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and friends

The Forest Project Final Report

Produced by

Kim Sutton – Volunteer Project Support
Sam Barlow – Chief Officer
Vickie Hiller – Deputy Chief Officer

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1. Background

The Forest Project was developed as a result of a grant from the Ideas Fund <https://theideasfund.org/> The project was designed as a way of helping children and young people cope with bereavement. The grant required close working with a Research Team and we were matched to a team from University of Hull.

A total of five Forest Project programmes for children with Hull postcodes were facilitated. This report provides an overview and learning from all of the programmes.

Studies have found that mental and physical wellbeing can be improved by being in nature. It has been shown to boost the immune system and decrease anxiety and depression. It is this understanding that led to the desire to test out a new means of bereavement support for children – in a forest setting. The aim was to create a way of children experiencing a wide range of outdoor forest activities, alongside the exploration of literature, to help them express, understand and manage their grief and loss.

2. The Research Relationship

The project involved a collaboration with Dr Richard Meek of the University of Hull. Dr Meek is an expert in the field of Shakespeare and Renaissance literature, with particular research interests and expertise in the history of emotions. Dr Meek has co-edited an anthology entitled Legacies of Loss, a selection of writings on death, loss and remembrance, which is designed to enable reflection on the capacity of literature to offer consolation in the face of bereavement. This anthology is linked to and available via a website www.legaciesofloss.wordpress.com which is dedicated to exploring expressions of loss.

The plan was to co-produce innovative activities that would be of mutual benefit to the community and the researchers. The Legacies of Loss anthology was used as a starting point for a discussion about how poems and imaginative literature can be a catalyst for articulating and writing about feelings of grief. The plan was to co-design age-appropriate writing workshops to form part of the forest sessions. It was hoped the workshops would also be a space for participants to reflect upon their physical and emotional responses to the natural world, creating a shared space of community-building and creativity.

3. The Team

The team was made up of:

- Programme Co-ordinator
- Forest School Leaders (FSL)
- Bereavement Support Facilitators (BSF)
- Research Team

The Programme Co-ordinator managed all the bookings, communications to parents/carers/referrers, organisation of transport/meetings/training, writing up of evaluation, support with publicity/marketing. For one programme a young volunteer joined us – Emily has lived

experience of bereavement. She wrote a blog after her experience which gives another insight into the benefits of the Forest Project. See <https://fitMums.org.uk/news-article/Together-in-Grief-The-Forest-Project,-Emily-s-blog/349>

Forest School Leaders organised all the activities, which are numerous and include: building dens/bridges, carving, cooking on the campfire, fire lighting, willow weaving, hammock swinging, leaf painting, games etc.

The purpose of the Bereavement Support Facilitators (BSF) was to provide therapeutic support, and to ensure children felt safe and supported to discuss their grief if they wished. The hope was that participation in the project would contribute to improved mental and physical wellbeing in the process of managing grief, and potentially create connections with peers, which would be beneficial for longer term support beyond the lifespan of the project.

The overall development, monitoring and design of the project was driven by the Chief Officer and Deputy Chief Officer.

4. The Participants

Initially the project was designed for children from 10 - 17 years but referrals came in for younger children. We therefore decided to try and organise programmes in a range that meant the combination of ages was appropriate. For example we tried to plan for a younger age group session, and then a more teens focused session – but this did not always work out due to the nature of referrals received.

5. Assessment Process

All referrals were assessed by a BSF to check for suitability for the programme. Very few children were not deemed suitable. One reason for not accepting a child was due to a concern about the level of risk. The child needed 1-1 support at school to ensure safety and this wasn't possible to put in place in the Forest with the resources available. Sometimes the bereavement was very recent and BSF or parent felt it was too soon to gain the most out of the programme. Outcomes of assessment and subsequent attendance detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Assessment Outcomes

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3	Programme 4	Programme 5
Number Assessed	11	6	6	6	7
Place offered	11	6	6	6	7
Place accepted	6 (3 siblings)	6	6 (2 cousins)	6	7
Age range	9-14 Years	6-10 Years	9-14 Years	9-14 Years	9-15 Years
Transport needed	3 children	1 child	2 children	4 children	

Table 2 – Attendance Outcomes

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Programme 1	6	5	4	6
Programme 2	5	5	5	5
Programme 3	5	5	4	5
Programme 4	4	3	3	4
Programme 5	1	4	5	9

6. Programme Structure

A loose weekly outline was developed at the outset of the project, created using the expertise and input from Forest School Leaders and BSFs (see Appendix 1). Flexibility was essential in approaching each session. Forest School Leaders work very organically and are used to having a range of possible options, choosing appropriate activities on the day according to the needs/wants of participants and conditions in the forest. A team debrief took place with all staff after each programme and the structure of sessions were co-developed as time went on, also taking into account feedback from children and parents/carers. Initially the programme was designed to be a full day, followed by 3 half days. However it proved to work better with the full day being the last day – by which time the children had bonded and settled in. Consequently the format changed – a benefit of this type of funding, being able to test out ideas and respond.

