

Gather Together

What we learned by learning something new as a family by Liz Lowe





“When families are foraging together, everyone starts off on an equal footing – parents are surprised by the stuff their kids know”

It’s a summer’s morning in Ceredigion, Wales, and the drizzle has permeated through three layers of clothing to give my skin a clammy quality. I sip coffee that went cold moments after being poured and look across the damp wooden table at my two children. They’re oblivious, totally immersed as their small hands weave green willow into stars and bird feeders.

We’re midway through our week at Gather – an annual event which offers a packed schedule of workshops with makers, creatives and outdoor learning experts – held at Fforest Farm, near Cardigan. There are only around forty families here and the majority are repeat visitors. After a few days of foraging, whittling, screen printing, botanical dyeing and more, our ‘hill shac’ is overflowing with crafts and we all declare it one of our best holidays ever.

The reason? Well, the setting is beautiful. It’s a 200-acre site, bordering the Teifi Marshes Nature Reserve and fringed by the River Teifi, which flows on to meet the sea at nearby Poppit Sands beach. The artfully rustic accommodation (which includes bell tents, cabins, domes, ‘shacs’ and the farmhouse) is well designed and showcases the expansive countryside views.

But there’s something else. As my son Charlie helps me select willow rods, I realise how much we’re all enjoying learning something new as a family. “I like that the activities aren’t just for children, and we can try new things together,” says my nine-year-old daughter, Isla.

“Doing workshops together is a definite highlight,” agrees Lou who, together with five-year-old daughter Daisy, will return this summer for her fourth consecutive year. “Daisy has a love of arts and crafts that I believe has been directly influenced by the creative activities at Gather,” says Lou. Some workshops have a minimum age requirement

which allows older kids to take on more ambitious projects and gives Fforest’s younger guests something to grow into. “Every year feels new as there are different activities that appeal to Daisy,” says Lou.

Breaking down boundaries

I’m interested in the impact shared learning has on children and ask Dr. Sandi Mann, Senior Psychology Lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. “In most situations the parent and child roles are very clearly defined,” says Sandi, “so learning something together is a way for that to be equalled in a way that’s healthy.” She explains that allowing children to explore a different role and to feel they have knowledge and experience that perhaps the parent doesn’t, can be good for self-esteem and promote parent-child bonding.

Jade Mellor, of Wild Pickings, observes this in the foraging workshops she runs at Gather. “When families are foraging together, everyone starts off on an equal footing – the adults generally aren’t more knowledgeable than the kids, in fact it’s often the opposite and parents are surprised by the stuff their kids know. Foraging brings people together and breaks down boundaries.”

We often teach our children skills from our standpoint as ‘experts’ at life, in their eyes anyway. At Gather we show them something different: how to be a beginner, how to get it wrong but keep trying, how to be patient and resilient.

Steps towards independence

Our kids seem to grow in confidence throughout the week and FForest Farm is the ideal environment to take small steps towards independence. It’s big enough that kids can run wild through trees and fields, but small enough that parents know they’re never that far away and, with no cars around, it feels safe. “You get the freedom to run around and explore,” says nine-year-old Ada. ➔



‘During the week I’m reminded what it feels like to enter ‘flow state’ and become so absorbed in an endeavour that time seems to melt away’

We soon settle into the rhythm of Fforest days. At Gather, time feels stretched somehow and everything seems designed to be experienced in a slow, considered way. “It usually takes me two weeks to relax,” says Ben, who is here with his wife and two daughters, “but because life is simplified, it’s easier to leave work behind and fully immerse.”

The site’s hub is the lodge, where the shop and café are located, and evening suppers made with homegrown and local produce are served. Adjacent is Fforest’s tiny 200-year-old pub, Y Bwthyn, which apparently has its own ghost.

Many of the activities take place in and around the Project Barn, which is a hive of creative activity. This is where we meet Nick Hand of The Letterpress Collective. “Gather is socially and from a craft point of view just a brilliant place to be,” he says. “It’s a very beautiful environment and suits making in a very positive sense.”

Most of the workshops are run several times, so no one misses out, but Nick finds this also allows people to cultivate interests. “I’m interested when children turn up on their own for the second or third workshops – some children and adults seem to be really drawn to one or two crafts and spend time honing their newfound skills. Children do seem to build a self-confidence at Fforest Gather and it’s very nice to see.”

Entering flow state

Both Nick and Jade describe the positive effects of working with your hands. “When we do repetitive things with our hands, we become relaxed and open up, connecting us to each other,” says Jade. During the week I’m reminded what it feels like to enter ‘flow state’ and become so absorbed in an endeavour that time seems to melt away. It’s a sensation I haven’t felt for a while, a reawakened memory, and I get as much pleasure from watching the kids slip into it as I do from experiencing it myself.

We take a lot away from our week at Gather – literally, the boot is overflowing with willow, prints and textiles. Mostly though, we leave resolved to include more shared creative projects and learning experiences in our everyday life. We plan crafts to make gifts for friends and family, try local foraging walks and look out for workshops with local makers. We feel more connected, both to our kids and to a creative side of ourselves, and we want to hold on to that feeling.

MORE RESOURCES

EXPLORE Fforest Farm offers accommodation for much of the year – coldatnight.co.uk

BOOK Fforest Gather runs for a fortnight every summer, with the option to book for week one or week two fforestgather.co.uk

DISCOVER The Letterpress Collective – theletterpresscollective.org and Wild Pickings – wildpickings.co.uk

MORE FAMILY LEARNING EXPERIENCES

LEARN HOW TO BUILD A TINY HOUSE

The Centre for Alternative Technology, is dedicated to finding practical solutions to the climate crisis – and teaching people how to implement them. This summer the Tiny House course is sold out but there are plenty of other opportunities such as spoon carving, pallet building and creating gardens for wildlife to check out. On-site accommodation is in eco-buildings heated by biomass boilers and solar-thermal cells. cat.org.uk

MEET FELLOW BOARD GAME GEEKS

Board game breaks at HF Holidays promise like-minded people and all sorts of interesting conversations. You stay in the comfort of a characterful country house, choose from a selection of board games – or bring your own. There’ll be a host to start you off, after which you can expect games running throughout the day and evening. And when you’re not busy playing, head out on self-guided walks in the local area. hfholidays.co.uk

THROW A POT

Throughout the year Gosforth Pottery in Wasdale, Lake District, runs residential courses for all ages and abilities. You can learn to throw a pot on the potter’s wheel and discover handthrown pottery techniques to create your own pots or sculptures – a great way to develop skills or learn a new craft. The course is run in an old Cumbrian farmhouse with a large garden and homemade meals are included in the course fee. potterycourses.co.uk