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Forest4Youth

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Forest-Based Interventions in Adolescent Mental Health



Inclusive
society

This guide is for anyone who supports young people's mental health through time spent in nature.

Where this Practical Guide comes from

It draws on experience gathered across five countries — Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland and Luxembourg — as part of the Forest4Youth project. [Read more about the project.](#)

Who it is for

Young people on mental health pathways have whole circles of people around them playing many roles: mental health professionals, forest guides, foresters, educators, family members, carers, and the young people themselves. This guide speaks to all of you.



Photo: Forest4Youth / Forest Guide / Forest Guide

How to use it

Each role has its own chapter. Read the one that fits you, or read across them to understand what others bring.

In practice, you may be working without the full circle. A clinician without a forester. That is fine. Take what is useful for your situation and leave the rest.

Many voices, one guide

Every chapter in this guide was shaped by people with direct experience: young people, families, clinicians and forest professionals. All shared what the forest actually meant for them, and what helped them get the most from it. Their voices are throughout.



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Before you begin

"Forest" here means any woodland, parkland, or green space with tree cover. You do not need remote or large forest areas.

Sort out the site

Check with the landowner or forest authority that the site is safe and clear on your planned date. Visit in advance, note the hazards, and make a plan for bad weather, injuries, and route changes. Share that plan with everyone before you set out.

Agree roles before you start

Confirm who is doing what before the session begins. A forest guide, a mental health professional, and a family carer have different roles. Make sure everyone knows theirs, and that communication during the session is agreed in advance.

Brief the adults

Carers, professionals, and other adults joining the session need their own briefing, before the young people arrive. Adults can pass on anxiety without realising it. Prepare them first.

Talk to the young person about phones

Agree in advance how phones and devices will be handled. For some young people, going somewhere unfamiliar without a phone feels unsettling. Present it as an option, as part of preparation for the forest visit. Engage the young person on their views and choices here.

Be open — gain consent

Young people need to be informed and engaged before the forest visit. Talk with them, answer questions. Share maps, photos, anything to reassure them and raise their interest. Talk through the risks and how they are managed, any expected behaviours. How long it will take. What equipment they need. Who they can ask questions to.

Arrival is part of the session

The moment of arriving at the forest is often the hardest. Build in time and a consistent arrival routine, such as a circle or a brief group check-in, so this transition from everyday world to forest world is part of the experience.

Young people

If you have been offered a forest programme and are not sure what to think about it, this is for you.

You do not have to love it

Many people don't. Some just don't get it. It can take time to settle into the experience. That is fine.



“

Jayden, 15, did not want to go. The forest looked like exactly the kind of place he had no interest in. Wet, pointless, and cold.

The guide said: *You do not have to do anything. You can walk behind the group, sit on a log.* Then she began the walk.

Jayden walked behind the group. About twenty minutes in, he spotted something. A mushroom, bright orange, perfectly formed. He stopped. He looked at it for a while. He didn't say anything.

● ***He came back the following week.***

Here's what actually happens on a forest visit

The forest gives you something to pay attention to that is not your own mind.

A few hours where nobody is asking you to talk about how you are feeling, and your brain gets a break from itself.

It sounds simple. It kind of is. But that space adds up.

Most people find they get good at taking shelter in the forest. From their thoughts. From the world.

Somewhere along the way, without quite knowing how, something good might happen here.

What helps you make the most of it

You are allowed to be silent. You have permission to be loud and lively. You are allowed to be slow... or fast... quiet... or loud. You are allowed to be you.

Wear warm comfortable clothes. Bring water, snacks, a little mat to sit on. It's a practical, earthy place, but you don't have to be uncomfortable.

If you are in the middle of a thought or an activity, and someone interrupts your moment, it is okay to say: **leave me with this for a bit.**

Family and carers

This chapter is for parents, carers, and family members supporting a young person on a forest programme.

What carers notice

Young people come back quieter. More settled. Sometimes tired in a good way. They chat, not about therapy, but about something they saw, something that happened, something that was unusual.

“

Nature calms you in general. It is soothing, refreshing. When you come back from a walk in nature, you can see the difference. You notice it and people around you notice it.

FAMILY CARER, FRANCE

Carers describe gradual shifts, rather than anything dramatic.

