



School Grounds

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Most schools and early years settings have a multi-faceted resource for learning outside the classroom on their doorstep — their own site or grounds.

The immediate surroundings of a school or early years setting are an easily accessible, cost-effective and convenient resource for learning outside the classroom. On-site activities can be led by your own staff, with the resources to hand.

The range of possible activities may be limited by the size and nature of the site; even so most school grounds can offer some or all of the following possibilities:

- play areas — for problem-solving/team-building games and activities
- habitats such as playing fields, hedges, meadows and ponds — for field study and science
- school garden or growing areas — for science, sustainability and food education
- whole site — for orienteering, outdoor literacy (e.g. storytelling) and practical numeracy
- activities, visual and performing arts (e.g. murals, sculptures, mosaics, music and drama)
- paved areas — for D&T outdoor experiments
- wooded areas — for Forest School activities
- playing fields — overnight camping experiences
- playground equipment and climbing/traversing walls — for adventurous activities.

Whatever the resources available on your site, you might consider establishing links with another school with a very different setting. Inner-city schools might link with rural schools and schools with one kind of resource on-site or close to hand might link with a partner with a very different kind of provision or opportunity.

With a small amount of investment in their use, design and management, school grounds can provide a wide range of opportunities for:

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Learning and discovery

Learning in the school grounds can never replace the experience of, for example, fieldwork and other educational visits beyond the school or setting. However, outdoor learning within the grounds strengthens off-site learning by allowing young people and teachers to practise the skills they need to make the most of learning experiences beyond the site. Teachers and other practitioners can build their confidence in managing learning outside the classroom by holding lessons in the familiar surroundings of their school grounds, perhaps team-teaching with a more experienced colleague. Young people can practise both specific skills, and responsible behaviour outside the classroom.

Learning outdoors in the school grounds is special. There are opportunities here which do not exist in the classroom, and simply having space allows a more physical, experiential way of learning. Young children in particular need physical movement as part of their learning. Noisy and messy activities are easier and the outdoors provides more sensory stimulation, making learning a whole-body experience. Young people can gain a fresh start from outdoor lessons, which can boost their confidence and help them feel positive about learning.

Relationships are different in lessons outside the classroom. Young people report that their teachers seem friendlier and the lessons more interesting. Going beyond the confines of the classroom requires young people to take more responsibility for their own behaviour. Lessons in the school grounds are often very suited to collaborative learning, helping young people to work together.

Projects to improve and look after the school grounds provide extra opportunities for learning. Young people develop their problem solving skills through hands-on experience, and learn practical skills. By caring for their immediate environment they discover the world around them and develop a sense of place.

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Physical health

Time spent outdoors is vital for physical health and development. The space of the school grounds encourages more physical play — especially important for the many young people for whom the school grounds is their only access to safe outdoor play. School grounds are a vital resource for sport, but can also introduce young people to other healthy outdoor activities beyond traditional sports, which may help them maintain levels of physical activity beyond school.

Physical activity outdoors will help develop muscles, tendons, bones, hearts, lungs and nerve connections. It will help young people to be more flexible and agile, and improve balance and



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coordination. Young people who have lots of opportunities for physical play are more likely to stay active and fit in the future.

School grounds are an excellent place for young people to test themselves and learn how to manage risk and overcome physical challenges. Exposure to acceptable levels of risk in the security of the school grounds will help avoid them seeking the thrill of risk elsewhere in unsupervised situations.

School grounds can be designed to better support physical health. Play areas can be created and managed to support different types of physical activity, individually as well as in small or large groups. Large play equipment, playground markings and small play equipment all have a role, but just as important is how you manage break-times to encourage all young people to take part in activities, and the layout and design of your school grounds will have a big effect on the character and use of the spaces. Food-growing areas will encourage healthy eating, and adventurous equipment will help young people learn about risk and challenge, testing their physical abilities in a safe environment. Shade — either from man-made structures or natural — is important on sunny days.

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Social confidence

The school grounds provide space for young people to spend free time away from adult control. It is here that they practise and consolidate making friends and learn to negotiate and cooperate with each other. Some develop their social skills through quiet play, or just talking with friends, and need social areas which allow for small groups as well as large to gather. Others socialise through physical play, developing not only physical skills but also team building and leadership skills. School grounds which provide for different types of play, and which are varied and interesting, encourage positive behaviour at break-times. Teachers report that young people who are happy at break-times are better able to settle and concentrate in lesson time.

Being involved in maintaining and improving their grounds also helps young people to grow in confidence, as they work with others and with adults, and learn that they can bring about change. By exploring their grounds and planning improvements they develop a sense of place, and learn to value and take ownership of their grounds. A school grounds improvement project involves such a wide range of tasks that everyone can demonstrate a skill. Being empowered to be creators of services, projects and activities, and not just recipients of them, can give a huge boost to young people's confidence and self-esteem. Overcoming the problems which occur in any project will help them develop resilience and the capacity to cope with changes and challenges, and bounce back during



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difficult times. The public nature of school grounds improvements encourages recognition of their achievements both within the school and in the wider community.

