

earthwatch
EUROPE

OUTDOOR LEARNING GUIDE

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Helpful tools and guidance for
initiating, funding and sustaining
outdoor learning and education
within your school or setting



WHY OUTDOORS?



In the UK, many children spend as little as 16 minutes in nature a day, with research suggesting that at least 75% of UK children spend less time outdoors than prisoners. Increasingly, children are spending more time using technology and less time outdoors – this means that an entire generation is rapidly disconnecting from nature and being deprived of the opportunity to explore and learn outdoors. Outdoor learning breaks down the boundaries of typical classroom-based learning in education, acting as a strategy to connect people with the natural world and engage them in the outdoors. People of all ages and abilities are offered the opportunity to learn new skills, develop personally and socially, and establish a positive connection with nature.

Outdoor learning is often viewed as an addition to educators' already heavy workload, but its key principle is to complement and support the curriculum, enhancing transferable skills, such as communication and problem solving, as well as promoting self-development. In fact, a recent study found that as little as two hours of outdoor time a week could have drastic improvements for personal well-being.



Research suggests that at least 75% of UK children spend less time outdoors than prisoners

HOW TO INTRODUCE OUTDOOR LEARNING



In 2019, Earthwatch worked with educators across the UK who expressed a huge amount of passion and enthusiasm for outdoor learning. However, one of the common themes we gathered from conversations is that often, they were one of very few people in their school or setting that wanted to utilise outdoor learning. It is key, when approaching any conversations about outdoor learning, to appeal to a range of interests and be open minded. Educators have different priorities and outdoor learning could be low on the list, so it's important to respect different motivations. It may be helpful to assess the level of interest, gathering support from other members who share your enthusiasm.



Make a plan for how you will utilise outdoor learning in your setting, its applications in the curriculum, and the practicalities. Don't be afraid to address the challenges head on. Outdoor learning can be a difficult selling point for educators - the pressures of the curriculum, lack of time, and focus on, or interest in, other topics limits the interest in outdoor learning. In this guide book, we outline the benefits of outdoor learning and address some of the things that can limit its uptake.

Outdoor learning's key principle is to complement and support the curriculum.

BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

IMPROVED WELL-BEING

In the past 3 years, referrals to child health services for mental health issues in children under 11 has risen by 50%. Stress, anxiety and depression have risen exponentially in young children and remains a critical issue in educational settings across the UK. This significant rise in poor mental health is attributed to many things, but includes lack of outdoor time and over reliance on screens and technology. Research indicates that spending time outdoors benefits mental health - a recent survey of teachers states that 84% of respondents noticed an improvement in children's moods when exposed to outdoor learning, promoting happier and more social students.

Immersing yourself in the outdoors helps to relieve anxiety and stress by reducing the stress hormone cortisol, improving self esteem and well-being. Additionally, the change in scenery can act as a regulatory activity, offering pupils the opportunity to de-stress and remove themselves from a busy or overstimulating environment. Exposure to the outdoors has positive implications for well-being - the Wildlife Trust advocates that nature is a critical component of mental well-being, and that appreciating the peace and beauty of the natural world can help children to become more in tune with their emotions.

Poor mental health has risen by 50%
among children under the age of 11.



BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

SKILLS AND DEVELOPMENT

Outdoor learning contributes to a broad range of skills development, spanning holistic and experiential learning and development of knowledge and skills learnt through a variation of methods. Learning outdoors can be significant in developing knowledge, skills and contexts within education.

Outdoor learning bridges the gap between theory and practise, and allows pupils to develop cognitive and physical skills. Cognitive development spans creative thinking, emotional processing, managing change and reflection. Physical skills include practical skills such as identification, building and movement, as well as observation and linguistics. Research suggests that a critical method of learning is through action and practise; responding to instructions, processing methods and decision making are all benefited by direct action and so can be practised within outdoor settings.

Experiences include higher level thinking and problem solving, better understanding of feelings and ability to understand others, emerging importance of values and morals and a connection with nature.

