

# Back to the Basics: Outdoor Schools and Programmes Building Confidence and Promoting Well-Being

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***Studies have shown that in a school setting, holding class outside in nature has extremely positive effects on children in terms of increasing attention span, confidence and leadership skills. Some schools in Ireland have witnessed the positive effects of outdoor learning and have implemented programs to allow children to get back to their ‘biological roots’ in nature in order to create a more wholesome, diverse, and natural learning environment.***



Image: Irish Forest School Association

Looking back on our childhood years, we rarely remember the times where we convened around our tiny desks while we learned the basics of maths and English. We remember break-time when the teachers opened the doors and we were able to sprint outside to play in the great outdoors.

“It’s about giving the children the opportunity to risk assess ... giving them the opportunity to explore and the freedom to develop,” says Sally O’Donnell, owner of Early Learning Schools, Ireland’s first Outdoor School – a primary school based in Donegal that holds the entirety of the school day outside.

From 7:45 a.m. to 6 p.m., children of the Early Learning Schools (the Ray Outdoor School, Park School, and the Glen Outdoor School) are outside, learning, playing, and exploring nature. Early Learning Schools follow Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and well as Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. At this school, children learn all of the same things that they would in a “normal” pre-school setting, the only difference is that, according to them, “their tables are outside and, instead of blackboards, they use trees.”



Image: Early Learning Schools

“I think it gives them all the things that they’re supposed to do at [ages] two, three and four. Those skills that are developed at that age, they need room, they need space. They need to be able to run and use their language,” says O’Donnell. “I just feel like they are restricted inside and it’s the right environment for them to develop all of those skills, and things that are not developed at that right age, at that appropriate age, can be missed later on in life if they are not learned when they should be learned.”

A normal day at the Glen Outdoor School sees that the children have free time to play, group time to learn the curriculum, and even reading time and quiet time. The children of this school are out in all types of weather, year-round. But, the school ensures that all children are dressed appropriately, providing thermal underwear and rain-suits if need be.

“There is no such this as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing,” says O’Donnell.

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Being at this school for 11 years, O’Donnell has seen first-hand the drastic improvements in children’s development by schooling in the outdoors.

“The big feedback [from the teachers] is that they cannot believe how independent the children are outside,” says O’Donnell. “[The children] just fall down and jump up and run on, they’re not looking for assistance.”

According to O'Donnell, schooling outside for a significant amount of time drastically improves the confidence of children, who are able to further their ability to think independently and spark curiosity.



Image: Early Learning Schools

“You become more aware, and you’re more involved in your own decision making. I think you make choices yourself and you make decisions and you become more independent and you’re more confident to speak up for yourself.”

For many parents and children, attending school outside for the entirety of the day does not appeal to them. However, the Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School in Dublin could not ignore the stark benefits of giving children the opportunity to be outside and therefore implemented their Forest School initiative.

Once a week, the Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School holds classes outside for a majority of the day in a designated area in nature in order to expand the children’s horizons and cater to various ways of learning.

“I suppose the idea is to get children into the outdoors and to give them the opportunity to have a childhood experience in a new and unfamiliar environment that is safe. And encourage children to work together in a way where they use new skills,” says Rosemarie Stynes, Principal of the Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School. “It’s a very holistic way of learning.”

For many of the children at this school, Forest School gives them something to look forward to, and, according to Stynes, gives the children a chance to display more confidence, which they may not get the opportunity to do in a more sheltered, normal school environment.

“Some research suggests that kids talk more when they’re outdoors, they ask more questions ... and that’s really important because the more that we talk and use language and ask questions, [the more] we will build up resilience and confidence and self-esteem,” says Joan Whelan, Chairperson of the Irish Forest School Association (IFSA). “[We want] to hand down actual real experiences using the environment and nature to learn.”



Image: Irish Forest School Association

Whelan has also noticed the children gaining a greater appreciation for the environment throughout their time at Forest School.

“I do think that there is lots of important learning about our place in the world, and the whole idea of the ‘more than human world,’ that, as humans, it’s not our planet to dominate, that we need each other. The natural world and the human world. And if one tries to dominate the other it doesn’t work,” says Whelan.

On Saturday, 6 October 2018, the Northern Ireland Forest School Association is hosting their annual Autumn Gathering, titled “Weaving Our Connections and Celebrating 10 years of NIFSA.” The event will be held in Clandeboye Estate, outside Bangor, Co Down and will offer a host of speakers and workshops surrounding outdoor education.