



From muddy hands and dirty faces...  
to higher grades and happy places

Outdoor learning and play at schools around the world

*Cath Prisk and Dr Harry Cusworth*

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*‘Happy hearts and happy faces  
Happy play in grassy places –  
That was how, in ancient ages,  
Children grew to kings and sages.’*

*Robert Louis Stevenson, A Child’s Garden of Verses, 1888*

A report looking at how much time children around the world spend playing and learning outside as part of the school day. The report includes a review of the wide-ranging literature about why outdoor learning and play are important and an overview of the impact of the Outdoor Classroom Day movement.

Sign up and find out more about Outdoor Classroom Day by visiting: [www.outdoorclassroomday.com](http://www.outdoorclassroomday.com)

The global website gives access to dedicated pages for country-specific campaigns.

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## Foreword

### The future will belong to the nature smart

Not long ago, I visited a school in Georgia where elementary school students spent a third of their school days learning outside about an array of subjects – in school gardens or on learning trails in the surrounding forest.

In that school, a six-year-old student rushed into his classroom, grabbed his head and exclaimed to his teacher:

*“There’s so much nature out here and I only have two eyes and one brain, and I think it’s going to explode!”*

Such enthusiasm is infectious. In countries around the world, teachers and other educators are incorporating nature play and learning into their school days and they’re getting results.

Through the global Outdoor Classroom Day campaign, over 40,000 schools in over 100 countries have encouraged more than 4 million students and teachers to step into the largest classroom in the world.

Today, as this report makes clear, there is a growing body of research indicating that a high percentage of parents now consider outdoor learning and play an essential ingredient in the daily lives of their children, or think it should be. According to the Outdoor Classroom 2017 survey, 93 percent of US teachers express a desire to take lessons outdoors more. Government policies in Australia, Scotland, Finland, and Germany already support outdoor learning and play – isn’t it time that it’s recognised everywhere?

This increase in awareness has been stimulated over the past decade by a relatively new and growing body of research indicating how learning and playing outdoors can improve cognitive functioning, reduce student (and teacher) stress, lower the symptoms of attention-deficit disorder, raise test scores, improve creativity and social skills and, most importantly, ignite a sense of wonder.

This is not to say that the barriers to getting outdoors at school have disappeared. In the US, for example, even as awareness of the effectiveness of outdoor play and learning expands, some school districts continue to cut back on the number of hours available for recess; and children in the US experience far less time outdoors than their European cousins, or their neighbours in some parts of Canada. Though parents and teachers may be more aware of the positive influences that playing in nature has on children’s health, they continue to struggle with urban design that reduces available nature, digital encroachment on everyday life, intensifying economic pressures, and fear of strangers and of nature itself.

Even so, a countertrend toward more nature in children’s lives continues. We see a dramatic increase in the number of nature-enriched preschools; K-12 language and literature teachers who encourage children to write poetry under the trees; science teachers who take advantage of the creek at the edge of the schoolyard to teach biology; high school

administrators who establish natural learning expeditions far beyond their campuses; and educators, parents and students who work together to create native-species gardens and natural schoolyards; especially important in densely-populated urban neighbourhoods.

Many of us now believe that the future will belong to the nature smart – those young people with hybrid minds, who become leaders by developing both ways of knowing the world, the virtual and the natural. Each school that participates in Outdoor Classroom Day will help young people take a step into that future. And then another.



Richard Louv

*Chairman Emeritus of the Children & Nature Network and author of ‘Last Child in the Woods’, ‘The Nature Principle’, and ‘Vitamin N’.*





‘No-one will protect what they don’t care about and no-one will care about what they have never experienced.’

David Attenborough

# The Outdoor Classroom Day movement

## Building a community to help children get outdoors more

‘Too many of London’s children have little or no meaningful contact with natural places in the city. As a result, they may be denied the many and varied benefits that experiences in nature bring: experiences that many adults understand at a deep emotional level from their own childhood memories.’

