



PRE PREP

Editor

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When is Outdoor Learning Appropriate?

A strange question, to which the answer would ideally be ... always and for everyone! I imagine, most teachers would agree that almost any learning objective in a Preprep school setting can be delivered through an environment beyond the classroom. When outside, the children seem to light up, they have smiles on their faces because their experiences (I daren't say *learning* as that seems almost to formalise and restrict this

activity) are free and varied, they move with an abandonment that is unlike a general lesson. However, obviously, we need to balance this with thought and consideration for which subjects and learning objectives work better when learnt in the outdoors and which do not. Surely it can't be the best option for every activity at school and alongside this how do our parents respond to outdoor learning – keen or eyebrow rolling?

The EYFS curriculum and outdoor learning

The EYFS curriculum lends itself (of course) ideally towards child-initiated experience, the free-flow classroom moves between settings with ease and therefore this curriculum being more fluid hugs itself to the natural world outside. Many settings have regular outdoor learning opportunities whether these are a specific outdoor classroom, sessions that take learning to the playground or a more defined Forest School style experience.

Almost any objective on the Development Matters curriculum (although non-statutory) could be achieved outside the four walls of a regular classroom. To enable this, sometimes the adults will base themselves outside and see if their children choose to take the activity out or would rather complete this inside, often the activity and learning intention will be specifically established in the outside area.



It is perhaps the 'chicken or egg' phenomenon, do the children enjoy taking their learning outside or does the outside lend itself better to the learning which is what the children enjoy? What we do know is from even experiencing just a few days in the EYFS, you see children engaging with their outdoor area, mark making, manipulating materials, planning, problem solving with such freedom and exploration that it is a joy to watch. Have you ever noticed how children feel able to 'have a go' if the end result isn't defined or evidenced in a formal way; the outside seems to enable this more fully than the walls of a classroom – similar to writing on a whiteboard as opposed to in a book, you're far more likely to problem solve and dare if it is 'wipeable'.

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Outdoor provision and individual benefits

In our family, we are fortunate to live in a rural, leafy green area of Essex (I hasten to add that I am not saying I don't get envious of civilisation and shops occasionally!) and therefore my mother has a Forest School setting on her nature reserve in Bradwell-on-sea, often she has schools that visit to explore this area (she is a trained Forest School practitioner) and encourage their children to engage with their surroundings, climb trees, use wood and natural materials to create but also to feel at one with nature. When they start their day at the reserve, Mum has commented that for the first part (especially if they are not in the EYFS at their setting) the pupils almost need time to just tilt their heads back and stare at the sky, take in the birds, watch the rabbits dashing between the trees; if they are not local children (and therefore often not used to such a setting) they need time to perch on a log stool and just exist for a few moments (or hours) and absorb what is around them. Their teachers, families, parents sometimes feel this is a waste and want them 'to hurry up and learn' however, the Forest School ethos seems very much about encouraging and embracing whatever we feel prompted to do, take time to just exist - if this is to dwell on a log swing or up a tree then so be it.

When a group of home-schooled families visit the reserve, they seem to be more accepting of needing to take time to settle, it is recognised that whatever gains are taken from the day this is enough. It doesn't need to be timetabled and ticked off for assessment in a formal manner. Moreover, they have community groups such as families of children with additional learning needs who visit the forest school; sometimes a huge benefit is through being with

families with similar experiences to your own, it might be the shared flask of tea and a tin-foiled jacket potato chat at lunch is the best part of the session or it could be that your child engaging with mark making for the first time in the form of bonfire charcoal and leaf

phonics is the highlight of your month. Our individual benefits are precisely that ... individual. Who is to say what we might gain from outdoor learning – I am not sure I can always say the same of a defined learning objective in a classroom based lesson.



Does it need to be 'Forest School'?

I don't personally believe so, over the years of my teaching career I have experienced various different forms of outdoor learning provision and have felt that whilst the staff responsible for the pupils' provision of course need to consider what their intentions for the learning experience might be (this could be from specific training or their own knowledge) – depending on the desired experiences and outcomes for the pupils consider whether inside or outside seem to lend themselves best to this, would a playground or woodland work? If this is varied, set up materials in such places and encourage adult modelling of the desired outcome; see if the children join and where their experience takes them. I do not feel we need to define this as a certain type of outdoor provision.