7. Pillow Chat Diaries

The Pillow Chat Diary is a resource which had been developed prior to the development of this project. It is a little notebook which offers children the chance to share worries and fears without the need to talk face to face. Children simply write in the diary and slip it under their pillow where their trusted adult can then find it and respond. It was developed by a family living with a terminally ill parent to aid communication.

The diary allows children to express worries and concerns and ask questions they just can't ask face to face as this is often too intimidating. The child's trusted adult is sometimes someone in a different setting such as school so it has the potential for uses across different spectrums. The Pillow Chat Diary offers invaluable support for a child and also a reassuring communication channel for the trusted adult in their life. Each child was given a diary and encouraged to bring it to the Forest or talk (if they wished) about how they might be using it. <https://fitMums.org.uk/support/pillow-chat-diary>

8. Challenges

Recruitment - each programme was designed with capacity for 10 children which we felt was the right number of children to manage activities and also ensure appropriate emotional support. However we never managed to fill all places. Despite marketing and promotion through flyers; direct emails; videos; attendance at meetings; social media we never managed to reach full capacity on a programme. When we did get a referral from a health professional, they commonly said they had not heard about the project through their professional role – often by friends or contacts.

Researcher relationship – the Research Team introduced some suggested literature for use with the children in the Forest. This created a healthy discussion – and ultimately some compromise in the

nature of the poems to be used. The Forest Project team felt the original suggestions were a little out of reach for the children – due to literacy levels and appeal. The Research Team attended one half day session and led discussions using literature. The alternative suggestions of poetry from the Forest Project Team were well received by the children – some related to this activity more than others. But by having this as a theme to explore, it actually created an effective activity. For example children wrote their own poems, or helped to create a group poem. They spent some time looking at words/phrases and writing them on a blackboard. It was a useful activity and provided another means of helping children to explore their grief.

Weather conditions – we had to delay the start of the first programme due to high winds. Forest activities are not allowed to take place when winds exceed 40mph. This led to the development of an adverse weather policy.

Mosquitos – at certain times of year the forest is unsuitable to use due to the high prevalence of mosquitos. This meant we had to source an alternative forest venue. We managed to do this but the other venue did not work quite as well as the usual site.

Transport – funding was included for transport and this proved essential. A number of children would have been unable to attend if it had not been available. Finding community transport at the weekend was a challenge. However, we linked with Beverley Community Lift as they provided a DBS driver and volunteer with DBS, and they were excellent in their support of the project.

Attendance – in one programme in particular attendance was very low despite multiple bookings. For example one week only one child out of 7 bookings attended. The team adapted to the situation by inviting the parent to stay and instead created a family orientated session. However the nature of dealing with a cohort affected by grief means attendance can be patchy. Potentially a larger number of bookings might address this – however we never managed to fill all existing places.

Contact time – we realized even at Programme 1 that it was not sufficient to support children through the 4 weeks and have no further contact point. We therefore managed to get a small amount of money from another funder to test the theory of a “Catch up Day”. This allowed us to invite children to another full day session in the forest, as a means of touching base with the team. Typically the Catch Up day was organized 1-2 months after their original programme.

Staff support – we did not build in a supervision system at the outset. The feeling initially was that we were trying to create a low level intervention – with a focus on signposting to other services if the need arose. However as the programmes went on, staff reported the need to have the means of debrief – the experiences and backgrounds of participants were by nature difficult to assimilate at times. We organized a reflective session with a Clinical Psychologist and would include this element in any further plans for future programmes.

Systems – despite best planning, some processes needed tweaking as we went along. The meet and greet procedure was an example of a process we needed to review to ensure safeguarding of children and also to create an appropriate welcome for parents/carers who often needed some time to chat also. It became clear that playing a game before sitting down to have any discussion, helped children settle into the forest and be more ready to join in a group chat. The leaders realised that moving the benches closer together made the discussion time more effective.

Contact groups – a challenge of the Catch Up day is helping children to mix where they developed strong relationships on their initial programme. There is a tendency for these children to stick to their initial grouping, seeming to be less inclined to mix with children from other programmes that they haven't met before.

Age range – Some of the older children reported they would have liked to attend with more children their age. The team felt programmes were better when age ranges were not too spread. We were somewhat limited with regards to this due to number of bookings. We didn't want to turn children away given the limited number of programmes we had available. We have learnt through the programmes what the ideal age groupings are:

- 5-9 Years
- 10-14 Years
- 15-17 Years

9. Learning

Bereaved children respond well to support in this setting. Even when a child didn't open up within the 4-week programme, they subsequently did when attending a further "Catch Up" day. Some children took longer to trust and hence another benefit of having an additional contact point.