*Tim Gill, Sowing the Seeds report for the London Sustainable Development Commission, 2011*

In 2011, London’s Sustainable Development Commission asked Tim Gill, an expert in childhood, to produce a report on how best to reconnect children with nature in order to grow the next generation of environmentally-conscious young people. *Sowing the Seeds* offered a depressing analysis. Gill found that a number of children rarely or never went to a green space – a park, woods or beach. In London, one in seven families did not go to a green space over the course of a year.<sup>1</sup>

Anna Portch, an environmental educator, was in the audience at the launch and was particularly struck by the finding that possibly as few as 4% of London’s 1.1 million children under the age of 12 were being ‘engaged in nature’ through their schools. Enlisting the help of other nature-based organisations, Anna started a campaign to encourage schools to celebrate how they connected children to the outdoors and to inspire other schools to have a go.

The campaign, then called ‘Empty Classroom Day’, started small, just a few schools in South London. By 2015, over 600 schools in 15 countries were involved. The following year, Project Dirt, one of the founding organisations, partnered with Unilever’s Dirt is Good team to grow the campaign and expand it internationally.

The campaign became ‘Outdoor Classroom Day’ and since then Project Dirt has joined forces with ten leading education NGOs and teams from Dirt is Good brands to build local campaigns in sixteen countries, engaging with over 4 million children worldwide. Schools in over 100 countries have signed up, from Alaska to Tasmania, Patagonia to Sulawesi.

Outdoor Classroom Day is now a truly global movement to inspire and celebrate outdoor learning and play. The movement has two campaign days, one in each half of the year, so schools in different countries can participate on a day that suits their climate and fits with their term times. As well as being a lot of fun, Outdoor Classroom Day shows teachers and parents how beneficial and easy it is to allow children to enjoy more time outdoors.

<sup>1</sup> Gill, (2011).

The Outdoor Classroom Day movement has three simple but ambitious goals to make sure the campaign is about more than just one day:

- **Outdoor learning part of every school day.** Outdoor learning is part of every school day for every child.
- **A consistent minimum target for recess/playtime.** Every child has great recess/playtime at school every day for at least 60 minutes, with the longer-term aim of 90 minutes.
- **Schools to advocate for more time outdoors.** Schools act as advocates for more time outdoors so that outdoor play becomes part of every child’s everyday life.

From the Outdoor Classroom Day 2017 survey of teachers who have taken part in the campaign, it is evident that the campaign is already making some headway in achieving its longer-term goals. Over one fifth (22%) of respondents to the survey worldwide said they have increased playtime since getting involved; and more than two fifths (44%) said they have increased the frequency of outdoor learning. Almost every teacher surveyed – 97% worldwide – said that time to play outdoors is critical for children to reach their full potential.

With the increasing pressures on our time from all angles, it’s vital that we allow children the space to experiment, understand the world around them, and express themselves. Access to the outdoors helps our youngest generations to develop into creative, healthy and socially responsible adults, who in turn will become active participants in the development of healthy and productive societies.

Project Dirt has been proud to be a part of this campaign from the outset, and I hope this report will help the movement build so that getting outdoors at school becomes part of the new normal.



**Nick Gardner**

*Co-founder and CEO Project Dirt:  
Connecting Communities for Good*

*Global Lead Organisation for the  
Outdoor Classroom Day Campaign*



# Executive summary

Outdoor Classroom Day is a global movement to inspire and celebrate outdoor learning and play. It was created to raise awareness about the importance of playing and learning outdoors, highlighting the benefits it brings to children, families and whole communities. The campaign is led by the organisation Project Dirt, who have joined forces with ten leading education Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and teams from Unilever’s Dirt is Good brands to build local campaigns in sixteen countries, engaging with millions of children worldwide. Schools in over 100 countries have signed up, from Alaska to Tasmania, Patagonia to Sulawesi.

In this report, we set out the goals, impact and evidence base for the campaign and the wider case for why getting outdoors is so important, advocating ‘every day and often’ as a recommended prescription for time outdoors: for all children, both during and after the school day.<sup>2</sup>

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These goals support the World Health Organisation’s guidance on time needed per day for physical activity<sup>3</sup>, the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>4</sup> and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup>, which expects States to ensure children connect to nature, have access to good quality schooling, and have time to play.