What you can do

The most useful thing is practical. Get the clothing right: warm, waterproof, including sturdy footwear. It's likely that the programme will run in all weather. Often the wildest weather creates the best sessions. After all, "there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing!"

If your young person is reluctant, stay steady. This is worth trying, and if it really is not working, the young person can tell the team.

You know your young person best. If you have concerns about weather, safety, or anything else, solve them with the programme team before day one.

What you do not need to worry about

The programme has a lead adult responsible for safety on every session. The site is assessed before the programme begins, and risk is planned for.

Your role once it is underway

The forest works partly because it is a space apart from ordinary life. So you might not be invited to join in.

Your young person may come back and not say much. That is fine.

What happens in there is subtle, slow, and gentle. It does not always look spectacular from the outside.

- *Stay interested, stay curious, and trust the process.*

Mental health professionals

This chapter is for all professionals working together in the care of a young person: psychiatrists, mental health teams, nurses, specialists.

How your role shifts in the forest

In a clinical room, you control the environment. In the forest, you do not. The session follows what the forest presents and what the young person does with it, not a pre-planned clinical agenda. You enter the forest with them, alongside them. It becomes a shared experience where the patient-practitioner boundaries can soften — in a good way.

If you are working alongside a forest professional, agree roles before you start. Who holds clinical safety? Who monitors the young person's mental state? Who leads on the trail? Your ability to step back and let the forest guide lead is as important as knowing when to step in.

You may not always be working alongside a separate forest guide. You may have trained to lead forest groups yourself, or have enough experience to work independently.

Here's what good forest practice looks like

Be led by openness. Effective forest work is about being present rather than doing or directing. Trust the process. Resist the urge to fill silences or redirect to planned exercises. Avoid positioning yourself as the expert. Be a reassuring, boundaried presence.

Best practice for recording in the field

Skip the digital tools. Use printed session record sheets or laminated prompt cards instead.

Run a short structured debrief straight after each session: first with the young people, then separately with the adults. This closes the session and gives everyone space to process what happened.

Find the right supervision

Outdoor, uncontrolled environments will surface material that standard clinical supervision is not always designed to hold.

Don't let this stop you bringing it to supervision.

Where specialist supervision is not available, peer group supervision with colleagues doing similar work is a practical alternative. Professional networks and nature-based therapy associations in your area may help you find relevant expertise. This setting is different enough to warrant finding a space where that difference can be properly reflected on.

“

They all turned out differently than I had planned. That is actually quite nice. For me, that is a symbol of good therapy in the forest.

MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL, GERMANY

Forest guides

This chapter is for forest guides, nature-based practitioners, and environmental educators.

You bridge the forest world and the everyday world

You hold the facilitation space in the forest in two ways. First, you move the group, noticing what the forest is offering, introducing activities. Structured, yet flexible. Not rigid. You set the group tone by keeping things curious and open. It's an unpredictable natural environment — you make it "as safe as necessary". You bring them on the full cycle of a forest visit: leaving the outer world, moving through the forest experience, and guiding the return.

Second, if there are medical or other professionals with the young people, you are the bridge between them and the forest environment. You provide non-directive facilitation, helping them access whatever the forest has to offer that day.

Your job, more than anything, is to make the forest feel like somewhere young people can be, rather than somewhere they are being taken.

How to create unstructured time

This is the hardest part of the role, and the part that most distinguishes it from conventional outdoor education.

Unstructured time is not empty time. Your job is to hold the space without directing it. Young people may need to be silent. Or noisy. Still, or active.

Your calm, undemanding presence nearby is what matters. Build unstructured time into every session, with enough slack that when the forest offers something unexpected, you can stop and follow it.

“

A lot of the magic that happened in those immersions was the things that were not structured, not factored in. The questions the young people had were the slug that they would see, and that turned into their greatest fascination and their greatest enjoyment.

FOREST GUIDE, LUXEMBOURG

You might partner with other professionals

You lead the session from the outside. Other mental health professionals or carers may be holding the internal map of each young person. You work together, in balance.

Before each session, share what the site is offering that day, where the flex points are in the plan, and anything that might affect how it runs. After each session, protect time for debrief. What you saw from the outside adds to what they saw from the inside.

