

Climbing Trees and Building Dens:

Mental health and well-
being in young adults
and the long-term
effects of childhood
play experience

Research Report

July 2004

*Institute for Health Research
Lancaster University*



'Climbing trees and building dens'
Mental health and well-being in young adults and the
long-term effects of childhood play experience.

A study funded by the Forestry Commission and conducted by
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The report is illustrated throughout with photographs and video stills taken during the workshops.

Foreword

This report arises from research conducted from October 2003 to April 2004. It complements the Forestry Commission's 'Newlands' Project, which aimed to identify wasteland urban areas or abandoned rural woodland that can be developed into accessible, recreational woodland and maintained over time by supported local community groups (Jones, 2002). In order to understand the potential benefits of these developments, the Commission has been sought to gain a greater understanding of how lack of accessible woodland play areas may impact on the health and well-being of children and young adults (Tabbush & O'Brien, 2002). In particular, there is a critical knowledge gap about the relationship between changes in childhood play space and the long-term implications for young people's mental well-being (Burgess, 1996; Macnaghten et al., 1998). This is especially so, where children are deprived access to natural woodland spaces, or discouraged from going into local woodland areas. The aim of this study has been to redress the current lack of evidence-based research around these issues.

Key Findings

Young people's perceptions of woodland

1. These range from woodland as therapeutic and a place for adventure and fun, to woodland as a fearful place full of potential dangers.
2. They are dependent upon parental attitudes and childhood experiences regardless of whether childhood was urban or rural based.
3. They are influenced by gender.
4. They are strongly influenced by good and bad myths or stories and negative media images of woodland.
5. They can change if young people are given opportunities for new kinds of interaction with woodland.

The relationship between stress and use of outdoor spaces including woodland

1. 75% of 16-21 year olds participating in this research reported significant stress from study, family and personal problems. Of this number 25% reported moderate to severe physical or mental health problems, which led to them seeking support from a counsellor or their GP.
2. The most common stress-relieving strategies included being alone and going outdoors to seek privacy and space.
3. There are important links between safe childhood play space and subsequent choice of outdoor spaces when stressed.
4. Two distinct views emerged of woodland as a therapeutic space if stressed:
 - It is safe to visit only if accompanied.
 - It is safe to visit alone only if childhood memories of woodland are good.

Woodland use as play and recreation

1. Three common types of woodland visits undertaken by young adults were evident:
 - Accompanied by friends or family - all ages.
 - Accompanied by dog or horse-riding - usually over 10 years of age.
 - Alone - only if perception of woods as safe secure place - from early teenage years.

These types of woodland experience are strongly influenced by childhood patterns.

2. Woodland is most commonly visited in childhood as part of family walks or outings.
3. The more opportunity for unstructured, less supervised, but safe play in woodland as children, the greater the subsequent enjoyment of woodland as young adults.
4. The more secure a young person feels in woodland, the more likely they are to visit wooded areas in times of stress, when seeking recreation, or as an inspiration for work.
5. The greater their knowledge of woodland natural history and management, the more likely it is that young adults will visit for recreation and interest.

Woodland interaction: some theoretical observations

1. Childhood games include den-building, making traps and climbing trees
2. Some young adults use woodland for walking, sitting or reading and to enjoy peace and quiet.
3. Some young people occasionally went into woodland to 'play like kids again.'
4. The interactions observed in this study support psychotherapeutic theories concerning:
 - the development of a creative, facilitating relationship of Self to an outdoor, non-human 'Other'
 - the development and empowerment of agency (Self) through play

Effective research methods

1. Research methods based on practical 'hands-on' experience of woodland arts and crafts, proved to be a highly effective means of exploring the research questions.
2. Practical exercises encourage young people to engage at a multi-sensory level with trees and other elements of woods.
3. Methods drawing on psychotherapeutic approaches are effective and sensitive in facilitating recall and perceptions, past and present.
4. The methods proved inspiring and educational for the participants, encouraging some of them to re-consider their perceptions of woodland, and others to ask for details of woodland craft training day courses.
5. Participants were unanimous in their enjoyment of the workshops.

These findings need to be interpreted in the knowledge that they are based on a small pilot study undertaken in North West England. They build on existing studies (see for example Burgess, 1996; Valentine, 1997; Henwood, 2001; Tabbush & O'Brien, 2002; Ward Thompson et al., 2004;).

We recommend that this study be used as a basis for the development of a larger study with young adults drawn from a broad range of rural and urban locations. Further research could usefully target, for instance; young men, urban dwellers, and disadvantaged groups of different ages as well as parents of young children.

Recommendations

- The positive promotion of urban and rural woodland spaces as safe and accessible for all age groups, at both local and national level, may help counteract fears and negative perceptions gained from literature, media and other sources.
- 'Woodland for health' campaigns targeted at parents, schools, community health teams, and local and national government could help raise awareness of the beneficial effects of play and recreation in woodland areas on mental health and well-being, both at different stages of childhood and in young adulthood.
- Encourage schools to include woodland as places for children and young people to visit on a regular basis for play (both structured and unstructured), creative, educational activities and physical exercise.
- Seek to develop safe but 'wild places' in woodland, where children can enjoy less supervised, unstructured play without fear of harm.
- Promote knowledge and awareness of woodland *holistically*. That is promote woodland as an important natural resource, which can be used not only as a recreational, therapeutic environment, but also as a working environment with potential careers in traditional coppicing and management.
- Increase opportunities for more children and young people to engage creatively in practical, 'hands-on' woodland activities and skills. This can be achieved by building links with existing, local craftspeople, skilled in teaching traditional craft activities.

- On the basis of the above recommendations: build on existing guidelines (see Tabbush & O'Brien, 2002), that seek to encourage different types of play for children, and acknowledge the need for recreational or work opportunities for young adults in natural woodland areas. In this way woodland is actively promoted as providing a positive resource and benefit for maintaining and supporting mental and physical well-being in young people.

Introduction and background to the study

Over the last 15-20 years young adults in the UK have experienced and grown up through a unique change in their childhood play. Both the place and experience of play have been radically mediated by increasing exposure to new technologies such as computers and televisions (Greenfield, 1984; Postman, 1992). At the same time, there has been a reduction in opportunities for children to play freely in natural and woodland environments as these habitats have become increasingly subject to the pressures of development.

For children living in urban and rural locales, changes in the place of play have been exacerbated by increased road traffic, rising crime rates and parental fear of crime - rendering many previously safe play-spaces out of bounds (Valentine, 1997; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Ward-Thomson et al., 2004). Increasing technology-based indoor childhood play spaces also raise "questions about emotional, social, personal and health hazards [which] have barely been asked much less answered" (Healey, 1999, 22). This is an important omission given the growing recognition of the parlous state of the mental health of young people in both rural and urban locales.

A study undertaken in 2003 for the Department of Health noted that of 1000 young people questioned, 86% knew someone in their age group who had experienced a mental health problem (Prasad, 2003). Those experiencing child poverty and economic deprivation are particularly at risk (Alexander, 2002). The UK government has recognised the potential problem in both the change in the types of play and the reduced availability of places for children to play in. Yet, while various government initiatives have sought to address these issues through schemes, such as the National Forest and most recently the Forestry Commission's 'Newlands (1 & 2) Project' (Jones, 2002), as yet there is little research evidence to underpin the potential value of these initiatives.

This study focused not only on young peoples' present everyday experiences, but also on their childhood memories, imaginings and embodied sensory experiences - particularly as recalled from around the ages of 7-11 yrs. This age range represents a unique phase of normal childhood when children develop independent, individual relationships with the physical, material world (Donaldson, 1986). We specifically selected to work with those aged between 16 and 21 years of age, as these young adults have grown up through the 1980s and 1990s. This was a time of unprecedented change in the experiences of children and their play spaces in the UK.

Aims of the study

Our study explores the nature and complexity of the relationship between mental well-being in young adulthood and childhood play experiences, gaining insights into the influence of different play space, particularly of rural and urban woodland areas. This addressed an urgent need to identify how different play and recreational environments can become a life-long resource to restore, improve or maintain mental health and well-being. We wished to assess the impact and influence of young people's recalled childhood play experiences upon their current mental well-being. We are using the term 'mental well-being' as defined by our participants: where an individual feels happy, positive and comfortable about themselves, with a sense of confidence and ability to cope with their life. The research focused on the following key questions:

- Where do young people from urban and rural communities recall playing as children?
- What kind of benefits and disadvantages do young people recall in their opportunities to play in natural and/or woodland environments in comparison to indoor recreational spaces?
- To what extent do young people feel their different childhood play experiences support or constrain the development of their inner mental, emotional resources?
- To what extent does childhood experience influence a young adult's choice of recreational environment?

Key objectives of the study were:

- To identify the long-term influences of outdoor play in woodland areas and other natural settings on young people's mental health and well-being;

- To identify factors that encourage a lifelong and positive, sustaining relationship with woodland environments in urban and rural areas;
- To contribute to our conceptual understanding of the developmental stages in childhood in relation to play-space, location, type and content of play;
- To explore the long term impact of different kinds of play on mental health and how everyday therapeutic landscapes that promote the health and well-being of young people might be developed;
- To develop innovative methodologies with which to explore embodied memories, feelings and awareness that usually remain at the fringes of everyday consciousness.

Methods of Data Collection

There is paucity of qualitative research examining the role of multi-sensory experience in childhood experience and development. Given the need for a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the long-term effects of childhood play on subsequent mental well-being in young adulthood, this is a significant omission (Philo, 2003). Hence, in this study the emphasis was on innovative methodology designed to bring together qualitative techniques commonly used in social science research with well-established psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate access to memories, fantasies and recalled multi-sensory awareness of the past (Totton, 2003). The psychotherapeutic approach draws on the work of D. W. Winnicott and Object Relations Theory (Winnicott, 1971). The techniques used in the workshop sessions are used extensively in art therapy (Dalley, 1984; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994)

This multi-method approach aims to illuminate the relationship between the multi-sensory experience of childhood play and the long-term effects of different play spaces on mental health and well-being (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of methods and data collection

Phase One: Initial Focus groups/individual interview - audio-taped, transcribed and analysed.
Phase Two: One day workshop (we ran two workshops over one weekend) Woodland walk - video-taped and analysed Coppice craft session - video-taped and analysed Focus group feedback session - audio-taped and transcribed Sandplay session - video-taped and analysed Modelling session - video-taped and analysed
Phase Three: One month follow up, in-depth interview - audio-taped, transcribed and analysed.

A central element of the study design was the one-day practical workshop to which all the participants were invited to attend. This included two woodland-based activities and two artwork sessions based on specialist, well-established, psychotherapeutic methodology to facilitate the group (see Figure 1).

Following recruitment those willing to participate were invited to take part in one of two initial hour-long focus group discussions. The discussion group was designed, firstly, to explore their general perceptions of the current state of mental health and well-being in their age group; secondly, for participants to describe their current recreation patterns and their recalled childhood memories of place and play.

Following the discussions, participants were invited to take part in a one-day practical workshop. As far as possible, we placed the participants into two groups according to age (one group with predominantly 16-18 year olds and the other 19-21 year olds). This, we felt, would accommodate the different needs of older and younger ages. It would ensure workshops were relatively small-sized, easily managed groups. This was important given that the nature of the day's activities required time and space for participants to relax and to focus on the tasks.

The young people could choose to participate in one of two workshop days over the weekend 6th-7th December 2003. Both workshops took place in North Lancashire, with all woodland activities at Silverdale, and all indoor art sessions in the village hall at Yealand Redmayne.

Those who attended the workshop were paid £10 in acknowledgement of their commitment to the project. Participants were offered transport to the venue, as required. Meals and refreshments were provided throughout the day.

Figure 1: The four activities during the workshop day



Walking in the woods



Woodland craft -
using the shave horse



Sandplay session



3D Woodland Models session

Workshop
Day
Sessions

Approximately one month after the workshop each participant was individually interviewed for between 30 - 45 minutes. This interview provided an opportunity for participants to re-examine memories and experiences stimulated by the workshop sessions. All participants had the opportunity to view photographs of the workshop activities, in particular of their own work, and to review the outcomes and ideas that emerged. We also provided feedback over the next two months in the form of a 10 - 15 minute edited video clip of each workshop day.

We collected a large amount of data; this included a total of 22 hours of video footage, transcribed audio-recordings of all interviews, group discussions and workshop sessions; photographs of the sandplay and 3D modelling art sessions.

The video footage was edited into two 10 -15 minute videos: one of each workshop day. We also edited a total of 62 video stills (single frame). Both these video formats were used successfully by the largest school group in their 'year end', National Curriculum 'creative activity projects'. The video material was analysed using visual 'frame by frame' analysis of body language and action in relation to verbal feedback and reflection by participants; this follows analytic techniques drawn from moving image analysis (Rose, 2000), content analysis (Bauer, 2000); 'ethnomethodology' (Goodwin, 2001) and psychoanalytic method (see Mitchell and Friedman, 1994; Bingley, 2002a; Bingley, 2003).

The text-based data was analysed using a qualitative data analysis software programme (Atlas ti), and a chart-based coding system. The major themes that emerged from these data are discussed in the analyses sections of this report (see page 29 onwards).