Since the campaign started in the UK in 2011, over 40,000 schools in more than 100 countries have signed up. In 2017 over 2 million children from over 20,000 schools in more than 100 countries got involved and there were dedicated campaigns led by world-class educational and children’s non-profits in eight countries. In Australia, the Government in Queensland wrote directly to every teacher to encourage them to get involved. In Indonesia, the Government also supported schools to get involved by contacting the Heads of Education in territories across the country.

<sup>2</sup> Yogman et al., (2018).  
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs385/en/>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

As a result of their involvement in the campaign, we are now seeing more playtime and more outdoor learning in schools:

- Over 70% of those who signed up prior to 2016 have now increased the frequency of outdoor learning.
- 22% of primary schools who responded to the Outdoor Classroom Day 2017 survey worldwide said they have increased playtime since taking part in Outdoor Classroom Day.
- More than two fifths (44%) said they have increased the frequency of outdoor learning.
- Almost every teacher who responded to the survey – 97% worldwide – said that time to play outdoors is critical for children to reach their full potential.

Tens of thousands of schools around the world are now taking lessons outside and prioritising playtime, as well involving parents and volunteers from their communities – which helps spread the message that outdoors should be an essential part of every day.

## Defining play and outdoor learning

Outdoor learning, playful learning and outdoor play all have their place in a school day and are valuable in their own distinct way. This report seeks to tease apart the benefits of each, using the following definitions:

**Outdoor learning** refers to any adult-directed lessons that are held outdoors.

**Playful learning** is learning planned or directed by an adult but with the child controlling their own engagement – the intention is that it should be fun, playful and experiential.

**Play** is directed by the child, is not constrained or directed by an adult and is a process engaged in for its own purpose.

**Playtime** refers to all break times throughout the school day.

This report does not include ‘outward bound’ activities such as hiking, canoeing or climbing.

## Part 1 - A snapshot of outdoor learning and play at school around the world

The first part of the report summarises findings from the Outdoor Classroom Day 2017 survey, building a picture of the time children around the world spend playing and learning outdoors as part of the school day.

The survey team asked teachers about their experience of taking lessons outdoors and the availability of opportunities for outdoor play within their school (that is, free time



outdoors where children can enjoy self-directed activities, for example, during recess). The team received sufficient responses to build a comparative set of data from Australia, Canada, the UK and the US.

The data was collated between November 2017 and April 2018 and brought together responses from 713 teachers answering questions about outdoor learning and 629 teachers answering questions about outdoor play. The survey team received responses from 44 countries. As far as we are aware, this is the first large-scale global survey of the length of time children spend outdoors while at school.

The analysis focuses on comparative data from Australia, Canada, the UK and the US, as each of these countries had over 90 respondents. When considering length of playtime and frequency of outdoor learning, the data was further refined to focus solely on primary schools (ages 6 to 12).

Although the data can only represent a snapshot (as we can assume responses came from teachers and schools already predisposed to outdoor learning and play) we can, nevertheless, draw some interesting, if at times worrying conclusions. Even in Australia, Canada and the UK – where most state or regional governments formally recognise outdoor learning and break time as important – children are still by no means learning outdoors every day or playing outdoors either for the minimum one hour recommended for physical activity, or for the 25% of school time that some psychological research on mental wellbeing suggests is optimal. Again, given this was a survey of schools who had engaged with the Outdoor Classroom Day campaign, and presumably with an interest in allowing more time outdoors, we can infer that the results in the wider population may well be even lower.

## Headline statistics from the data

### Frequency of outdoor play

- 99% of teachers in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (and 97% worldwide) agreed that time to play outdoors throughout the day is critical for children to reach their full potential.
- Nevertheless, two thirds of primary teachers worldwide (65%) said children at their school get less than one hour of playtime a day; 12% said children get less than 30 minutes.

