

Curriculum for Excellence Factfile – Outdoor Learning



What is outdoor learning?

Any form of learning which takes place outdoors ranging from reading a book outside through to a life-changing four week expedition abroad with a large variety of outdoor experiences in between can be considered as outdoor learning.

Why does outdoor learning matter?

All learning is important whether it takes place indoors or outdoors. However, sometimes the outdoor environment can be a more effective and stimulating place to learn than indoors. Frequent and regular outdoor learning encourages children and young people to engage with their natural and built heritage and brings a host of benefits in terms of health and wellbeing. The outdoors also provides excellent opportunities to use a wide range of skills and abilities not always relevant in the classroom.

So is it a subject?

Outdoor learning isn't a single subject or class; it is an approach to learning which can be incorporated at appropriate times into every area of the curriculum. Being outdoors allows children and young people to engage directly with the environment through a direct, 'hands on' approach with challenges which cannot be offered in the classroom. Outdoor learning brings together many different areas allowing children and young people to 'make connections' on their learning journey. For example, a project involving growing vegetables involves numeracy, sciences and health and wellbeing as well as other skills.

Who is responsible for outdoor learning?

All staff have a responsibility to offer 'regular and frequent' outdoor learning experiences from early years, through school and beyond. This includes time spent in classes as well as intervals, lunchtimes and after-school activities.

Literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing are everyone's responsibility and taking learning outdoors can greatly help develop understanding. Staff should ensure that the outdoor environment is used in a stimulating and meaningful way. For example, in numeracy outdoor learning could be measuring angles and calculating bearings and journey times. In health and wellbeing it could be becoming physically active in alternative ways and improving emotional wellbeing and mental health by being outdoors.

Where and what will children and young people learn outdoors?

Children and young people will learn progressively about different places through exploration, play, direct experience of natural materials, the natural and built environment and through a series of planned and structured learning and teaching activities. They will learn about curriculum areas, for example studying the weather for science and social studies. Outdoor experiences take place through all seasons and in a wide range of weather conditions, thus fostering adaptability and resilience. Different outdoor learning experiences offer a breadth of opportunities for personal and learning skills development in areas such as communication, problem solving, information technology, working with others, creativity and thinking skills. These transferable skills are required to meet the opportunities and challenges of a rapidly changing world. Being outdoors offers challenge and enjoyment through learning about different aspects of the curriculum in an engaging and relevant way.

How can parents help?

The support and contribution of parents and carers is very important. They are key partners in delivery and help to prepare children and young people for outdoor learning experiences. Parents and carers can often provide rich outdoor

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Curriculum for Excellence
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May 2011

learning outwith educational settings, as well as assisting on outdoor visits. Your child's school may ask you to ensure that your child is suitably dressed for learning outside all year round. Being enthusiastic about being outdoors is one of the most valuable ways in which parents can help both their child and school or setting.

What happens at different stages?

Pre-school

The children at almost all pre-school settings are outdoors on a daily basis, learning through energetic play, exploration and investigation.

Primary

Children develop their knowledge and skills to higher levels. Learning outdoors often takes place in the school grounds and local community through exploration and study of the local landscape. There may be opportunities to visit a farm, forest, outdoor centre, historical site, country park etc.

Secondary

All curriculum areas provide a range of progressive learning opportunities outdoors. There are often opportunities to explore rural and urban spaces further afield and these could perhaps include a visit abroad. The outdoors also offers many themes to support interdisciplinary study (working across traditional subject boundaries) or transition projects with real and relevant experiences to develop and deepen understanding. It is also common for learners to engage with more challenging adventure activities.

Will children and young people be placed at risk when outdoors?

Most outdoor learning activities carry no higher risk than activities and situations faced by learners on a day-to-day basis. To ensure that the benefits of any planned activity outweigh the risks many practitioners utilise a risk/benefit approach which is advocated by the Health and Safety Executive. Schools and local authorities will also have comprehensive guidance in place which teachers and others will follow. Risk management is a life skill and learners should be educationally involved in the process from the outset. This will help learners to make good decisions about risks as they develop.

What measures have been put in place to manage the safety of my child whilst learning outdoors?

Schools and local authorities have guidelines for all off-site visits. Measures will be in place to ensure that: there are agreed ratios of adults to children, staff are competent and emergency arrangements are in place. Children and young people will, where appropriate, be encouraged to manage their own and others' safety.

Who else has a role to play?

Learners are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their learning, indoors and outdoors.

Professionals and specialist organisations, such as Countryside Rangers, Active School Co-ordinators, Grounds for Learning, Royal Highland Education Trust, work in partnership with schools to deliver learning outdoors.

Employers will be able to make a contribution in the school community or offer opportunities for work placements outdoors, for example in forestry, eco tourism or recreation, that expose young people to real-life experiences as part of their development.

Third/voluntary sector e.g. youth workers and others (including people from the local community) work alongside schools to support young people by offering personalisation and choice through a wide range of learning opportunities within and outwith school. Skills (for example, gardening) can be developed and the chance provided for personal achievement through awards such as Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, John Muir Award and ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network).

Further information online:

www.LTScotland.org.uk/outdoorlearning – more detailed information on outdoor learning in the curriculum

www.LTScotland.org.uk/Parentzone – information for parents about all aspects of children's education

www.LTScotland.org.uk/understandingthecurriculum – more detailed information on Curriculum for Excellence

www.sqa.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence – latest information on the new qualifications

www.hmie.gov.uk – information on inspection and evaluation of education provision

www.employersandyoungpeople.org – making connections with employers to support learning


www.enquire.org.uk Enquire – the national advice service in Scotland for additional support for learning

www.youngscot.org – tailored information for 11-26-year-olds

www.youthscotland.org.uk – the network of youth groups across Scotland

www.youthlinkscotland.org – the national agency for youth work in Scotland

www.sptc.info – Scottish Parent Teacher Council – national organisation for parents' groups in Scottish schools



Curriculum for Excellence is a major change to the education system in Scotland that aims to raise standards of learning and teaching for all 3-18-year-olds, wherever they learn. In this factfile we sometimes use the term 'parents' for short – we mean all parents and carers. When we talk about 'learners' we mean all young people learning in nursery, school, college, community learning, training, special schools, extended support and secure settings. 'Teachers' or 'teaching staff' means all staff who support young people's learning e.g. lecturers, nursery staff, trainers, youth workers, learning support personnel, among others.