

Outdoor Learning

Practical guidance, ideas and support for teachers and practitioners in Scotland

Section 4:

Places to learn outdoors: school and centre grounds

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There are significant advantages to using school and centre grounds as a place for learning. It is usually the first outdoor space beyond the building and thus is quick to access on a planned or spontaneous basis and the connections between indoor and outdoor learning can be immediate. Becoming familiar with leading learning in your school or centre grounds can also give opportunities to develop the skills and confidence that will allow the use of outdoor spaces further afield.

Children and young people can develop a more intimate relationship with their grounds than almost any other outdoor space, exploring it at break times as well as in class. Children and young people view school grounds as their space and can be given opportunities to be stewards of their environment.



'When I made the decision to get my class outside more frequently, I realised I had to be prepared. I looked at my termly plans in all curriculum areas and decided where being outside would make a positive difference to an activity or series of activities that I intended the class to undertake. My plans included investigating angles in maths, environmental art, exploring Buddhism outdoors and sensory activities in science. This may appear a lot but it was only one or two activities per week.

I informed my headteacher about my intentions as well as submitting the plan and a risk assessment for using the school grounds for curriculum activities. I wrote to parents to let them know their children would need to bring outdoor clothing and footwear. As it was the winter term, I had emergency indoor plans. I thought this would reassure everyone that I was sensitive about the need to account for the weather.

I put together a bag of items that I knew would be helpful. This included small plastic bags, handwipes, a selection of magnifying glasses, bug boxes and mirrors and a whistle. It was a different sort of preparation from being indoors. I found myself checking out the areas of the school grounds to see which area would work best for an activity.

Initially the preparation and planning took longer than for indoor activities. The children were very excited and it took several sessions to get them used to the idea that it was class time and not play time. For example, the best gathering place was on a decked area. The children just wanted to jump up and down on it the first two sessions! Another time, a child uprooted a small holly tree to show me her prickly object during a sensory activity. So we all learned about leaving living plants alone in a very experiential way.

Surprisingly the weather was always good enough to go outside when planned, although the children didn't always have the right footwear. One child often turned up in slippers. She would borrow a pair of gym shoes and used them instead.

By the time the summer term arrived the children and I had got into the routine of going outside. My mindset had changed and I was able to 'think outdoors' naturally without having to put any more effort in than I would with an indoor activity.

That was three years ago. I'm still taking children outside almost every day that I teach.' *Supply teacher, Aberdeen City*

Getting outside

Often the hardest step is actually getting into the routine of going outside. Initial planning and preparation can make this easier. The following advice may help:

- send out letters to parents requesting that outdoor clothes and footwear are brought to school daily throughout the year. The Scandinavian proverb states, 'There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing'
- save time and do an activity outdoors just before or after break, lunchtime, arriving in the morning or leaving in the afternoon. In secondary schools, arrange to meet your class outside at an agreed spot for outdoor sessions. This works well if it can happen on a regular basis for a period of time
- get pupils practised at getting outdoor clothes on and off. Routines can be developed that encourage learners to do this quickly and without fuss. This includes going to the toilet before going outside
- have outdoor clothes in a class dressing-up box and let children in younger classes practise getting outdoor clothes on and off
- have bags and resources easily accessible and ready to go. Encourage children to carry resources and put them in a designated place outside and back inside
- undertake a risk–benefit assessment with the class(es) being taught outside. Ensure the learners are part of this process. Informed and involved children and young people will consistently make better decisions about how to handle risks and this builds on the existing skills of the learners
- spend time planning a series of outdoor activities that link to indoor classwork. Initially keep these short and simple whilst learners get used to working outside. Often games work well to begin with

'The active problem-solving activities were a brilliant beginning for me. I gained confidence through trying them with my class. It's really important to have success early on, or it puts you off going out.'