### Frequency of outdoor learning

- Almost a third (29%) of American primary teachers said they take lessons outdoors less than once a month, by far the least worldwide.
- By contrast, almost three quarters (72%) of Australian teachers surveyed said they take lessons outdoors at least once a week.

### What stops children going outside at school every day?

- Eight out of ten teachers said the weather prevented outdoor play, and seven out of ten said it prevented learning outdoors.
- One in five teachers worldwide said poor playground behaviour stopped children going outside (despite consistent research worldwide saying more play can lead to better behaviour).
- One in five (19%) of children in the US were kept in at playtime to catch up on lessons, compared to less than one in ten of children in Canada (9%) and Australia (8%).



- Behaviour was also perceived as an issue for taking lessons outdoors for at least one in seven teachers worldwide, rising to over a quarter (28%) in Australia.
- One in five teachers (20%) said they were worried about the extra preparation needed to take lessons outdoors, rising to over a quarter (26%) of teachers in the US.
- Australian teachers were most likely to say nothing stops outdoor play (21%), while teachers from the UK were most likely to take lessons outdoors in all weathers, as 24% said nothing keeps them inside.

*Perceived benefits of outdoor learning and play*

- The majority of teachers said that children gain a better understanding of the environment through outdoor play (92% of Australian and 88% of Canadian teachers identified this as an outcome, compared to 83% in the UK and 82% in the US).
- Teachers across the world believe playing outdoors develops key skills for life, including social skills, imagination and creativity, improved fine motor skills and the ability to focus on a task.
- Teachers believe playing and learning outdoors helps children in their learning, through improved behaviour and by enabling them to better engage with learning and retain information.
- Playing outdoors and outdoor learning makes children happier.

**Part 2 – Why outdoor learning and play should be part of every school day**

The second part of the report presents an overview of the wide-ranging literature about outdoor learning and play, highlighting why it is important at school and every day.

The literature reviewed shows that outdoor learning and play has a huge range of benefits for children. Being out in fresh air, whatever the weather, has been shown to improve mood, reduce stress, improve eyesight and increase physical activity.<sup>6</sup> The report references a number of robust research studies, which show that encouraging children to play freely can improve their educational outcomes.<sup>7</sup> The fun that comes from play is a crucial part of childhood, and is essential to health, wellbeing and learning.

Key themes identified within the available literature:

**Getting outdoors connects us to the places we live and the environments we will want to protect.** Environmental stewardship and connection with place is strongly related to the amount of time we are immersed in nature as children.<sup>8</sup>

6 Gill, (2011) & (2014); Children and Nature Network, (2018); Maller et al, (2006); Kellert, (2013); Dowdell, Gray & Malone, (2011); Herrington & Brussoni, (2015).

7 Sobel, (2004)

8 Louv, (2008); Dowdell, Gray & Malone, (2011); Sobel, (2013); Williams, (2017); Ballantyne & Packer, (2009).

We protect what we love, and we love what we know deeply and intimately. Children who are outdoors in nearby spaces often love their environment and grow up wanting to protect it.<sup>9</sup> Distant mountains make for great adventures, but every day and often is the recipe for growing tomorrow’s environmentally-responsible adults.

**Getting outdoors results in better learning outcomes, across the board.** Outdoor learning can create improvements across all academic disciplines<sup>10</sup>, helping with problem-solving and enthusiasm for learning; and can contribute to improved test scores and grade averages.<sup>11</sup>

**The benefits of outdoor learning and play last beyond early education.** Preschool children who enjoy large amounts of outdoor time have been shown to consistently score better on standardised tests for executive function, attention and short-term memory than children attending preschools that have fewer outdoor hours in the school day. Those children who enjoy more outdoor time during preschool continue to score better on standardised testing once they have moved into primary education.<sup>12</sup>