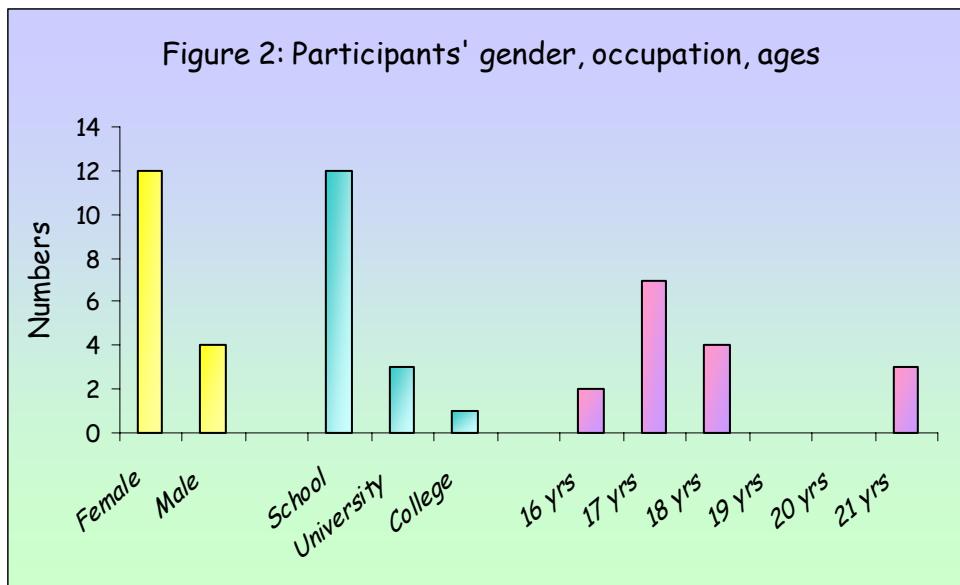
Sampling and recruitment

We set out to recruit a group of 20 - 25 young people from a range of rural and urban communities, representing a variety of experiences. Sixth form colleges, high schools, community projects, further education colleges and universities in the Cumbria and North Lancashire area were contacted to recruit young people. We used eye-catching posters and leaflets to encourage interest. We also posted a recruitment call on student website notice boards, and student tutor groups. Those who responded were sent an information sheet and invited to take part in three separate activities over approximately two months of the fieldwork.

Initial recruitment achieved a mixed gender group of twenty-seven young people aged between 16 - 21 years old, who ranged from school pupils, university students and young people with different work experiences.

Due to illness, accidents and unexpected commitments several young people dropped out before the workshop. This was disappointing, but not unexpected, given the everyday pressures and stresses reported by many of these young people. These included managing their studies, extra-curricular activities, work and family commitments.

Despite such pressures, sixteen young people participated in either an initial group discussion, or attended a post-workshop interview. Fifteen of these young people also attended one of the two workshop days. The majority of the group were school pupils with an average age of 17 years. The older participants, in the 18 - 21 year age group were either attending a further education college or were at university (see Figure 2).



Most participants came from rural backgrounds and still lived in rural and semi-rural communities, the remainder had experienced urban childhoods or were now living in urban areas. Participants came from a variety of socio-economic and family backgrounds, although ethnicity was entirely white and predominantly they were from the north west of England. Several participants came from families who had lived in local, rural areas over many generations. (See Table 2 for a breakdown of location, childhood and teenage experience of rural and urban areas.)

Whilst, ideally, we would have wished to recruit from a broader population base, we were constrained by the short duration of the project. Recruitment of this kind requires the building of community-based links with gatekeepers such as schools, colleges and higher education establishments, voluntary and other community-based organisations. For instance, it takes time to effectively outreach and sustain contact with inner city schools and urban and rural community projects with a wider range of ethnicity and experiences.

Nevertheless, in the time available to us, we established important links with one school in particular, a local Millennium Volunteers group, and a tutor from the Geography Department at Lancaster University. All of these links proved invaluable in recruitment.

Table 2: Childhood and teenage location; childhood play space, outings and holidays

Name *	Location childhood	Location Teenage	Childhood play space (usual)	Family outdoor space	Holidays
Heather	<i>Urban - city</i>	<i>Same</i>	<i>Urban garden, park, copse</i>	Rural, woods, hills, river, <i>family, Mum, Dad</i>	Rural
Polly	Rural - village	<i>Same</i>	Rural garden, fields, hills	Rural park, woods, seaside, <i>family, Dad</i>	Seaside
Terry	<i>Urban - city</i>	Semi rural village	<i>Urban garden, street</i>	<i>Urban shopping Mum</i>	Seaside Rural <i>g/parents</i>
Ella	Rural village	Semi rural village	Rural garden, valley	Rural woodland, valley, hills	Seaside
Amy	Rural dwelling	Semi rural village	Rural woods	Rural woods, fields	Seaside
Jane	Rural - hamlet	<i>Same</i>	Rural, fields, garden	Rural park, river, <i>Dad, Mum, sister</i>	Skiing, seaside
Jenny	Rural - hamlet	<i>Same</i>	Rural garden fields, hills	Rural hills <i>Dad</i>	Rural mountains
Ros	Rural farm	<i>Same</i>	Rural woods, lake	Rural <i>Mum, g/parents</i>	Seaside
Ruth	Semi rural village	<i>Same</i>	Rural fields, riverside	Rural hills woods <i>Mum</i>	Rural hills (rarely seaside)
Laura	<i>Urban - city</i>	Rural (2 yrs ago family move urban)	<i>Urban garden, park/ Rural fields</i>	Rural fields <i>siblings, Dad</i>	Seaside
Jack	Rural farm	<i>Same</i>	Rural fields, woodland	Rural field woods <i>siblings</i>	Seaside
Will	Rural - village	Rural - hamlet	Rural hills, fields	Rural lakes, fields, woods <i>family</i>	Seaside
Rachel	Rural - village	Rural - hamlet	Rural hills, fields, canal	Rural lakes fields woods <i>family</i>	Seaside
Tess	<i>Urban - city</i>	<i>Same</i>	<i>Urban garden, street</i>	<i>Urban</i>	Seaside
Tom	Rural dwelling	Urban - city	Rural woodland	Rural <i>boarding school</i>	School/ army rural
Sophie	<i>Urban - city</i>	<i>Same</i> (18m ago family move rural)	<i>Urban garden, park</i>	Rural woods, urban parks <i>Dad</i>	Rural fields, woods

*Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues are of critical importance when working with potentially vulnerable young people, especially given the nature and depth of the enquiry (see Bingley, 2002b).

The research proposal was submitted to, and approved by, the Institute for Health Research Departmental Ethics Committee. Informed, written consent was obtained from all participants and for those in the 16-18 year age group, their parents/guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity has been preserved throughout.

Images of participants used in any visual material, which may be used in published articles or in presentations, have given individual consent for each photograph or still.

All support workers and both researchers obtained CRB clearance certification to work with the 16-18 year old age group.

The Workshop Day

The workshop day was a key element of the research design. Hence we describe in detail the agenda and process of the workshop. As we note above, each participant was



invited to take part in one of two groups, of similar age, doing identical workshop days that were held over one weekend. This allowed each participant to work in a small, manageable group of young adults of similar ages.

The workshop consisted of four sessions, which were interspersed with breaks. Each session was designed to facilitate multi-sensory awareness and reflection about natural woodland environments. Following a general introduction at the local village hall, participants were taken on a walk, lasting approximately half an hour, through Eaves Wood; a partially coppiced, mixed woodland (native broadleaf with various coniferous species including well-established yew).

During the walk, participants were asked to join one of two small groups. Each group was accompanied by one researcher, a video technician, and one or two support workers, including a coppicer. The two groups took different routes through the wood. One route wound through mixed coppiced areas, past an old ruined cottage and through an impressive ring of mature beech trees, before running along the wood edge looking out across the valley, and then back to the starting point. The second route traversed coppice with stands of mature broadleaf and conifers, then ran out along the edge of a extensive quarried area before returning back to the starting point through an area of coppice with some large stands of yew.

Participants were asked to follow the agreed route, but were free to walk within reasonable sight off the path, provided they avoided unnecessarily disturbing any living



woodland elements, whether trees, plants or wildlife. They were encouraged to observe and reflect upon the woodland environment, and focus on any aspects, which they felt had meaning for them. They also talked to the coppice workers about the wood; asking about its history and the work involved, together with issues about wildlife, birds and trees. We suggested that they could pick up a *small* piece of loose-lying, non-living woodland material (leaf, twig, fir cone, bark), that they felt some affinity or association with. Participants were encouraged to use this material as an adjunct to the artwork and discussion sessions in the afternoon.

The participants then took part in a two-hour traditional coppice craft session, at a woodland site. They had the option to learn some greenwood crafts; they were taught how to quarter the logs, use a shave horse to prepare wood for the lathe, and make a 'rolling pin' on a polelathe. They could also try wood-carving. All these crafts were taught and supervised by three experienced coppice workers, one of whom was an environmental artist who regularly worked on projects with primary and secondary schools.



After lunch, we conducted two focus groups in the village hall, with the participants. Here, they were encouraged to reflect on their woodland and coppice craft experiences, as well as any memories that had arisen from the morning's activities. The day concluded with two indoor artwork sessions. The first session lasted approximately



45 minutes. Participants were asked to engage in sandplay. This is a technique whereby participants are given dry or wet sand with which to 'play'. Some of the time they are asked to work with their eyes closed, in order to focus on the non-visual, especially tactile, sensory

experience. After about 10-15 minutes small 'tools' such as plastic containers or scoops are introduced. As the above video-still records, people often model sandcastles, but many other structures are also created and some people preferred to just handle the sand in unstructured free-form ways.

The purpose of the exercise is twofold. Firstly, sandplay heightens non-visual sensory awareness in a relaxed way; which tends to enable people to re-connect with play space. Secondly, the process also stimulates childhood memories, levels of awareness and ideas, all of which may have continued to retain varying influences over our active thoughts and reactions, whilst remaining at the fringes of everyday consciousness. Thus, the participants are able to fully engage at a sensory, tactile level, and also creatively reconnect with childhood modes of awareness, before they are introduced to the key session in the workshop, in which they model their impressions and connections with woodland.

In the second of the artwork sessions all participants were invited to create 3D models to represent some aspect of their woodland experiences. They could choose to reflect a



childhood memory stimulated by the woodland activities; some imaginary place they associated with woodland; or ideas and concepts they had about woods in general.

A vast range of natural and artists' materials were provided, from logs, small branches, twigs, birch bark and dead leaves to textiles, thread, wool, beads and buttons, to metals, plastics and cardboard, plasticine, sand and clay. People could use a range of small hand tools and adhesives. Support was on hand from an expert coppicer using larger hand tools, such as drills and saws. The aim was to offer the participants a wide range of materials to choose from, which they felt would best express their experience and perception of woodland landscape.

Each session concluded with individual feedback and a chance to discuss the exercises. Workshop sessions were recorded using visual and audio techniques. Two people, experienced in the use of video cameras, undertook the visual recording. We were also supported with general organisation and observation by two to three volunteers each day. One of the coppice workers was also a trained first-aider and was present throughout each day.

The multi-sensory techniques of sandplay and 3D modelling, both drawn from psychotherapeutic methodology, are proven to be highly effective in facilitating access to embodied memories and ideas (Mitchell and Friedman, 1994; Bingley, 2002a; Bingley, 2003). As we have found in previous projects, participants do not need to be especially artistic or dextrous, and people of all ages have reported finding the sessions highly enjoyable regardless of their level of artistic ability or experience.

The overall approach of combining practical workshops and discussion groups proved highly successful. This was found especially helpful for this 16-21 year old age group, who, though very articulate when feeling assured, tend to be vulnerable, self-conscious and consequently less prepared to share thoughts and ideas.

The practical exercises, including the woodland walks was an effective 'icebreaker' amongst participants in the group, as well as encouraging them to engage in craft and art activities of which they had little, or no, previous experience.



We enjoyed sunny, though frosty, weather during the workshop days. The groups suggested this had been instrumental in encouraging them attend, in spite of having to walk and then work out in the cold.

The workshop sessions, both coppice craft sessions and

the artwork, were unanimously described as unexpectedly enjoyable, creative and pleasantly challenging.

For logistic reasons (equipment and numbers of people in each group), some people were asked to undertake the complete polelath process in reverse. They began with polelathing and finished with wood preparation, rather than beginning with the initial process of preparing the wood for the lathe. This, they felt, lessened their sense of achievement in comparison with those who began with a log and finished with a lathed item such as a rolling pin.. However, overall, this had not lessened their engagement with the task.