Class teacher, Newhills Primary School

Clothing

- ask for donations of spare outdoor clothing in case any pupil forgets or does not have any. This can take a long while to establish as not everyone will remember to do it. It needs frequent reminders in newsletters and on websites. Alternatively, source some sets of outdoor clothing, wellies and woolly socks. Over-trousers are especially useful as these are rarely donated
- develop a class enterprise project where learners write to different outdoor clothing companies for samples. They evaluate the products according to agreed criteria on cost, durability, comfort, etc. Then the learners plan a fundraiser to raise the cash for a class set of outdoor clothes
- have a stock of cheap plastic ponchos or challenge the pupils to design a reusable outdoor suit from black bin liners
- in secondary schools, an interdisciplinary approach can be taken to developing a bank of outdoor clothing. The art department could work with pupils to brighten up pairs of welly boots. The home economics classes can create designer hats. Science departments can involve students in testing samples of outdoor clothing for effective wear

Thinking about space outside

Be aware of the possibilities or restrictions of any outdoor space. Learners may need to safely stand, sit down, squat and move around. They have to be able to hear the leader, and each other. Consider the weather conditions and the space and decide whether it is suitable for speaking activities, or whether movement and dance need to be the focus. Choose an outdoor space that will suit your needs and exploit that space to the advantage of the children and young people.

Using sound calls or a whistle can be an excellent way of setting boundaries for children in a range of environments, especially where there are no physical barriers. It can be an interesting investigation to find out how far sound can carry in different weathers and to use a 'sound map' to mark out the boundaries. Using this approach also gives learners responsibility and develops trust. Another option is to request that learners work where they can see an adult at all times.



Gathering outside

Having a gathering place is helpful for children and young people. This may vary according to the weather. Go for a sheltered spot in windy or wet weather. Find shade in hot, sunny weather.

‘Quick Circle’ can be a good motivator for getting pupils into a circle. Shout out the name of your class and start counting. The challenge is to decrease the time it takes to get into a circle. For quick classes, add in additional challenges, such as doing it silently or remembering who is beside whom and getting into the same place back in the circle. This is a form of whole-class problem solving, so encourage the learners to discuss strategies for this.

‘Sticky elbows’ is a technique where everyone puts their hands on their hips and gets their elbows to touch each other to create the circle. ‘Sticky shoulders’ is good on windy days where learners might need to huddle to hear you. Ensure that you are facing the wind and the children have their backs to the wind.

Use a whistle or signal to let learners know to gather round. The sound needs to be heard in the wind. Challenge the class to devise a sound or call and response that can carry over a large space. This becomes the signal to which everyone responds, for example a long call of ‘cooo-eee!’ The pupils can respond with an echo of the sound as they gather.

Very young children often enjoy singing a song that signals that it’s time to gather round, tidy up or move to a different place.

The weather

‘There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.’

Scandinavian proverb

In terms of mindset, it is helpful to compare Scotland to Norway. By comparison we have a very good northern climate. Ways of managing outdoor learning in all weathers include the following:

- go for planned spontaneity. If the weather is inclement, wait until it improves before going out but don’t let a light shower dampen your plans. There is usually a let-up at some point in the day. In secondary schools look for opportunities where there is flexibility about when a specific skill or focus is taught outside
- learning intentions can be shared prior to going outside to ensure a relevant and coherent purpose. Review sessions can happen back inside too. In secondary schools, this can happen the period before and after the outdoor session

- on cold days plan activities that involve moving about. When using dens or shelters, have fleece blankets and other warm material to help children stay warm if they are sitting down or staying still
- poor weather can add interest and challenge to outdoor experiences. However, consult the children and young people and consider their thoughts. Some classes enjoy a wet and windy session outside, especially if appropriately dressed
- children and young people need to learn to cope with ice and snow. Invite them to think about how to behave on icy surfaces. Plan investigative activities where the children can move but have no need to run around. If the ground is like an ice rink, then consider postponing an activity. In any case, proper briefings, clear expectations and a sense of purpose will help to limit slips and falls. Use common sense
- children and young people should bring sun hats and wear sunscreen, in line with school or local authority policy, on sunny days if they are outside for a long time. On sunny days, the teacher or responsible adult should face the sun. Wear light-coloured lenses if wearing sunglasses so that eye contact can be made
- use portable insulated seating mats if there are activities that involve sitting. These can be put on benches, grass or anywhere, ensuring there is always a warm, dry place to sit. Portable mats can be purchased from outdoor shops. Alternatively, challenge the children to create their own from basic household materials, which meet agreed criteria