Catch up days are imperative - We would write this into the model for any future programmes we manage to facilitate. It also allowed children to meet other children from different programmes – thus extending their community of young people to relate to.

Parent support – the drop off time proved to be a helpful point of contact with parents/carers. It became apparent that they often welcomed the chance to chat and it was an opportunity for signposting. We developed a resource sheet which included every element of grief support we knew of locally and with national organisations too. We gave this to parents/carers at the first session so that they had access to other offers of support. With more staff we would have liked to develop a drop in for parents/carers to chat – and meet other parents/carers at drop off. This is a possible area for development.

The structure was tweaked as we went along and a good, robust format defined. Flexibility is key and the ability of staff to change in the moment is essential.

Contingency planning is needed – not just for adverse weather, but as happened when only one child arrived for the session. The team were wonderfully responsive to the situation and created a different sort of experience but one which was still reported to be very helpful. It prompted us to think about wider contingency in the planning phase.

Ratios – sometimes there were more adults than children in sessions which felt a little too much (e.g Programme 5). Only four children arrived at the second session and there were six adults between BSFs and FSL.

Timing - July is perhaps not a good month to hold programmes as people have other commitments and attendance is not as good as at other times.

Clothing – it became apparent that not all children had suitable clothing for a forest environment which led us to create a stock of second hand outdoor gear. We took a supply to the beginning of each programme in the event any child needed additional clothing.

Carvings – in Programme 1, at the last session, we gave a carving to each child. This was something they could take home with them, to remind them of their time in the forest. The team encouraged them to hold onto it in times of upset, to help calm them, just as they had experienced in the forest. This was so well received by the children that we implemented this for all future programmes.



10. Individual Programme Feedback

The following section outlines key activities/feedback from each of the programmes.

Feedback - Programme 1

- The sessions incorporated campfire chats where everyone had the chance to talk about their bereavements. Memories, funerals and difficult times were discussed as well as plans for the future.
- One family stated that they were planning to take their first trip to Australia to see where their loved one used to live.
- Another girl stated that she would like to go back to Spain where she had a lovely holiday with her loved one. Photos of loved ones were shared.
- Some children were more comfortable to voice their worries and concerns than others but all of the children opened up as the weeks went on.
- Several 1:1 conversations took place where the children shared their worries and were given comfort and advice.
- Some of the children wrote their worries and hopes on leaves which were burned at the end of the session.
- BSF feedback confirmed that all of the children joined in and enjoyed exploring and learning new skills. BSFs also noted that all of the children seemed more confident in the forest and friendships were formed. One of the Mums stated that her boys were always “at each other” at home, but they got on really well in the forest and were happy to share memories together. Two teenagers formed a friendship and talked a lot together.
- Children of similar ages spent time together and the older children said that they would have liked to be with more children their own age.
- Two siblings attended the programme and talked openly about losing their Mum. They are now supporting and caring for their younger brother and were concerned about him and some issues he was facing. The Forest Project gave them the chance to forget their responsibilities for a while and think about themselves following the death of their Mum. They said that they enjoyed coming to the group for several reasons including being able to get out of the house and having someone to look after their brother while they enjoyed their time in the group. The BSF talked to them about Young Carers support and reassured them.
- The children always enjoyed the food, including a celebration cake in the last week, and the supply of spare warm clothing was used and appreciated.
- Forest School Leaders and BSFs worked well as a team. Carvings were made for everyone to take home as a special memento of their time in the forest.

- There were several mentions of the children wanting a reunion in the forest after the programme. Some of the children exchanged contact details with each other so they could stay in touch.
- The parents/carers who collected their children stated how much their children had enjoyed attending the Forest Project. The children were all happy to provide feedback and the evaluations were all really positive.

Feedback - Programme 2

- The second programme included younger children than the first programme and so raised new suggestions and ways to adapt the sessions for younger children.
- This time the idea of the pillow chat diaries was explained to the adults when they (instead of just to the children).
- Learning from the first programme meant that the introductory chats were kept more brief and the Leaders more quickly moved to play the ice breaker game “123 where are you” which the children enjoyed and continued to do so throughout all programmes.
- All of the children enjoyed the games and activities and were happy to bring photos for the 2nd session. They said that they enjoyed being in the forest and were looking forward to returning each week.
- By the end of the first session, the children were all more comfortable with each other. Some children did not want to share information about their bereavement and no pressure was placed on them to do so but, as the sessions progressed, more of the children felt comfortable enough to open up about their feelings and concerns.
- The girls in particular grew in confidence and were able to share their feelings more as the sessions went on. It was noted that there was a huge difference in how they were by the end of the programme. One girl carried her teddy with her for most of the first session but even by the second session she kept it in her bag rather than carrying it around with her. She said she felt more confident and was able to leave her comfort toy with her belongings.
- The children who found it difficult to talk about their bereavement still joined in all of the activities and made friends. One boy seemed to enjoy the whole programme but acknowledged that he was too sad to talk about his bereavement.
- Two of the children started a discussion about how their loved one’s ashes had been transformed into a piece of jewellery that their Mums have, as well as other objects that they have at home which bring them comfort. They both opened up as the sessions progressed and seemed to make a special bond. One of the other children said that she had a teddy made from her loved one’s clothes and this all encouraged some of the others to speak about their loved ones.
- One of the children was slightly withdrawn from the group at times but a BSF had a 1:1 session with her and she spoke openly about the trauma of the loss of her Grandad. They also spent time together 1:1 while she climbed trees and later spent time doing some braiding together away from the group. The girl had been using her Pillow Chat Diary to share her worries with her Mum. She wrote her worries on a leaf, about the possibility of losing her Mum, and tied it around her toy rabbit's neck.
- For the final session, some of the quieter children seemed more confident and opened up. On the way into the woods the group stopped to look at the snowdrops and were asked what they thought of when they looked at them. One of the quieter boys was really vocal and told the group how the snowdrops reminded him of snow and he remembered his Dad