**Outdoor play gets kids more active.** Children everywhere are leading significantly less active lives than children a generation ago<sup>13</sup> and this inactivity has significant health implications.<sup>14</sup> When engaged in play, children will stay active for long periods of time<sup>15</sup> and are more active outdoors compared to indoors.<sup>16</sup> Studies done using GPS tracking in the UK show that children are more than two-and-a-half times more active when outdoors compared to indoors.<sup>17</sup>

**Outdoor learning and play creates healthier kids.** Children who regularly play outdoors come to school more often, can concentrate better, physically sit at their desks for longer, can see better and can learn more.<sup>18</sup> Active free play is also critical in helping children develop balance, co-ordination and improved motor fitness.<sup>19</sup>

**Time spent outdoors boosts mental health.** Research from around the world points to the ability of nature to restore our sense of wellbeing.<sup>20</sup> Children feel better and perform better after they have been outdoors.<sup>21</sup> Getting outdoors helps children feel calmer, helps process their day and builds the holy grail of capabilities: resilience. Most importantly of all, play brings happiness and improves children’s quality of life immeasurably.

9 Louv, (2008); Gill, (2014).

10 Sobel, (2004); Center for Disease Control and Prevention, (2010); Baines & Blatchford, (2011); Chawla et al (2014).

11 In Sobel, (2004) p36.; Kuo et al, (2017).

12 Ulset et al. (2017).

13 Australia, (2016); Duncan & McPhee (2015); Kellert, (2013); Planet Ark, (2011).

14 Tremblay et al, (2016); Active Healthy Kids Australia, (2016); Langford et al., (2014).

15 Australia, (2016); Baines & Blatchford, (2011); Beresin, (2016); Center for Disease Control and Prevention, (2010).

16 Cooper et al, (2010); Janssen & LeBlanc, (2010).

17 Cooper et al, (2010).

18 Langford et al, (2014); Brussoni et al, (2015); Robinson & Aronica, (2018); Strauss & Hanscom, (2014).

19 Fjørtoft, (2004).

20 Williams, (2017); Chawla et al (2014).

21 Stixrud & Johnson, (2018) p209.

**Schools as influencers: making outdoor learning and play part of every child’s life**

In the concluding section, we discuss how schools can act as catalysts in their communities to help increase opportunities for children to play outside of the school gates.

Many schools are now making outdoor days happen at least once a term, sometimes once a month and even committing to outdoor lessons every day. For those who are just starting on their journey, there is a huge range of resources, guidance and support for both outdoor learning and outdoor play via specialist websites and communities on social media platforms.