Only one or two participants had any previous wood craft experience. Most commented that they had imagined the woodland craft session would entail working with large machinery, and were surprised that traditional crafts with hand-made greenwood lathes and shave horses were still practised. The feedback below, from the follow-up interview, was echoed throughout our participant group:

'The best bit was the wood carving bit. I loved that. That was ace. ... I loved it. I really want to do it at school now, but the person who did it has left.'
(Tess, 16 yrs - about the coppice crafts)

'It was fun doing it though... it was just something really different that I've never done before and it was fun.'
(Ella, 17 yrs - about the coppice crafts)

'The clay was fun. I like that: really easily moulded. I like making the bricks and stuff like that. That was fun. I've still got that, I think, somewhere.... But it was fun, I enjoyed it, it was good. I liked it, I liked the walk. I forget how good it is to walk. My dad used to used to make me walk every Sunday or something. Ahh! I used to hate it. But... I do enjoy it, it's really nice. It's nice looking out like for certain things, different things in nature.'
(Laura, 17 yrs - about the 3D modelling and the woodland walk)

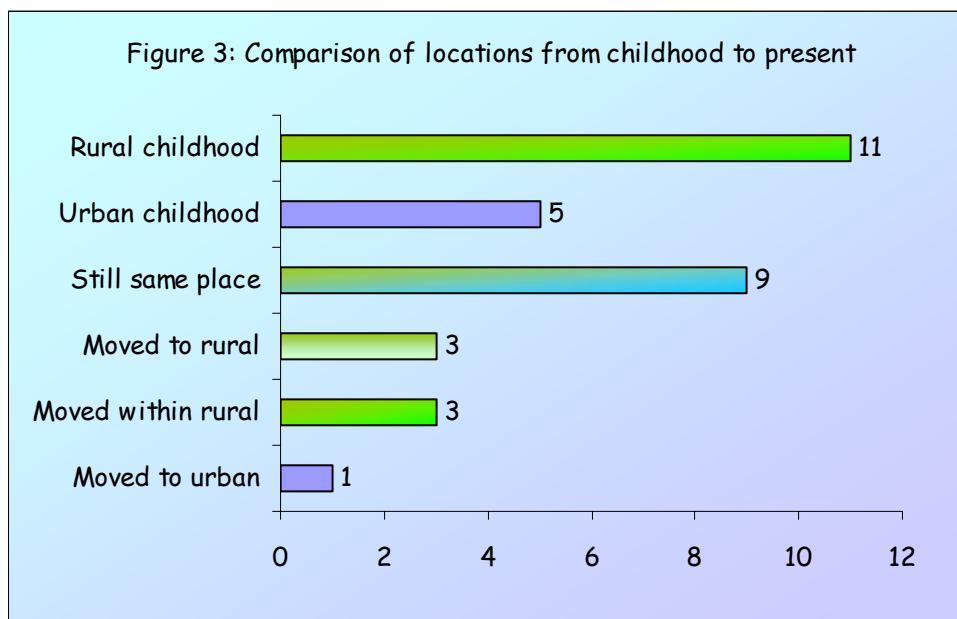
Several other young people commented that, having gradually lessened the amount of time spent in woodland areas in their teen years, they could now imagine

going for walks in woods again. One young woman felt she had discovered a new world in the woods that she had never realised existed before, having only gone on mountain fell-walks as a child and teenager. Three participants were sufficiently inspired by the polelathing and wood carving to ask for further information about the short courses regularly offered by the coppicers who worked with our group.

Childhood play space: rural and urban experiences

In this and the following sections we discuss the outcomes and themes arising from the analysis of the data.

The teenagers and young adults who took part in this study lived, mostly, in rural or semi-rural areas¹. Of the sixteen participants active in the study, eleven had spent at least the first ten years of their lives in semi rural or rural villages - a few in small rural hamlets, two on farms and one person in an isolated dwelling on a country estate (see Figure 3). Six young people lived in urban areas at the time of the study. However, two university students retained a strong tie with their rural family home, which, for one, involved a recent move, from an urban to rural area, made by their family some eighteen months prior to the study. The other student spent all his leisure time in countryside activities.



Nine young people had lived in the same place since birth, which for eight of these people was a rural area, and for one, an urban area. Of the remaining group members, six had moved from cities to semi-rural or rural villages during their teenage years.

¹ For the purposes of this report the term 'rural' refers to a single dwelling, hamlet or village set in a countryside area; 'semi-rural' refers to a location adjacent/in immediate proximity to an urban area; 'urban' an entirely built-up area within a town or city. In this basic definition we acknowledge the long-running debate around these terms and the numerous ways they can be defined (see Cloke, 1985, Halfacree, 1993).

One person had moved from the city, at the age of nine, to a rural village and then at the age of fifteen had moved, with her family, back to a local town.

Our participants were young people who had experienced relatively stable living situations in rural or semi-rural areas. More urban-based participants would have permitted a broader look at influences of urban play space, nevertheless, we found that this group offered intriguing insights into rural childhood as experienced by young people in late twentieth century England.

As Philo (2003) and Jones (1999) note, the self-narrated, lived experiences of rural childhood tend to be over-looked, or too easily explored from an (often unintentionally) adult perspective. In part, this may be due to powerful cultural constructs of the 'rural idyll' which, over the years, have obscured some profoundly less than idyllic, and certainly more complex, realities of rural life for children (Philo, 1992). As researchers working with rural children and young people, we may fail to recognise the obscuring effects of both our own pre-conceptions of being a child and our cultural constructs of the 'idyllic rural childhood'. Although rural studies address some of these issues, there remains a tendency to imagine that 'rural' equals 'idyll'. As researchers we may seek to address the more obvious problems of disadvantage in urban children and young people and risk ignoring rural disadvantage (Cloke & Little (1997). As Cloke (1997) contends 'country life is not all that it is cracked up to be' (1997: 252). There are many and varied situations in the rural lifestyle, some of which directly contradict closely held concepts of living 'out in the country'.

Our study confirms that the lived experience of the rural-dwelling young person is considerably more complex than suggested by the culturally imposed idyll. For example, not all participants were particularly healthy, privileged or middle class, which contradicts some of those more powerful and commonly-held myths of rural living, noted by Cloke (1997).

More importantly, in terms of the remit of this study, our pre-dominantly rural group provided some valuable insights into the relationship between the rural child, their countryside play space and local knowledge. We found, more often than not, that rural play space was fraught with a range of safety issues, parental restraint and myth. A situation we discuss in some detail below, which has many resonances with Valentine's (1997) study of rural parents' perceptions of stranger danger and the effect on their children's play space. We also found that in the group, urban-dwellers reflecting on rural experience, had some very different, though no less complex, attitudes to safety and play space.

In terms of the rural and urban experience of childhood play space in woodland, and how this had influenced young people's relationship with woodland areas subsequently, four key observations emerged:

1. The extent to which childhood play in woodland (and other play space) was more, or less, supervised or structured;
2. The attitude of parents or other trusted adults towards woodland areas;
3. The types of childhood visits taken to woodland areas;
4. The nature of the recalled childhood interactions with woodland areas.

These points are discussed in detail below.

The extent of supervised or structured childhood play in woodland and other outdoor play spaces

Participants recalled a range of play experiences, but the key influence on long-term confidence to walk in woodland, appeared to be the degree to which they had been able to experience unstructured play in woodland areas with little or limited adult supervision. This occurred regardless of whether they had lived in urban or rural areas as children. With the exception of one person who recalled definite times alone in woods, participants mostly recalled woodland play with siblings or other children.

Those seven young people in the group, Polly, Tom, Ros, Jack, Tess, Heather and Terry, who reported feeling most confident and at ease in woodland had all, as children, been given the most opportunity to play with a very limited level of adult supervision in wooded areas. Four had lived in close proximity to woodland. The most confident and knowledgeable young man had, from the age of about 7 - 13 years of age, attended a boarding school that was set in woodland. In particular, he noted that the ethos of the school revolved around encouraging regular, unstructured, woodland play and the teaching of woodland knowledge and craft skills:

'..every morning we'd have to go out and collect firewood... . But also we were allowed to play in the woods and, like, every break time we'd go [on] runs through the woods and then on Sunday afternoons and different afternoons of the week we were out and [we'd] just play and make dens and all these sorts of things. So it was all various sort of times 'cos it was all the same, obviously being set in grounds, it was all the same piece of wood. But they had lots of different things that I remember from the woods there.'

(Tom, 21 yrs)

Tom had been involved in OTC (Officer Training Corps) Army training since his early teens, much of which took him into woodland in the guise of 'enemy territory'. He felt that Army training had introduced him to a (previously unknown) sense of anxiety in woods. However, on return to his normal everyday life he was able to reconnect with his great enjoyment of woods for quiet recreation.

The two young women who recalled playing with limited adult supervision and very little, obvious parental anxiety were also the least anxious around woodland. In particular, as Polly's account illustrates below, woodland areas were familiar places, where other people she met while taking a walk were more likely to be friendly; sharing their enjoyment of the woods with others, as they walked their dogs:

'I think partly 'cos I've spent a lot of time in them [woodlands], so I know that there's nothing out there that. I don't have any fears there's something out there that's gonna get me or that I'm gonna fall over in the forest or that the tree's gonna bite me or whatever. And there ... tends to be sort of, you know, dog walkers and people that you meet, and they always sort of seem quite friendly and everyone sort of say, 'Hi' as you walk past. Even though you've got no idea who this person is, you don't feel that they're about to attack you because they've just said hello and they've got a friendly dog. You know, you're sort of walking past, so there's no sort of in-built fear of any people or any 'thing' that's in there. I suppose it's partly just down to me, the fact that I grew up in the countryside where you don't have muggings and gun crime and stuff, 'cos it's a quiet little country village, that kind of thing doesn't happen! So I suppose it's partly that. But ... I think I've just had sort of experiences of woods where they're sort of fun and you go in there to play or talk or be with family or friends and do stuff and, you know, you've got sort of fond memories of it and stuff so there aren't any associations of bad things and stuff. ... in general woodland's quite a relaxing and fun, sort of quite nice place to be.'

(Polly, 21 yrs)

As Polly observed, she felt at ease in woodland largely because of her relaxed attitude, encouraged by familiarity and numerous positive associations with woodland space that she had enjoyed throughout her childhood and early teens. This seems to have given her some 'risk perspective' and thereby allowed her freedom to feel safe to walk in woodland.

Three of the more confident participants had lived in urban areas (two were still urban dwellers). Heather, an urban-based young woman, recalled playing in a small urban copse near her house. She, like Polly, expressed a continuing ease and enjoyment associated with woodland and trees:

'There's a copse just behind which is perfectly safe and we were always, I mean that was when [we] were about 8, 9 [years old] and we were responsible for ourselves, and again there were four of us.... And you also kind of feel safe in a wood 'cos you've got all these trees around you that are protecting you. I don't know if that's to do with the fact that

you were kind of: it was raining and then you went into the wood and the rain kind of stopped..' (Heather, 17 yrs)

Heather's feelings of safety and protection in woods reflect the degree of unstructured, less supervised play she was allowed, as well as the kinds of adventurous, creative family outings to local woodland that she recalled were a regular feature of her childhood.

Another young woman, Tess, had lived in urban areas all her life, but still recalled happy and positive countryside experiences as a child. She now demonstrates a clear preference for woodland and countryside to urban areas:

... 'Cos when I was in ... a small village there's loads of freedom there. But I think it's just in big cities 'cos with there being so many strangers, and things going on, that you can't really have freedom, 'cos you have to be over-protective and stuff. ... No I like woods! I like walks and I don't know I just like [those places] rather than cars and traffic and stuff. ... But the trees, the trees always look healthier as well, like a lot greener and everything just looks brighter. But that could just be my imagination thinking 'oh it's clean!' (laughs) (Tess, 16 yrs)

Although Tess had some anxieties about being in woods at night, feelings she shared with many of the group, her more positive attitude tended to keep her fears in perspective. Ros also reflected some of this love of the freedom in woodland. She had enjoyed minimally supervised, unstructured play as she lived on a farm surrounded by woodland:

'The fact that it was just, hardly anyone was really there and you could do what you wanted to and, I don't know, I like being outside in places like that, where it's just nature and trees and things, so. I liked that bit the best.' (Ros, 17 yrs)

These young people perceived woodland as primarily a safe, friendly place, where their memories of less supervised, creative play affirmed their sense of agency. This appeared to enhance their ability, as young adults, to visit woodland areas with appreciably less anxiety than those of their peers who had experienced more supervised childhood play. However, as we discuss below, other participants experienced more complex relationships with woodland areas.

Adult influence on attitudes towards play in woodland areas.

The attitude of parents or other trusted adults towards woodland areas, as safe places to play without close supervision, appeared to influence the subsequent attitudes of the young people. Participants who recalled experiencing very little parental anxiety during childhood, had markedly less negative associations with woods than others in the group.

In contrast, some participants described a constrained rural play space, where the parents' anxieties were clearly expressed and 'safe' play zones' had been set out. Some of these zones extended to proscribed areas within view of the house, or within easy reach for a sibling who could run for help in the event of an accident. For example, while Jane had been allowed to play without adults present from under ten years of age, she thought that in a city she would not have been allowed to play outside until she was older. She noted, however, that even in the countryside the range of her play space was strictly controlled:

But if we lived in ... somewhere built up, I think it'd be a lot older 'cos my mum would be scared of like people and stuff. But like round here we've got a big footpath walk through that, through the back of that field to the back of our house, so there's no-one hardly ever goes on there and you know it's pretty safe, there's no cars or anything. So my mum didn't have to worry. And we used to play in the back field there and if our mum needed us she could/you can hear us, so, wherever we are, so. (Jane, 17 years)

Jane described a complex relationship with woodland, expressing anxieties about the potential dangers from other people in woods, whilst acknowledging that she also enjoyed several aspects of woodland. However, she had almost always visited local woods accompanied, as a child, with grandparents and parents and in more recent years horse riding, accompanied by her mother. Jane's experience was similar to that of several participants, whereby woodland had been 'out of bounds', unless accompanied by adults.

