

## 1.2: The benefits of outdoor learning

**An increasing volume of research evidence<sup>1 2</sup> supports the implementation of outdoor learning approaches, the quality of which has improved significantly since the publication of HQOL (2015).**

A summary of the evidence base supporting outdoor learning in the UK<sup>3</sup> found that nearly all interventions had a positive effect. Evidence supports positive impact on building social capital, fostering pride, belonging and community involvement<sup>4</sup>, while a growing number of Social Return on Investment Studies (SROI) are showing a significant return on investment in relation to wellbeing and preventing poor mental and physical health<sup>5</sup>, and positive learning outcomes<sup>6</sup>.

**“The available evidence suggests that experiences of nature help children acquire some of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors most needed in the 21st century.”**

*Kuo et al (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Relationship. Front. Psychol. 10:305. p.6*

Outdoor learning has been shown to improve health and wellbeing, engage students and develop personal competencies<sup>7</sup>. Numerous studies demonstrate that experiences in nature promote learning, fostering nature connection leading to pro environmental behaviour and develop leadership, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills<sup>8</sup>.

Academic performance has been shown to be positively affected by repeat outdoor learning experiences over multiple weeks<sup>9 10</sup>. Evidence of the long-term benefits of outdoor learning in school settings was established through the Natural Connections Demonstration Project which ran for four years with 125 schools in the south-west of England from 2012-2016.

Benefits for children included improved enjoyment of lessons, connection to nature, social skills, engagement with learning, health and wellbeing, behaviour and attainment. Significantly, the project also showed that there were benefits for teachers as well in terms of positive impacts on teaching practice, health and wellbeing, professional development, job satisfaction and teaching performance<sup>11</sup>.

While increasingly acknowledged as an approach to effective teaching and learning that is incorporated into formal education through national curricula, outdoor learning also offers an alternative pathway for those who might struggle with mainstream approaches, with improvements seen in behaviour, peer to peer relations, cooperation, enjoyment and student-teacher relations<sup>12</sup>.

Outdoor learning is also applicable to adult and family contexts. Research shows the value of outdoor settings to inspire curiosity and interest, and continuing engagement with the outdoors promotes healthy lifestyles, resilience and flexibility<sup>13</sup>. Family projects, where parents or carers and their children engage together in social care interventions offer the potential to improve family resilience and improve school engagement<sup>14</sup>.

There is significant qualitative research supporting the benefits of residential<sup>15 16 17</sup>, overseas expeditions<sup>18 19</sup> and sail training<sup>20</sup>. Outdoor based approaches to therapy also have a growing evidence base<sup>21</sup>.

The benefits of outdoor learning can also be framed in terms of the outcomes and longer-term impacts that high quality practice leads to (see 4.0 The outcomes of outdoor learning).

**“...it is time to take nature seriously as a resource for learning and development. It is time to bring nature and nature-based pedagogy into formal education – to expand existing, isolated efforts into increasingly mainstream practices.”**

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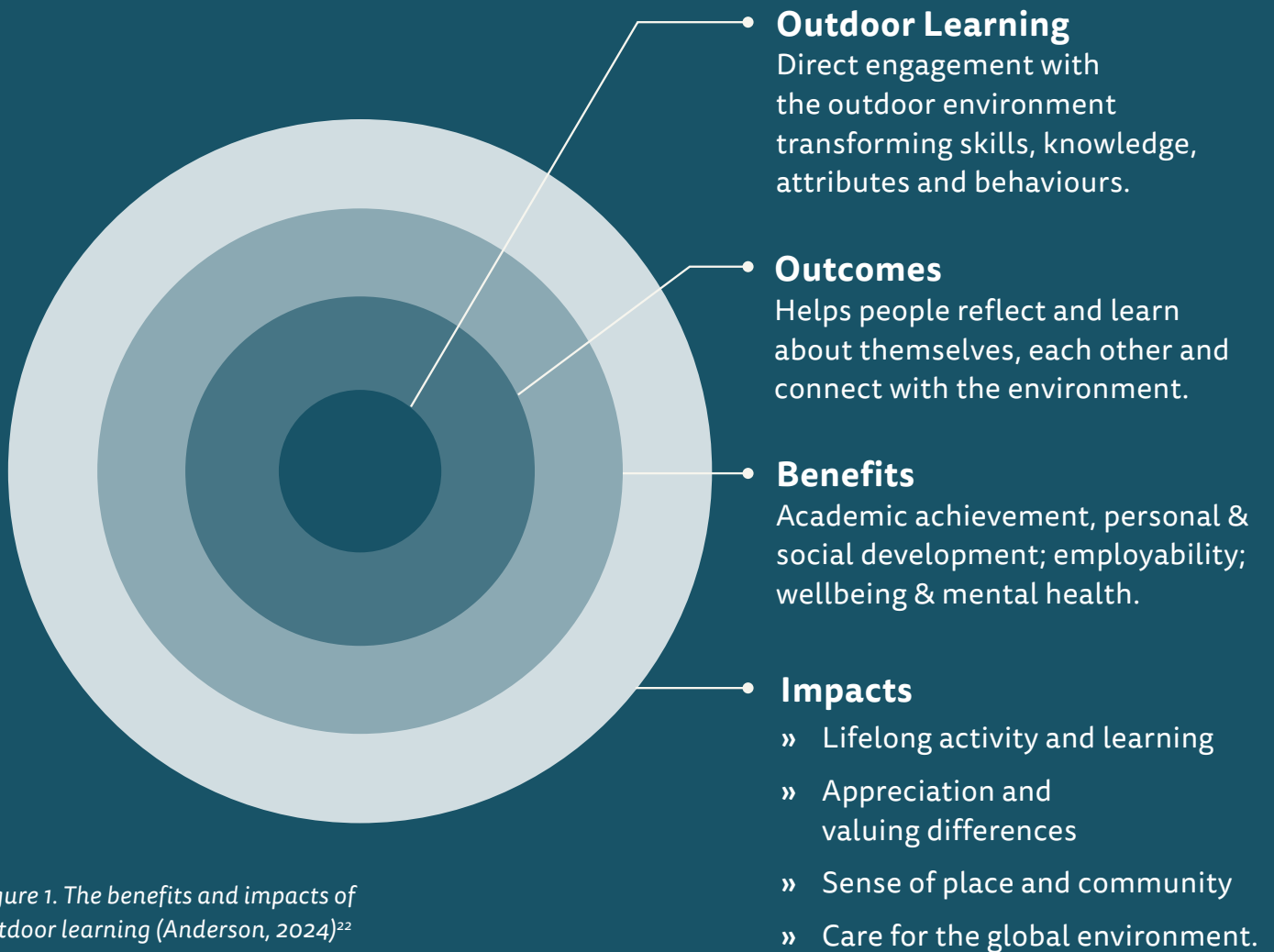


Figure 1. The benefits and impacts of outdoor learning (Anderson, 2024)<sup>22</sup>

### See also:

- 1.0 An overview of outdoor learning
- 1.1 How people participate
- 1.3 The context for outdoor learning
- 4.0 The outcomes of outdoor learning

## References

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