

THE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING FOR CHILDREN IN URBAN AREAS.

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It is easy to take for granted the wonderful natural world that we live and work in but for many of our visitors even playing outside can be a new and exciting experience. In this short article we hope to show the benefits of outdoor learning to 110 children from two High Wycombe Schools.

INTRODUCTION

The schools have been able to apply to the FSC Kids fund for financial support, which in combination with legacy money from the Saker family means that these children get valuable outdoor learning opportunities that they might not otherwise have.

For the schools, the John Muir Discovery Award is the hook to hang the experiences on – it is a national award run by the John Muir Trust with the aim of encouraging young people to get outside and enjoy wild places by discovering them, exploring them, helping to conserve them and sharing their experience. Being a recognised award, the children get a certificate at the end to say they have taken part, and this helps to cement the sense of achievement that they gain from completing the award. Participants are encouraged to do some research into the naturalist and explorer John Muir at school before the visits then as part of the introduction they play a game of true or false about John Muir. If they get the questions right, then they get to dress one of their classmates or teachers up as John Muir, complete with beard, ready to go exploring in the woods.

Activities undertaken during the children's time at the centre included: team games; shelter building; measuring the River Misbourne, invertebrate surveys in the woods; pond and river; exploring the woods; natural art; mindfulness activities such as magic spot; hide and seek; and collecting firewood, lighting fires using a fire steel and cooking popcorn. They also looked at small mammals caught in Longworth traps, followed an orienteering trail and carried out conservation of the lowland heath by coppicing saplings and creating habitat piles.

Some of the children were slightly apprehensive at being in the outdoors at first, as it was an unfamiliar environment to most of them. They became very enthusiastic and excited about what they were going to be doing and had lots of questions about the woods, the animals, and the world around them. Putting wildlife sightings on the wildlife board almost became a competition and throughout their four visits to the field centre the pupils made great leaps and bounds in their confidence with the tutors and the environment.



FIGURE 1. Children helping conserve Lowland Heath by removing invasive rhododendron, one of the activities undertaken while working towards the John Muir Discovery Award.

EVAULATION

The children each filled in an evaluation form with questions such as “What did you like best?”, “What did you learn?” and “What tips would you give to other people about how to enjoy the environment?”

What did you like best about the John Muir Award?	What did you learn during your John Muir Award?	What tips would you give to other people about how to enjoy the environment?
I liked being outside all the time and seeing all the different animals.	That all animals are different and that they all have different habitats.	By showing them the beauty of nature.
I liked playing hide and seek in the woods.	That nature is a wonderful thing.	Make sure you’ve got extra layers on and enjoy the dirt.
I liked going in the river because it was really fun.	That outdoors is a fun place	To enjoy it with your friends

TABLE 1. Example feedback questionnaire responses from the children.

“All of our class have now learnt about the outside world, how to protect it and that there are lots of living creatures everywhere too.” (Year 6 pupil, Oakridge School)



FIGURE 2. Children’s questionnaire responses; ‘What did you learn during your John Muir Award?’. (Results collated from feedback from 60 children.)

Feedback from the class teachers from this year’s visits and those in previous years explicitly mentioned the benefits to not only the children but also their wider family members. Children attending the centre in previous years have brought their families along to field centre open days to show them where they did activities, and teachers have reported that some children have also been out to their local river in High Wycombe to catch invertebrates following their experiences on their John Muir days. Older siblings and cousins have passed along experiences that they have had to younger siblings and helped to generate excitement about visiting the field centre and completing their John Muir Awards.

BENEFITS

There is a growing body of evidence that children are becoming increasingly detached from the natural world, and subsequently a drive to help young people become more in tune with the natural world (Moss, 2012). The benefits of this have been clear to see in the children from Oakridge and Castlefield. Positive, repeated outdoor

experiences have helped them broaden their horizons, gain a sense of achievement and a boost in confidence and self-esteem. Cross-curricular links can be made and embedded; for example, many of the children were able to develop their language skills, from the outdoors being a stimulus for creative writing, poetry, letter writing and discussion, to improved vocabulary and use of specialist language while talking to tutors and classmates.

Outdoor learning helps the holistic development of children (English Outdoor Council, 2015), increasing confidence, honing teamwork skills and can help with behavioural problems. Most importantly children have the chance to play outdoors, which many children don't have the opportunity or space to do back home. This can help reinforce friendship bonds, improve physical literacy and encourage independence. Repeated outdoor experiences with time in between allows the children to reflect on their time outdoors, share their feelings at home and at school and assimilate the experiences into their daily lives.



FIGURE 3. "Getting muddy was really fun and when it was raining it was even better!" Year 6 pupil, Oakridge School.

REFERENCES

English Outdoor Council (2015). *High Quality Outdoor learning*. English Outdoor Council. Available at: <http://www.englishoutdoorcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2049-High-quality-outdoor-learning-web-version.pdf> [accessed July 2016]

Moss, S. (2012). *Natural childhood*. National Trust. Available at: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/documents/read-our-natural-childhood-report.pdf> [accessed July 2016]

FSC Kids Fund aims to bring environmental understanding to disadvantaged young people by providing financial support for them to attend a course at an FSC learning location. FSC Kids Fund courses are funded by donations from individuals, Trust Funds and from FSC Membership subscription. FSC staff also organise fundraising events. More information is available at: <http://www.field-studies-council.org/about/fsc-kids-fund.aspx>