Laura, for example, recalled that playing in woodland had been actively discouraged as being too risky, even with siblings present:

'I cant remember much about the trees from where I lived ...'cos we didn't live there for long... . We really didn't go off to the forest that much, because it was quite a long way away from my house, and me Mum couldn't see us there and if we got hurt, if one of us had got hurt, then it'd take ages for one of them to run back and run. Do you know what I mean? (Laura, 17 yrs)

However, Laura had been allowed to play freely near the family home, and she also had good memories of supervised play with her father and siblings. She had enjoyed the six years she spent living in a rural area, but did not now access the countryside or woodland either for recreation or if stressed. She was more likely to venture out into her local urban area to access outdoor space.

The most notable example of adults placing constraints on woodland play space was recounted by Amy, who had lived in the midst of woodland for much of her childhood:

Amy: Yeah, and I just lived in the middle of nowhere there, and we like, lived on this big like estate so I ... there was woods everywhere and I just could play anywhere.

Interviewer: Did you used to go out and play anywhere?

Amy: Erm, well, not anywhere. But yeah with my older sister and my mum and things, yeah and our babysitter as well. 'Cos like he just lived up the road on the same like estate so we would go out with him. (Amy, 17 years)



Although Amy recalls being able to enjoy plenty of time in woodland, this was never without adult supervision. She described having been quite adventurous in terms of physical activity - climbing trees and making traps in the woods - yet she currently experiences anxiety around woodland. This was expressed through her 3D model, illustrated in this video still. She initially set out to model the ruined cottage seen during the woodland walk, but after a lot of indecision, she finally modelled a monster, as she noted below:

Amy: (laughs) I don't, well, first of all it was meant to be the ruin that we saw in the woods. Erm, but then, I kind of put like two eyes on it, and I then I thought it does look like a monster, so then I make/made it look a little bit more scary (laughs).

Interviewer: Did you find the woods scary?

Amy: No. I would if I was by myself, I probably would. But, erm, not when I was with like my friends... (Amy, 17 years)

Amy's response illustrates her ambivalent relationship to woodland; a place of childhood adventures but only with supervision, yet fraught with vague anxieties and uncertainty. Now, the only safe visits to woodland she can envisage would be with others, in this case friends, thus mirroring her childhood pattern of woodland experience.

In contrast, to Amy and Jane's perception of woodland as a place of uncertain, but unrealised risks, Polly, as noted above, demonstrates an ability to assess actual risks of being in the woods. In this way, she appeared to increase her sense of agency and freedom of choice. The ability to make decisions that align to the perceived 'realistic risk' is fundamental to the personal degree of security felt in a given situation (see Smith, 1992). Interestingly, this kind of decisive risk awareness was not discussed by young male participants, who expressed very little anxiety about woodland. While one young man recalled childhood fears of the supernatural, these young men, in direct contrast to the young women, indicated that they had never associated woodland with dangers from other people.²

It is worth noting, however, that the degree of risk experienced was also a part of the appeal of play in woodland. It is variously regarded as an exciting 'other' place, to be explored, and thus made familiar to the child, and also a space within which to learn and test physical ability, courage and independence. Importantly, as one participant suggested, the opportunity to take risks in play had supported her physical confidence and trust. This was echoed by Polly, who was convinced that children needed some opportunities to experience risk in order to learn safety awareness and to encourage their physical agility. She was very clear however, that when children are small and learning physical agility and skills, they actively need adults present to supervise:

² This was an intriguing contrast to findings by Burgess (1996), where young men in her study confessed to feeling very anxious about attacks in woodland.

So if you don't learn to be aware of risks when you're little then you sort of think, 'That's safe, ahhh! Maybe not, I got hurt'. And as you get older you get more seriously hurt, 'cos a broken bone when you're six is a lot better than a broken bone when you're thirty. So it doesn't take your time off work and stuff. I suppose it maybe hurts less and it heals quicker and all sorts of things. And you learn that maybe you shouldn't climb up things that are six times taller than you, 'cos you'll fall out of them! 'Cos there's a lot of judgement of self, sort of your own abilities - 'Can I do that or not?'
(Polly, 21 years)

The sense of agency and freedom gained through this kind of early experiences of unstructured play can be seen as a source of independence and inner strength, which can be drawn upon in subsequent challenging and stressful situations. Parental anxieties are thought to considerably dilute potentially important experiences of independence in childhood (Aitken, 1994). Our young people were aware of these influences. Indeed, the more independent of them were very able to reflect on the advantages of unsupervised play space both in terms of supporting their long-term health and well-being, and of widening their choice of outdoor places to visit that helped them in times of stress.

One young man, who had been allowed to roam freely over his family's farm, had virtually no anxieties about outdoor spaces and a high sense of adventure. Jack describes playing as a child outdoors:

Jack: 'I live on a farm so being outside was the thing.

Interviewer: Did you have quite lot of freedom where you went on the farm? Was it like your Mum or your Dad would say, "see you for lunchtime", sort of thing... ?

Jack: Well it wasn't even that, it was basically we would go out and if you weren't back for dinner you would hear my Dad whistling! (laughs). It were like a dog or something! (laughs).'
(Jack, 21 yrs)

His experience was very unusual in comparison with his peer group, and closer to those mid-twentieth century play space patterns recalled by older age groups, than to 1990's patterns (Bingley, 2002a). Jack had overcome some physical disabilities, which he felt had considerably compromised his school and social life as a child. He felt he had often needed to get away from strangers who stared, leaving him angry and unhappy. As he notes below living on the farm meant he had space to escape. Also, when family stresses were difficult he could get away by going outdoors:

Jack: I don't know, getting away from it all. I mean there were things at home that weren't good. But, when they weren't good it was a way of getting away from it.

Interviewer: So you could get away from things that you found difficult to deal with?

Jack: Yeah.

Unsupervised, rural play space for Jack was not just a place to escape to, but also provided a space where he could take risks, test and develop his courage:

'Yeah. I remember when I was little, my Dad owned a house and under it was a cellar, it isn't very big, it's not that deep. But when we were little it used to be completely dark and we used to run in and run out again and try and go in a bit further in there. But we didn't know what was there at all.' (Jack, 21 years)

Jack's model in the sandplay session was reminiscent of this kind of 'cellar', which he described as like a cave that no one would be aware of unless they approached it directly. His memories of unstructured, adventurous play appeared to suggest that these adventurous activities supported his physical independence and confidence through the challenges of his childhood.

In comparison, Tess held onto the positive childhood memories of 'free-to-roam' play in countryside and woodlands for the short period of time she had spent living in a rural area. She was keen to emphasise the sharp contrast between perceived 'safe' rural spaces and the lack of safe outdoor places to play where she lived in the city. She lived in what she described as 'a very rough' urban area, and during the focus group held after the woodland walk, she had expressed several fears about woodland that were similar to those expressed by the more fearful rural-dwelling girls. One month later, during the one-to-one interview, we reflected with a little humour on her perception of the actual risks:

Tess: 'I've just watched Cabin Fever, and that's all set in the woods and obviously a cabin. And there's weird people jump out of everywhere so it's like, 'okay'. (her emphasis)

Interviewer: Cos' actually the reality in the average wood of anyone bothering to hang around long enough to frighten somebody... ?

Tess: Yeah, just in case someone walks past (laughs).'

(Tess, 16 yrs)

In a similar way to Polly, Tess has assessed the reality of perceived risks and decided the benefits outweigh any real and serious risk. As a result her general liking and enjoyment of woodland is only minimally affected.

These observations indicate that those young people who tend to associate fear and uncertainty with woodland were rarely allowed to roam freely and unsupervised in woodland as children. Also they had fewer regular opportunities to go into woodlands, whether or not they were accompanied by adults or siblings.

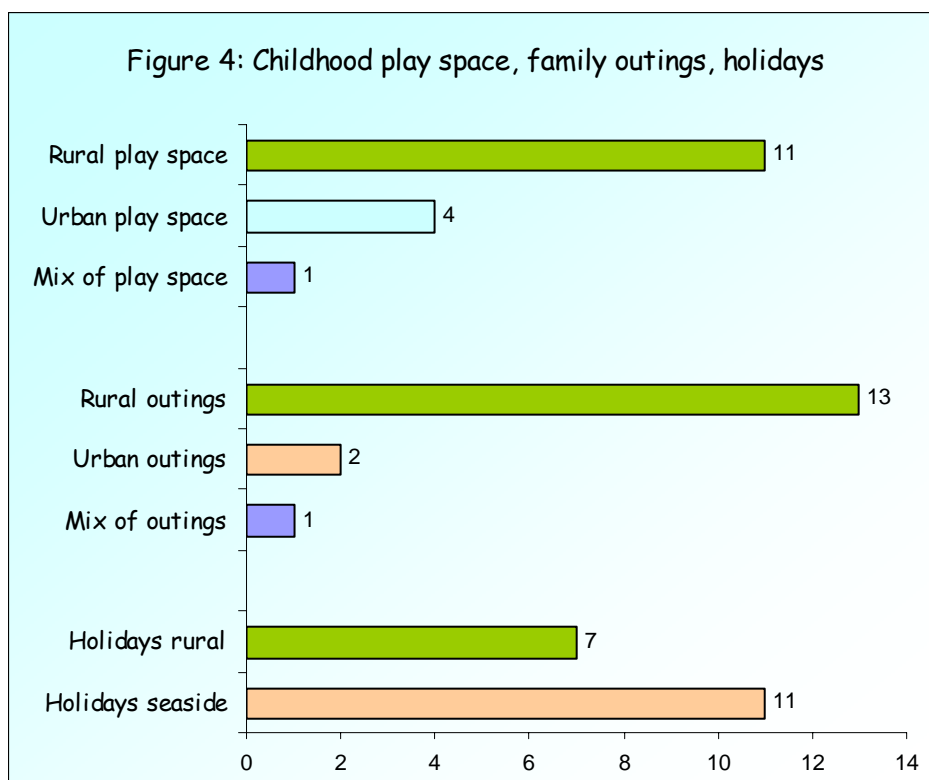
Importantly, and this cannot be emphasised enough, *not one* of our participants reported ever having experienced any actual negative or dangerous events in woodland, not even any memorable accidents. In fact, whatever risks they described in woodland areas related entirely to their *imagined sense of risk*. This appears to be profoundly influenced by media, myth and fantasy; a point which we discuss in more detail in the following section.

Indeed, those participants such as Polly, Tom, Will, Ros and Jack, who had the most regular opportunities for less supervised play in woods, or wooded countryside, had a better knowledge of woodland, and showed more curiosity and adventure during the workshop woodland walk. However, a certain amount of curiosity was also observed in those young people who had been given opportunities for unstructured play in countryside close to where they lived, even where this had not included woodland areas.

Climbing trees and building dens: childhood visits and play in woodland areas

There was a strong link between awareness and enjoyment of woods and the kind of woodland visits and play that participants had experienced in their childhood. First, we explore the 'visit' to woodland, when the child goes to the woods as part of an accompanied outing. Then we explore the kinds of play and interaction recalled by the participants when they were children.

The young people remembered with great detail the context of visits to woodland. These included special family outings, holidays, or an outing accompanied by a parent or grandparent, that had become a treasured memory. The strongest feature described by the majority of the participants, regardless of whether they were urban or rural dwellers, was their experience of family outings to countryside areas for recreation and holidays (see Figure 4).



Although holidays were often seaside based, most of the group recalled short day or weekend trips to rural woodlands, valleys, hills or mountains accompanied by, either one or both parents, grandparents, siblings or other relatives. As noted in the previous section, visits to woodland as a young adult tends to reflect childhood patterns, for example, only going to the woods if accompanied by an older, trusted adult, a sibling or with friends, or in some cases, by a dog or when horse-riding.

Two of our urban dwelling participants recalled that, in general, their families resorted to more urban-based leisure activities and tended not to go out of the city unless visiting family. Urban-based children were also more likely to play closer to home, either in their own or friends' gardens. Outings with their mothers were more likely to involve shopping in urban areas rather than going into rural areas. Special outings to rural areas tended to be undertaken either with the whole family, or with fathers or another trusted male relative. One young man from an urban area recalled visits to his grandparents' home in a rural area. Terry had been deeply influenced by walks with his grandfather, who had taught him about the countryside:

... my granddad, when I used to go walking with ... we used to see like animals or birds and all that ... 'cos he'd lived around here all of his life. He like he knew all the types of bird and he knew all the types of animal and everything, and just everything that he pointed to and he'd name it then I'd pick it up and all that and ... I remembered like knowing a lot about wild life and stuff around here. And I knew wildlife, and that shocked a lot of people considering I was from the city, but I knew quite a lot about the wildlife. (Terry, 18 years)

Terry was one of the few in the group who had an urban-based childhood, or who still lived in the city, but whose families were generally more 'rural-aware' and routinely went out to rural areas for leisure. In some cases, like Terry and Sophie, their families had eventually moved into a rural area:

'we used to have a caravan and we happened to have family in the countryside and [a] holiday home as well in the countryside, so we used to spend a lot of time and most weekends out in the country. And my parents were unrestrictive as well so, you know we have two dogs, which I think gets you out more; gets you out into the woods. I was

quite, you know, quite well informed about the countryside. ... Now we've moved in the last eighteen months and so we do actually live in a rural area, in a farm.'
(Sophie, 18 yrs)

The rural was further imbued with certain 'idyllic' and special qualities for another urban young woman, and associated with happy experiences in countryside spaces with her parents:

'When we were young we used to always go on like themed walks. Like in autumn we'd go and pick up coloured leaves and conkers and come home and stick them down. But I mean they always fell apart after twenty minutes. And in the spring going and picking the flowers and you'd see, you'd probably see a blaze of destruction behind us. But yeah, 'cos Mum and Dad were very keen walkers so we were always out in the fells and in the wind and snow.' (Heather, 17 yrs)

Many of the rural-based young people also recalled that rural outings tended to be a family event with their mother only (if in a single parent family) or with their father and/or the rest of the family. Most of this group recalled going to countryside, including woodland and seaside for holidays and day outings, but a few tended to frequent hills and mountains. One participant had been deeply influenced by the positive experience of going out into the Lakeland hills, with her father, on day outings. He had never taken her to woodland and she was one of the people most delighted by the woodland walk:

'I really loved [the woodland walk] because it really did remind me of being a child again, even though I'd never been in a wood as a child really. It was just like everything you saw was so exciting and everything was completely different. So I did feel like a child again in that respect. (Jenny, 17 years)

As Jenny noted, the opportunity for a walk in the woods, an unfamiliar environment for her, was a source of unexpected interest. She did not associate woodland with fear as such fear had never been engendered in her. In contrast, she showed a high degree of interest and curiosity in the woodland during the workshop walk and looked forward to further encounters with this newly discovered environment.

