wildlife, and erect natural boundaries where the wood meets a public space. Now the woodland is used every lunchtime by children throughout the school.

**'There's more things to do.
The playground can be fun –
but not as fun as the woods'**

Pupil from Lenzie Moss Primary



Packed with play resources

Whatever its size, a woodland naturally offers a range of flexible, natural play 'equipment' that can fire a child's imagination – from branches, twigs and sticks, to small pools, puddles and muddy areas, seed pods, leaves and pebbles.

A bit of imagination – and minimum investment – can extend these play opportunities even further. At Cardross Primary the pupil council created a box of resources linked to the woodland, including laminated activities – such as a scavenger hunt – conveniently located at the entrance to the wood, for use by any children playing among the trees. Den building – a simple activity for children of all ages to enjoy outdoors, get creative and learn how to problem solve – is supported at Lanark Primary with tarpaulins, ropes and mats stored in school and transported to the woodland by trolley.

A chance to grow

To reap the benefits of woodland play, keeping adult intervention to a minimum is key (see 'A sense of freedom' over page). Inevitably, however, clear boundaries regarding acceptable behaviour need to be agreed – and engaging children in the process of developing these rules ensures they are widely owned as well as helping to develop the children's self-regulation skills.

At Invergarry Primary the children have been involved with developing and agreeing a simple set of rules. They discuss issues during circle time and can post thoughts in a box for school discussion.

At Abernethy Primary too, the children are trusted to make decisions for themselves. For example, only sticks of a certain length (no longer than from the elbow to the fingertips) can be used for stick games, and these can only be played with others who want to play stick games.

'My favourite thing is to build dens because you have to do lots of problem solving and work with your friends'

Pupil from St Ronan's Primary

Links to learning

Developing your woodland for play will also enrich children's learning opportunities. At Cardross Primary the woodland is used as a learning environment to enhance the children's understanding of the biodiversity within it. They display a key on a noticeboard at the entrance to the woodland relating to the nearby fauna and flora; staff from the local Scottish Wildlife Trust office have supported the children in identifying wildlife and they have listened to and recorded bird song, repeating the survey at different times of the year. At Craighdu Primary children and parents have worked over the years to create a variety of learning resources including a bird hide and bug garden. At Redhall Special School, using the woodland supports their Skills for Life curriculum – for example, the children learn how to dress appropriately, put on their own wellies and experience rain and slippery terrain.

It's all about...

- freedom
- adventure and challenge
- taking responsibility
- exploring nature
- being creative





A sense of freedom...



**'It's liberating for them.
They can be children again'**

Teacher from St Ronan's Primary

Free from an adult's gaze, children can truly lose themselves in an activity, and play without inhibition. They can make decisions and solve problems for themselves. In turn this freedom allows them to learn how to assess and handle risk, which builds their self-esteem, independence and confidence.

Schools that embrace this philosophy recognise that you don't always need to be able to see children to ensure they are safely supervised. Indeed, maintaining close visual contact in woodland areas can be impossible, as well as unnecessary.

Subtle supervision

At Chatelherault Primary, only the nursery children and those from the autistic unit are supervised directly. Otherwise, during play time the school janitor stays at the edge of the woodland where he can be easily reached if needed.

A similar approach is taken at Invergarry Primary which has two acres of mixed woodland in its grounds. The children play here every breaktime, navigating rocks, fallen trees, and a small stream. With such a large area, it is impossible for staff to keep an eye on all the children all the time even if it were desirable. Instead, staff stay in one spot so children know where to find them if they are needed.



At Dalmeny and Lenzie Moss Primary each staff member has a walkie-talkie so if more adult help is required another adult on duty elsewhere can quickly be contacted. In an emergency, the supervisor at Dalmeny also has a whistle to blow indicating that the children leave the woodland and report to the waiting area to be counted.

Checking in, checking out

A simple rota system can help you keep track of who is playing in your woodland. One class per day is allowed in the woods at Chatelherault Primary – and access is monitored using a woodland pass. If a class can't use their pass for any reason (a class trip, for example) they hold on to it for the next day.

At Dalmeny Primary each child is given a wrist band that has to be handed back if they leave the woods. And because the focus is on quiet, reflective (rather than boisterous) physical play numbers are limited to small groups of eight or nine.

At St Ronan's Primary, each class is allowed access to the woodland area for a whole week to allow play to develop, and give children time to complete projects such as building dens or digging ditches.

