



At Nature Explorers School, the curriculum includes forest bathing. Here, the children are observing leaves. PHOTO: NATURE EXPLORERS SCHOOL

THE FOREST IS MY SCHOOL

More parents are putting value on outdoor education and enrolling their kids in forest schools, which conduct classes like outdoor survival skills at parks and nature areas

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When Ms Sandra Aw drops her four-year-old son off to class on Saturday mornings, she knows he will return all muddy and sometimes “completely soaked”.

Unlike many of his peers who head to academic enrichment on weekends, Luca attends a forest school programme with Nature Explorers School.

He and his classmates decide what they want to do during the sessions at parks in western Singapore, which may range from nature walks to jumping into pools of water to learning about flora and fauna and outdoor survival skills. Once a term, they have trips to other nature areas.

“They have a blast every week,” says Ms Aw, 37, who works in the finance sector and has another son, aged one. She signed Luca up for the programme in late 2020.

“He’s very young, so I want him to play before he goes to primary school.”

More parents like her are warming up to the idea of forest schools and outdoor schools here. There are at least nine vendors offering

varying degrees of forest school programmes – from the completely child-led classes to more structured ones.

A few pre-schools also incorporate forest school pedagogy into their curricula.

Mr Darren Quek, who started Forest School Singapore (FSS) in November 2016, recalls parents asking why they had to pay about \$40 for his programmes when nature walks were free or cost about \$10. He obtained his Forest School Practitioner certification in Britain.

Its weekly classes have grown from about 20 to 30 kids in 2017 to just over 100 kids who show up every week, rain or shine.

FSS’ holiday camps, which are pitched as a taster of its regular programme, took about 40 days to fill up in 2017.

By 2019, they were fully booked in about 20 days. During the pandemic, all its holiday camp slots in December 2020 were snapped up in just five days. Its coaching team has also grown in tandem with demand, to about 70 coaches.

Local kids make up about 70 per cent of its cohort, he says.

Mr Jenson Ong, chief explorer of Nature Explorers School, started with two weekly sessions at two locations in 2019, and has since doubled them. It attracts an equal mix of local and expatriate kids and wait lists are common for school holiday camps.

Three years ago, pre-school

group NTUC First Campus entered the outdoor education arena with Outdoor School Singapore (OSS). Its recent March holiday programmes attracted about 100 children and were held over three days at Dairy Farm Nature Reserve and Chestnut Nature Park.

The school also runs a survival skills programme at Admiralty Park over four Saturdays and offers customised programmes for organisations.

Unlike pure forest schools, OSS takes a more structured approach to outdoor education. It offers the widest range of programmes for children aged four to nine, says Ms Ann Phang, its programme architect.

“This year alone, OSS will be conducting more than eight programmes that will be held at parks and nature reserves across Singapore. Our children are exposed to different learning experiences and achieve different learning outcomes each time they join us.”

KIDS LEAD, COACHES SUPPORT

Forest schools sprung up in Denmark in the 1950s and spread throughout Scandinavia, which has a tradition of outdoor education. They became popular in Britain in the early 1990s and, later, North America.

According to a BBC report in January, Asian territories such as Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong have also seen a proliferation of such schools since the 2000s.