Positive childhood associations with woodland that arose as a direct result of family affirmation suggest this is a powerful factor in encouraging young people to feel confident about visiting woodland, or even considering it as a place they might find relaxing or pleasant to visit.

In terms of play in woodland, the majority of participants recalled that, as children, their interactions with woodland took the form of physical activity. They expressed great excitement telling us about these games, particularly climbing trees and building dens. In this excerpt from a focus group discussion participants share experiences of childhood play in woodland:

Amy: Yeah, I used to live like in the middle of nowhere, like woods everywhere round me, so I went out to the woods everyday and didn't stay inside much. ...[we used to go out and] climb trees and stuff... Making dens

(Loud agreement from group)

Jane: Oh yeah, we used so many dens, yeah.

Ruth: We used to make dens in trees, like behind this field like under bushes and stuff.

Some participants also remembered making 'traps' for other unsuspecting woodland visitors or wild animals.

Amy: Yeah, we used to make like traps (laughs). Like put stuff over and hope someone would fall in.

Group laughter

Jane: I still made traps but I made them in the garden, and dig massive holes in the grass and stuff.

In some cases these activities were part of unsupervised play but often would be part of a family outing or holiday. For Rachel, playing 'ambush games' with her family in woodland often seemed more exciting than playing on a beach:

... but like I was going to say ... the woodland's a lot more like exciting. You can play like, I can remember we used to play like up on the Knott here. We used to play ... me and my sister. We'd all go for a family walk and then me and [my brother and sister] would go off and we'd like ambush my parents, whatever. And like I think having some woodland and things like that, you can't really play those games on the beach particularly or the sea. (Rachel, 17 years)

Some also had memories of a special tree that they had played around or liked to climb, either in their garden, in local woodland, at school or in a park.

'We had a really big tree in the field at the back of the house. It was absolutely massive, like an oak tree and that was really good to climb 'cos the branches were really low down and stuff so it was quite easy when you're younger.' (Jane, 17 years)

These memories had influenced the ways in which the young people felt about woodland now. A 'special' tree memory from childhood easily converted, in young adulthood, into a positive association with trees and woodland. Indeed, we found during the workshop, that this group were very open to going on the woodland walk in spite of having acquired a number of fears and anxieties about woods that, increasingly, in their teen years had acted as a deterrent to woodland visits. Some participants re-discovered aspects of woodland that they had forgotten. For example, Terry's absorption with the wildlife and birds when in rural areas had been superseded by finding woodland as a place for playing games with his friends.

...it was nice to go back into like the woodland like areas. 'Cos I mean when my granddad had died, a few years later me and friends used to go out into a forest which was nearby. ... And we used to go in there and like play like hide and seek and stuff. And because like it was an absolutely huge forest we used to have such, like a good laugh. But I hadn't gone on a walk through the forest that demanded me to spend a lot of time looking round and paying close attention to things, 'cos I mean when you're not with somebody like a parent or like figure you don't think about all the different things. You're just like having a laugh with your mates or whatever. But it was nice to think, it really was nice to go back and pay close attention to things that were going on. (Terry, 18 years)

Terry's comment highlights how different play and recreation can create new opportunities for connecting positively with an area. Thus, woodland can be a place to climb trees, make dens or play hide and seek, but it can also provide an opportunity to engage all the senses and observe wildlife and plants with great attention, and gain unexpected benefits from this experience.

However, even if childhood games in woodland were remembered as fun, it did not always follow that this translated into visiting woodland as a young adult. Neither did such well-enjoyed games diminish current fears and anxieties. The young people's reactions to woodland, together with their childhood memories, emerged strongly during the workshop day, during the woodland walk and the woodland craft activity: reflecting the nature and impact of the embodied interactions with woodland elements recalled as children. In the next section we explore in more depth the relationship between young people and their childhood interaction with woodland and forest areas.

Young people's relationship to woodland: the influence of current and childhood experience.

As we note in the previous sections these young people have an often complex and ambivalent relationship to woodland. In certain ways, we suggest, their ambivalence may be influenced by the kinds of opportunities they had to play in woodland. In this section we explore several other major influences, which from childhood onward, had affected and continue to affect how these young people relate to woodland.

The key factors participants mentioned were myths and fairy tales recounted to them in childhood; powerful, and usually negative, influences of media, such as newspaper, TV and radio reports; horror films such as 'The Blair Witch Project', which drew on ideas of supernatural forces in woods and appeared to feed into existing fears of woods and forests; the book and film 'Lord of the Rings', which was felt to present some more positive images of woods. Fear of attacks by strangers was another strong negative influence in deterring young women from going into woodland. Lastly, as a positive counter to some of the more sinister and fearful images, the acquisition of local or if possible specialist knowledge about woodlands acted as a very useful influence in encouraging young people to visit and learn more about woodland and forest areas. However, almost all participants told us that they experience apparently contradictory feelings about the same wood depending on the time of day, the context, or the intensity of current influence of particular media, myths or knowledge.

Our group of young people was highly aware of woodland myths and fairy tales. Their imaginations echo the continuing and powerful cultural perception of woodland myth and story described by Cloke & Jones (2003); Bord & Bord (1995). As Schama's (1995) work suggests some woodland myths and stories are found to be deeply entrenched in the Western European cultural imagination. Woodland, it would seem, continues for this generation to be a place perceived though a rich and complex mix of both good and fear-inducing myth and imagination. This phenomenon was reported by the majority of both the young women and young men, although, the young women described myth and

fairy tales in more detail and appeared more affected by tales of the supernatural and myth than the young men. Some myths are connected to well-known fairy stories or folklore, which they recalled having been told throughout their childhood.

For two young women, Jane and Ruth, there were elements of the 'good faerie' in woods, who occupied a fairy world, which could be 'called up' in their imaginary games. Jane said this had been instilled by her mother and it tended to temper the existing anxieties that were associated with woodland. She recalled a favourite book: the fairy tale collection 'Enchanted Wood', which she read throughout her childhood. Ruth also had the advantage of other positive associations with woodland rendering myth and faerie into a beneficent influence:

It was just like, I don't know, quite magical really. 'Cos like when you're there and see all the rocks and roots covered in moss that just reminds me, doesn't seem real, 'cos it's really weird, always reminds me of fairy stories and stuff like that. (Ruth, 17 years)

Ruth described this strong association of myth and woodland in her 3D model, which reflected the colourful elements of woodland she loved as well as a glittery 'fairy ring' of trees in Eaves Wood, where she recalled playing as a child. For several young women, woodland myths fuelled anxieties, and this was intensified by the way, for example films, draw on the potentially frightening aspects of woodland areas, such as when in the woods in the dark and surrounded by unpredictable elements:

Sophie: I spent a lot of time in woods when I was growing up, playing and I still find them creepy in a lot of ways (laughs).

Jane: At night it's quite scary.

Sophie: Yeah night is, yeah definitely.

Jane: I don't like going in then.

Sophie: And especially when paths get narrow and they overhang.

Interviewer: Not the sort of place you'd go on a dark night?

Sophie: No, even on your own, it'd be a bit intimidating, I think.

Interviewer: What would be intimidating?

Sophie: Erm, well/

Tess: Just so/

Sophie: /the trees might come alive (laughing).

Interviewer: The trees might come alive, but they are already alive!

Sophie: (laughing) Yeah, you know it's just like the whole Blair Witch effect.
(Workshop Focus Group, 7/12/03)

As we note above, the two most quoted sources for the media-generated anxiety was the film 'The Blair Witch Project' and 'Lord of the Rings'. Red Riding Hood and the Teddy Bears' Picnic featured as well, along with tales of bad and good fairies that inhabited the woods. All these tales had appeared to feed into the imaginations of the myriad 'unknown' dangers or presences in woodland.

Such myth and supernatural imaginations conjured up the more ancient cultural version of woodland described by Schama (1995). This suggests that ancient myths are still sufficiently active in our society as to profoundly influence young people's ideas about the countryside; perhaps, surprisingly more than might be apparent in the technologically, scientifically-orientated, twenty-first century. Such ideas appear to be a factor in decisions to visit woodland, in what circumstances and under what conditions. Significantly, there appeared to be a link between the degree of fantasy, the level of actual lived experience, and the level of insight into the whether a fear was worth taking seriously, for instance if it was real or imaginary.

Sophie, in particular, expressed a high degree of anxiety about woods, much of it fed by negative images from media. She had usually visited woods with family, and her 3D



model was an intriguing mix of fairy story and a powerful image of a bear, which she associated with her Dad playing with the family in woods, who used to pretend he was a bear jumping out at her and her siblings. As Tess rather candidly pointed out in the feedback, she 'was not surprised that Sophie was anxious about woodland if her Dad had frightened her like that'. Sophie

expressed these conflicting but powerful perceptions of woods in her woodland model, by clearly placing her wood fairy' a 'beneficent' female next to the 'bear' who, she said represented the fearful male aspects of woodland: aspects that she needs a strong male to protect her from.

Most, though not all, media stories, and a lot of myth has highly negative connotations. These anxieties were expressed by most of the young women, whereas only one of the young men appeared concerned. For one or two of the young women these imaginations cast deep shadows in their minds about woodlands and acted as a strong deterrent to their visiting woodland without a trusted, strong male:

'Yeah, I wouldn't go by myself but I'd go with my friends. But I once went in the woods with my friends at night and we all just like started hugging the only boy that was there (laughing) 'cos we were so scared.' (Amy, 17 years)

Danger from male strangers was mentioned by the young women, who were especially anxious about the risk of being attacked and this acted as a powerful constraint on their freedom to visit these areas unless accompanied by family or friends. In contrast the young men in the group expressed few fears of risk from strangers in woodland and were more likely to visit woodland alone. Some of the young women, like Ruth, were very affected by newspaper stories of murders in woods or finding dead bodies in the woods. She, like a number of the young women, had been allowed to walk in local woods once she had reached at least 10 or 11 years old, but preferably if accompanied by a dog or when horse-riding. The presence of an animal was described as very important in supporting a sense of security:

Like you see all these things on the news like people getting buried out in the woods and stuff, and like that's quite scary. But I'd go for a ride through the woods 'cos then I wouldn't really be on my own 'cos I'd have my horse with me. But I don't know I probably wouldn't go for a walk on my own, would through fields 'cos they're kind of more open. (Ruth, aged 17yrs)

Her fears were echoed by Rachel, who usually restricted herself to walking in open fields, which avoided possible woodland dangers:

Rachel: No, I'd probably stick to open fields, yeah. I just, you know, you can see ahead, you can see if there's anyone's lurking or anything.

Interviewer: So there's also the possibility of someone lurking in the wood?

Rachel: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Whereas in an open field you'll be able to see that and/
Rachel: Yeah.

In similar vein, Heather thought her fears of woodland were a compound of stories and myth, which she was most likely to remember if she went into woodland at night. Interestingly, she identified the effect of the Moor's murders in the 1960s as a turning point in restricting children's outdoor play because of 'stranger danger':

Heather: I think I'd be a bit scared. That's also partly 'cos you hear lots of stories of nasty men in the woods.

Interviewer: It's not just the sort of fairy and ghost and ghouls bit.

Heather: Yeah it's sort of kind of both, I think. They kind of intermix, which is a bit odd. It's like the classic Red Riding Hood story isn't it... I mean the big scandal that everyone knows about; the Mary Hindley, you know the Hindley. I think that kind of was the beginning of the end for children being allowed to play freely... I don't think kids are taken out any more these days because there is this big stranger danger fear. (Heather, aged 17yrs)

Heather felt safe going on walks into woods at night time provided she was accompanied by her father. This point was echoed by several other young women. As mentioned earlier in this section, woodland was considered most scary at night, partly because of unknown 'supernatural' elements as well as known 'stranger danger', and partly because animals were more frightening and unpredictable at night. Tess and Jane reported finding other natural phenomena scary, such as noises of wind in branches and so on. But if they were accompanied on night walks in woodland these fears could be overcome and they could enjoy watching the nocturnal animals and hearing the owls hoot, or the barking of deer and foxes. For Heather, along with several others in the group, these negative myths and fears could be overridden by the fact of their enjoyment of woods and their love of trees, and these participants said they often (but not always) felt quite differently about walking in woodland in the daytime.