If other adults are joining the session, brief them beforehand. They most probably are not used to facilitating such autonomy in young people. Their own concerns and fears may suddenly emerge.

- *An unthinking comment like "don't touch that, it's dirty" can wipe out hours of carefully built confidence.*

Bring your own forest relationship with you

Your interest in the natural world is part of what makes this work.

Let your curiosity lead. If something catches your attention, follow it. If you do not know what a plant is, say so. Some of the best moments come from shared not-knowing, where you and a young person are discovering something together. You are not an invisible backdrop; your presence is part of the energy of the session.

Know your site well and know it now: what is out, what has changed, what the ground is like after recent weather. That current, specific knowledge is what lets you offer the forest as something alive rather than a backdrop.

Foresters and land managers

You may be preparing a site that a clinical team or forest guide uses with young people. You may also be going out with groups yourself. Either way, this chapter covers what changes when your expertise enters a therapeutic context.

You prepare the site for others

You are making the forest available for young people on mental health pathways. That means translating some of your knowledge into terms professional partners can use, and being willing to adapt your usual practice to fit a health context.

What does not change is your authority over the land. You know the site. Your assessment of what is "safe as necessary", accessible, and suitable for vulnerable young people is essential.

Give practical information

- What the terrain is like
- Where the hazards are: unstable ground, water, tick habitats, toxic plants
- Which areas work for open, active sessions, and those that offer sheltered enclosures
- What is off limits, and why
- Who to call if something goes wrong
- How to adapt for the seasons: birds nesting in spring, leaf mould in winter — you know how and where the changes take place

Ideally, make at least one joint visit before the programme begins. Walk the site together and let them ask questions. However, a single meeting is rarely enough to build the trust needed between the forester and the care team.

“

Each place needs a site visit with the healthcare team beforehand to look at risk points together. Co-construction based on expertise.

FORESTER, FRANCE

Helping people feel at home in the forest

You are not a therapist. But your calm, competent presence in the forest matters more than you might think. Young people notice when someone is genuinely at home in an environment.

Be practical. Manage the terrain, the weather, the safety. Let others manage the therapeutic frame. If you are unsure where the boundaries are, agree them in advance.

Biodiversity helps. A site with varied species, ground cover, water, and seasonal change gives young people and practitioners far more to work with than a uniform stand. Open and enclosed spaces within the same site are particularly useful. Starting in lighter, open areas and moving into denser spaces as confidence builds is a pattern that works.

Partnership agreements

Trust between individuals comes before any formal document. Get the relationship working first. A sound agreement then covers:

Permitted use of the site

Responsibility for risk and safety

Insurance and liability

Emergency contacts

Seasonal or area restrictions

Cooking fire and waste

A review date

A parallel tool: immersive and virtual nature

Not every young person can reach a forest. Some are too unwell, too unsettled, or not yet ready. Immersive Virtual Nature (IVN) offers a way.

What IVN is

IVN uses screen-based nature environments to bring something of the forest into the clinical setting. It is not a substitute for real nature. It is a preparation for it, a regulation tool within care, or a bridge back after a session.

How to use it

The IVN practical guide sets out three modules, each with its own one-page sheet:

01

Preparing a young person before real forest exposure

02

Running short regulation sessions in care settings

03

Supporting transition and integration after time in the forest

Where to find it

An IVN Companion Guide will be published on the website: forest4youth.nweurope.eu

For more information, please contact mostafa.el.madani@ulb.be

Pocketbook of activities

A handy pocketbook for anyone preparing a forest session. Forest guides trained for this purpose are recommended to facilitate groups, however this is not always possible.

The possibilities in a forest are endless. As you build your skill, you will become adept at taking up the multitude of offers the forest makes, in many wonderful ways. To give you inspiration and get you started, here are seventeen activities, grouped under five themes that follow the natural shape of a session.

01	Getting there	4 activities
02	Waking up your senses	4 activities
03	Discovering yourself	3 activities
04	Connecting with others	3 activities
05	Coming back to yourself	3 activities

Nothing here is mandatory

Every activity can be shortened, extended, or adapted. Within each theme, activities are ordered from lower to higher demand.

TO STRETCH A GROUP

Increase the time, reduce the structure, add a social element, or invite reflection.