taking him sledging around his neighbourhood. This prompted another boy to speak about his Grandad taking him sledging and some of the memories that they had shared together.

- The children wrote their worries on to leaves and some of them wrote their hopes on the other side of their leaves too. Then each child burned the leaves.
- The poetry section added another dimension to the session which most of the children connected with.
- Some of the children commented that they had used their Pillow Chat Diary several times and had used them to express their worries.
- During a 1:1, one of the girls said that she enjoyed attending the Forest Project because everyone was her friend and everyone had experienced grief and understood how she felt. She thought that her friends at school didn't understand what it was like to lose a loved one.
- At the end of the programme, the children were given carved foxes for them to remember the forest. They were told that they could look at them if they were feeling sad and it would remind them of these times. All of the children said how much they loved the sessions and how they wished they didn't have to end.



Feedback - Programme 3

- One of the BSFs commented that this group felt like a good mix of ages. In this group, the BSFs noticed that the children were talking to each other well when doing the activities and age didn't seem to matter.
- One child's Dad became quite emotional when they arrived and the BSFs listened to him and gave him a resource sheet for support for himself. He said that he was planning to come on some Together in Grief walks. These walks aim to provide a safe and nurturing environment for participants to experience the benefits that walking and talking can provide, alongside other people in a similar position, and help with mental health during times of bereavement.
- One of the BSFs felt that some of the adults who brought their children were in just as much need of support as their children.
- Lots of different forest activities took place, in both a group and individual setting, alongside sharing thoughts about bereavement: '1,2,3 Where are you?', tasting of wild garlic, drinking hot chocolate, toasting marshmallows, tree climbing, den building, crumpet cooking (with wild garlic butter), braiding, bread making and slack line. As the sessions progressed the group started to help and encourage each other.
- One of the Dads asked if there would be anything for his son in terms of support after these sessions are complete - the BSF told him about planned catch up days.
- Each child spoke about their bereavements and some memories they had of their loved ones. One child showed some pictures on his phone, one child brought a photo album and another showed videos that he had made.
- The two cousins seemed quite shy at first and wanted to stay together but they both opened up throughout the 1st session and began to do things separately.
- During den building, tree climbing and digging there were key opportunities to get to know and support individual children.
- All of the children said that they had a great time.
- Friendship bracelets were handed out and used as a reflective activity. They were made from 3 strands – one to remember a special memory of their loved one, one a special memory they take with them from the forest today and the third was something about themselves that they valued.
- One of the girls didn't open up about the loss of her mother and her Auntie said that she never has done since her mother died. At the end of the session whilst making the bracelets the girl chose the memory of her Mum as loving swimming, this felt like an opening in her connecting memories to her Mum and sharing about them.
- One of the children talked about how she can't find any space or quiet time to do arts at home as she shares a room with her sister who is very messy. She talked about how everything has changed since her Dad died.

- During one of the sessions, they played a really effective game of 'When I worry I...' which encouraged each of the children to share what we do when we worry. This helped to break the ice and showed the children that we all worry and that this is normal. They wrote their worries on leaves and then burned them as a symbol of letting go of their worries.
- During another session there was a bereavement jar for children to put questions or things they would like to talk about in, one child wrote that they would like to talk about their worries.
- Poetry was read during the sessions which the children enjoyed. The poetry that the visitors from The University of Hull read was really engaging and the children seemed to really appreciate it. This encouraged the children to read their own stories and poems. One of the children read out a poem that she had written for her Auntie's funeral. Others came up with words to write on leaves which were stuck on a leaf tree.
- The food and drinks provided by one of the Forest School Leaders was really appreciated by the children and the adults – everyone looked forward to them each week.
- The three girls in the group got on really well towards the end of the programme and swapped numbers before leaving the forest, to keep in touch with each other.