Looking out for each other

Promoting the need for pupils to look out for each other can increase safety without creating a sense that they are being policed.

At Lanark Primary, where every class has access to the woodland for free play, volunteers from higher up the school are enlisted as the eyes and ears of adult supervisors. Known as 'Wood Watch Rangers' they wear high visibility vests with their own new logo and have a range of responsibilities. These include positioning boundary markers to indicate the area to be played in that week, transporting the woodland resources by trolley to the woodland, and ringing a bell at the end of breaktime.

A buddy system can work well too. At St Ronan's older pupils engage with younger ones for their structured play sessions while at Craigdhu older and younger groups are given joint access to the woodland and encouraged to look out for each other.

**'I like playing
hide and seek because
there are lots of branches
you can hide in'**

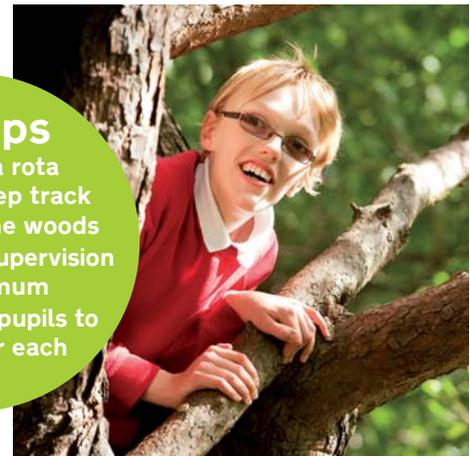
Pupil from Lenzie Moss Primary

Creating boundaries

In larger areas, not all the woods need to be 'in bounds' all the time. Schools can, for example, demarcate designated areas which not only allows time for over-used spaces in the woods to recover but also makes supervision easier to manage. The woodland at Lenzie Moss consists of two areas – one of which is a local nature reserve adjacent to a public path. To keep the children from straying beyond this area, a boundary has been erected using natural materials, including bushes, logs and a fence. Dalmeny Primary has planted a native hedge to delineate the play area within their wood, while at Redhall Special School the boundary is marked out with rustic posts.

Top tips

- Devise a rota system to keep track of who is in the woods
- Keep adult supervision to a minimum
- Encourage pupils to look out for each other



Adventure and challenge

Children naturally seek adventure and challenge, even when it is not provided for directly. Conquering the unknown gives them a buzz, and the desire to do it again. They can test the limits of their physical, intellectual and emotional development, and gain confidence as well as a sense of achievement and the motivation to keep trying. They become experts at assessing risk for themselves.

In an age in which many children no longer have the freedom to explore and create their own adventures, woodlands are ideal places to provide adventure for children and harness the benefits. Here, play can be open-ended, dynamic and varied. The very fact that it is also at times risky and unpredictable increases the sense of adventure – and the opportunities for learning.

Enabling, not disabling

Enabling adventurous and challenging play requires schools to balance the benefits of this approach with their responsibility to provide due care for children's safety. An excellent approach to managing this balance is described in detail in Play England's 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' guide, endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive (see right).

Writing a formal play policy which identifies the benefits of woodland play is a useful foundation on which to build a whole-school approach to an enabling play ethos. This can have a number of tangible benefits, including a common understanding of the role of play and physical activity in the woodland, a practical working tool for developing and improving this play environment and an induction document for new staff.

'All schools report cuts, grazes and bruises, as with any play environment but NO serious accidents'

A walk on the wild side

Outdoors in a woodland a child's sense of mobility is naturally sharpened as they learn how to manage uneven ground and varied topography. At Invergarry Primary the children navigate rocks, fallen trees and wet areas with ease, developing their coordination and self-awareness as they swing on low branches, play chase or climb on boulders. In the winter when the burn is frozen, they skate and jump on it until it cracks.

All schools taking part in this project reported cuts, grazes and bruises, as they would have in any other play environment – but there have been no serious accidents. Indeed, when Craighdu Primary installed a boardwalk to allow access to a particularly wet area of their woodland, they decided not to add friction strips as they wanted children to learn about the danger of slipping on wood in wet weather. 'It's all part of the learning experience... the same is true of nettles,' says their headteacher.





