

# Outdoor learning: a positive legacy of the pandemic

**DANIEL MONCRIEFF**, SSE Outdoors service manager for Somerset County Council, looks at how outdoor learning can support the post-covid-19 recovery agenda.

In January 2021, the Prince's Trust published its annual survey of young people's happiness and confidence, recording the worst findings in its 12-year history. Half of the young people interviewed said current political and economic events had affected their mental health. More than half said they always or often felt anxious, and more than one in four said they had felt unable to cope with life since the start of the pandemic!

Widespread concern for young people's mental health is echoed by school leaders up and down the country. Lockdowns, virtual lessons and curtailed extracurricular activities have all impinged on young people's opportunities to work with others and form meaningful relationships.

Outdoor learning can provide young people with the space to begin to re-form these connections with others and arm them with an important tool to manage their mental health positively. Whether it is working together to scale a climb, creating a group shelter in a forest or collaborating to estimate the size of a tree and how much carbon it contains, creative problem-solving with others allows young people to develop their relationship-building skills.

In 2019, an Exeter University study established that spending 120



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minutes a week in nature resulted in significantly improved mental health<sup>2</sup>. The impact on the well-being of children spending time in the outdoors is well documented<sup>3</sup>.

Regular outdoor learning can positively impact well-being in the short term by providing young people with time in nature and opportunities to build connections with others. It also arms them with the life skills to revisit wild places. This is particularly important for the less advantaged in our society who are less likely to visit the countryside with family. School visits and outdoor learning can level the playing field and provide the tools to access one of the cheapest ways to improve mental well-being throughout someone's life.

We saw numerous innovative uses of outdoor learning in 2020.

Many schools embraced outdoor classrooms when they returned in May to aid social distancing. Several outdoor centres developed alternative provision programmes for those struggling to engage with formal education settings during a turbulent year.

There has been an explosion of resources and ideas to support children to engage with the outdoors while being homeschooled, with teachers now regularly setting homework that involves going to wild places. At the same time, **50%** of outdoor centres face the prospect of closure because they have had little income for a year, and **6,000** people have already lost their jobs in the sector.

This year, 2021, provides the opportunity to embed regular outdoor experiences within the curriculum and for residential and off-site visits to begin again. At the heart of these learning experiences is the need to equip young people with the skills to enhance their well-being.

**For more on this, listen to the December episode of the School Leadership Podcast on lockdown, learning and the great outdoors (available on our website, [www.naht.org.uk](http://www.naht.org.uk)), where Jim Whittaker, chair of the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres, talks to NAHT's James Bowen about health, well-being, learning and the importance of outdoor spaces.**

<sup>1</sup> YouGov (2021) *The Prince's Trust Youth Index 2021*, accessed at Youth Index 2021 | Research, policies and reports | About The Trust | The Prince's Trust ([princes-trust.org.uk](http://princes-trust.org.uk)).

<sup>2</sup> White, M.P. et al (2019) *Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and well-being*. *Sci Rep* 9, 7730.

<sup>3</sup> McCormick, R. (2017) *Does access to green space impact the mental well-being of children: a systematic review*. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 37, pp 3-7.