'Anyone who says sunshine brings happiness has never danced in the rain.' Jo Liversidge

One teacher and 33 children

In the school grounds, the same ratios generally apply as indoors.⁴⁷ Initially teachers do need to think about and plan outdoor activities carefully. Over time the effort required does subside. The more frequently a class of children learn outside, the more normal this becomes for everyone as routines become established

To begin with, plan activities that you feel most comfortable with outside. For instance, if you like doing art inside, take art outside. Build up your confidence over time and look for support from others who might have more experience. Often it helps just to start with simple games that develop the routine of going outdoors.

If you have a classroom assistant allocated to your class, then use this time to go outside. Literacy and numeracy activities can be undertaken outside. Alternatively use parents or other volunteers.

47 You should always check with your senior management team or local authority.

It is helpful to find other practitioners who are also developing outdoor learning. Brainstorm planning sessions and look for opportunities for joint work outside through shared projects and activities.

Behaviour outside

Staff frequently comment about the positive impact of an outdoor activity. Children and young people often enjoy the opportunity to work on practical tasks outside.

It can take time for children to acclimatise to being outside. Some pupils who present challenging behaviour indoors can manage better outside. Likewise, some find a new situation harder to manage. Practitioners need to be sensitive to this and be prepared to tweak their techniques for supporting children and managing their behaviour outside.

Initially, keep the sessions short and focused until routines have been embedded. Ensure that the time outdoors is part of ongoing curriculum work and not a bolt-on activity. Discuss, share and enjoy being outside. Extend the collaborative learning environment to being outside. Allocate roles and tasks, and make sure everyone knows what to do. Have equipment and resources accessible and organised.

Raising the profile of being outside as part of learning and teaching activities helps too. Displays inside and out of children enjoying their learning outdoors help. Keep class or individual journals about what happens. Spend time making the outside areas attractive and demonstrate that the school or centre values the outdoor area.

Have the same expectations as inside. If a pupil is misbehaving, then follow your school behaviour policy. Generally, the approaches used effectively indoors will work outside too. After an outdoor activity, review what worked well and what would be even better the next time.

It is worth discussing the use of school grounds if there is limited space outside with other staff. Indoor activities can be affected by classes working outside. It may be necessary to have shared agreements in place.

Involving parents and carers

Parents and carers are generally positive about learning outdoors.⁴⁸ It is important to share the benefits of taking learning outdoors with parents and to discuss concerns and practicalities about children spending time outside throughout the year and in different weather conditions. Create opportunities for parental involvement. For example:

- discuss and share ideas and plans for outdoor activities with parents through standard communication channels
- invite parents to assist with outdoor activities
- consult and involve parents, the Parent Council and PTA with any school grounds improvement work and opportunities within the curriculum for learning outside

48 Scottish Parent Teacher Council, Grounds for Learning (2010), Outdoor Learning and Play: Parental Survey Report www.itl.org.uk/pdf/1295453810Outdoor-Learning-and-Play-Final.pdf

- have a large number of photos and positive images of the learning that goes on
- share the research about why it is important for children to be learning outside. Combine this with quotes and positive feedback from the children and insert these into newsletters and add to classroom and outdoor displays
- organise a parent workshop or include a session on outdoor learning when children first start at the school
- look at the factfile on outdoor learning on the Education Scotland website and share this with parents and staff. This can be found at http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/publications/c/publication_tcm4660547.asp?strReferringChannel=parentzone&strReferringPageID=tcm:4-633325-64
- provide engaging and meaningful outdoor activities as homework

'The children have a good appetite, a more positive attitude and sleep better when they have been outside. If the children are stuck inside all day, they are agitated and **crabbit.**' Parent volunteer, Woodlands Nursery, South Lanarkshire



Equipment and resources

This is a matter of personal preference, subject, project and activity. Experiment and find out what is most useful for your context. Some resources will be useful on an ongoing basis whereas others will only be needed for particular aspects of your work.