Staying safe, having fun

Find out more about
risk and benefit. Visit

- www.playengland.org.uk/resources
- www.ltl.org.uk for CPD training

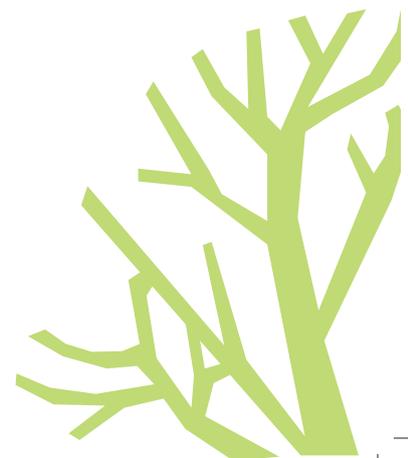
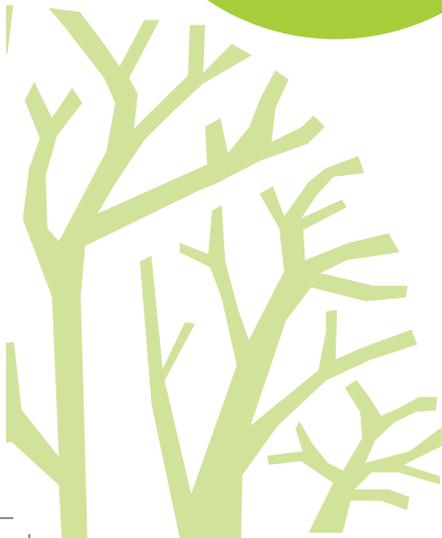
High and mighty

For many children the chance to climb offers a strong incentive to be active – and trees are natural climbing frames. With branches offering natural progressions, children of all abilities can have a go. Climbing increases upper body and grip strength and improves coordination and balance. It allows the climber to demonstrate persistence and achieve a personal goal. And up high, children can survey the ground below and enjoy imaginative play.

Sometimes tree climbing isn't advisable. At Invergarry Primary for example, it isn't allowed as there are boulders and rocks in the undergrowth. However, many of the schools are happy with low-level climbing and swinging on branches. At Cardross Primary, where the children are actively encouraged to risk assess for themselves, trees that are popular for climbing have a ring placed around them indicating the maximum height the children are allowed to reach from the ground.

Back to nature

Being among woodland plants helps develop children's sense of awe and wonder at the world around them and stimulate their senses. They can enjoy different textures (with leaves that are large, velvety, serrated, spiky etc), scents (wild herbs), tastes (blackberries, hazel) and sounds (crunchy leaves etc). These plants provide natural play props and create hidden spaces. Some, however, can pose dangers. While children quickly learn that nettles can sting, some – like fungi – need to be treated with caution. At Invergarry the children have learnt which to avoid with help from a visiting fungi expert.





It's elemental!

Experiencing the daily and seasonal weather patterns gives children the chance to discover an ever-changing environment. They can get close to nature and appreciate the natural world: in the winter investigating frozen puddles; in the spring witnessing seedlings come to life and leaves unfurl; in the summer tracking the sun and finding warm spots to sit and contemplate; in the autumn exploring the colours and shapes of fallen leaves.

Being outdoors every day, all year in all weather is well established in the nursery sector. After all, woodlands provide natural protection from the more fierce elements – shade on sunny days, shelter under tree canopies on wet days. For most schools it's only on very windy days that woodland play is suspended due to weather.

Dressed for success

Children don't dissolve in the rain – and with the right clothing they can stay warm and dry. At Invergarry the children are responsible for bringing suitable clothing to school for playing outdoors in the woodland, but several spare waterproofs and wellington boots are always available. At Craigdhu the children bring outdoor footwear to school and are required to change into this before going outdoors. Children at Abernethy Primary have all-in-one suits and thermal wellies to wear in the winter, courtesy of the People's Millions Big Lottery Fund.

Lenzie Moss Primary has a dedicated space for storing outdoor clothing. And at Peel Primary, where the woodland area is freely accessible to all from the playing field, the children have indoor shoes to change into after being out.

'Some of our children find the classroom very restrictive. Out in the woodland they cooperate brilliantly'

Teacher from Lenzie Moss Primary

'They can get close to nature and appreciate and understand the natural world'

Shade and shelter

Additional protection from the elements can easily be constructed in a woodland. A sail maker at Lenzie Moss Primary made a bespoke shelter fixed to the trees. At Invergarry Primary, with support from the parents, a wooden shelter has been redeveloped – with a mural painted by the whole community – incorporating storage benches designed by the children in which clothing is kept for easy access.

