

6. Outdoor education and age of participants

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Outdoor Education is a study subject in schooling that focuses on learning about self, others and the environment. The outdoors is a place that people of all ages can get pleasure from being in and can act doing different activities.

Today’s children and families often have limited opportunities to connect with the natural environment. Children spend more time viewing television and playing video games on computers than they do being physically active outside. Nature is important to children’s development in every major way—intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually and physically (Kellert, 2005).

Being outdoor is important for people of all age groups. If we make an effort to spend more time outdoors, we will appreciate how important our parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, bicycle routes and walking trails are. Our kids will have memories of what they did in nature as they were growing up. Parents and grandparents will be glad they took the time to do things outdoors as a family. And everyone will be healthier because of it.

The outdoors is full of creative opportunities and is rich with sensory stimuli. Children can explore and respond in a variety of ways to what they see, hear, feel, touch and smell.

- Infants and toddlers
- Late childhood, first adolescence (8-15)
- Senior schooling
- Adults

Infants and toddlers (0-5)

The outdoors is full of rich stimulus and sources of learning for very young babies and even the very youngest will respond to the difference in the outdoor environment. The sights, smells and sounds of outdoors will interest and intrigue them. As their head and body control develops they will turn towards what they see or hear and reach out to

whatever catches their attention. Being placed safely outside for sleep or rest periods gives babies and young children fresh air and an environment filled with new things to look at when they are awake.

The outdoors is a place where babies and toddlers can begin to find out about the world around them, the things that happen in that world and the opportunities for them to get involved. As they become more mobile babies and toddlers want to thoroughly explore everything they see outdoors. They will express their interests outdoors through their emerging language and communication skills and will rapidly absorb new words, signs and concepts relating to outdoor experiences.

They are often enthusiastic transporters, endlessly carrying objects from one place to another, for example, using small wheelbarrows to move conkers or leaves. The expanded space offers opportunities for greater physical challenges such as clambering up or rolling down a small hummock, using wheeled toys, digging in soil or collecting leaves.

The outdoors is a place where children can continue to learn by doing. They carry on building on the knowledge, skills and understanding that they have already acquired to make sense of the world around them. They are active learners, seeking information and continuing to question and explore. Their enthusiasm to participate in outdoor experiences is expanded as their social and communication skills develop and they seek out and enjoy the company of adults and other children.

Elementary school (5-8)

The old school suffered from an overdone confidence in the word and the oral presentation. It was spoken too much, told too much, asked too much and explained too much. In short: too many words came from the teacher's desk. (Telhaug & Mediås 2003:114)

A school that stimulates pupils and teachers to use books and the classroom *in combination with* outdoor learning in order to develop knowledge will contribute to a better school. This will not only have the potential to strengthen the pupils' learning outcome, but will also activate the pupils' bodies and senses as a natural part of the educational process. This will probably improve the pupil's well-being and health. The challenge we face in school is *to*

combine experience-based (practice) and text-based (theory) learning processes. This should be a natural approach for all kinds of learning.

Outdoor learning gives teachers and pupils a wealth of opportunities to work with and have experiences with central topics in all *school subjects*. They can seek out the sources of knowledge in the local surroundings of the school, and here they relate to different objects found in nature or in the urban areas as well as artefacts, phenomena and processes in their surroundings. Moreover, in nature and the urban environment outside school the teachers and the pupils find alternative “classrooms” which provide opportunities to teach in quite different ways than the text-based teaching in the classroom context makes possible.

The pupils experience the topics via their bodies and senses as becoming participants in a community of practise. In this way the pupils’ individual and social development as well as their cognitive, physical, motor and practical skills is stimulated. Consequently, outdoor learning can give the pupil possibilities to work with the topics as a whole human being, using their “head, heart and hand”. The school subjects can be related to outdoor learning in different ways.

The pupils in Norway schools have outdoor learning lessons one day every week that is 35–40 times a year. On these days the pupils carry out a voyage of discovery in the surroundings. Teachers and pupils move the educational work into the local environment, where most of the trips take place, and they are sometimes far away from school.

Senior schooling (15-19)

This usually involves content such as skill practice, planning and safety. In senior schooling it is possible to organise journeys or expeditions in outdoor education. Experiential learning through participation in outdoor activities provides opportunities for the development of self-awareness and is fundamental to understanding personal development through outdoor experiences. This course introduces and provides opportunities for developing personal skills.

Adults

Walking or being active outside is not only an easy, low-cost way to boost your mental well-being or lift your spirits, it can also improve your fitness level and provide numerous other health benefits.

For adults, spending more time being active outdoors can help with weight management. Other health benefits may include:

- reduced risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease (as cognitive function is enhanced by physical activity);
- more opportunities for social interactions, which may improve mental well-being;
- an improved sense of community and belonging, as a result of walking around and being active in the local neighbourhood or environments;
- an increase in energy and improved immunity;
- reduced risk of diabetes, heart attack and some forms of cancer.

In addition, adults and children can all benefit from outdoor activities and special times with family and friends. In many cases, the outdoor fun will create memories that last a lifetime!

So, what are you waiting for? Take a step in the right direction “for the health of it” and get active outdoors!

For example, if you are an older adult, you can avoid falls by:

- keeping active;
- ensuring you take your medications correctly;
- planning your activities with care and watching your step; and
- speaking up and telling others if you feel dizzy or light-headed, e.g., talk to a family member or your health care professional.

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The fact is, regular physical activity can slow the effects of aging and help to prevent falls, by increasing your muscle tone and overall fitness. This helps you to keep your balance in daily life and when doing physical activities.

Further resources (literature):

Learning Through Landscapes: subscription support service for Early Years settings, ‘Early Years Outdoors’; available online from: www.ltl.org.uk Learning Through Landscapes (2005)

Outdoors for Everyone: enjoying outdoor play in the Early Years, Southgate Publishers, Crediton (DVD).

„Curriculum for excellence through outdoor learning“
http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf

”OUTLiNES – Outdoor Learning in Elementary Schools – from Grassroot to Curriculum in Teacher Education”

<http://www.healthyalberta.com/>