

Case Study | Wild Minds

Wild Minds is an innovative outdoor therapeutic programme designed to support young people's mental well-being. Delivered over eight sessions to small cohorts of up to eight participants, the programme blends hands-on nature-based activities with low-level therapeutic approaches. By fostering a connection to the natural world, participants learn about themselves, develop emotional intelligence, and gain coping strategies to support positive mental wellbeing.

This case study highlights the journey of a group of young people referred by their school to participate in the Wild Minds programme. All participants had learning needs and were identified as likely to benefit from a supportive, nature-based intervention.

Background and Context

The participating group consisted of young people aged between 12 and 15, each facing challenges related to anxiety, low confidence, social difficulties, and disengagement from mainstream education. Traditional classroom settings had proven stressful, leading to low participation and self-esteem.

The school sought an alternative approach that would:

- Re-engage students in learning through experiential methods
- Provide a safe, supportive space to build social and emotional skills
- Offer opportunities for personal growth and improved mental wellbeing

Approach

The Wild Minds programme was delivered over eight weekly sessions in a woodland setting. Each session combined structured activities, guided reflection, and free exploration. Activities were designed to encourage self-expression, teamwork, and personal responsibility while developing an appreciation for nature.

Key components included:

- Group activities: Building teamwork, communication, and trust through shared problem-solving tasks and outdoor challenges
- Individual reflection: Encouraging self-awareness nature-based mindfulness exercises
- Therapeutic discussion: Guided conversations to help participants identify emotions, build resilience, and set personal goals
- Environmental stewardship: Developing responsibility and respect for nature through conservation and care-based activities

The programme facilitators maintained a relaxed, non-judgmental approach, allowing each participant to engage at their own pace. This flexibility was crucial in supporting those with varying emotional and learning needs.

Observations and Outcomes

At the beginning of the programme, participants showed signs of low confidence, social withdrawal, and reluctance to engage. As sessions progressed, visible improvements were observed in both individual and group dynamics.

- Participants developed emotionally, becoming more comfortable expressing their emotions and reflecting on personal experiences. Several reported feeling calmer and happier after time spent outdoors.
- Initially quiet individuals began participating more actively in group discussions and collaborating during activities. Building their social skills, friendships developed naturally through shared experiences.
- As each participant grew in confidence and independence they took on increasing levels of responsibility, from planning small group tasks to leading certain activities by the final session.
- Participants demonstrated a growing appreciation for the natural environment, recognising how time outdoors positively influenced their mood and focus.

Quantitative evaluation supported observations, with improvements recorded using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Qualitative data, including facilitator observations, photographs, and participant feedback, reinforced these positive outcomes.

All participants achieved their individual objectives and contributed to the group's shared goals. The combination of outdoor learning, therapeutic discussion, and personal reflection proved effective in improving mental and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

Wild Minds successfully demonstrated that nature-based, therapeutic interventions can have a significant impact on young people's mental wellbeing, confidence, and social development. The programme's holistic, experiential approach allowed participants to learn about themselves, build resilience, and develop practical coping strategies for the future.

By providing a safe, nurturing outdoor space, Wild Minds not only supported positive behavioural change, but also inspired a deeper appreciation of the natural world—equipping young people with tools to support their well-being well into adulthood.