TO BRING IT BACK TO ENTRY LEVEL

Remove any requirement to share, work alongside rather than together, and reduce the task to its simplest physical form: find something, make something, notice something.

Endings are important

They mark the end of the time in the forest world. A short reflective pause before re-entry to the everyday world offers many benefits.

Do this before you reach the car park — somewhere near the forest edge, but not quite outside it. Involve everyone in the group. The prompts on the next page will help guide you.



Don't forget to make time for a separate supporting-adults debrief too. Supporting these sessions can be demanding, and a short reflection before moving to the next task can help rebalance.

Prompts for the closing circle

Noticing the forest

- What did you see today that you weren't expecting?
- Who found something — a place, an object, a moment — that mattered to them?
- Where did the energy shift, and what caused it?

Noticing yourself

- Did you take on something today that surprised you?
- Was there a moment you felt more like yourself?
- Did you get on with someone today in a way that felt new?

Noticing the group

- Where did the group work together without being asked to?
- Was there a moment of shared quiet? What preceded it?
- What did the group make or build today, physically or socially?

Looking forward

- What would you do differently next session based on today?
- Which activity do you want to return to, and why?
- Is there anyone you want to check in with before the next session?

Supporting safety, autonomy and competence

Indicative practice guidance. Care teams should add to it based on the young person they know.

PURPOSE	PRACTICE
Sense of safety	Choose activities with a clear task and a visible outcome; discuss the session arc in advance; share the session plan with the young people; allow time to shift task; avoid enclosed spaces and required physical closeness in early sessions; consider IVN as a bridge where outdoor access is not yet possible.
Sensory processing preferences	Gradually build sensory intensity; introduce the session in advance; always offer choice.
Support regulation	If high energy, start physical: building, carrying, fire-lighting, hiking, exploring. If low energy, offer a hammock, a sit spot, looking at a view. Slow down, explore.
Autonomy and choice	Offer choice of activities, and be prepared to follow through whatever they choose; avoid focusing adult attention on the reluctant young person; give small meaningful tasks with responsibility (carrying tea, holding the map); do not require activity completion; frame the session around presence, not performance.
Support relationships	Establish a stable bond before the first forest session; maintain a non-directive presence.



Take what is useful for your situation, and leave the rest.

Shaped by young people, families, clinicians and forest professionals across Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland and Luxembourg.



GETTING THERE

Introduce yourself to the forest

Build a personal connection with the forest. Find a place of your own.

a name in sticks, leaves, stones



YOU NEED

Nothing.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Walk around and find a spot that speaks to you. Spell out your name there using natural materials – as big, small, simple or ornate as you feel today. A nickname or initial is fine.

TO CLOSE

Signal the group back to a meeting point. Invite anyone who wants to share.





GETTING THERE

The soundscape map

Engage the senses on arrival.



YOU NEED

Paper, pencil and a clipboard per person.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Find your own spot. Sit still for five minutes. Mark where you are, then mark where sounds come from and how they feel. Share anything you want when we come back.

TO CLOSE

Bring the group together. Invite sharing. Ask: did you hear anything unexpected?

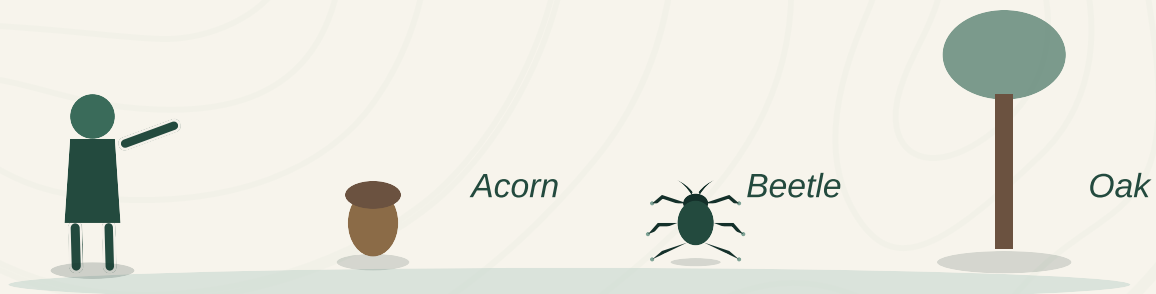
2



GETTING THERE

Getting to know the forest

Names reduce anxiety. Familiarity builds confidence.



