

The forest experience can be transformational

CONTINUED FROM C1

To the casual observer, forest schools may seem like guided nature walks, but there are key differences, says Mr Quek.

"It's child-led in everything, apart from safety. They decide where they want to go, what they want to do, when they want to eat, when they want to stop for a break."

For example, kids enrolled at FSS may do everything from exploring to getting into stick fights.

They may use tools such as knives and ropes, climb trees and build structures using materials they find in the forest.

There is no minimum age as long as the child can carry his or her own backpack, and its youngest participant on record was 2½ years old, Mr Quek says.

Sessions have a mix of ages and most children stay for a year or two.

Regular attendance in the same venue is important too, as that is how children build what he calls "a relationship with the land".

He recalls that his first batch of forest schoolers developed such an affinity with their natural environment at Rifle Range Nature Park that "they called it home".

The park is closed for enhancement works.

Repeated exposure to nature nurtures the seeds of environmentalism, Mr Quek argues.

"When it comes to needing to protect the space, fight for the place, they will be the ones to do it."

Ms Phang concurs.

"You always start with awareness, followed by appreciation, then you talk about ecological intelligence," she says.

"Many schools teach children about the 4 Rs (reuse, reduce, reuse, recycle), but if there's no awareness to begin with, there's no connection or appreciation. Let's build the foundation first."

Some parents are concerned about safety, but Mr Ong tells them that young children are able to make sound decisions if they are given space.

"By overprotecting a child, you are taking away their ability to make sense and do their own risk assessment, and you are removing their defences that they would normally pick up if left alone," says the father of three kids aged four to nine.

LIFE SKILLS FROM THE FOREST

When nature is the teacher, children learn holistically and lessons unfold organically.

Being in the forest heightens the basic senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

Kids also make use of spatial awareness skills, motor abilities, balancing and even the mind-body connection, says Ms Phang.

Information technology professional Pauline Koh says her only child, Joy Tinn, finds nature walks with the family boring, but loves attending holiday programmes with OSs she can play games.

Besides gaining confidence in navigating different types of terrain, the eight-year-old has also learnt to identify poisonous plants and knows what to do if she sees a monkey or snake.

"It helps to ingrain in her some basic survival skills. I think these scenarios are real in Singapore, especially since there are monkeys in a lot of places," says Ms Koh, who is in her 40s.

The natural environment is particularly empowering for special needs kids, Mr Quek says.

"If they shout, it's okay. If they hit things, it's okay. The kids will sort themselves out."

"What's beautiful is the children's interaction allows the special needs children to grow their understanding (of human behaviour)."

In fact, FSS has an overseas outpost in Medan, Indonesia, which is helmed by Ms Joselin Valiant, a coach who has autism spectrum disorder.

Without protective parents hovering over them, children also pick up life lessons through trial and error.

For instance, if a group in FSS reaches an impasse about what to do, "then they're stuck", Mr Quek says.

Rather than step in like teachers or parents would, the coaches hold space for the kids to resolve challenges by themselves, Mr Quek explains.

"They listen, negotiate, even write. You see social skills going on." Recently, some members of a group resorted to name calling, leaving one child in tears. A boy came to her defence, helped her calm down and, together, they discussed what to do next.

While Mr Quek does not condone bullying, giving agency to children is important. "The best form of support is other kids," he says.

CHANGING MINDSETS, CHANGING LIVES

For some children, the forest school experience can be transformational.

Mr Ong recalls a girl with separation anxiety who would cry at the start of each session, but she came to enjoy collecting items in the "treasure buckets" the coaches handed out.

Over time, she became independent. "We would often observe her finding quiet moments to herself to just be with nature and observe her surroundings, looking for insects and spotting interesting leaves and flowers," he says.

"Nature has a great way of calming a person down. It takes time for the changes to occur, but when they do, they can help the child deal with life's many challenges."

Gerald Ren, 15, started his forest school journey six years ago with FSS and is now a junior coach on weekends.

"It opened up a lot of avenues for imaginative play and things I wouldn't be allowed to do in normal circumstances, like throwing sand at one another and playing with sticks," he recalls. "But we do look out for safety."

A hazard could be a pair of scissors, but the risks in getting cut, if you have the right actions, the scissors are okay. "It's about learning how to use it and not take away that hazard," says Ms Phang.

There are several things to look out for. One is ant trails or plants, so the kids do not harm them and are not harmed by them.

"Another one is the space around. Are you able to cross? If you cross and step into a pit, that's not safe," she says. "Third, is it stable enough to climb? We don't want children to just choose any tree, any log and just climb. If it's a hollow one or it's wet, then it's not wise to step over."

Ms Ann Phang of Outdoor School Singapore says parents may take their kids to the park, but they usually are not allowed to touch anything.

This is a pity as young children learn through their senses. "Instead of saying 'no touching', why don't we teach children what poisonous and non-poisonous plants are?" she says.

Children also learn that the forest is someone's home, so they should treat it respectfully.

"We ask them (in return), 'What do you think you can play? What's interesting here?'"

As children blossom, parents reap the benefits.

Ms Aw says after a term with Nature Explorers Singapore, she received a report that surprised and delighted her because it was so different from Luca's more academically oriented school report.

"They know he's very humorous. When he sees his friends upset, he'll try to make them laugh."

"It's a different side of your child that maybe the school doesn't get to see or you don't get to see, maybe because in that kind of environment, he or she feels more open and free," she says.

"I feel it's very grounding for young kids to have this kind of experience, rather than all the academic stuff."