One factor that encouraged woodland visits was some degree of local knowledge about woodland wildlife, trees, ecology, management and uses, and curiosity about woodland places. Participants who were most intrigued by woodland had either, as in Tom's case,

some practical and specialist experience of woodland work, or they had been used to playing in woodland whilst learning about the wildlife and trees from family or teachers.

Tom, Will, Rachel, Laura and Jenny seemed particularly sensitive to the multiple elements of interaction between wildlife, trees, plants and humans within woodlands. For example, Tom created a 'patchwork' representing the diversity. As he explained:



'I was trying to sort of show the diversity. 'Cos when you look at woodland it's very easy to think sort of it's just woodland and there's trees. But then when you sort of consider that people actually work there and make a living from woodland and then also...everything that goes on and all the different people; like the fact that there are bridleways through there and people who go to walk their dogs... and it's used by a lot of different

people for a lot of different things and they all sort of overlap in one place. So, that's what it was but ... it was how it all overlapped so the different human uses as well the fact that animals used it was sort of the diversity of it all, rather than one aspect (Tom, 21 years: Interview)

Tom clearly had considerable knowledge of woodland as a result of his childhood woodland play space and having been taught as a child about woodland wildlife and coppicing skills. This is further demonstrated by his comments about how his model reflected his experience of the woodland walk:

'... the fact that entire communities survive off of woods and all sorts of different people affect them and depending on who works there depends on what the wood looks like. Whether it's being coppiced or whether it's being used for charcoal or whatever or how it's managed and all those sort of things. So I just thought I'd go for the diversity, trying all these different ... All the influences.

Coppicer: So you were aware of being in a managed environment rather than just a natural?

Tom: Well, not always managed, but influenced. Yeah, so, like woodland environment is defined by how people use them (Tom, 17 years: Workshop session).

Jenny and Rachel were also intrigued by the wildlife and by the diverse layers of colours and sensory experience in woods. In Jenny's case, her enthusiasm and fascination was especially vivid, as this was a new experience for her, never having been encouraged to go into woodland as a child in spite of living in a rural area surrounded by

woods. In a similar way, Rachel, having had a rural childhood, also confessed to having little in-depth knowledge of woodland life. But in both instances, these participants demonstrated their capacity to readily perceive the interaction of different woodland elements. In her 3D model, Rachel focused on the diversity aspect and, like Tom, used textiles. But she incorporated wood strips and bark, modelling a complex layered interweaving of materials to illustrate the hidden elements of woodland:

But like yeah looking back on it I suppose that's kind of like part of how the forest works and stuff isn't it, sort of you don't see, well like with the ants that are there, you don't see them (Rachel, 17 years)

Together with Will and Jenny, Rachel had been one of the more curious participants during the woodland walk, eager to engage with and enquire about the diverse sounds, scents and sights of the wood, including being particularly interested in seeing a very large wood ants' nest.



Another aspect of woodland knowledge was expressed by several participants who were concerned about environmental problems affecting woodland. Laura highlighted this in her model, in which she represented the different facets of human intervention and her imagined reaction by the woodland 'entity' to interference over time. She had some very strong feelings about damage to the woods, and her model reflected this with red ribbons for blood, and nuts and bolts painfully jammed into the clay 'woodland spirit':

That's like representing like pain, like the blood sort of thing ... So building walls is hurting Nature, you know. (Laura, 17 years - Workshop)

In Laura's interview, a month later, she explained that her model represented:

Nature biting back style thing (*laughs*). There's so much trees and stuff being cut down these days.... Man in a way, is hurting the woodland, and there must be sort of a 'woodland spirit' or something that just like, "Get out!" And that is what it looked like (*laughs*). And then I just made a wall, like a little fence round it and stuff.... I think it was/ it had two meanings, I think, that either to protect the woodland you'd need a

really big high wall. But in a way Man makes the walls, so it's a bit sort of contradictive of itself. So, I wasn't too sure about that, but I thought it was quite a good concept. ... Nature would need a really, really, really tall high wall so no one could get in. But in the first hand Man would have to make those walls. (Laura, 17 years - Interview)

As a corollary to these concerns about human and woodland interaction, several other participants commented on the signs of human activities. Laura had walked the route past the quarry, which had reminded her and Jack, in particular, together with several others in her group, of the negative aspects of environmental impact of human activity. On the other route, participants were equally intrigued by the ruined house. In this instance they did not have negative associations, but were instead fascinated by the history of the people who once lived there and the fact it represented an 'ancient' connection with, and capacity to live in, wild woods: a concept that in their experience was hard to imagine.

Other participants modelled specific trees that they had acquired knowledge about and associated with positive childhood memories. Polly created a spindle tree complete with



very carefully sewn orange spindle berries. Her model reflected her childhood memories of the spindle in her garden at home, stimulated by seeing a tree in Eaves Wood during the woodland walk. She included a figure of herself in bright colours enjoying the woodland. Polly had always found woods exciting places to play as a child and relaxing

to visit as a young adult. Her enjoyment of woodland was made more interesting by having some knowledge of the kinds of trees in a wood.

Ella expressed her association with woods by creating a model of a single tree. This image arose directly from very positive memories of the cherry blossom trees and the experience of the walks with family in the valleys and woods in an area they had moved from a few years ago. She had never reclaimed the same kind of ease walking in woodland in her new local area, preferring to stay in the village or



walk along the canal. But her feelings and sense of this childhood image was strong, and she modelled the tree with intense concentration, attention to detail and a clear knowledge of the appearance and colours of her childhood cherry blossom trees.

The majority of these young people were keen to learn more about woods, regardless of their previous childhood play space experience. We observed (perhaps unsurprisingly) that those people who had enjoyed regular childhood woodland walks and play wanted to discover more about woodland. We also found similar enthusiasm in young people who had very little childhood experience of woods. This latter group were particularly impressed by the natural features they observed in trees and other wildlife in Eaves Wood. For example, Jenny and Terry liked the wildlife, especially the birds and deer.



But also during the greenwood craft workshop most participants were amazed by the different qualities inherent in the greenwood, as well as the fact that traditional greenwood skills encouraged intense and immediate, tactile engagement with the wood.

In terms of natural phenomena, there was excitement about the natural features of the woodland, such as two yew trees joined by a single branch, which fascinated the Sunday workshop group, inspiring both Terry and Ros to model a 3D version. In Ros' model she was intrigued by the strangeness of the phenomena of trees having joined in that way. Terry noted how, on seeing the joined trees, everyone he was walking with 'were all mesmerised by this branch'. He related how he had been inspired to create a model swing, as the branch had clearly been used as swing in the past. The 'mesmerising' sight of the joined trees gave him a sense of the trees' having capacity to feel and act with intention. As he notes the fascination was because:



'... they'd actually grown up, they hadn't grown into each other and intertwined. There was just that one single branch that had grown right across and had attached itself to both trees. It wasn't like a log that had been fixed there, it had actually grown from one tree into the other tree ... Oh it's like, it's almost like one tree needed the other one to survive sort of thing... it sounds strange, but when one tree felt like the other one was like dying or whatever it like helped the other tree out basically.' (Terry, 18 years)

Terry reflected an attitude that was echoed by various other members of the group; one of the intriguing factors about woodland was that wildlife, plants and trees apparently operate outside human lore. Conversely, as noted in the discussion about Laura's model above, woodland, the wildlife and other elements were threatened by human interference and needed protection in order to survive (and thereby maintain non-human agency).

In terms of the greenwood workshops, participants appreciated the opportunity to work directly with wood, most of whom had no previous experience. The wood craft workshop highlighted the potential for developing different ways of relating to woodland. Following the greenwood session, one aspect mentioned by participants was the sense of connection they felt with ancient traditional crafts and skills. Several participants were struck by the fact that all the equipment used for greenwood turning, apart from the metal tools, is hand crafted out of woodland materials. They had been expecting some industrial process with lathes and heavy machinery.

Ros: it was the fact the machine/ well they weren't even machines that they used either, I was totally amazed when we turned up and that was what they used.

Laura: We thought they would be like high tech/

Terry: I thought it'd be like heavy machinery/

Laura: But it was really/ they were making/ you could see that they made like all of their stuff out of like branches and stuff.

Ros: And even the things that you sat on/ the horse things, they were completely made out of different pieces of wood. It wasn't like/

Laura: And like she said 'Oh we, we made that the other day' ...

Terry: Hardly anything was like industrial was it? It was all made out of like natural resources ... just what made it a bit better to do. (Workshop discussion 7/12/04)

This fact that the coppicers had made all the lathes and shave horses themselves also represented for Sophie a set of feelings and perceptions of rural life that were 'comfy' and 'unpretentious':

... it's very rural. It reminded me of a very, it's still quite old fashioned isn't it? And down to earth and it's part of the lifestyle as well it's, yeah it's just a nice comfy countryside feeling and it's not pretentious any way. (Sophie, 18 years)

Sophie's reaction was substantially different from her usual anxious feelings about woodland, offering some potentially new and creative ways to relate to woodland and forests. As well as surprise at the continuing existence of rural tradition, many participants expressed delight in discovering the creative potential of wood. This in itself was not only a pleasant and engaging experience but also opened up a new dimension to relating to woodland and forests. As Will noted, it was not just the equipment that fascinated him but also the skills required to make the different products:

I thought it was really interesting learning how to use all the equipment and stuff and like it was like amazing like what you can make and stuff; like all the techniques they use. (Will, 16 years).

Polly echoed Will's thoughts and also highlighted the importance of the process which resulted in a piece of 'artwork' that she had 'created':

That it was just immense fun! I loved that bit! Really good fun. Like get out there and sort of attack the piece of wood and hack it. And it went from a sort of, I don't know, ten inch round log, which we hacked into little like eighths I think it was, and it went from that thing into like a sort of two inch diameter turned piece of artwork, in a sense! ... It's kind of, like, you created it ... (Polly, 21 years)

The reaction that these young people had to the woodland crafts session would suggest there is great potential to encourage quite different ways of relating to woodland. Many anxieties generated from some of the myths and stories in this group seem to arise from regarding woodland as an unpredictable, dangerous place where, especially in the dark, one must be accompanied by trusted, strong others. However, these young people

could also recognise that there is another way of perceiving woodland: as a familiar, known space where it is possible to work or safely enjoy recreational activities. Through engaging their curiosity and 'hand's on' experiences, they could imagine the possibility of developing different and perhaps more practical ways of relating to woodland and forests.

Mental health and woodlands: a therapeutic landscape?

In this section we discuss firstly, the patterns of reported stress in this group and the strategies used by these young people used to alleviate stress. Secondly, we examine to what degree young people are choosing to visit woodland and rural outdoor spaces when they are stressed; what qualities they feel are 'therapeutic' about woodland versus other outdoor spaces. Thirdly, we explore the relationship between past experience of play in woods and the choice to visit woodland when seeking time away from their usual environment.

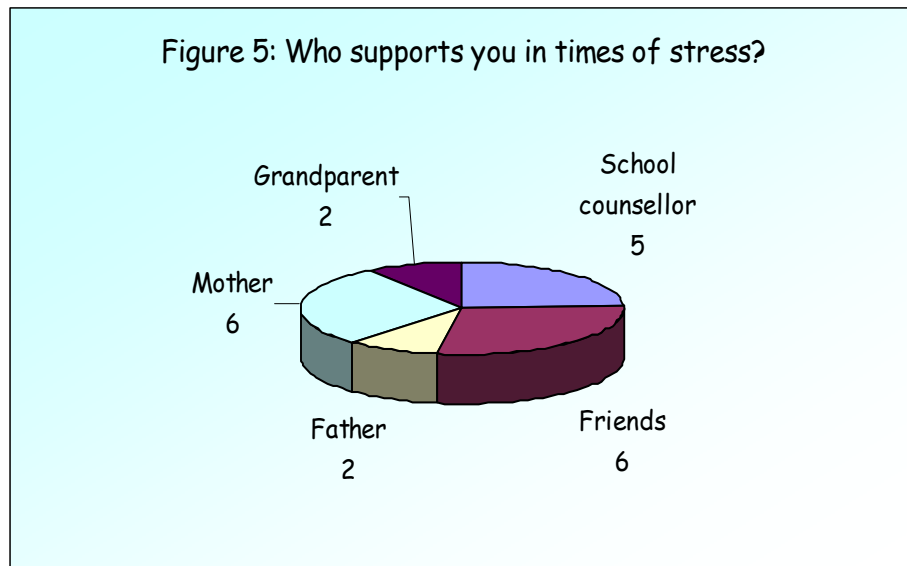
Over three quarters of the young people in this group had experienced marked periods of stress in their teenage years.³ Most often, in our group, stress was study related:

Normally I just don't have any time and I've got loads of work and I can't cope terribly well. Or like gets too much, I don't know, just get completely feeling swamped down by everything. (Ruth, 17 years)

Young people in the 16 - 21 years age group are particularly prone to pressures from school work, or if having left school, are feeling the pressure of having to choose college courses and find work to earn a living. About a third of the group were combining full-time study with part-time work, in addition to sometimes coping with various family responsibilities. Several participants described stress as a result of family or personal relationship problems. Just under a third of the group had suffered significant bereavements or illness in the past two to three years. About a quarter of the group reported clearly defined stress-related mental and physical health problems of variable severity.