Outdoor learning promotes a range
of skills, including cognitive
development.



BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

SCHOOL VALUES

School values guide behaviour and thinking of pupils and staff, and offer the opportunity to support personal development among children. Providing a structured set of values aids the sense of community within educational settings, allowing children to value others and feel valued for who they are. These values can be translated into an outdoor setting by linking activities directly to specific values and highlighting this link to your pupils. Outdoor learning does not have to focus solely on learning about the environment, but is also a good opportunity to teach pupils about team-building, caring for others, being responsible in new surroundings and being creative in their learning.

Often, values that are important to schools can be developed within outdoor education. Some examples include -

- Respect
- Compassion & Caring
- Responsibility
- Patience
- Independence
- Creativity
- Curiosity

Values help children to develop as individuals and as part of a community.



BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

CONNECTION TO NATURE

Connection to nature is a critical aspect of conservation, as it symbolises relationships, emotions and attitudes to the environment. Research conducted by the RSPB suggests that a deeper connection encourages positive behaviour change, making people more likely to act for the environment. Similarly, it is proposed that a connection with nature has positive implications for well-being – the Wildlife Trust advocates that nature is a critical component of mental well-being, and that appreciating the peace and beauty of the natural world can help us to becoming more in tune with our emotions.

Currently, around 50% of the global population live in urban areas; in the UK alone, around 90% of people live in towns or cities. This means that many people, particularly children, feel disconnected from nature and the environment, something that the Natural History Museum of London is calling a Nature Deficit Disorder. Many feel uncertain about how to establish connections, whether individually or within groups of people, and how this can influence positive behaviour change. Outdoor learning breaks down the boundaries of typical classroom-based learning in education, acting as a strategy to connect people with the natural world and engage them in the outdoors.

Currently, around 50% of the global population live in urban areas.



CHALLENGES OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

BEHAVIOUR FOR LEARNING

Many teachers feel that disruption in the classroom limits opportunity for outdoor learning, which could present increasingly challenging behaviour. As an experiential method of education, outdoor learning offers a variety of learning techniques, enhances academic interest and increases confidence and motivation among pupils. Outdoor education enhances social relationships and can promote behaviour for learning among students, particularly those with different abilities or who struggle in traditional classroom settings. Below are some tips on managing behaviour in outdoor settings -

- Create a list of rules in collaboration with the class, to form an outdoor learning contract. Make sure students stay accountable to these rules and address any issues or concerns early on. Establish a noise or action that signals the class to stop and listen.
- Plan your lessons so that they transition and flow effectively. Short activities can assist with focus and can feed into a bigger task at the end of a session or topic.
- Allow for hands-on exploration. Establish a physical connection with nature among children by deepening their understanding.
- Practise makes perfect! If your first lesson doesn't go well, try a different approach or a new resource. Don't be disheartened!
- Introduce the lesson indoors and establish a focus point for the session. Explain why you're going outdoors and why it is important.

Outdoor learning offers opportunities
to learn that suit different abilities
and behaviours.



CHALLENGES OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

CONFIDENCE

It can be quite daunting to start a new initiative, particularly when feeling unequipped, under prepared, and unsure of best practise. Lack of confidence limits the amount of outdoor education conducted in schools. But lack of confidence doesn't always equal lack of capability, and so it is important to outline strategies to allow educators to feel more comfortable - below we outline key methods of increasing confidence in outdoor learning.

Structure - planning sessions in advance or structuring outdoor time is effective in feeling more confident in the activities you are conducting. Having a clear starter, main and plenary activity will allow for easy transitions and controlled activity, so that sessions can run smoothly. Using a timer or having a signal to grab attention can also help.

Training - lack of experience or training is a critical component of lacking confidence when utilising outdoor learning. Use online courses, such as the ones on our website, to improve your understanding, or if possible, attend training/CPD events, to develop skills first hand.

