

# **Outdoor learning 'boosts children's development'**

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**Outdoor learning can have a positive impact on children's development but it needs to be formally adopted, a report suggests.**

Childhoods were dramatically changing, with fewer opportunities to spend time outdoors, researchers observed.

The loss of exposure to the natural environment would have negative long-term consequences, they warned. Establishing an "outdoor learning hub" would help teachers, and help shape policies and strategy, they suggested.

## **Long-term risks**

The report highlighted previous studies that showed that busier family lives, combined with an increased sense of fear in society, children were having fewer opportunities to explore their surrounding natural environment.

This was hampering children's social skills as well as risking stifling their long-term physical, emotional

development and wellbeing. Therefore, it was important that schools did not overlook the opportunities that outdoor learning provided to bridge this gap.

"At the moment, if outdoor learning is part of a school's curriculum in England, it is largely because the teachers recognise the value of it," said report co-author, Sue Waite, a reader in outdoor learning at Plymouth University, UK.

"With so much focus on academic attainment, there can be pressure on teachers to stay in the classroom which means children are missing out on so many experiences that will benefit them through their lives."

## Joined-up thinking

Ms Waite added that the report showed that although there was a significant body of research that supports outdoor learning in both formal and informal contexts, it was likely to remain on the margins of education until the benefits were recognised by policymakers and reflected in policies. The report calls for it to be adopted by national curricula.

The report made a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a "strategic policy/research hub" to "collate existing research, prioritise future research needs and help improve the alignment between research and policy".

The report also proposed a "Framework for 21st Century Student Outcomes" that could be delivered through regular lessons in natural environments.

The outcomes were grouped into five themes:

- A healthy and happy body and mind
- A sociable, confident person
- A self-directed and creative learner
- An effective contributor
- An active global citizen

"We need to be a little bit clearer about what forms of outdoor learning meet what purposes and aims (of curricula)," Ms Waite told BBC News.

"So rather than just being outdoors magically making things happen, activities such as residential outdoor experiences would be particularly effective for developing social skills and leadership," she said. "Whereas field studies would be particularly effective for greater awareness of the environment. What we argue in the report is for people to think about the purpose and place (of the activity), as well as the people involved, in order to construct different forms of outdoor learning that will meet certain (teaching) aims."

Ms Waite said that the findings acknowledged that schools were under pressure to deliver results, and found increasing constraints on time, finance and other resources.

She said that linking outdoor activities to learning outcomes would allow it to become part of a curriculum so there would be "no need to find extra time" for outdoor learning.

She added: "Getting it embedded within policy gives that extra reassurance to teachers that this is something justifiable to do."

Ms Waite's fellow co-author Prof Karen Malone, from Western Sydney University, added: "This report maps the evidence to encourage researchers and policymakers to meet at the interface of research and policy in order to shape a positive future for our children."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-36795912>