




# OUTDOOR Learning

**Anya Waddington looks at how the great outdoors is becoming ever more a part of the daily curriculum.**

Most of us have fond childhood memories of hours spent outdoors splashing in puddles and climbing trees; if my husband is to be believed, he was locked outside from dawn and barred from coming back inside until dusk! Today's children lead far more indoor existences due partly to busier family lives, an increased fearfulness and the lure of screens. One survey suggests that three-quarters of children spend less time outside than prison inmates. With so much focus on academic attainment and a packed curriculum there is pressure on teachers to stay in the classroom. Thankfully, recognition is growing of the value of outdoor learning: not simply for its obvious health benefits but also for its impact on educational wellbeing. I talked to several outdoor practitioners and prep schools who have linked outdoor activities to learning outcomes, enabling them to become part of the curriculum so there is no need to find "extra time" for the outdoors.

Forest School is a phrase we hear more and more. The concept originated in Scandinavia. It involves taking children out into the natural environment in order to nurture their development and creativity. Fancy some den building? Want to light a fire? How about following a map to some hidden treasure? Jane Worroll and Peter Houghton authors of 'A Year of Forest School' (see School News page 115) are both Level 3 qualified Forest School Leaders. They explain to me that Forest School is not just about doing one-off activities outside. They see the same group of children over a long period and on a regular basis, observe the group and will tailor activities to suit an issue. This is child-led, "therapeutic learning": if a child lacks empathy or resilience they will find an activity to suit the issue.



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Alley's Prep School in Dulwich introduced Forest School about six years ago. The Headmaster, Simon Severino, and Reception class teacher, Nicola Price, are struck with the independence and confidence it inspires in the children: over the year the Reception children take on responsibility for tools, clothing and possessions. "We often find that when our boys and girls are given the opportunity to learn in a completely different context and group dynamic, hitherto unseen aspects of their personalities are encouraged to come to the fore."

Forest School is an integral part of Bromley High School's curriculum in Years 1 to 4. Kelly Powell, Deputy Head of the Junior School, explains that they are lucky enough to have two sites allowing one area to rejuvenate while they use the other. Three teachers have been trained as Forest Leaders. A rope marks Forest School, the children chant a song as they arrive and then everyone is counted into the "safe space". It is structured and yet free. Children feel able to ask questions, possibly because the teacher isn't behind a desk and there is no demarcated teacher/child space. The Bromley girls collaborate and share their experiences while they make photo frames out of sticks and strings or birdfeeders. Friendships are forged and the outdoors is brought back into the classroom. Bromley are part of the "The Power of Reading" project to develop language and writing. In order to teach this they have used Forest School – drawing in the sand and chanting. "[Forest School] gives ownership to the children, empowers them and builds confidence in the children you wouldn't expect to see it in," says Kelly.

It's this "joined-upness" between outside and inside, and between subjects, that Steven Shove of Really Wild Education is passionate about. Steven works with schools helping teachers to



Alleyn's Junior School

bring outdoors into the classroom and “to bring the curriculum alive”. His mantra is: “Ignite, inspire and achieve”. He gets pupils inspired and works with teachers to give them the aids to keep that inspiration in the class. Outside, children are less likely to realise they’re learning. So, for example, map reading is all about angles and trigonometry. And it’s important not to see them as separate.

While Clayesmore isn’t officially a Forest School, it has embraced the outdoors as a way of keeping children engaged with learning. Once a week they welcome Antony from The Ancient Technology Centre near them in Dorset. Antony talks to the teachers about the topics they are teaching and complements the curriculum. Outdoor education is “not a distraction from the core subjects” but a vital ingredient: “It encourages children to think and solve problems,” says Will Dunlop, the Headmaster, who is a keen advocate of outdoor education as a way of engaging all children and believes it can also help to combat underachievement. “Children who appear to struggle in the traditional classroom setting suddenly take off,” he says. The pupils ask questions, develop mental curiosity, and the practical nature of the experience makes it engaging and memorable. A child who is bored in the classroom will find that something he sees for real actually has a point. It is practical and relevant so becomes “a memorable experience”. It’s not surprising that many see the therapeutic value of outdoor education, for example, in reducing attention deficit disorder.

Outdoor Work (ODW) at Dunhurst (Bedales Prep School) fully embraces the spirits and ideals set out by the school’s founder, John Badley in 1893. The principal of “learning and growing by doing” was and still remains central to Badley’s vision of using Head, Hand and Heart to develop the whole child in mind, body and spirit. All pupils have a double lesson per week with many more opportunities

beyond that to extend the children’s interest. The activities and projects undertaken by the children are largely guided by the changing seasons and range from maintenance of Dunhurst’s land (for example, coppicing, woodcutting or tending to the chickens); to building (bridge construction or fence building) and rudimentary farming (growing vegetables, harvesting apples and juice pressing or wilderness and outdoor survival). ODW is truly multi-dimensional learning and a superb foundation based on practical experience that sets them up for the programme in the senior school where many

pupils opt to take an Outdoor Work BAC (Bedales Assessed Course – the school’s GCSE alternative).

Importantly, outdoor learning does not require acres of school grounds. Alongside daily maths and science lessons outside (learning about angles by looking at a branch of a tree is much more interesting and memorable than a text book), the Dragon Pre-Prep – right in the middle of urban Oxford – has a termly Empty Classroom Day when everything is taught outside. This year Little Forest Folk, London’s first full-time outdoor nursery, has won

the Queen’s Award for Enterprise for Innovation. Since starting in 2015 it has spread rapidly, and is now in five London locations in Barnes, Chiswick, Fulham, Wandsworth and Wimbledon. (See our Nursery Guide for details.) Their mission is to help two to five year-olds become “creative, resilient little learners”.

By committing to learning both inside and outside the classroom, schools are able to teach children that learning is not something that only occurs when a book is open and a pen is in hand. The last word goes to that lover of the great outdoors Wordsworth: “Let nature be your teacher”.



Dunhurst, Bedales Prep