Don't let rain stop play

- Put food colouring in puddles to make swirly patterns
- Dam temporary streams
- Make mini boats from leaves and twigs to sail in puddles
- Collect rainwater in buckets and tarpaulins
- Jump from puddle to puddle





Caring for your woodland

Most woodlands require little management or maintenance to make them suitable for play. In fact, keeping development and disruption in a woodland to the minimum will help keep the space as natural as possible.

Firstly establish who owns it and make sure you have permissions to carry out any changes. Where there is no budget for maintenance but community and/or parental support is strong, then community and pupil/parent action days can be arranged to get specific jobs done. Pupil-focused groups can also play an important role – not least in encouraging a sense of ownership. At Peel Primary, the eco committee oversees themed assemblies such as ‘caring for our environment’ and a group of pupils known as the Junior Environmental Team (the Jets) acts as guardian of the woodland, organising litter picks when needed and phoning the local authority environmental team to report any tree-safety issues.

With some issues the answer to maintenance may be to do less! At Craighdu Primary, for example, the planted willow that divides the woodland area from the main playground used to be cut back but now, to avoid the work involved, it is allowed to grow freely and only coppiced if willow withies are required within the woodland areas, or for use in an art project.

**‘There is a set of rules.
If they don’t obey
the rules they know
the consequences.
They’ll go inside’**

Teacher from St Ronan’s Primary



Litter watch

At Craighdu Primary, where picnic tables have been installed so packed lunches can be eaten in the woods, the children are expected to find a bin for their litter in the main playground. By taking responsibility in this way the children develop a sense of pride and respect for their environment. The janitor checks the woodland area every day before morning break but discoveries of dangerous litter have been few and far between.

Tree safety

It makes sense to have an initial check by a professional on the trees in your woodland. Your local authority or Forest Education Initiative (FEI) cluster group should be able to help you find someone.

When maintenance tasks such as clearing branches need addressing schools use a variety of approaches. Often fallen branches or trees can be made safe and left to be used as benches or provide materials for den making. At St Ronan's Primary larger branches and trees that were unsafe have been used to repair and create new seats, as well as being used for natural play features such as a balance beam and bespoke A-frame to encourage den building.

At Chatelherault Primary wood that has been felled has been used by a local artist to create wood carvings – a project funded by the school's PTA. At Abernethy Primary a number of trees were taken down after cracking with severe snow and frost. The task was financed by the property repairs budget.

At Dalmeny the children are encouraged to look for 'drop bears' – branches that might fall. These are reported to the estate that owns the land. Small scale maintenance, however, is carried out by pupils trained in forest school techniques.

'Teachers are excited because they can see the enjoyment that the children have'

Teacher from Lenzie Moss Primary

Access and pathways

The more often a woodland is used, the more likely it is to be cared for. Keeping pathways clear of obstructive debris and low level branches – especially those at eye level or that have large thorns – helps encourage use. If paths become too worn and need time to recover, they may need roping off while an alternative access way is used instead.

At Lenzie Moss Primary an all-weather path was installed thanks to donations from a local firm. The path was created by the pupils and parents, and includes an original Antonine (stone and turf) wall and a bridge taking users on an alternative route. Cardross Primary laid a path that circuits the woodland, allowing immediate access throughout the year.

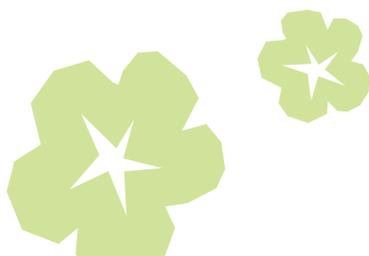
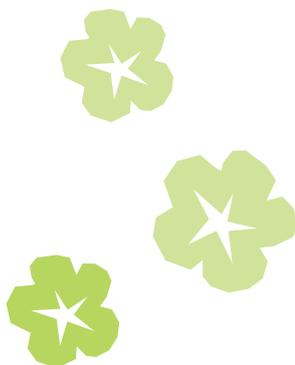
At Dalmeny Primary children access the woodland – which isn't part of the school grounds – via an aerial walk way designed for free by a parent and built for free by the Royal Engineers. This fun and playful access adds to the children's excitement and motivation to explore and use the woods.

Supporting wildlife

Woodlands naturally support wildlife and may have special features that need protecting. At Blackhall Primary one of the children noticed signs of badger activity while playing in the woods and the area has now been fenced. New habitats can also be encouraged. If adding trees to extend the site, choosing native species will help maintain the local biodiversity. At Chatelherault Primary the eco committee has worked to improve biodiversity by installing bat boxes, insect hotels and a hedgehog house with funding courtesy of donations from local businesses. At Dalmeny Primary the school has demarcated their area using trees donated by the Woodland Trust, with boundaries of biodiverse rich hedges. They have also developed a wetland, orchid and wildflower area.