YOU NEED

Nothing, or a laminated sheet of local species.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

*As we walk I'll point a few things out. You don't need to remember any of it.
Everything here has a name.*

TO CLOSE

No formal close. It dissolves into the walk.

3



GETTING THERE

The hammock

Settle into the woodland.



YOU NEED

One or more hammocks hung between trees.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

There's a hammock over there. Go and lie in it if you want. You don't have to do or say anything. Just notice what it's like. We'll check in every half hour.

TO CLOSE

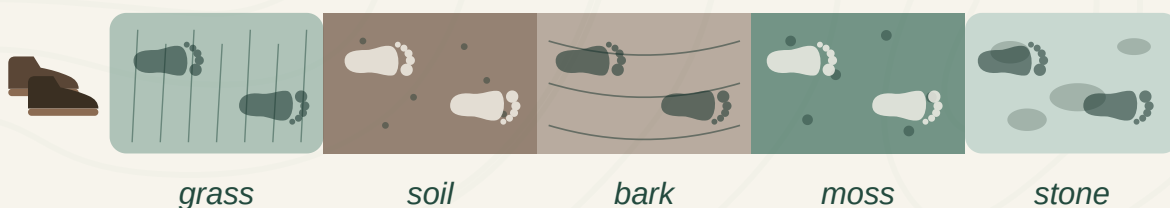
No structured close. Let young people leave when ready, and have the next activity quietly ready for this.

4



Barefoot trail

Engages touch and proprioception. Grounds ruminative or anxious thinking.



SHOES OFF · WALK SLOWLY · NOTICE THE CHANGE

YOU NEED

A short varied path of grass, soil, bark, moss and stone.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

If you're comfortable, take off your shoes. We're going to walk this bit very slowly. Just notice what you feel through your feet.

TO CLOSE

Pause the group. Ask: what was the most interesting texture? What surprised you?





Colour palette walk

Focused looking, without needing words.

find one for each colour



YOU NEED

A laminated colour palette or paint chips per person.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

As we walk, try to find something in the forest that matches each colour. You don't need to pick anything up, just find it.

TO CLOSE

Gather the group. Who found a surprising match? In autumn, make a palette from fallen leaves instead.

6



Five senses inventory

Structured grounding (5-4-3-2-1). Produces quiet, focused attention.



5

4

3

2

1

see

touch

hear

smell

taste

NAME WHAT IS HERE · IN ORDER

YOU NEED

Nothing, or a small prompt card.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Stand still. Find five things you can see. Four you can hear. Three you can feel. Two you can smell. One you can taste, or imagine tasting. Take your time.

TO CLOSE

No formal close. Can be used as a reset at any point.

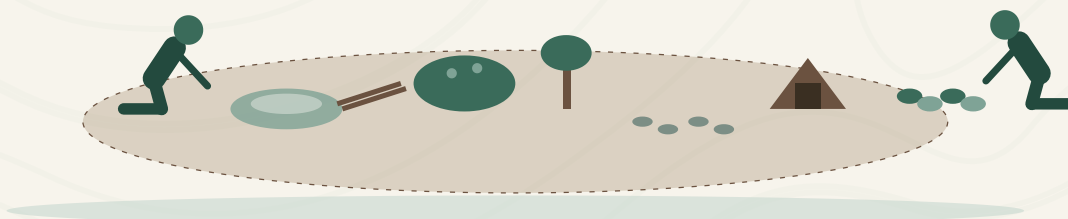
7



Build a tiny world

Hands-on play, creativity and group immersion. Encourages touch, imagination and collaborative making.

an imaginary world from what's underfoot



YOU NEED

Natural materials on site: mud, soil, leaves, sticks, stones, bark, moss, water.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

We're going to create an imaginary world using only what we can find. Work in small groups for about an hour. There's no right or wrong way.

TO CLOSE

Signal the end a few minutes early. Invite groups to walk through each other's worlds. Return materials to the ground.