Feedback – Programme 4

- The first session started with introductions and an ice breaker activity; "I remember, I remember"; recalling an early memory. All four children joined in and shared memories relating to family members, shopping trips and important people to them. They then played "vanish" which helped everyone to get to know each other's names.
- During the first session, one of the children asked when they were going to talk about the people that had died. They enjoyed hot chocolate and a biscuit around the fire while discussion was opened up about loss and the special people that the children were thinking of while they were in the forest. Some children were more talkative than others. One of the girls shared that she had lost her Auntie when she had fallen from a seventh storey car park and that she had also lost her brother when he was born. She said that when she saw a rainbow she thought it was her Auntie and when she saw a red/pink sky it was her brother.
- Another of the girls talked about her Dad who had died in a motorbike accident and said that she had been picked on by her friends for not having a Dad. She shared that this had made her feel angry and upset and that she had physically hurt people who had teased her in this way. She later spoke about the anger she also felt towards her Dad's motorbike and how she wished it had been destroyed so that he would not have been able to ride it on the day he died. One of the other girls had also lost her Dad due to problems with his heart.
- Some of the girls were anxious about coming to the Forest Project but they grew less worried as the sessions went on. One of the girls shared that she had struggled significantly with anxiety during the past year and had found herself unable to leave the house, attend school or walk around the local community at times. She added that she is working with a counsellor and sets herself weekly goals and targets which she is slowly achieving. Attending the Forest Project was one of her goals.
- All four children were praised for their bravery and courage for coming along and engaging so well with one another and with the adults involved.
- One week the children wrote on post-its and placed them in a worry jar. The following week everyone took either a worry of someone else's out of the jar or talked about their own. The issues included worrying about the loss of another parent, a parent not being present for significant life events/celebrations and adults being upset in front of children.
- By the third session, all of the girls appeared relaxed, engaged and comfortable amongst the Forest School Leaders and BSFs. Deeper relationships had formed between the children and one of the BSFs commented that they 'show a level of care and understanding which is bonded by their shared experience of the group and their grief'.
- One of the girls talked about how she disliked school and is bullied for having red hair. Another spoke about having been upset at school one week, she was triggered by a song which reminded her of her Dad and that she and some of her friends had been tearful together.
- During the last session, evaluation questionnaires were distributed for parents/carers to complete and individual evaluations were done with all four children. All of the children

provided positive evaluations and were happy for their comments to be shared for future programme recruitment.

- One of the BSFs commented that there was tangible sadness about the programme ending and they spoke to the girls about the importance of continuing bonds with supportive people at home who they can go to for help.
- At the end of the programme, the children all wrote phrases to make a collaborative poem which everyone seemed to really enjoy.
- It was noted by some of the BSFs and Forest School Leaders that the community lift volunteers were lovely, providing encouragement and support to the children when they dropped them off.
- Ice breaker activities at the beginning and end of the sessions were always enjoyed and this group of children enjoyed how this generated conversation and discussion.
- Some of the girls said it was much easier to come for the second week as they were not as nervous. One of the children had brought memory photos to show and had worn the special trainers which had belonged to their special person. It was noted that it was a big achievement for one of the girls to come to the sessions and her Mum said that she had noticed a difference in her even after one session. Another of the girls bonded with one of the BSFs and told her that she made her happy.
- One of the Forest School Leaders brought a lamb to one of the sessions which the children liked, as well as the farm dog. One of the BSFs commented on how helpful the animals are for the young people and how they personally found them to be an excellent therapeutic tool.
- When one of the Mums dropped her daughter off, she shared that her daughter loved attending the sessions and that she was gaining a lot of confidence from meeting new people and talking about her Dad.
- The girls supported each other and sometimes held hands as they walked through the forest.
- One of the older girls felt that the project had had a positive impact upon her socially. She felt that her anxiety was significantly reduced, and she was continuing to work through weekly targets and goals with the wellbeing worker at school. She also said that her family had noticed a positive improvement in her which had helped her to feel it was real.
- At the end of the programme, all four girls hugged everyone to say goodbye.
- One of the BSFs commented that they really enjoyed working as a team and that all of the volunteers brought varied skills and contribution.

Feedback – Programme 5

- One of the children spoke about her family members and some of the difficulties that her Grandmother was having at this time around the anniversary of her Aunt's death and how this impacted her mental health.
- Another of the children shared that he used to go metal detecting with his Dad. He spoke about a collection of fossils/treasures that they had found together which he brought to the following session. This was well supported by BSFs/FSLs and the other children were sensitive and engaged in listening to his explanation of their findings.
- One of the children said that they felt agitated and restless during a session but they took themselves off to the hammock where they fell asleep.
- One of the girls was quite unkind to one of the other children at times and critical of him which one of the BSFs addressed with her. She found it difficult to engage in the group activities at times and appeared to be more rigid in her expectations of the sessions.
- Three of the children played on the hammock together and talked about their loved ones who had died. One of the girls shared that her brother was stillborn. She felt confident enough to talk about this which the BSF noted she had previously struggled to do.
- One of the children played in the hammock and spoke about it being preferable to playing on his tablet all day and that he intended to ask for one for his birthday.
- Another of the boys said that attending the Forest Project had helped him with everything this year as he had found a way to be distracted and have fun. He also felt that it had helped his relationships at home.
- During one session, the group played the "When I worry" game. All of the children and group leaders participated and shared information which was personal to themselves. This enabled the children to learn that everyone has worries and they heard a range of strategies which can help to manage these feelings.
- Two brothers attended the final session and one of the BSFs felt that it was a family bonding experience as well as an individual experience for them.
- The older three children seemed to get on really well. One of the BSFs felt that the experience had helped them to bond more solidly as a peer group who can offer support but also have fun together.