Community - find groups on social media, or schedule time to chat with colleagues about outdoor learning. Establishing a support network can boost confidence and offer guidance on best practise. Look for forums or blogs that share ideas and tips, or to find resources that people have already tried and tested.

Lack of confidence doesn't equal lack
of capability.



CHALLENGES OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

TIME CONSTRAINTS

A recent study has shown that 80% of teachers surveyed want to conduct more outdoor learning, with more than half stating that curriculum pressures was the main barrier to this. It is important to remain realistic about what can be achieved, and to remember that even 30 minutes outdoors can have great benefits. Building participation and sessions over time is critical; attempting to do everything at once will add to the time pressures that educators are already subjected to. Link outdoor learning to learning objectives and outcomes for topics, embedding into the curriculum rather than making it an addition.

Studies have found that as little as two hours of outdoor time a week could have drastic improvements for personal well-being. Similarly, 75% of respondents to a survey stated that their pupils' concentration levels increased after outdoor learning, supporting academic performance. Planning sessions in advance allocates dedicated time slots to going outdoors and reduces the pressure of having to produce something in a short time frame. Additionally, lots of organisations and projects, such as Naturehood, the Wildlife Trust, the RSPB and Earthwatch host resources and activities on their websites, providing opportunities for outdoor learning without the planning.

Spending time outdoors improves children's confidence, motivation and concentration.



FUNDING SUPPORT

Access to funds often limits the uptake of outdoor learning in schools. Below, we've listed key websites to check for funding opportunities.

Forest schools UK – funding

Schoolscapes – grants and funding for schools

English outdoor council – funding

Creative star learning – grants for outdoor learning and play

Institute for outdoor learning – funding outdoor learning

Council for learning outside the classroom – funding

You can also find new funding opportunities through education and outdoor learning charities and newsletters. Local community action groups (CAGS) often have newsletter with funding opportunities.

A lot of funding opportunities focus on a problem they would like to fix and are looking for how you can provide a clear solution to the issue. It is important to highlight the difference that their money will make and give clear and SMART objectives that last within the lifespan of the funding.

- Having an elevator pitch, that summarises your school ethos and the developments you'd like to make is a good tool that can help to begin applications.
- Adapt each funding application to suit the funding body, tailoring the application to the funder's goals and beliefs.
- Consider the language used, as often you have very limited words. Facts and figures can be an effective way of delivering information clearly and concisely.



RISK MANAGEMENT

All of our citizen science projects and activities allow teachers and students to engage with the outdoor environment. Each project has Health and Safety guidelines that you should read prior to doing any risk assessment. It is important that teachers are aware of the surroundings and risks in their school grounds or nearby green spaces where activities may be delivered.

A risk assessment is a vital element of health and safety management and its main objective is to determine the measures required to comply with statutory guidelines under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and associated regulations to reduce the chance of incidents/accidents.

STEP 1 - IDENTIFY THE HAZARDS

In order to identify hazards, you need to understand the difference between a 'hazard' and 'risk'. A hazard is 'something with the potential to cause harm' and a risk is 'the likelihood of that potential harm being realised'. Hazards can be identified by using a number of different techniques, such as walking around the outdoor spaces with other teachers, support staff or community officers, dependent on the outdoor space.

STEP 2 - DECIDE WHO MIGHT BE HARMED AND HOW

Once you have identified a number of hazards, you need to understand who might be harmed and how, such as 'students using digging equipment' or 'teachers/students taking measurements from water bodies'.

RISK MANAGEMENT

STEP 3 - EVALUATE THE RISKS AND DECIDE ON CONTROL MEASURES

After 'identifying the hazards' and 'deciding who might be harmed and how' you are then required to protect the people from harm. The hazards can either be removed completely or the risks controlled so that the injury is unlikely.

STEP 4 - RECORD YOUR FINDINGS

It is a legal requirement that any findings should be written down, while recording the findings demonstrates that you have identified the hazards, decided who could be harmed and how, and how you plan to eliminate the risks and hazards.