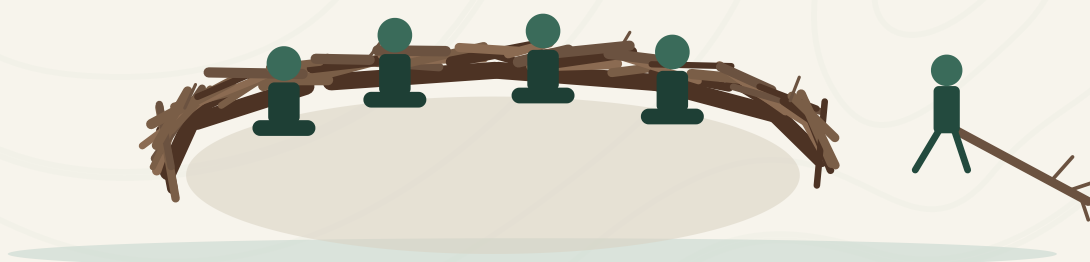




Building the forest sofa

Create a shared space owned by the group. A gathering point for the rest of the programme.

a place the group has built — together



YOU NEED

Fallen branches and logs. No tools needed.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

We're going to make somewhere to sit that fits all of us. See what you can find — branches, logs, anything on the ground — and bring it back here.

TO CLOSE

Sit in it together. Mark the moment. Return to it in future sessions.



Fire lighting

Shared goal, skill transfer, visible outcome.

a sequence learned through doing



YOU NEED

Site permission, safety clearance and a competent practitioner.
Fire steel or matches, tinder, kindling, fuel wood, a fire circle,
water nearby.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

We're going to light a fire. I'll show you how to set it up, then anyone who wants to can try. It usually takes a few goes – it can be tricky.

TO CLOSE

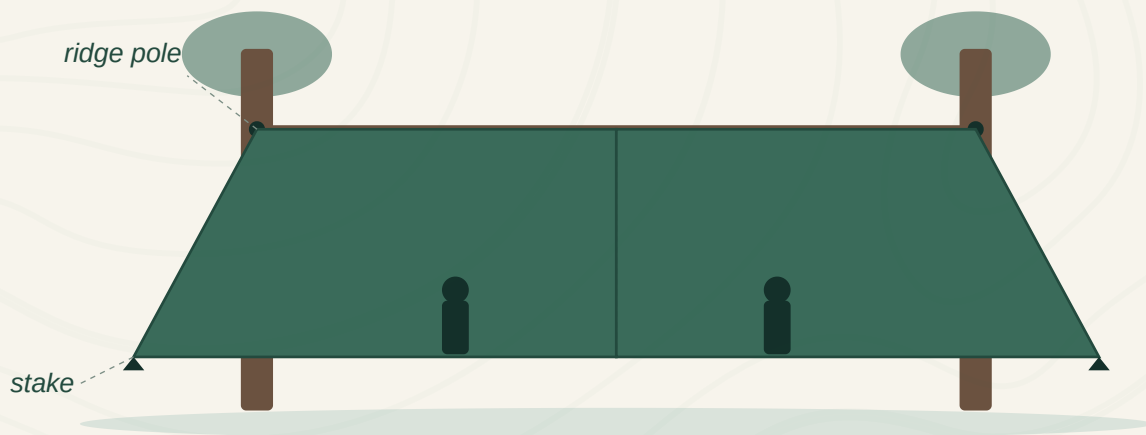
Formal close required. Extinguish fully together — every participant should see this. Leave the site as found.

10



Bivouac building

Cooperation, problem-solving, shared accomplishment.



YOU NEED

Tarpaulins and rope, or on-site materials.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

We're going to build a shelter big enough for at least four of us. There's no one right way. See what you've got and what you can find. I'll help if you get stuck.

TO CLOSE

Test it together. Sit inside. Enjoy the achievement.





The sit spot

Each young person finds a place in the forest that is theirs, returned to across sessions.

a place to return to, week after week



by the stream



on the log



in the hollow



under the pine

YOU NEED

15–20 minutes unstructured, and a site with enough variety for individual spots within earshot.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Find somewhere in the forest that speaks to you. Somewhere you'd want to sit. It can be anywhere. You don't need to explain why. We'll come back together in fifteen minutes.

TO CLOSE

Invite anyone to show or describe their spot. Make returning to it a regular ritual.