11. Evaluation

Evaluation - Programme 1

The first programme finished in January 2022 and the children provided video feedback to help us evaluate the impact of the programme <https://youtu.be/EPk4osMAeMQ>. They also provided written feedback – you can see this and the questions used at Appendix 2.

Evaluation - Programme 2

- The children's favourite activities were tree climbing, digging a trench, hide and seek, making dens and playing. One of the children said that the BSF was one of the best teachers she had ever played with.
- Some of the children said they were too sad and didn't want to talk about their grief in the forest, but others said that they found it easier as the other children knew how they felt and they were all experiencing the same things.
- Most of the children agreed that being in the forest has helped them with the loss of their special person as it distracted them, made them feel happier and they were with friends who understood how they felt.
- All of the children except one said that their time in the forest helped them manage school and home life better. One of them said that she doesn't normally want to leave her Mum and another said it took their mind off other worries. However one of the children said they were still sad at home and school.
- The children all said how much fun the Forest Project was and any other children attending in the future should not be scared as everyone is really friendly. Another said that they would come every week if they could! They all described the forest with positive words except for being a little sad when they talked about their loved one.

Evaluation - Programme 3

- Repeated words on the children's feedback were 'fun' and 'calm'.
- Things they enjoyed most about the Forest Project were: climbing trees, sharing their feelings, the hammock – "reminds me of being with my family" and the clay.
- One of the children said that they found it easier to talk about their grief when they were in the forest with other children but, when they missed a week, they felt miserable at school.
- Another of the children commented that the Forest Project made them feel better because they do not want to let their feelings out at their Dad's house.

Evaluation - Programme 4

- The children said they enjoyed all of the forest activities, especially lying in the hammocks.

- When the children were asked what they would say to the next group who might feel anxious about coming to the Forest Project, one of them said “I was worried but it might really help what you’re going through” and the others said, “you don’t need to be scared”, “The first one is good but the rest are a really good experience” and “It’s ok and very fun”.
- One of the girls commented that she felt better talking about her Dad with this group and was more comfortable at the second session. She thought it had helped her feel a lot better. However, another of the girls had wanted to talk more about the people they had lost.
- Another of the girls talked about how much she had enjoyed the project, she said it had been really good fun and she had enjoyed making new friends.
- One of the children said that she was surprised that she had enjoyed it so much because she struggled with self esteem and was worried that no one would like her but she had found everyone really welcoming and had made friends.
- One of the children said that she felt that the project had not helped her feel different about losing her Dad but that she had enjoyed coming, had made new friends and she was sure that he would have enjoyed hearing about it when she returned home.
- The group said that they felt ‘useful’, ‘exhilarated’, ‘calmer’, ‘amazed’, ‘happy’, ‘fun’, ‘excited’, ‘forgetful’ and ‘distracted from the loss’ while they were in the forest.
- All of the girls felt that it was easier to talk about their grief when they were in the Forest with the other children.
- When asked how the forest had helped them with the loss of their special person, the children said that it had focussed on some positives instead of just the sad things, taught them that everyone has been through the same thing so they did not feel as anxious about it and helped them to talk to their Mum.
- The girls thought that the programme had helped them to manage their home life better but not necessarily school. Knowing that there were people in the same situation as them made them feel a bit better and it brought new conversations between them and their loved ones at home.

Programme 5

- No evaluation forms were completed during this programme due to the change in participants across the sessions. However, one of the parents/carers shared that her son is now attending lessons consistently and having no time out of school. She also commented that his mental health seemed to have improved since attending the sessions.
- It was noted that this programme was not like previous programmes as there was no continuity between sessions due to the change in attendees each week. The children had to form new relationships with one another every week.

- It was commented that, in general, this did not feel like a full programme. It felt more like a number of catch up days and one off sessions. One of the BSFs commented that the full programme works much better. However, previous participants that got the opportunity to return seemed very grateful and seemed to really enjoy it.



Appendix 1

The Forest Project – Weekly Outline

Each session will start with a reminder of the rules for safety:

- Walk around the outside of fire pit
- Explore the forest in twos' including going to the toilet

The activities listed are suggested possible activities – not set in stone. It will depend on each group as to what is appropriate. It would be useful to make a note of what activities are used and impact – for review at the debrief meeting.

