

[INTERVIEW]

AS NATURE INTENDED

The Journal speaks to Justin Baker, founder and creative director of First Hand Experiences, which brings children back to the outdoors with its holiday camps, clubs and bespoke party adventures

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As the daffodils begin to grow and nature wakes from its slumber, we can start going back outside without the fear of icicles developing on our noses, and with this comes the Easter holidays. Once all the chocolate has been eaten, and the Easter eggs have been found, you and your children may be stuck for a little inspiration of what to do next. Fear not, as First Hand Experiences is available to keep your little ones inspired and entertained.

Using British country folklore as its muse and fusing it with a modern carnival flavour, the Wake Up! programme will run three times through the Easter break, with Fulham's All Saints Church being its base. Children can expect to go on a treetop walkway at Kew, become plant scientists looking at seeds, create a drum and a hobby horse,

who founded it in March 2015. Justin's background in school education also encompassed teaching English as a foreign language. "Towards the end of my time learning at school I had a desperate need to see the world and I decided that Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) was my passport and I spent five years travelling around the world," he begins to explain. He went on to teach nursery children in Taiwan before returning to England, where he started working at Ecole Marie d'Orliac in Fulham, which is part of the Lycée Français Charles De Gaulle de Londres.

While teaching there, Justin realised that although he was providing children with great tuition, there was limited access to nature and the outdoors. "Learning in a classroom can be very effective with all the hi-tech resources

Experiences was born.

I ask Justin whether he was nervous about leaving his career as a teacher. "Deciding to quit our teaching jobs was a huge leap of faith but we'd always felt that we knew children, knew how they worked and understood where they felt happiest," he answers. With a strong team behind him, including Teri Billon (camp co-ordinator), Yusra Ali (camp mentor), Iole Motolese (chef) and Martha Garland (art and craft co-ordinator), I want to find out what makes someone a First Hand Experiences kind of person. "First and foremost, they must have a great desire to enrich children's lives through these genuine experiences; that is what matters the most," Justin tells me.

In an age where technology is king and smartphones and tablets are super-glued to our hands (and quite a few of

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visit Vauxhall Farm and become a puzzle solver and adventurer on a scavenger hunt in Richmond Park.

First Hand Experiences was set up by a married couple, Justin Baker and Louisa Gilman, both former teachers,

but nothing better can teach a child about the world and how it works, than the real first-hand experiences," he says. So by amalgamating this outdoor philosophy with Justin's and Louisa's teaching experience, First Hand

our children's hands too), a certain type of pleasure and nostalgia is derived from playing outside, and this is one of Justin's favourite aspects about his job. "I love being outdoors with nature and learning about the world alongside children; it's



great seeing them so engaged, inspired and motivated by learning, way more so than I ever saw in a classroom," he says.

Coming from a teaching background, Justin understands the importance of traditional education and classroom schooling, but he also thinks there are ways this could be improved. "I love football, for example, and I think children should be out enjoying sport daily, but how many explore the woods daily or the garden or make something healthy to eat? I also know that all too often competitive activities can create divisions. Nature on the other hand is the perfect leveller," Justin explains.

London and the UK are hardly limited to holiday camps, so what sets First Hand Experiences apart from the others? Personally, I think it's their holistic approach to child development; for them, of course, having fun is part of it, but it's also about instilling this all-inclusive view to child development. "On each day of the programme the children get to have a day that excites and enthalls, while we uphold our aim to promote the arts, healthy wholefoods and outdoor adventure," he tells me. "It's a massive challenge but one we strive to meet each time. It is both the most challenging and rewarding part of the job."

The camps also emphasise a

preference for small group sizes, and I want to find out why. "Relationships are important to us. You have a better chance of getting to know children and finding out how to get the best from them with smaller group sizes. Giving children freedom within a nurturing

environment is important to us – and treating them like people, not like children, also helps."

As mentioned earlier, food is a big part of First Hand Experiences; but it's not just cheese sandwiches and a packet of crisps at this camp. Justin describes his passion to me for healthy food to fuel children keeping them energised and through this, he encourages them to help make and share food as part of the experience. "The chefs prepare fresh and seasonal food, sometimes including ingredients the children may have picked themselves," he says.

With this in mind, and our tummies rumbling, I can only wish that there was such a camp for grown-ups. Where do I sign up? ♦

The three Easter camps run from 29 March – 1 April, 4-8 April and 11-14 April. Drop off is 8.30am-9am and pick up is 4.30pm. £240 per child per camp, with concessions available for siblings. The price includes lunch, a snack and transport. The base camp is at All Saints Church Hall, 70a Fulham High Street, SW6 3LG. For more information call 01843 652 833, email contact@firsthandexperiences.co.uk or visit firsthandexperiences.co.uk

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