12



Distributed responsibility

Young people experience being depended on, not just cared for.



small functional roles, distributed

YOU NEED

Specific practical roles agreed before departure: who carries cups, who carries tea, who checks the path, who holds the map.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

I need some help today. I can't do this alone. I'm going to ask each of you to be responsible for something.

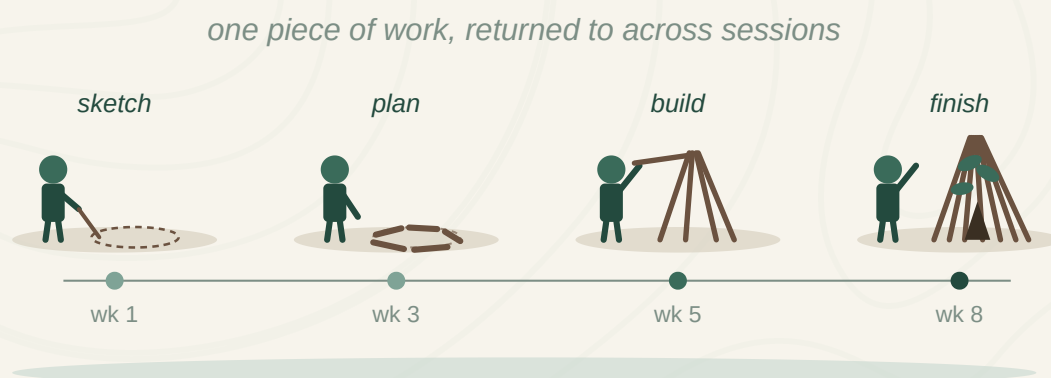
TO CLOSE

At the end, name what each person did specifically. This is acknowledgement of a real contribution.



The individual project

One young person takes on a personal project across multiple sessions.



YOU NEED

Session time, and on-site materials.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

This part of the forest isn't being used for anything. I wondered if you might want to do something with it over the next few weeks? Build something, plant something, create something?

TO CLOSE

At programme end, the group visits together. The young person leads, and describes what they made and why.

14

The forest object

A small natural object to carry between sessions — a portable resource.

choose one. one word for what it carries.



YOU NEED

Permission to take small fallen and found objects.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Before we go, find something small that nature has already let go of. Something you want to take with you from today. You don't need to explain why.

TO CLOSE

Invite anyone to show what they chose and say one word about it.
One word only — not a reflection exercise.

15



COMING BACK TO YOURSELF

The silent self check-in

Brief self-assessment before leaving. Builds self-reflection as a habit.



private. held quietly within.

YOU NEED

To find a good place before the end of the forest paths. Ask everyone to think without need to share.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Take a silent moment to check inside yourself for how you feel now. Much better? A bit worse? This is for you to note, no one else needs to know.

TO CLOSE

Quietly be sure that the group has had enough time. Move on when ready.

16



Campfire close

A natural closing ritual. Shared stillness before departure.

a circle. shared stillness. then leaving.



YOU NEED

A fire from the session, or tea on a small stove if there is no fire.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE

Before we put the fire out, let's sit with it for a few minutes. You don't have to say anything. Just notice where you are. Then we'll head back.

TO CLOSE

Extinguish the fire together. Walk back however the group chooses.

17

This guide is for informational and professional development purposes only. It does not constitute legal, clinical, or regulatory advice.

Practitioners are responsible for ensuring all activities comply with applicable health and safety, safeguarding, data protection, and professional standards in their jurisdiction. Requirements vary across Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, and Luxembourg; local legal frameworks always take precedence over this guidance.

This guide does not replace clinical protocols, risk assessments, or governance requirements set by your organisation or regulatory body. All activities involving vulnerable young people must fall within the practitioner's scope of practice and receive appropriate supervision and any necessary approvals.

Forest4Youth is co-funded by the European Union under Interreg North-West Europe (NWE0400643). Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Forest4Youth project and do not reflect the views of the EU, partner countries, or the Managing Authority. Project partners accept no liability for outcomes arising from the application of this guidance.

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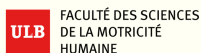
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Total project budget

€5,5 million

EU funding

€3,3 million

Timeline

2025 - 2028



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