For consideration: a poem for the end of each session.

Week one “Our Story”

As we sit around the fire/drink time we could invite young people to open up the conversation of “our bereavement story” by saying who we are bereaved by, what happened and what they were like etc. Maybe bring one photo each to show (include in booking confirmation email).

Forest activities:

- Welcome and introductions
- Ice breaker game: 1-2-3- where are you
- Campfire chat
- Whittle a stick for marshmallow and hot chocolate
- Introduction to flint and steels
- Den building
- Campfire chat with bereavement box
- Throw water on the fire – group ending

Week two “Memories”

Talking about ways we can remember them and our continuing bonds with the people we are bereaved by. I usually bring perfume, letters/cards my parents/carers wrote, special/sacred places etc. Share our happiest memory about our loved one.

Possibly play “when I went into the forest I took with me...” or “whispers” or “the what’s missing game” (all simple to do while together as a group) starts to get them thinking about remembering.

Forest activities:

- Ice breaker game
- Campfire chat
- Leaf painting/writing
- Aboriginal story stick
- Throw water on the fire – group ending

Week three “Worries and fears”

What are our worries? (Most young people worry about either someone else dying whom they are close to or themselves becoming ill). But it brings up many things, money, not being able to sleep, looking after others etc. Maybe talk about them openly and throw their fears (symbolically) into the fire (letting go).

Forest activities:

- Ice breaker game
- Campfire chat
- Leaf painting/writing
- Fire lighting (throw worries on the fire)
- Throw water on the fire – group ending

Week four “Endings and celebrations”

Talking about “how are we at endings?” Being mindful that this is our last session as a group and some young people may have experienced terrible endings (sudden deaths and suicides) So let’s make this one a positive ending. Perhaps as a group share one positive thing about another member of the group. E.g “X was really kind and helped me build a den.”

And bring in a treat to eat such as a birthday cake to celebrate the life of their special person.

Forest activities:

- Ice breaker game
- Campfire chat
- Bridge building/Den building
- Throw water on the fire – group ending



Appendix 2

Evaluation Programme One (2021)

What have you liked best about being in the forest?

Carving sticks.

Making stuff together, talking with other children who have also experienced grief.

Having pancakes, carving and making a sword.

Do you find it easier to talk about your grief when you're in the forest with other children?

Yes - going through a similar situation to me.

Yes - I feel safer telling people my feelings as they have experienced grief as well. I feel it is easier since I won't get bullied so much.

No - it is difficult as sad time.

How has being the forest helped you with the loss of your special person?

It has helped me to realise I'm not the only one going through a situation like this.

I can do things to remember my Dad and I can showcase my Dad and how I loved him to other people in grief.

It has helped me quite a lot and taken my mind off them. It has been really fun.

Which was your favourite area or activity in the forest?

Stick making and den building.

Camp - all having a reunion and talking and doing things together as well as making things together. Being near the fire because it is warm!

Has your time in the forest helped you to manage school and home life better?

You can't manage school life. The teachers understand, but still give you lots of work. It helped me to come to terms with my grief and manage my grief at home.

Yes because it makes me feel less grief because we are made to feel safer and people experiencing grief can help each other and remember their lost loved ones.

Yes. I don't have to spend so much time with my sister so much.

Given me more confidence about how to make friends. I am happy when I get home and play with the sword I made at home. I am carving a fox for a friend (*at school) to make her happy.

What would you say to the next group of children coming to the Forest Project - who may feel a little anxious. How could you reassure them about what it will be like?

No one really judges you as they're all in the same boat.

Don't be anxious or nervous. It is a great group to talk about grief and damage you have. So don't be nervous. You can do lots of things here. If you need to talk to someone, there are lots of adults to talk to.

You get to do lots of fun things and fun games and get to eat pizza and pancakes as well. You'll gradually make friends. I didn't know anyone on the first day and on the second day I made more friends.

Are there any activities you would have liked to have done in the forest?

No, not really.

Clay making and swing making as I like making things. I was very creative in 2021 and I want to make my Dad proud although he is not here anymore.

Everything has been good. Can't think of anything else to do.

Is there anything else we could have done to help you with your feelings of loss for your special person?

No, not really. You've done more than enough to help me and my grief. Since you've done everything you can do to help me to remember and love my Dad, I would be back here again if I could.

No, nothing else that has not been done already.

What three words would you use to say how you feel when you're here in the forest?

Cold, open (*with feelings)/at ease, happy

Thankful, happy, overjoyed.

Happy, joyful, excited.



Appendix 3

Blackboard Poem

This was created in Programme 4 (grouped phrases).

1,2,3 together in grief,
Hide and seek, don't peak!

Sit around the firepit with a cup of hot chocolate,
Giving a majestic speech.
Will I stumble or Mumble or get in a muddle?