Outdoor items will get worn much more quickly. Thus the best resources are those which are cheap or free to replace, such as ex-household items and natural materials. This is also important in demonstrating a whole-school commitment to the sustainable and wise use of resources. Safe 'junk' can be used for den building, bridge making, machine producing and other activities. Buy a class set of portable seats and clipboards that can be used anywhere instead of benches and tables, allowing greater flexibility in where learning takes place outside.

Outdoor resources need to be accessible. Have them organised and ready for immediate use. For example, ensure you have a shed for tools beside the garden area. Know how wet resources will be managed and dried. Encourage independence and make routines less demanding through allocating routine jobs around managing equipment and resources to learners.

If natural materials are not readily available within the school grounds or outdoor space then they can be collected or purchased very cheaply. When collecting natural materials always check by-laws, follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code⁴⁹ and gather a little at a time. Some materials, such as fossils, bulbs, mosses and lichens, have strict collection codes. Never remove rocks and stones from walls, no matter how derelict, without the landowner's permission. More information can be obtained from Scottish Natural Heritage.⁵⁰ Advice can also be sought from countryside rangers and Forestry Commission Scotland, especially if you need sticks and wood products. For logs, contact your nearest sawmill. Give specific instructions about the material and the level of finish required.

Examples of natural materials that can be used for learning activities include twigs, sticks, bark, logs, shells, leaves, seaweed, nuts, seed pods, pebbles, rocks, compost, soil, hay, organic cotton, silk, wool, jute, dried flowers and plants. Natural materials look aesthetically more pleasing when stored in natural containers such as jute bags and willow baskets. This is, of course, in addition to all of the materials that can be used in situ in a natural outdoor environment that do not need to be collected.

Schools and centres may need to agree how available natural materials should be used within the outdoor area. For example, picking common weeds from the playing field may be fine. Stripping the formal display at the school entrance may not be acceptable.

49 Scottish Outdoor Access Code www.outdooraccess-scotland.com

50 Scottish Natural Heritage www.snh.org.uk

Transforming outdoor spaces

Children and young people may easily spend one hour per day, every day, of their school lives in the school's outdoor space. Well-designed and thoughtfully developed school grounds enrich learning and play opportunities. Improving outdoor spaces dovetails naturally with most school improvements and strongly links with the approaches to learning and teaching advocated in Curriculum for Excellence. In particular, an outdoor space developed along sustainable principles can lend depth and relevance to learning activities within the Sustainable Development Education (SDE) theme, actively demonstrating sustainable approaches to living.

Developing an outdoor space gives pupils of all ages real-world learning opportunities, including project planning, consulting peers, reviewing options, budgeting, fundraising, practical work and evaluation. All of these develop skills, citizenship and a sense of participation and pride in school. Learners who struggle with classroom learning can demonstrate other skills and be publically recognised for them. There are strong links between OL and enterprise in education.

