

Teaching Outside: How and Why



David Attenborough on outdoor areas



“Natural spaces are essential to human development and wellbeing, and none more so than those that we set aside for use by our children. A school playground is a vital space.”

Connecting pupils with nature



Having daily contact with a natural space is vital for children. For many, the only occasion they might have to do this is while on their school grounds.

Taking learning outdoors can provide a new perspective not only on a curriculum topic, but also in developing an understanding of why nature is so important.

If we want our pupils to grow up with the desire to protect nature, then they need to experience it, appreciate it and understand it.



Why should we teach outside?



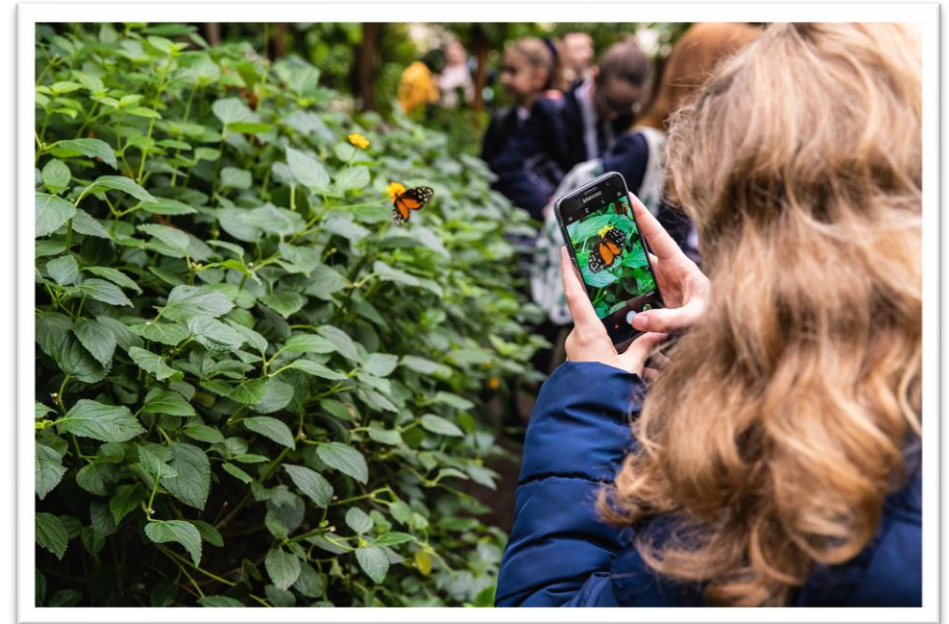
Although perhaps not practical for every lesson, taking learning outside can have huge advantages: it provides opportunities for students to make real world connections and develop their problem-solving skills, while encouraging teamwork and a sharing of knowledge and understanding between peers, rather than always relying on teacher feedback.

Learning outdoors



Taking learning outside the classroom does not have to be a huge undertaking, nor set in stone. As the class teacher, you are best positioned to assess how your class will respond on a given day; there may be other considerations linked to circumstances in the wider school day. You may also need to take a literal raincheck!

All forms of learning outdoors are valid, even if it is simply taking your class outside for a change of scene to do your plenary.





Making use of the natural resources outside your classroom allows learning to become more interactive and can be used to provide an alternative look at abstract concepts.



You may be further inspired by Andrea Stevenson's reflections on going from never having taught outdoors to teaching 100 maths lessons outside in the space of 3 months: [100 Maths Sessions Outside](#)

The benefits of learning outdoors



Research* has shown that outdoor learning has a significant impact on pupils' attitudes and attainment:

- Children who experience school grounds with diverse natural settings are more physically active; more aware of nutrition; more civil to one another; more creative.
- Exposure to natural settings increases children's ability to focus and enhances cognitive abilities.



*Ofsted: Learning Outside the Classroom (2008)

*Getting Out of the Classroom and Into Nature: frontiers in Public Health

*The Scottish School Grounds Survey Report 2025: Prof John H. McKendrick

Outdoor learning...



Makes lessons more enjoyable (95%)



Has a positive impact on behaviour (85%)



Engages pupils with learning (92%)



Leads to a greater understanding of nature (94%)



Improves pupils' health and wellbeing (92%)



Leads to a greater understanding of nature (94%)

Top tips for teaching outside



Behaviour is often cited as one of the main reasons why teachers are reluctant to take learning outside. When learning outside is a novelty for pupils, they are less likely to see the outdoor space as an extension of their classroom and instead associate it with where they spend their free time during break and lunch.

However, the more often lessons are taken outside, the more regular it becomes for pupils to see it as another space where they learn. Create places to gather that serve your teaching needs, such as log seats or an outdoor chalkboard attached to a fence.





The best way to ensure teaching outside becomes an embedded part of the curriculum rather than an ad-hoc activity is through adopting a **whole school approach**. Encourage your colleagues and school leaders to be involved in the delivery and development of your outdoor learning space.

When you first start teaching outside, **start small**: ten to fifteen-minute activities that can be moved throughout the day or week are best to start with, rather than aiming to spend a full hour outside.

Find and share early successes and problem-solve issues together. Meet as a school or department to collaboratively plan projects and make curriculum links, plus consider outdoor areas other than your school grounds to make use of, such as parks/green spaces and allotments, and cultural opportunities provided by museums, libraries, theatres and other local businesses.

Important elements in successful learning outdoors



In a report by HM Inspectors ([Successful approaches to learning outdoors, Education Scotland](#)), it was found that when the following six components of practice are put in place, it creates conditions for high quality outdoor learning:

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| 1) Effective leadership of outdoor learning | 4) Staff using the outdoors to support the wellbeing of students |
| 2) Using outdoor environments to support the delivery of the curriculum | 5) Creating partnerships to support the planning, delivery and evaluation of outdoor learning |
| 3) Making learning in and about the outdoors a regular feature of young people's learning experiences | 6) Staff CPD centred around building confidence in delivery outdoors |

Your outdoor area



How do your students feel about the outdoor area? Is it inviting, with places to play, sit and learn?

Involve pupils in discussions about what they would like if you are making any changes. Consider providing shelter and seated areas; planting native trees, shrubs and flowers to break up larger spaces and fill in smaller ones that are currently unused; and create new pathways that demonstrate preferred routes around your site.



Where would pupils feel more inspired to learn, play and spend time outdoors?



‘Go bags’



Schools that have embedded outdoor learning recommend having an outdoor learning pack or bag in each class that can be grabbed as needed. This also allows for flexibility in inclement weather.

Useful items to include:

- tarpaulin (to create an outdoor ‘carpet space’)
- pencils
- chalk
- pegs
- clipboards (these could be made out of cardboard using pegs to attach paper)
- a selection of natural resources (e.g. stones, twigs, conkers, etc.)
- ropes (could be used to create an outdoor washing line to hang up pictures or texts)





Outdoor learning policy

Creating an outdoor learning policy could help to promote teaching outside as an embedded part of the ethos of your school.

It can be included in staff and parent handbooks, published on school websites and advertised on noticeboards. Outdoor learning could become a real selling point for your school.

Planning and embedding outdoor learning:

- Who will lead on your school's outdoor culture?
- Who will be in charge of the budget? (e.g. buying in resources like chalk, clipboards, etc.)
- Who will organise ongoing training and support for staff?



The information and guidance provided by ZSL are intended for educational purposes only.

Responsibility for the safety and supervision of pupils remains with the school and its staff at all times. Teachers should only undertake activities that are appropriate to their setting and must ensure that all activities are planned, risk assessed, and carried out in accordance with their school's policies, procedures, and safeguarding requirements.