STEP 5 - REVIEW YOUR ASSESSMENT AND UPDATE AS AND WHEN NECESSARY

You should never forget that outdoor spaces, even on school grounds, rarely stay the same and as a result any risk assessment associated with outdoor activities should be reviewed and updated regularly.

RISK MANAGEMENT

CONDUCTING A RISK ASSESSMENT

When conducting a risk assessment, you should have adequately assessed the outdoor space for hazards, deciding who may be harmed and by what activities, and considered the measures that you will put in place so that risks are controlled and injuries are unlikely. Risk Assessments should be reviewed regularly, but especially when there have been significant changes to the outdoor spaces.

In terms of assessing risk, written risk assessments require you to:

1. Identify the hazard
2. Identify persons who may be harmed and by what activities
3. Existing or pro-active measures to control risk
4. A risk rating before and after the control measures
5. Additional or reactive control measures
6. A risk rating after additional or reactive control measures

For more information on Health and Safety at Work visit:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm>

There is also a useful section called Mythbusters to clarify any questions you might have around Risk Assessments and Health and Safety:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/myth/index.htm>

RISK MANAGEMENT

EXAMPLE

Here is an example risk assessment pro-forma by Earthwatch which outlines the areas that require completing. A blank copy is included in the module.

HAZARD OBSERVED	WHO COULD BE HARMED BY THE HAZARD?	RESULT	RISK RATING	CONTROL MEASURES	RATING AFTER MEASURES	FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED?	RATING AFTER FURTHER ACTION

The use of a coloured risk rating matrix helps determine a risk rating. An example is provided below. This involves understanding what the likelihood of an incident occurring is (Remote, Unlikely, Possible, Highly Likely) in addition to what the impact or consequence resulting from the hazard may be (Minimal, Low, Medium, High or Very High).

RISK ASSESSMENT MATRIX						
LIKELIHOOD OF RISK		MINIMAL: VERY MINOR INJURIES OR RESULT	LOW: INJURIES OR RESULT REQUIRING FIRST AID TREATMENT	MEDIUM: SIGNIFICANT INJURY, REQUIRING TREATMENT BEYOND FIRST AID	HIGH: SEVERE INJURIES OR RESULT, PERMANENT DISABILITY OR DEATH	VERY HIGH: MULTIPLE DEATHS
	REMOTE	LOW RISK	LOW RISK	LOW RISK	LOW RISK	LOW RISK
	UNLIKELY	LOW RISK	LOW RISK	MEDIUM RISK	MEDIUM RISK	HIGH RISK
	POSSIBLE	LOW RISK	MEDIUM RISK	HIGH RISK	UNACCEPTABLE RISK	UNACCEPTABLE RISK
	HIGHLY LIKELY	LOW RISK	MEDIUM RISK	HIGH RISK	UNACCEPTABLE RISK	UNACCEPTABLE RISK

RISK MANAGEMENT

Here is a potential example from the Tiny Forests project of a hazard, and the control measures in place to mitigate the impact of the risk to teachers and students.

HAZARD OBSERVED	WHO COULD BE HARMED BY THE HAZARD?	RESULT	RISK RATING	CONTROL MEASURES	RATING AFTER MEASURES	FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED?	RATING AFTER FURTHER ACTION
SOILS FROM TREE PLANTING	TEACHERS AND STUDENTS	ALLERGIC REACTION	LOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• USE GLOVES• WASH HANDS• CARRY SANITISING GEL	LOW	NONE	LOW

There are many different types of risk assessment but the principles outlined above are all the same. If you need more information, speak to your designated Health and Safety lead in your school or the teacher responsible for risk assessments in your school. The process should not be onerous, but risk assessments should be based on the five-step approach to risk outlined above. Aspects of risk management can be incorporated into your outdoor learning contract. Another great tool for your pupils is to teach them to be SAFE:

Spot – spot the dangers

Advice – follow safety signs and advice

Friend – stay close to a friend, teacher or family member

Emergency – shout for help and know the correct emergency number to call

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