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Emotional well-being

The outdoor spaces are the part of the school site which most belong to young people, and well-designed and maintained school grounds can have a profound influence on the culture of the whole school. They signal to young people that the school values their needs and convey this to the wider community, along with the ethos of the school.

There is growing international evidence that natural environments are beneficial for psychological and emotional health. Contact with nature is important for providing refuge from the pressures of life, relieving stress and anxiety. Studies have shown that playing in natural environments can help reduce the symptoms of attention deficit disorder, and increase concentration levels. Experiencing a sense of awe and wonder at the natural environment is part of spiritual development.

Natural environments are not the only way that school grounds support emotional health. Fresh air, natural light and exercise boost us both physically and emotionally. Being active and having fun are possible in all school grounds, and will help young people feel happy at school. Spaces where they can get away from noise and bustle and have some quiet time with their thoughts will help them develop their emotional resources.

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Community engagement

The grounds of your school or setting are shared with your local community — at least visually and increasingly as a resource for local people and as a valuable part of the green space network. They are the first impression that visitors to the school and passers-by gain, and shape local attitudes about the school or setting.

School grounds offer a route for the community to engage with the school. In whatever way you want to make more of your grounds there may be members of your local community who can help, whether by providing a workforce to help clear an overgrown area or donating resources such as surplus seeds and cuttings to create a new garden. Working together in this way can improve community cohesion by providing a common vision and developing positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.



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By working together to help improve their grounds, young people learn skills that will equip them to be active citizens in future life, such as research, communication, action planning, decision-making and compromise. Some schools who are experienced at involving young people in the development of their school grounds have taken these skills out into the community, with young people helping other schools, for example, or looking after their local churchyard.

Attractive school grounds, with facilities for play, sports and social use, can be a valuable community resource if made available outside school hours. This could include a regular agreement with organisations such as the Scouts, or to host holiday clubs. Not only does this help the local community; this type of community use can help schools access funding for school grounds improvement projects.

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Nature and sustainability

School grounds have much to contribute to the natural environment. In many areas they provide the only large green space; in others, they are an important link in a chain of habitats that might stretch for miles. Even an inner-city asphalt playground can be turned into a wildlife haven with a little imagination, using planters and barrel ponds, bird-feeders and nest-boxes.

Your grounds provide an important opportunity for young people to experience nature first-hand in all its seasons — essential to their understanding of the world around them. Observing plants and creatures will develop their innate sense of awe and wonder at the world around them.

This sense of wonder for the natural world can be the starting point for inspiring action to protect and conserve the natural environment, initiating sustainable behaviours and attitudes that young people will carry with them through life. Gardening and growing things — perhaps animals as well as plants — will help them to learn about conservation through practical projects.

Features in the grounds such as composters and alternative energy systems (solar panels on the roof, or a wind turbine) can encourage and demonstrate more sustainable lifestyles, and help young people to understand the link between human activities and issues such as climate change.

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To investigate the specialist support available, such as training to build your confidence in working with young people in the outdoors; advice on how to improve your grounds; or grants to help you make changes, visit <http://www.loveschoolgrounds.org.uk/>



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Follow this link to find out how to deliver learning outside the classroom in the school grounds and local area at little or no cost.

School Ground Web resources

<http://www.ltl.org.uk/>

Learning through Landscapes (LTL) helps schools and early years settings make the most of their outdoor spaces for play and learning. The website has links to resources, toolkits, publications and programmes such as the annual National School Grounds Week.

<https://www.tsoshop.co.uk/education/bookstore.asp?FO=1290538&Action=Book&ProductID=9780112710615>

The outdoor classroom: educational use, landscape design and management of school grounds, DfES, Building Bulletin 71 (2nd edition) (1999) can be downloaded.

<http://www.cheshire.gov.uk/ecoschools/schoolgrounds>

<http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/schoolgrounds>

Both these sites offer advice suitable for any school considering developing and enhancing their grounds. They offer step-by-step guidance suggesting ways the whole school can be involved in the project as well as how to avoid many of the potential pitfalls on the way.

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

'Square foot gardening' is an idea from America in which schools can maximise the potential of a small site for growing activities.

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools/support/funding.cfm>

This site offers suggestions on possible funding opportunities for schools wishing to either use their grounds creatively or to develop them to enhance their curriculum. Some have specific time restrictions, but many are more open ended.

<http://www.pre-school.org.uk/>

The Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA) website contains links to publications and resources to encourage play and education outdoors.

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/>

Play England's aim is for all children and young people in England to have regular access and opportunity for free, inclusive, local play provision and play space. The website includes more about a national strategy for play and includes a resource section with briefings, for example on designing school grounds.