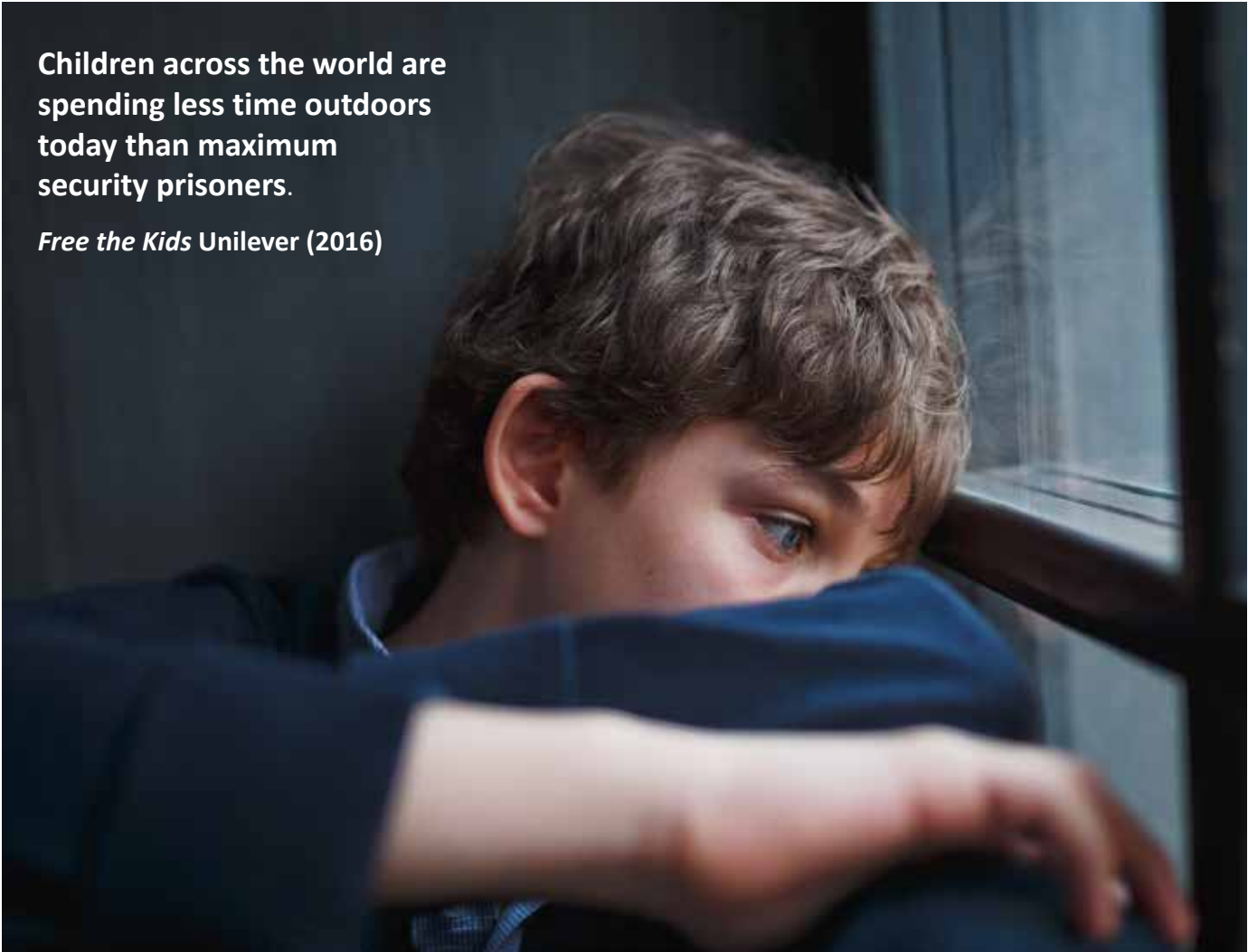
In Australia, the US, the UK and around the world parents value play and outdoor learning. Worldwide, 93% of parents agree that children’s learning would suffer without opportunities to play, and 95% say that, without play, children cannot reach their full potential.<sup>22</sup>

Schools, by sending the clear message that getting outdoors is important to children’s wellbeing and development, can help make outdoor learning and play become part of every child’s everyday life.

Many governments around the world actively support outdoor learning and play. Parents and teachers want it. Children want it. All that is required is the catalyst to make it happen.

‘The intention here is to make the case for more time to be spent outdoors on a daily basis, supporting ‘every day and often’ as a recommended prescription for all children both at school and beyond.’

22 Dirt is Good, (2016).



**Children across the world are spending less time outdoors today than maximum security prisoners.**

*Free the Kids Unilever (2016)*

# Get involved in Outdoor Classroom Day!

Outdoor Classroom Day is a global campaign to inspire and celebrate outdoor learning and play. On the day, thousands of schools around the world take lessons outside and prioritise playtime. As well as having fun, they show how important and easy it is to give children more time outdoors. The activation days are part of a wider movement to inspire more time outdoors every day, both at school and at home.

This report brings together the findings from the Outdoor Classroom Day 2017 survey and a review of a wide-range of literature that highlights the benefits of playing and learning outdoors. It aims to inspire schools, parents and policy-makers and anyone who cares about childhood to take action so that children everywhere enjoy their childhood and have the foundations they need for the life they want to live.

Join the movement today: [www.outdoorclassroomday.com](http://www.outdoorclassroomday.com)

The global Outdoor Classroom Day is led by Project Dirt, in partnership with Unilever as part of their Dirt is Good movement.

**Do be aware you get involved at your own risk! Be prepared to be amazed...**