Check!

- Keep an eye out for dangerous trees. Obvious signs include
- fungi growing on trunk
 - dead branches
 - large cracks
 - heavy leans
 - cavities





Making it happen... and making it last

In every case where woodland play has worked successfully, it has had strong support from the headteacher and senior management. In addition, involving the whole school community is key, from getting staff and parents on board, to finding the skills needed to implement the changes and maintain the woodland.

Start with a play policy

A policy that outlines your ambitions is a good starting point as it articulates how children benefit from woodland play and why the school is committed to enabling it. At Dalmeny Primary, their school aim is 'To learn adventurously'. At Abernethy, the nursery's play policy states that children will be outside every day, all year in all weather. Lanark Primary has produced a mini brochure for pupils, parents and carers with inspirational quotes relating to the value and benefits of woodland play, an outline of the activities the children participate in and simple guidance on staying safe.

Getting staff on board

As with any change, you may at first encounter some resistance, but it is really important that all staff are involved in any changes and can contribute their ideas. Start by sharing the benefits of woodland play.

At Peel Primary, all staff were given CPD training linked to taking the curriculum outdoors, encouraged to complete an environmental project, and identify places outside where teaching could take place.

Several schools showcased here already had staff trained as forest-school practitioners and were able to apply much of their learning to woodland play. Lanark Primary started with each teacher taking their pupils to the wood on an occasional basis during class time. This allowed staff to gradually get to know the wood, see how children were benefiting and build trust.

Engaging children

Many schools already have an eco committee and/or pupil council, which can help drive a project like this. Involving children in a meaningful way gives them an opportunity to learn valuable skills and develop a sense of ownership of their outdoor space.

At Cardross Primary, for example, a whole-school competition was held to find a name for the woodland and the winning entry – 'Forget Me Knot Wood' – was turned into a bespoke sign made of metal and wood by a local artist. In addition, the eco committee and pupil council created a set of basic rules for play and behaviour in the woodland.

To help sustain their outdoors, children at Peel Primary are regularly involved in raising funds: 'We feel this promotes a sense of ownership and empowerment'.

**'You have to take
people with you.
Take small steps,
trial things...'**

Teacher from St Ronan's Primary

Involving parents

Parents and carers from these schools have been overwhelmingly positive about woodland play, but some can be understandably anxious while others may not fully appreciate the value of these experiences for their children. As with getting staff on board, it pays to start by sharing the benefits of woodland play.

At Peel Primary, which has always had a history of using their grounds, the school makes a point of emphasising to parents that 'learning doesn't just take place within four walls'. If parents are concerned, try to establish why, and then reassure them that risk/benefit assessments have been conducted to minimise dangers. To ensure parental support, Lanark Primary sent out a questionnaire to parents to identify their thoughts and concerns prior to developing their woodland area. At Dalmeny Primary all children must have written agreement from their parents to be allowed in the woods, and this is reviewed annually. At Lenzie Moss some parents were involved in initial observations of woodland play as the school developed their ideas.

Who can help?

From clearing dead wood to erecting fences and building paths, parents and your local community can be a great source of expertise and support. A skills survey will uncover ways that parents can get involved – and providing a working lunch will often be incentive enough to get a team of volunteers!

If the changes to your outdoor space are going to affect your neighbours, invite them to an open day – perhaps with coffee and cakes – to raise understanding and make it easier in the future if you want to approach local businesses for funds.

Other local specialists can contribute ideas, expertise and hands-on help. The local Community Justice team installed steps at St Ronan's Primary. BTCV (the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) helped to build a path at Craighdu Primary. At Lenzie Moss Primary a ranger from the local nature reserve offered ideas to parents on path and fence building, while a local firm donated materials and labour for the path. And the local council health and safety officer visited the school to help write a risk/benefit assessment.

Forest Education Initiative cluster groups are good sources of advice on funding for woodland work. They can award small grants themselves as well as help schools apply to the Forestry Commission for woodland grants.

Get staff and parents on board by...

- sharing our woodland play case studies and film
 - visiting or speaking to some of the schools showcased here
 - providing appropriate CPD training
- Visit www.ltl.org.uk





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