Alastair Seaman, General Manager, Grounds for Learning,⁵¹ gives the following advice:

- understand where you are starting from. Take time to find out how the space is currently used. What works well? What doesn't? What interests and skills do staff and parents have? Who could help, including partner organisations and local authority staff?
- identify what you want to do outside and the difference you want this to make for children or young people. For example, is the priority a need to tackle behaviour at break times? Do you want to develop more engaging ways of delivering the curriculum? Or is there a need to get children more active? This will enable you to work out what changes are needed. Seek permission to make changes, if needed
- develop a long-term vision with the whole school community. Try to work out what everyone would like the grounds to look like in 15 years' time – and then do a little bit every year to work your way towards this. Try to avoid piecemeal approaches based on 'What should we do this year?'
- think about ongoing maintenance. Who is going to look after your new garden? Who will water the plants during the school holiday? Who will carry out any inspections of the new play equipment?
- get everyone involved in a participatory and inclusive approach. Include pupils, parents and staff, from setting the vision through to implementing work on the ground and ongoing maintenance
- think about how the whole project can be a learning experience. What opportunities are there for teaching and learning? Involve a number of members of staff in developing plans. This will increase the sustainability and viability of the project as well as sharing the workload. It will also improve the likelihood and quality of interdisciplinary teaching and learning
- consider inviting an accredited school grounds facilitator to your establishment to provide advice, support and training. This may save substantial amounts of money in the long term

Engaging partners in transforming spaces

Practical grounds projects offer good opportunities to establish and develop strong links with the local community and partner organisations. Examples include:

- ranger services advising on plants that improve the biodiversity of the outdoor space
- British Trust for Conservation Volunteers assisting parents with the clearance of a disused part of the grounds and preparing a site for development
- local businesses donating unwanted scrap materials for developing free play with loose parts at break times
- landscaping services advising on where to obtain top soil and donating bedding plants as part of Britain in Bloom work
- an egg producer supplying a school with egg-laying hens
- local allotment holders helping to set up and run a school vegetable garden
- older residents sharing their childhood playground experiences and games

Parents and staff have skills and interests that can be tapped into. It may be worthwhile creating a database of local organisations and individuals who can help with different projects within the school. This can also be a way of engaging male adults in school activities.

At a national level, the John Muir Award scheme can include developing outdoor spaces and school grounds activities as ways of meeting its criteria. The Eco-Schools Award includes school grounds as one of its nine topics. Other local award schemes may also provide an incentive to develop outdoor spaces using a participatory approach that involves pupils.

Funding

The amount of funding required to improve an outdoor space varies enormously. The most sustainable and effective approaches happen when schools or centres decide to make year-on-year small-scale improvements in line with children's interests, school improvement priorities and ongoing projects and events. This can be achieved through using scrap materials such as tyres as planters. Consider how flowerpots, hanging baskets and bird boxes can be used to bring nature into built areas. Outdoor art displays can brighten up a dark corner of the grounds on a temporary basis.

Find financial support so that the ideas can be developed properly. There are grants available locally and nationally. Think creatively about school budgets, apply for funding or hold a fundraising event to secure what you need to do the job properly.

Getting to know your school grounds or outdoor space

These activities are designed to help learners and practitioners get to know and use the school grounds.

Play games such as follow my leader, grandmother's footsteps and hide and seek. These help children develop spatial awareness. Play guessing games, asking questions such as 'Look around you, who or what lives in here?'

What are your top ten favourite things about the school grounds? List them and create a group wordle.⁵² What are the most popular features or activities? Is anything missing that would improve the school grounds? Share your findings with the pupil council or eco committee for further action.

Which is the most interesting part of your school grounds? Justify your decision with evidence collected within 30 minutes.

Find an interesting object outside and write as many questions as you can about it. Think about its physical features, construction, function, age, value, origin or design. Which question would you most like the answer to? Have a discussion about questions and whether it is better to be able to ask one good question or lots of questions of varying quality. Decide what makes a good question.

Send pupils out for a very brief look at the plants growing on the playing fields. Discuss the common types of plants that can be found on playing fields. The pupils should choose a small selection of plants to survey then compile an identification board, making sketches and notes about the chosen plants. Use a quadrat to randomly sample areas of the school playing fields. A systematic survey can then be carried out using a transect line across the grounds. Results can be analysed in a variety of ways showing plant distribution, effect of trampling and line-marking, shade etc.