



**inter-community
school zurich**

EST. 1960



A School

**in the
woods**

The Inter-Community School is committed to providing a supportive and enabling learning environment in which all members of the community are challenged to achieve their individual potential, encouraged to pursue their passions, and expected to fulfil their responsibilities.





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A School in the Woods

The Waldkinder (Children’s Forest) programme is an integral part of learning in the Preschool and Kindergarten at ICS. It allows our youngest students to take advantage of Switzerland’s pristine natural environment and provides opportunities for learning experiences beyond the formal classroom. A new approach and fresh ideas have recently been integrated into The Waldkinder programme at ICS, consolidating its position as an important learning space for Preschool and Kindergarten.

Recently, ICS supported teachers to undertake training to become qualified as Forest School leaders at Forest Schools Education in Sheffield, UK. “Forest schools” see the natural environment as an extended learning space, a particularly distinctive classroom, where young children explore their academic, social, emotional and physical development. The initiative also seeks to integrate care and concern for the natural world with all aspects of a child’s learning and development. The forest does not replace the formal classroom – but neither is it simply a supplement. Instead, it is a distinct learning space that provides unique opportunities for children to develop their potential across all aspects of their learning.

Forest Schools have a long and respected history. The idea for them first emerged in Denmark and Sweden in the 1950s and focused on teaching young children about the natural world. By the mid-1990s, Forest Schools began to develop in Britain, culminating in an extensive range of programmes throughout the UK. The Forest School initiative is well supported by extensive research into its benefits, and by a number of organisations providing accredited formal training for teachers. In the UK, Forest Schools have also received institutional support from national and local governments.

Forest Schools mirror many of the values and programmes ICS already maintains. The forest school philosophy intersects with the three cultures of ICS – the Culture of Learning and High Expectations, the Culture of Care, and the Culture of Community Engagement. Forest schools also embody many of the core principles and pedagogies of the Primary Years Programme (PYP).







Culture of Learning and High Expectations

Like the PYP, Forest Schools are child-centred and inquiry-based, focused on fostering learning and development across a range of spheres – cognitive, social, emotional and physical. They are based on reflective practice and on integrating curriculum in an authentic context, providing opportunities for structured, purposeful inquiry that engages children actively in their own learning.

The Waldkinder programme at ICS has a structure that extends over the school year, matching the best practice of Forest Schools throughout the world. Preschool and Kindergarten students at ICS go out into the forest on the same days each week, rain or shine, regardless of the seasons. This allows children to pursue interests and projects over time, and to develop an understanding of the seasons and the changes they bring.

The general structure of each Waldkinder session includes a meeting time in the forest to discuss activities and possibilities, followed by time spent pursuing inquiries in the forest, and then, at the end of each session, reflection time. This can take the form of individual written journals in the case of Kindergarten, or group reflection in the case of Pre-Kindergarten.

The reflection process makes use of the forest as another, albeit unique, learning space. A variety of curriculum areas come into play here including many opportunities for purposeful writing (journals, reports, stories). Mathematics, like literacy, is embedded in the programme

through inquiries employing measurement, data gathering and interpretation, early numbers, shapes and space. While the Waldkinder provides a practical context to employ these skills and understandings, it also provides purpose and motivation, since children are driven by their inquiries. Forest experiences are catalysts for all kinds of learning.

The natural environment does not exclude the use of technology. The Preschool and Kindergarten children take their iPads into the forest with them. In the forest, children use technology “in appropriate ways to capture learning and enhance the learning.” Technology is used to enrich, record and share – it is a tool, not a replacement, for the actual experience itself. As part of their reflections, for instance, students will shoot videos, take photographs or record audio to communicate their understanding of their experiences.

The forest programme allows for flexibility in learning, but careful planning is the foundation for the experiences that take place in the Waldkinder. The learning in the Wald (forest) is completely integrated with the yearlong units of inquiry undertaken by the Preschool and Kindergarten students. The teachers in the programme plan for the forest as they do for other learning spaces, providing a balance between elements of choice and structured learning opportunities while offering their experience, resources and support to the children.

Culture of care

The forest programme also forms a part of the school's culture of care. The training the teachers have received places a great deal of emphasis on risk-assessment and risk-management, in order to provide opportunities for children to undertake "safe" risks as a way of promoting individual growth. Appropriately controlled risk provides benefits: children develop self-esteem, confidence and independence, plus a greater understanding of boundaries and practical knowledge of the safe use of tools and fire. It allows children to explore their limits in a safe context. As teacher and forest leader Kate Bowen states: "Risky play is compelling, so providing opportunities means you can control it."

For instance, a carefully managed risk (fire and tools) can provide a safe and positive experience that also promotes individual growth and understanding. As part of this, teachers will instruct children in how to use tools properly and how to assess risks, while providing a clear set of safety routines, boundaries and support for children exploring their environment.

The Waldkinder programme also has social and emotional benefits in the opportunities it provides for relationship-building between teachers and children, and among the students themselves. There is time for informal conversations between teachers and students leading to a better understanding of students' learning styles and

needs. Children also learn to work cooperatively, to share tools and help each other with projects, while being given an opportunity to develop their independence. Projects in the forest encourage students to work in small achievable steps, promoting self-esteem and self-confidence. Another practical benefit of the Waldkinder experience is that children experience high levels of healthy physical activity in an outdoor setting.

A final aspect of the school's forest programme is its engagement with the communities in which it is embedded. The protection, preservation and cultivation of the natural environment are important priorities for our host nation, Switzerland. Initiatives such as Waldkinder provide an opportunity to develop environmental sensibilities in our youngest students which, in the long term, support those priorities.

Within the school community, the Waldkinder programme has also provided a learning opportunity for older students – the Grade 10 outdoor education unit has worked with the Preschool and Kindergarten students in a way that benefits both age groups.

ICS' Waldkinder programme is an important and unique learning space for our students, providing them with the opportunity to pursue their passions and achieve their individual potential in an environment that challenges them to think innovatively, take informed risks and care for themselves and others.





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ICS is fully accredited by the Council of International Schools (CIS) as well as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

