



## JOURNEY STICKS

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Image: Katharine Davies

As we progress through the dappled woodland shade, a blue train of overalls curving round hart's-tongue ferns, past spirals of unfurling bracken, over fallen logs and under dangling catkins, each Forest School learner carries their carefully chosen journey stick. Using grass stalks or twine, they attach a selection of meaningful items which they encounter as we traverse the landscape. A soft downy feather caught on a bramble, chestnut brown leaves gifted by autumn, sweet-scented primroses plucked from the grassy verge, the coil of a snail shell and the smoothest of pebbles. As the children gather their items, they consider what each means to them and what it says about them. Quietly contemplative, with the buzzard calling its young overhead and the gentle shimmer of leaves in the trees as their acoustic backdrop, they compare their treasures as we weave our way through the forest.

In ancient cultures, the journey stick is a tool used to tell stories, track travels and remember important events. By creating a journey stick, we make a visual map of our travels. By talking about it, a verbal story is made. But journey sticks are not only a way to document and remember a journey; they carry spiritual significance in many cultures. In Native American culture, the journey stick links the carrier to the earth and the spiritual realm. For children, as well as these physical and spiritual aspects, journey sticks can encourage personal growth and reflection.

Arriving at our destination, having glimpsed a passing deer, negotiated the badger set and clambered over thick trunks toppled by winter's mighty gale, we settle down to relax on the

soft bed of leaves under the great beech tree. Using their stick, each child in turn describes their journey, physical or metaphorical, in time or in space. One traveller focuses on her movement across the forest; the difficult patch of brambles, the spot where her friend tumbled into an abyss of soft ferns and the patch of ochre clay left by a burrowing mole. Another talks of significant steps along the path of life; his first memory of the silky sand between his toes on the beach, the gentle touch of his departed grandmother's hand and the friendships he forged on his first day at school.

As the children share their stories, they ask questions, giving thought to how each other feels and what triggers their emotions. This exchange promotes empathy and understanding and develops communication skills and their understanding of the world and place within it. This can, in turn, enable pupils to develop many other skills: self-awareness, conversation, creativity, respect and an understanding of other people's ideas and cultures.

As Forest School Leader for Years 3, 4 and 5 at Sherborne Prep School, my role is to facilitate a myriad of adventurous, creative and enjoyable experiences in 22 acres of ancient woodland. But a leader is also a learner. I too join in creating a journey stick and you've read my story. Life is a journey, not a destination. We can all benefit from taking time to pause, reflect and share our experiences along the way. ●

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