³ This incidence appears to be consistent with the Department of Health commissioned study of mental health issues in 1000 young people aged 15 - 21 years (Prasad, 2003).

Young people outlined a number of different strategies that they found helpful when dealing with stressful situations, for example, seeking someone in whom they could confide. Although the most likely person was a parent (usually their mother) or a close friend, several people had used a school or college counselling service (see Figure.5).



However, young people also noted that their first reaction if upset, was to find space to be alone. Although the easiest place to be alone was in their own room, often they found going out in the fresh air very helpful. As Ros explained, being outside was peaceful and helped to relieve tension and stress.

Ros: I think going outside is a good way of doing it though.

Interviewer: What do you think it does for you, when you're having a bad time?

Ros: It clears your mind, I think. It's somewhere where you can think without people going, you can't hear anybody talking so you can think, and you're on your own and it's peaceful. I just think, I think 'cos like an hour outside, it flows through your mind and everything goes back into perspective instead of thinking it's the end of the world, which it never is, so.

Interviewer: But sometimes it feels like that when it's first really bad?

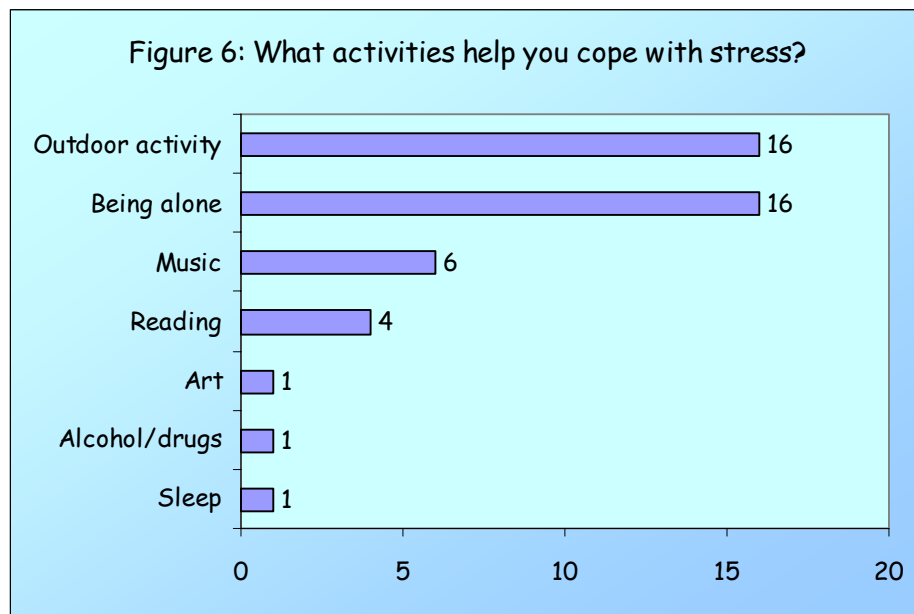
Ros: Oh, sometimes it can, but when you get outside it's all right.

For Ros, the key was to get away from people. She also found animals very soothing, recalling that from early childhood, if upset, she liked to go into the barn and cuddle

the farm kittens. For Laura the experience of being outside to 'cool off' in the fresh air was very important:

Laura: You get out, but if you're gonna get out, you might as well just go, go away from everyone (laughs), but yeah! It is good to just get out. It is good to feel like the wind on your face, because it is like cooling off, if you/ if you are feeling a bit het up and you have to get outside just cool off.

Where she chose to walk, when stressed, was less crucial for Laura than for others in the group. She lived in a small town and apart from a few years in a rural area had spent most of her childhood in a large city. She explained that she would never, independently, walk out into a rural area but would stay locally in the town. She found it relieved her stress to simply walk for a while in local streets. Finding relief in some outdoor activity on one's own was an experience echoed by others in the group, as Figure 6 illustrates:



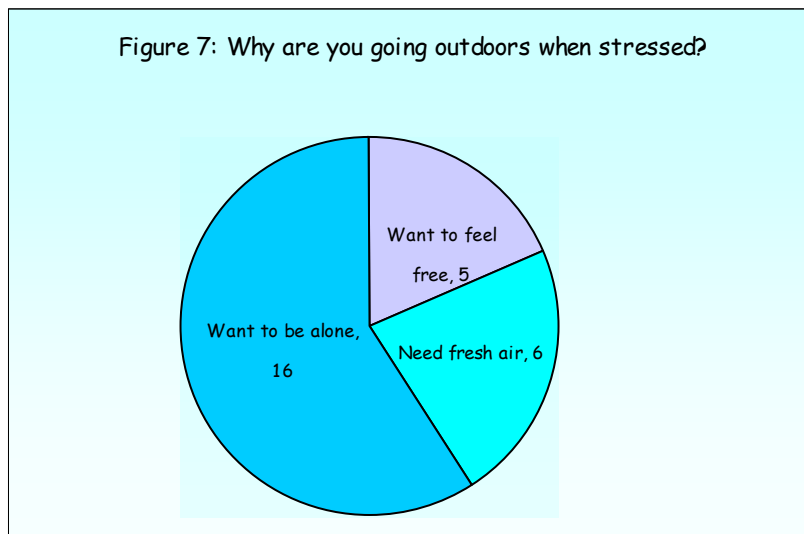
Only two people mentioned using alcohol or drugs to ease stress. One person described how she liked to paint and draw as a way of expressing her feelings and that this was a very helpful activity when stressed. Although, as Terry explained, different situations demanded different strategies:

I tend to go up to my room and put my music on full blast sort of thing. And, I don't know. It's not really a thing I've thought about like in detail like why don't I go outside. ... it's just been like that all the time. ... 'Cos my mum and dad, when I go into my room, give me my own space and they know that if I've gone into my room as soon as I get in then I've had an argument with my girlfriend or something. ...

But as he noted in other situations:

... Your parents just like can be as much of a hindrance to you as anything else, so sometimes you just need to get out of the house and go somewhere where you understand what you can like; where you can get your head right and stuff. And the forest or the woodland areas and all that is a nice place for you to go and sit and collect your thoughts I'd reckon, I think. (Terry, 18 years)

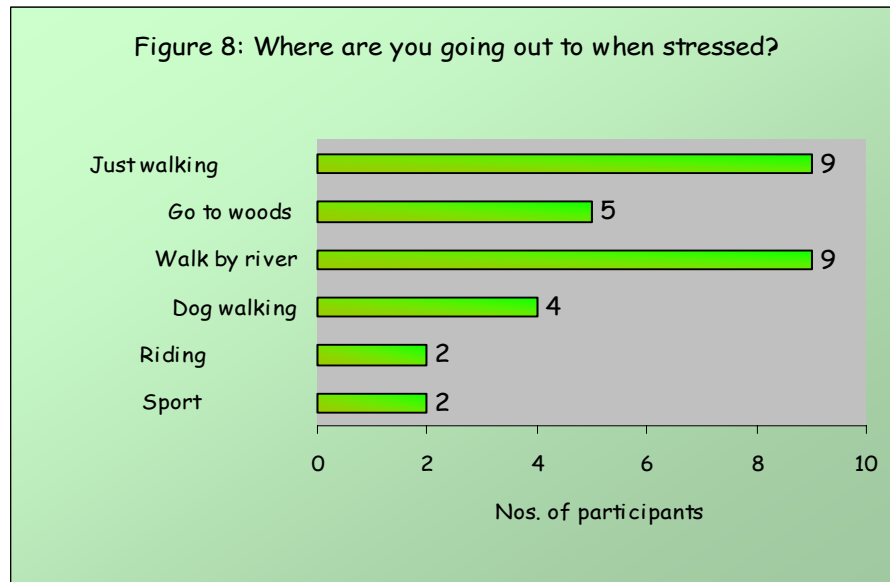
Whilst at times, young people expressed a preference to go into their room and play music (or alternatively to read or sleep) everyone noted that at some point, they would prefer to go outdoors. Three main reasons were given for choosing to go outdoors as noted by Laura, Ros and others in the group (see Figure 7).



Being out of the house when stressed generally fulfilled the need for space to be alone to think things through more clearly:

'...just having loads of space and then it clears your mind so you can think about stuff. I never used to know what was wrong, but then if I went out on a walk then I'd, it'd sometimes make me realise what it was or something. I don't know. It's weird.'
(Jane, 17 years)

Participants mentioned a range of outdoor activities and places that they felt were most helpful. Childhood play space experience appeared to have a direct relationship with whether an individual chose, for example, to go into woodland areas or simply visit a park or some other local 'natural' environment (see Figure 8).



For most people, just walking was a key element of being outside. But often *where* they walked was as important as being active. For some walking by water, a canal, river or lake was a soothing activity, particularly if combined with wooded areas:

... I do find that when I'm worried about something I tend to go for a walk along the River Eden. ... I think again it's partly to do with the river, you know the sound. And it's also the fact that these trees are here, and they've been here for hundred of years, and okay you've had an argument, your boyfriend's dumped you, but that tree's going to be there when you come back next time. So ... I think it's almost like you know kind of steady. (Heather, 17 years)

Tom also describes the benefits of there being a combination of elements in a place, but for him those differences were in the type of woodland itself, which he felt facilitated different ways of relaxing:

Some sort of woodlands seem to lend themselves to particular uses like they're fairly spread out trees so it's quite easy to sort of sit down and whereas some are quite

packed together. And it just depends on the woodland I guess. And quite often there's streams or whatever you can just go and sit by them or those sorts of things so.
(Tom, 21 years)

Sophie echoes this need for diversity. She likes a place that provides a varied environment, but with few other people about:

... Although I say you don't want to be on your own you do. You don't want loads of people. It's horrible when you go on a walk and you see loads of people knocking around. ... I don't like that you know. And sometimes it is nice to have that adventure of having you know little paths and you know quite/things to climb and you have to get up places and stuff. ... Obviously scenery, good scenery

Interviewer: What would be good scenery for you?

Sophie: Oh big impressive trees. But then you have tight places you know that are quite snug and sheltered. (Sophie, 18 years)

Just over a quarter of the participants chose to visit woodland if stressed, either walking, or sometimes horse riding. For those who did choose woodland, there are special qualities that appeal. Tom, for example, was particularly alert to the diversity of woodland and commented:

'... just look at, look around you and notice sort of interesting things and animals and all these sort of things that you see around you. ... whenever I'm walking through woods on my own there's always, normally see a lots of different things. Just relaxing just letting your eyes wander and pick up things. ... Relaxed, yeah, laid back sort of, a lot less to worry about. You're just sort of walking and that's all you've got to sort of worry about (not falling over rather than anything else!) ... Err (pause). I don't know it's sort of a relaxing feeling you get and the fact that your mind's sort of wandering to other things rather than being taken away from what it was worrying about.'
(Tom, 21 years)

Tom was one of several young men and women, from both urban or rural backgrounds, who observed that woods have relaxing, 'therapeutic' qualities, suggesting they may be particularly valued as places to visit when stressed or in need of some personal space. For instance, trees were felt to be imbued with 'special' qualities, such as protection and calmness. A tree's age - the more ancient being seen as the more wise - was a strong factor in the therapeutic quality they conferred (see also Rival, 1998, who described the imbuelement of the ancient tree with wisdom and 'sacredness' as

symbolising the cycle of life and eternity). Heather felt a strong association with these qualities, as she describes:

There is always like a calming presence around a tree as well. I don't know if you've ever felt that, but, I don't know what that is. I don't know whether it's 'cos it makes you put your life into perspective 'cos this tree's five hundred years old you know. But I, it's kind of calming. (Heather, 17 years)

For Jane, not only the age but also the great size of an old tree was especially comforting, not least because she liked to climb trees and preferred the safety of a large tree.

I don't know, I just like really big trees I think. I don't like little ones. I just feel quite safe, I'm not going to fall out of it. ... I wouldn't like to walk on a tree that's got really thin branches or something, I'd be really scared. But they're so big that you just feel that you know it can support you and stuff so you don't get worried. ... But that's the kind of tree I like, just sort of really, really big. ... The ones that go out really far and tall. (Jane, 17 years)

She also explained, however, that she had experienced similar feelings of safety in the middle of fir forests, when visiting Scotland:

Jane: There was like loads of big forests up on the hills and stuff, and all the different colours in the trees I think that's my favourite time. I think it's just really pretty. ... I like evergreens ... I think they're a bit mysterious really... Like really dark, like if you went right into the middle of them you can hardly see anything and it gets really dark ...Yeah that's probably what I like.

Interviewer: What, what is about being out in the middle of all those trees.

Jane: I think that feels quite safe.

These comments highlight the range of conflicting feelings and experiences of woodland and forest, as we have noted in the earlier sections. Jane's attitude to the dense fir forests was surprising given that earlier in the interview she had described feelings of 'claustrophobia' when walking in the coppiced, native woodlands around her home, noting that she liked to always have a view out of the woods because she would feel 'hemmed in' by all the plants and trees.

For others, such as Ella, Ruth, Polly and Will the relaxing elements of woodland were found in looking at and touching individual trees, mosses, and flowers and the sensory experience of woodland colours; the touch and smell of bark and leaves. Polly had expressed this delight in woodland colours in her model, and emphasised these elements as part of the relaxing nature of woodland:

... the colours and the contrast, in amongst everything else, I sort of wanted to bring that into my model, 'cos the model was kind of just like ... woodlands as sort of a place to sort of walk and relax and stuff, I think.

