

The value of nature

'Are there wolves here?' We've just arrived at the woodland space for our first session.

'What's that noise?' someone else asks, while looking over their shoulder.

The woodland provides the framework for Rooted. It is the context in which all our work is done. While this can be understood as a reference to the physical space, it more accurately refers to a much deeper experience as we connect to what the woods provoke in us. The unique environment is rich in variables and differing perspectives, which provides opportunities for seeing things differently. One week we can find ourselves bathed in sunshine and warmth and the following week we are seeking protection from torrential rain and wind. As the girls explore key themes around understanding themselves, they get to experience who they are in relationship with an ever-changing and yet secure space.

Adolescence is fraught with seeming contradictions (Lines, 2006), with a need for safety and dependency, alongside a desire to push boundaries and to feel invincible. The woods can hold both drives as it represents within itself these apparent opposites, offering both protection alongside the invitation to take risks. You can shelter in the shade of a tree's branches while, simultaneously, climbing its trunk and fearing the fall. Based on her own observations and research Thomashow (2002), has a similar perspective with regards to the impact of the natural world on teenagers. She writes: 'Through nature, adolescents are privy to models of living other than the cosmetically driven social world . . . and to rhythms and cycles that are different from those imposed by the constructs of the school day. Through nature they gain access to the wild and untethered, the naked realities of life and death . . . and come face to face with their biological origins and the underpinning of human purpose and meaning.' (p264).

The power of education

I hold out a cup filled with pieces of folded paper; 'Today we are thinking about things that can happen to us in life and the impact this can have on who we are. In this cup I have different possible situations that we can chat about together. Who would like to pick out a piece of paper and read it to the group?'

One of the girls volunteers and unfolds the note. She reads out loud: 'You are just about to go into school when a bird poops on your head.'

After a few initial giggles and 'Urgh' responses I ask the girls, 'How would you feel if this happened to you?'

'Embarrassed,' says one of the group, 'disgusting,' says someone else.

I then ask, 'What would you do?'

One of the girls responds with, 'I would run home as fast as I could and wash my hair.'



I then ask, 'What would happen then? Would you go back into school late?' We begin to talk about the potential consequences that could unravel from this one event before moving on to the next piece of paper.

Another member of the group reads out, 'You receive £1,000,000 inheritance from a relative you have never met.' The girls share how they would feel and what they would do with all the money before moving on to the next potential life event. As the girls begin to open up and share more, we begin to talk about addictive behaviours and self-harm; how these responses are often ways to cope with life events but how this can lead on to other consequences that cause more issues to work through.

We then reflect on some of the activities we have used in previous sessions that can be helpful tools for when events cause us distress. We hand each of the girls weaving circles and coloured wool, showing them that we can use cyclical patterns to create beautiful things such as the braids that they are learning to make. As they sit and cross over their strands of wool, we make them hot drinks and hand around the chocolate brownie tin. We give out their journals and some of the girls go over to the hammocks. A couple of them stay close, putting more sticks on to the fire and chatting to us about their weeks.

Through engaging with educational activities, we hope that the truth they discover will give them the courage to believe that change is possible and that this will deeply impact their whole life. This translates into our practice through the implementation of three key learning tools: physical play, relational learning and reflective practices.

Physical play

After eating together at the start, every session involves playing games together as a group. This involves a significant amount of time running around, screaming,

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laughing and interacting with each other. Scarfe (1962), stated that 'play is the highest form of research' (p120). It enables the girls to experiment with how they relate to each other. They try out new ways of being and are affirmed through a sense of belonging or being good at something. For example, on one occasion, a quieter member of the group was declared winner of the life-cycle game, which resulted in the girls giving her a spontaneous round of applause. The look of surprise and pleasure on the winner's face was incredible. I wonder what impact this feedback will have on her sense of self and, further still, how this will outwork within other settings of her life.

Relational learning

Another important consequence of play is the physical exercise that it involves. This is not only good for the body but has been found to increase aspects of cognitive functioning (Lambourne, Tomporowski, 2010). So, as the girls are getting their breath back, we sit together as a group and focus on one new learning concept every week. In the first five weeks we explore topics around personal understanding, and in the last five weeks we focus more on how we are in relationships. We look for ways to communicate this using the natural environment, that feel safe as well as meaningful. All of this is done within the context of the group. Each member has space to offer their thoughts or questions and this in itself is a great learning opportunity as they risk opening up or bringing something to the space. Seigal (2014), highlights the importance of relational learning stating that: 'When we reflect on the inner life of others, when we participate in reflective conversations and attune to another person's mind beneath behaviours, we join with others and our sense of self is expanded. Life feels full.' (p202)

Relational learning also recognises the importance of peer relationships in adolescent development (Kirkbride, 2018). As a result, what the group shares has immense power for influencing the girls we are working with. The more we facilitate discussion rather than teach, the more likely it is that girls will engage with the concepts we are learning.

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Reflective practices

Following this time, we create opportunities for personal reflection. Having this space creates an opportunity for deeper processing; for the girls to be able to go over what they have done, seen, felt or heard. Reflection creates a frame for focusing on a specific belief, behaviour or experience. The aim is that this will lead to an evaluation of where they are currently at, with a focus on the future and the change that needs to occur to get there (Ramsey, 2006).

Why do we do this?

In a society where mental health issues in young people are rising at an alarming rate, Rooted aims to provide a response that recognises the importance of an integrated approach in the pursuit of wellbeing. We aim to provide an intervention where the line between the therapeutic and the educational is transparent in recognition of their interconnectedness for creating growth. We provide an environment where the work is as much attributed to play and laughter as it is to taking risks and seeking change. We provide a space that will lead each of the girls into a relationship with nature that we believe will be deeply restorative, create moments of joy and, perhaps, rekindle hope in the times when it is most needed.

Each of the girls are given a pot, they tentatively stick their hand in the compost bag and fill their container with soil. Beth hands around the packets of seeds and they sprinkle them onto the surface. 'Just sprinkle them with a little water each day and put them on the windowsill in your bedroom – soon you should see some little green shoots appear.

'We look after the things we care about, that's why it's so important that we value who we are. Today we are giving you something for you to look after. In order for them to grow you will need to give them what they need. It is the same for us. We all need to look after ourselves in order to thrive.'

At the celebration session, a few weeks later, one of the girls approaches with her phone. 'Have you seen my flowers?' Her pot is overflowing with a brightly coloured ecosystem. She hands us a card signed by all the girls and gives us both a hug. 'Thank you,' she says before heading off with her Mum.