Class is in

What do kids do in an outdoor school session? The Straits Times followed groups of children attending Outdoor School Singapore's Forest Scout programme during the March school holidays. On the last of their three-day camp, the kids had to independently navigate Chestnut Nature Park, spot plants on their list, navigate fallen logs, climb a steep ramp and make their way up a tower to rescue "soldiers".

LOG ON (above)

Children climb over several logs, some bigger than others. In the process, they learn to make risk assessments about hazards.

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LEARNING ABOUT PLANTS (right)

Children look for specific plants on their list, some of which are poisonous.

If they find them, they earn "crystal" tokens.

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UP A STEEP SLOPE

The kids have to make their way up this steep cycling ramp. Some clamber easily, a few spy an easier way along the side.

Fear sets in for a couple of children and their mates cheer them on or devise ways to use props to help them up.

One girl cries after a lengthy but successful battle with the ramp, overwhelmed by the experience. Her coaches let her calm down and will help her reflect on her journey when she is ready.

Climbing over a big log is a personal milestone for some kids.

"Yesterday, we had children who didn't dare to touch the log because to them, it's dirty or they saw ants," Ms Phang notes.

One girl was afraid of grass patches on the first day.



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MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Kids celebrate at the top of the tower with the "soldiers" they rescued. Affirmation and acknowledgement are important. "They realise, 'I didn't know I could walk so far. I didn't know I could do this thing. I did it,'" says Ms Phang.

ST PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG

Celebrity Parents

Joanne Peh is still adjusting to the routine of primary school

The actress, who hopes her children become curious learners, has started an English podcast in which she speaks to people from various fields

Elisa Chia
Correspondent

It has been four months since her first child started Primary 1 and actress Joanne Peh confesses that she is still not used to the new routine.

"I realised that it's a battle that a lot of parents (with primary school children) have been going through. The kids wake up too early. They're not having their meals at the right time," she says.

Her six-year-old daughter, whom she declines to name, eats lunch at home about 2pm after school.

"Then, she takes her dinner at 5pm so she gets to bed by about 7 or 8pm. It just doesn't seem to make sense," she adds.

Peh, who turns 39 today, and her husband, Guangzhou-born actor Qi Yuwu, 45, also have a five-year-old son.

They post family photos on social media regularly but make sure the kids' faces are always turned away from the camera so as to keep their identities private.

Peh misses the days when her daughter was in pre-school, when she could catch up with the teachers at drop-offs and pickups.

"The relationships are very personal and I felt more involved in what's going on in the classroom," she says.

But she understands that it is not possible for primary school teachers to do the same, since they are dealing with the parents of 30 to 40 pupils a class.

She says that her daughter has adjusted well to Primary 1.

"I'm the one who found (the transition) very jarring," she explains.

The girl enjoys going for a variety of enrichment classes - ballet, piano, rollerblading and swimming.

Peh, however, is concerned that her child will not have enough time for fun with the primary school curriculum gets more demanding in the later years.

"I often hear this from fellow parents: We want our children to be happy. We don't want them to be too stressed by schoolwork, but the reality is we are all in the system where we have to make it work for them."

Instead of simply chasing grades, Peh hopes her children will be curious learners who are not afraid to ask questions and have a growth mindset.

She says she tries to be a role model for them and embody these traits.

That is one of her motivations for starting an English podcast series, What Do I Know?

For this series, which was launched this month, she plays the host and engages in conversations with guests from various fields.

Musician, film-maker and actress Annette Lee, and Mr Jian Yang, who is touted to own Asia's largest Barbie doll collection, are guests on the first two episodes that have been released. New episodes will drop once every two weeks.

The show gives her the opportunity to interact with people who may be very different from her or to delve into difficult topics.

She hopes her listeners will, in turn, gain new perspectives and



Joanne Peh and her husband, actor Qi Yuwu, regularly post family photos on social media, but make sure the kids' faces are always turned away from the camera so as to keep their identities private. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOANNE PEH

learn together with her.

In an upcoming episode, she spoke with digital literacy educator Carol Loi about pornography among other concerns.

"She mentioned one thing that's very real: When her children were my children's age, the world was very different from now," says Peh, referring to Ms Loi's kids, who are 20 and 17.

"We need to equip ourselves with new skills and knowledge all the time, so we can guide our children in the right direction."

She adds with a laugh: "I want to be this cool mum, you know, who is in touch with what people are doing and accepts their views and opinions."

Another exciting project she cannot wait to launch is a Mandarin television talk show series produced by her and hosted by her husband.

The eight episodes will see him chatting with his friends, who are mostly outside the entertainment industry, over a three-course meal prepared by him.

Filming has been completed and the team is in discussion about the show's distribution.

Peh says it is her birthday wish that her new ventures will do well.

"This year is really about me try-

ing out different things and setting new goals for myself," says the award-winning actress.

She took home the trophy for Best Leading Female Performance - Digital for her roles in Chinese drama Mind Jumper (2021) and English drama Last Madame (2020) at the Asian Television Awards.

Her role in Mind Jumper also earned her a Best Actress nomination at last night's Star Awards ceremony. Results were not in at press time.

While Peh and Qi are familiar faces on local television, Peh says her two kids do not watch their shows.

"Why is that so?"

"I actually talked about this in the podcast episode with Carol. The series isn't entirely about me getting to know my guests. I also share things about myself - my thoughts, my insecurities, my interests," she says before teasing: "You just have to listen to my podcast to find out why."

elisac@sph.com.sg

• Joanne Peh's podcast series What Do I Know? is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube. You can also watch the video version on her new YouTube channel, Two Happy Media (bit.ly/3EDM77)

stephyeo@sph.com.sg