Ella recalled the pleasure of walking in the woods as a child because of the variety of flowers, the colours and the clear air of woods:

There used to be like bluebells - and snowdrops in the winter - and bluebells in the spring throughout it. That was nice. But I don't know. ... It's, it's colour I suppose ... 'Cos all the wood's like green and brown. And then you've got like white or pink or blue, and it's splashed out. ... just how clean it is ... The air's cleaner kind of and lighter. ... just in woods it's the air's like fresher. It's strange, I don't know why. (Ella, 17 years)

For Jenny, Terry and Jack hearing the sounds of woodland animals and birds was a particularly relaxing element. When recounting her experience of the woodland walk during the workshop Jenny says:

'I felt quite at home there, even though I'd never experienced that kind of environment very much before. I never felt like uncomfortable or anything. It was all very, it was such a relaxing atmosphere with lots of different sounds and everything. It was really good.'

However, Jenny also suggests that these beneficial qualities could only be enjoyed if the young person felt secure:

'I think it was Rachel and Will helped me with that as well. Because they, they were really at home as well, they just shot off right. ... But, I did yeah, because there was so much going on me I never really thought about 'Oh this is really weird, this is really different'. I just loved it, so.' (Jenny, 17 years)

Jenny made the point that she had felt able to relax and enjoy the wood particularly because her companions, both of whom had been brought up locally and were used to the

area, were excited by the woodland and demonstrated (as we also observed) considerable curiosity. For example, they strayed from the path on several occasions during the walk to explore the different elements in the wood and wanted to know about some of the natural features and signs of animal life.

Concluding Comments

In this section we have outlined the general pattern of stress observed in this group of young people and described the kinds of strategies they adopt to relieve stress. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of those young people who were used to woodland as a safe and enjoyable place to play as children were the ones most likely to choose to visit woodland or wooded areas for relaxation. In particular, for some young people there was a strong positive association with ancient trees, that were felt to confer a comforting, calming presence. Non-human agency, observable in the apparently independent existence of trees, woodland plants, animals and birds seemed to be another powerful and positive attraction for people when stressed.

However, while for some, woodland represented calming and therapeutic environment, this is not the whole picture. The non-human agents cited above can also create an anxiety and uncertainty amongst young people which was likely to deter him or her, particularly if alone, from choosing a woodland site as a place to relax. This was determined by several factors such as associated fears, perceived risks, myth and fantasy. However, as we have already discussed, the type of woodland and the type of education about woodland plays a significant part in how secure a person feels in woodland.

In the final section we discuss and summarise some of the underlying theoretical aspects of our findings.

Discussion

Woodland and the benefits for mental health and well-being

The notion that woodland can provide social and personal benefits and amenities for young people tends to focus on the variety and type of use: for example, who is choosing to visit woods and why, as well as the social and physical obstacles to access. In this study we wished to build on this body of work by exploring some of the underlying reasons for the ways young people relate to woodlands and forests. In particular, this study highlighted the complexities of how contact with woodland space in childhood may support, or constrain, mental health and well-being in teenage years. This is particularly relevant given the reported increase in mental health problems in teenagers and young adults.

Woodland was found to be of great benefit for many of this group of rural and urban young people, in terms of their mental health and well-being. Where woodland is a space which is regularly sought out and enjoyed, a young person will be more likely to choose to walk or find a place to sit in the woods when stressed and upset. Very often this fulfils a pressing need to find space away from the usual places and people. In this study, going out into woodland, out of what one participant described as the 'hustle and bustle of life', provided that space.

An important element of woodland is the fact it offers contact with a non-human and diverse environment. Some of these aspects are reported to be particularly relaxing, notably the diverse sensory experience of colours, scents, touch and sounds, which arise from wildlife, plants and trees. There was a sense of freedom in getting away from the 'stressful' situation at home, school or in a relationship. In other words there was relief in escaping from a human-orientated space infused with human-generated stress into this non-human dominated space. The aim was to be free, temporarily, from obvious human reminders of the source of the upset and distress. Young people felt that the fact that they were able to engage in different ways with woodland diversity was a key factor in relieving stress. Such engagement, they explained, stills the mind, distracting

them from seemingly insurmountable problems. Thus, a space is created for those problems to be resolved more easily. Apart from the mental emotional effect of woodland, walking or running in the woods was also seen to be physically stimulating, and ultimately felt to encourage both physical and mental relaxation.

We found that positive and frequent childhood play experience did, in fact, encourage young people to visit woodland more often and to regard woodland areas as stimulating, enjoyable and relaxing. This aspect reflects similar findings in Ward Thompson et al.'s (2004) study on social inclusion and woodland. However, even though some of the physical and mental benefits were recognised and acknowledged by participants, there were found to be some complex factors at work, that could be traced back to childhood experience, and which influenced decisions to visit woodland.

As a young person grows up their positive childhood experience can be undermined in various and subtle ways. This was most apparent for those young people who were influenced by significant parental anxiety, or who were susceptible to negative myths, stories and media reports. There was also a tendency for negative images to become overwhelming if contact with woodland areas decreased as the young person grows up. The non-human agency that the woodland represents can then become a negative force. The sounds and touch of a branch in the wind, the sound of foxes and owls at night, become imbued with the sinister, the alien and the unpredictable.

We found that such negativity can be overcome by encouraging a renewed and positive contact with woodland. For example, by providing opportunities for woodland activities or training in woodland crafts, myths and negative perceptions could be extensively dispelled. Based on some real experience young people can renew or discover for the first time, an interest in woods and increase their knowledge about woodland and forest.

Theoretical perspectives

Whilst we feel that this report is not the place for a detailed theoretical debate, there is a purpose in highlighting relevant theories that engage with the data, and thereby inform and deepen our interpretation and understanding of these findings. From a theoretical perspective, we can identify some key elements that engage with three concepts. Firstly, landscape experience can be 'therapeutic'. Secondly, the ways in which people relate to landscape are profoundly influenced by their inner dynamic with the relationship of their Self and with all that outside of Self, known as 'Other'. Lastly, a child develops and empowers their sense of Self and 'agency', through play. The play space environment and the associations with that space can act as a powerful influence to subsequent interaction with similar spaces, but can also facilitate the potential to empower the child's inner resources.

Therapeutic landscapes

The notion of a 'therapeutic landscape' suggests that an environment (either natural or specifically designed and created) has restorative, relaxing qualities that promote health and well-being (see Gesler, 1992, 1993; Palka, 1999; Williams, 1999; Milligan et al., 2004).

In this instance, the landscape refers to 'wild' or 'natural' wooded environments, which can convey a feeling of relaxation, enjoyment and well-being, depending on the participant's attitude to the place and the time of day. The walk in the woods constitutes a 'therapeutic' experience, which soothes and relaxes; the woodland is providing a restorative space. As we described in earlier sections, for some people the trees themselves, especially if very old, big, and well-established, represent a protective calmness, which enhances the therapeutic quality. For other people the relaxation and restorative qualities arise from the richness of the sensory experience of walking in woodland. One or two of our participants also reported enjoying the

freedom of the woods where they could 'just be like a kid again' playing, and thereby free, for a little while, of the onerous stresses of the adult world.

As Milligan et al (2004) note, one 'goal' of harnessing the therapeutic qualities of landscape is to make natural, 'wild', landscapes accessible and then to encourage people to visit these places as a way of reducing or even preventing the ill-effects of stress (see Palka, 1999).

Objects relation theory

Object relations theory (see Winnicott, 1971), is primarily concerned with the relationship of the Self (the inner sense of self) with Other (everything outside of ourselves in the world). Winnicott theorised that from earliest infancy we are engaged in developing our relationship with all that is not-Self. First, this is our mother/primary carer and then gradually through this relationship we learn to relate to other elements of the world, objects, and people. As part of this process the child creates a fantasy 'space' which acts as a mediator between Self and Other, where aspects of the relationship between Self and not-Self can be safely and non-judgementally facilitated and developed. Winnicott called this imagined space around the individual, the 'potential or third space'. Potential space is the space of play, which Winnicott suggested is an essential activity for a child's development. Play is where a child can relax into an 'unintegrated' or 'daydream-like' state where fantasy, dreams and the real world can meet and sense be made of the nature and interrelationship of the inner and outer world' (Bingley, 2002a: 34). It is represented by the 'transitional object', which carries the dynamic of a creative, unconditional relationship of all that is not-Self. As infants the transitional object is in the form of a teddy bear, comfort blanket and so on. As we grow into adulthood we generally lose the need for such an overt transitional object. However, we do confer similar unconditional qualities onto other objects and elements as a means of creating potential space, which mediates our culture and our self-expression through art, music, dreams, literature and stories. Being in touch with this kind of space, in an 'unintegrated' state facilitates creativity, relaxation, and the

resolution of difficulties and problems. As adults, we often seek the quality of the 'transitional object' (which connects us to the 'unintegrated' space) in a place, or in one or more constituent elements of a place, as well as in recreational and creative activities.

We can observe the dynamics of the transitional object and the desire to create potential space in how these young people relate to woodland. For example, a child who has a positive, facilitating relationship with woodland as play space confers qualities of the transitional object onto woodland places and trees, plants or wildlife. As adults woodland may continue at a profound and fundamental level to represent a mediator between Self and Other. In other words, woodland can be a place where the young person can connect with 'potential space'. Within this space they can enter an 'unintegrated' state; thereby they have an opportunity to relax, connect with inner creativity and resolve difficult issues or problems. For example, those young people who recalled a positive play space in woodland were able to regard woodland variously as a stimulating, creative space. They were keen to use woodland for physical activities and play and walking and also as meditative relaxing space for sitting or reading, enjoying the peace and quiet.

Even for young adults who had little or no contact with woodland as children, there are always opportunities to encourage the conferring of positive qualities onto woodland and elements of woodland. Whilst in this instance the fundamental connection maybe less resilient, the young person can learn to regard woodland as a creative, interesting space with demonstrable 'therapeutic' potential; a space they may enjoy engaging with and perhaps visit regularly.

Agency and woodland

The study engages with concepts of human and non-human agency in relation to woodland (see Jones & Cloke, 2002). Through play in woodland during childhood a sense of autonomy, or independent 'agency' is developed through childhood games. The active

and sensory engagement of play when den-building, making traps, climbing trees, playing imaginary games in the woodland empowers the child in developing a sense of independence and ability. There is potential to develop physical and mental agility and confidence. Through these activities a sense of inner strength, confidence and ability is facilitated; attributes which the young people associate with good mental health and well-being.

Woodland play spaces provide opportunities to evolve a relationship with non-human agency. Non-human agency includes trees, elements of wood and woodland, plants, animals, as well as the weather and effects of the time of day and season. A positive relationship with the non-human natural world, based on real experience and knowledge is a key factor in encouraging both general environmental awareness, as well as an awareness of specific and local 'nature' and conservation issues.

Conclusion

Two major conclusions emerge from this study. First, for this group of young people their experience of childhood play space does have an impact on their mental health and well-being in young adulthood. Second, woodland and forest can provide certain 'therapeutic' qualities that a young adult may use to alleviate stress and mental health problems.

Play spaces and the recall of those play spaces have the potential to be a long-term resource. Play in childhood is an essential part of child development. Play has a number of different functions including facilitating the development of relationships with the child and the outside world; helping the child to develop physical and mental abilities and confidence; and empowering the child's sense of agency and autonomy. Play space in urban and rural settings is often constrained by poor access to safe spaces. This may become a source of parental anxiety, which for rural children reduces their freedom for unstructured play in woodland places.

Woodland and forest spaces offer some unique elements of effective play space, which work in favour of the child and young adult. If they have experience of regular, unstructured and enjoyable play in woods in childhood, the young person is more receptive to these woodland environments for recreational and work space. In other words, the more the child is able to realise their creativity and physical confidence the greater the chance that as young adults they will regard woodland as enjoyable, creative and relaxing spaces.

A young person can acquire negative images and feelings about woodland from media reports, frightening films, myths and stories. The sense of anxiety and uncertainty may have been emphasised by parental concerns about safety, for instance when playing in woodland, climbing trees and so on. Parental anxieties also include fears of their daughters being attacked by strangers (usually men). Negative images may completely deter young people, especially in this group, young women, from visiting woodland or

forest. They may only be prepared to go to woods if accompanied. The less often young adults visit woodland the more likely they will build up a picture of woodland as a dangerous, unpredictable and unfriendly place.

If a child is given sufficient opportunity for safe, enjoyable play in woodland they are more likely as young adults to perceive qualities in woodland and forest which have 'therapeutic' potential. 'Therapeutic landscape' is imbued with, or becomes a resource for beneficial elements that alleviate stress and may support good mental health and well-being. Young adults tend to seek outdoor spaces when stressed and when they are aware of the therapeutic resources of woodland will often choose to visit woods to alleviate or reduce stress.

Introducing or encouraging renewed contact with woodland through some positive experience and contact, such as 'hands on' opportunities to learn about woodland crafts, and gain some local, practical knowledge, can help to dispel negative images and re-instate a more realistic perception about woodland and forest.

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**This version of the report is posted on the Institute for Health Research website
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