I understand that it can be challenging, but care should be taken not to be too structured- an EYFS colleague has shared with me that they find that sometimes the need for a desired outcome- focused towards a specific objective/activity can, in fact, fog the children's creativity and be hindered by time constraints and resources or even the need to stay clean! She says it's hard for staff not to attempt to remove all the risks that actually the children need to experience and learn from, so that the pupils learn to manage their actions for themselves. If we were to follow Forest School ideals then these elements would, of course, be met, as Forest school follows 6 key principles:

- 1 Forest School is a long term process
- 2 Forest School takes place in a natural wooded environment
- 3 Forest School aims to promote holistic development
- 4 Forest School offers learners the opportunities to take supported risks
- 5 Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners
- 6 Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes (<https://thepracticalforestschool.com/the-6-forest-school-principles/>)

At Heathcote Prep and nursery school where I work (<https://www.heathcoteschool.co.uk/>) we have outdoor learning every Friday on our preprep curriculum map, we utilise the local outdoor areas (including the woodland and field) to enable our children to explore, play and be active, create, exist and develop as part of nature. This could be as part of their communication, literacy, maths, science/humanities/understanding of the world, art and design, motor skills (physical development), social (PSED/ PSHRE), musical development and much more! It could be one specific learning objective or a part of a huge intention for ongoing learning. Therefore, I agree wholeheartedly that this experience would be a sustained process, a one-off day isn't enough if this is to be a practice embedded in your ongoing curriculum.

However, I also know this can be incredibly challenging if your school environment or the area around you doesn't lend itself well to being at one with nature.



Post pandemic

The concept of our surroundings lending themselves well to free exploration made me ponder about recent events; in a post pandemic world we are more open (I believe) to making opportunities – whether this is enabling learning to continue off site to supporting our pupils' progress through non-academic means and fostering wellbeing when away from one's loved ones and support network. Outdoor exploration has been similar, it was not until we were told we must stay in that we were quite so very desperate to get out; an hour's outside exercise seemed an absolute privilege and joy. We relished in local woodland, parks and even the tiniest garden spaces became utilised whether for positive mental health or food, from hanging out of windows to tending high-rise window boxes to taking the greener routes to our shops whilst wearing masks. Indeed, even post pandemic localised travel and adventure opportunities are still being explored in a more diverse manner than previously. We are travelling across our beautiful island for holidays and 'staycations' far more than before with an absolute joy of nature exploration – from the puffin islands in Scotland to the castles of Wales to fishing in Cornwall.

Therefore, I feel the answer to the question of whether to engage with outdoor learning is moot, of course we

should! Really the question has to be around the best use of outdoor provision to enable maximum gains for our pupils' wellbeing and learning (across the range of subjects, aims and intentions from social to science!). Fundamentally the children should be leading the exploration and learning, developing new skills and communicating freely. Alongside all of this, we must balance parental understanding and expectations and consider any potential barriers to the experience - accessibility, timetabling, staffing and funding for resources. At Heathcote, we find our parents highly value the need for outdoor learning and we have recently extended this to the Prep school children, through enrichment days and activities and as part of the Science curriculum map. I would love to see this develop further – through Art, Humanities and so forth but as we have discussed here, this must be driven by sound, ambitious learning intentions for the pupils and be valued by all involved; only then will it be rich, varied and thrive. Challenge yourself to consider if an outside environment would not only support the lesson/objective/ aims but more critical than that, actively enhance the experience. If the answer is yes then outdoor learning is most certainly appropriate whatever the key stage, whatever the learning objective, whatever the subject being taught. Go on ... release your inner EYFS!



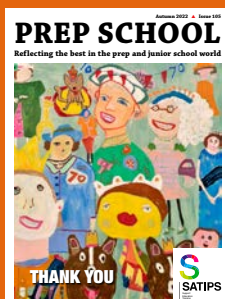
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Prep School Magazine

'Prep School' is published three times a year. It offers readers in Prep, Primary and Senior schools a broad range of authoritative articles on educational issues.

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Email: connect@learnplaynexus.com

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The CAP Award's nominated representative is Ian Jackson
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– Zellar

Zellar's Head of Education is Kevin Osborne
Email: kevin@zellar.com

✓ Wines

– Austin-Bailey Wines

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