A carpet of bluebells covers my (way),
What (will) I find in the forest today?
I'll go tell before we go,
Fairies' houses and (a) witches' sink.

What would I find in the forest today?
Maybe friends, a lamb or a new game to play.

Eagle eyes up in the tree, glaring down, can you see me?
A curious Robin comes close by, listening, chattering, (he) clears the crumbs.
Ants and creatures play together.

Swinging in the hammock up and down, when it stops in makes us frown.
Swinging peacefully as Cathy sings, (sleep) comes on and comfort it brings.

Finding us friends (who) understand, holding and helping, giving a hand.
Feeling nervous, (it) helps to make new friends. I hope this forest school never ends.

Learning to bake with Rebecca, as she's putting the chocolate cake on the fire, licking our
lips of hunger.

Carved animals from Chris.

Survival activities, (such) as fire making, learn(ing) to do (the) hammock and more (than)
you can imagine.

Swinging and laughing, enjoying the time of four days of fun,
Braiding and friendship bracelets.

Hard as flint, the fire is lit, keeping us comforted as we sit.
Rise up in our grief, giving us freedom out of our shadows.
Building a bridge as we grow out of our grief.
Finding new ways to cope.

New activities Cathy always brings, 1,2,3 come join in!

Appendix 4

Poetry Feedback

The Bereavement Support Facilitators for Programme 2 (Tanya and Jenny) facilitated sessions using poems and their feedback is below. Please note this programme had children attending from age 6 years to 10 years.

Tanya feedback:

We read out 3 poems in total, using nature and grief as our theme. The girls started to use rhyming couplets to create their own kind of poems and both S-A and E both shared their enjoyment of poetry. E also shared a lot of enthusiasm but as she was so young (6) she didn't have as much experience. C- also got very emotional at the poem 'do not stand at my grave and weep'.

They seemed to enjoy them. I think as these were young there wasn't much written engagement but I think with the older ones it might be more possible.

Also to add, we felt that the poems by Patrik Kavanah were a bit inaccessible due to the children being so young. However, they did inspire us to read the more accessible poems which are below, and like Richard suggested in the brief he sent us, we used the poetry as a springboard to ask the children what they like about nature and how it makes them feel and what memories certain aspects invoke, such as the snowdrops which two of the children associated very strong memories to their loved ones who had passed away from thinking about.

Sarah feedback:

In addition to Tanya's feedback, the poems were shared with children at the sessions when we focussed on memories and worries. Tanya kindly read out the poems to the children in respect of memories.

As noted by Tanya one boy became very upset at one of the poems. Two boys found it difficult to sit and listen and were taken out to do forest activities to avoid them from disrupting the poetry. However, the three girls really enjoyed the poetry and finding rhyming words.

The following week, after a group chat about worries, I read out the poem "Breathe", as recommended by Rebecca. All the children listened carefully throughout the whole poem and we discussed how nature can be so calming. Following this, the children wrote their worries on leaves. The forest activities linked with the poem as the children made imprints of leaves etc in clay. At the end of the session each child put their leaf onto the campfire.

The children in this group were very young and I agree with Tanya that an older group may be more engaged and undertake more written engagement in this regard.

Appendix 5

Example Poems

Butterflies on the Breeze: Poem about loss By Author?

The butterflies on the breeze,
The whisper through the trees,
The crinkle on the leaves,
Was it you?

The sparkle in the stream,
The murmurs in my dream
The efforts for our team,
Was it you?

The beauty that beguiled,
The sounds of the wild,
The giggle of my child,
Was it you?

The fragrance in the flower,
The rainbow after the shower,
The chiming of the hour,
Was it you?

The bobbing of the bird,
The softly spoken word,
The "love you" that's unheard,
Was it you?

I know it was you,
ALWAYS.

Do Not Stand at My Grave And Weep By Mary Elizabeth Frye

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die.

breathe by Becky Hemsley

She sat at the back and they said she was shy,
She led from the front and they hated her pride,
They asked her advice and then questioned her guidance,
They branded her loud, then were shocked by her silence,
When she shared no ambition they said it was sad,
So she told them her dreams and they said she was mad,
They told her they'd listen, then covered their ears,
And gave her a hug while they laughed at her fears,
And she listened to all of it thinking she should,
Be the girl they told her to be best as she could,
But one day she asked what was best for herself,
Instead of trying to please everyone else,
So she walked to the forest and stood with the trees,
She heard the wind whisper and dance with the leaves,
She spoke to the willow, the elm and the pine,
And she told them what she'd been told time after time,
She told them she felt she was never enough,
She was either too little or far far too much,
Too loud or too quiet, too fierce or too weak,
Too wise or too foolish, too bold or too meek,
Then she found a small clearing surrounded by firs,
And she stopped...and she heard what the trees said to her,
And she sat there for hours not wanting to leave,
For the forest said nothing, it just let her breathe`

