



“Feeling free, excited and proud!” - What outdoor learning means to me

Stomping barefoot through mud. Scrambling across rocks. Trekking over mountains and hills. This is what outdoor learning looks like for pupils at Shirland Primary School in Derbyshire, who completed their John Muir Discovery Award during a summer term bursting with outdoor activity.

Following the success of their ‘Space to Grow’ project, which saw pupils, staff and parents collaborate to transform their school grounds; teachers witnessed a blossoming enjoyment of learning outdoors. Enthused, they wished to broaden pupils’ experiences of the natural environment and identified the John Muir Award as something to help structure their aspirations.



“It provided support and focus within a framework that allowed us remarkable freedom. It was exactly what we were looking for to embody our outdoor learning provision.”

Mrs A Hukins, Deputy headteacher.

In the frame

Teachers used the Award’s four Challenges to organise school-based events and activities alongside those further afield, and set about creating a diverse programme of outdoor learning experiences. This structure – Discover wild places, Explore them, Conserve them, Share your experiences - gave focus to the growing spread of ideas and locations, and teachers were able to unite formal and informal learning.

“We had so many ideas and this framework gave us the freedom to go with them all! We wanted pupils to feel awe and wonder in the natural world – to be challenged, to get active and to learn. But above all we wanted pupils to have fun!” Mrs A Hukins

A snapshot of Award activities

Curriculum context

Some activities had a strong curriculum focus with fixed learning outcomes. Taking the annual Science Day outdoors saw pupils work scientifically - surveying, creating habitats, classifying invertebrate encounters, and recording first-hand experiences of life cycles and food chains. Pupils used geography fieldwork skills - plotting routes and using grid references to locate points of interest. They also utilised digital technology to create tree and bird spotter guides, and met a range of National Curriculum computing objectives in doing so.

Adventure and challenge

Other activities were firmly rooted in fun and challenge, and pupils engaged with wild places in spontaneous ways. During ‘Empty Classroom Day’ pupils explored their village, gaining an insight into the history of the landscape and the natural features that make it special. A particular highlight was an adventure into the Peak District National Park where pupils hiked across Mam Tor and Kinder Scout.

“We realised just how lucky we are to live so close to such beautiful places.” Year 6 pupil
“Exploring the Peak District made us feel free, excited and very proud, especially when we hiked to the top of hills and mountains.” Year 6 pupil

Simple pleasures

Some activities were chosen to allow pupils time to tune into their locality - to enjoy the sights, sounds, smells and emotions that being in the outdoors can bring. By using wild places as a backdrop for imaginative play, staff observed pupils' increased connection to and empathy with nature. This inspired talking and laughing with friends, often with creative results such as an impromptu grass trumpet orchestra and a 'Pooh sticks' tournament.



Outcomes - The Outdoor Learning effect

For staff, the experience brought added purpose and a clear narrative to enrich learning outdoors.

“There was a real sense of enthusiasm when planning activities. Using the John Muir Award gave us the perfect excuse to do different things, and the pupils were like sponges.”

Mrs S Hughes, Class teacher.

For pupils, frequent and progressive exposure to the natural environment led to a range of positive outcomes:

- **Enjoyment, confidence and character** – pupils realised how easily they can enjoy exciting outdoor experiences. They showed resilience during challenging activities, enthusiastically sharing their experiences with others. Opportunities for managing risk and challenge also resulted in pupils' increased sense of personal achievement and pride.
- **Health and wellbeing** – pupils were more active in and connected with their surroundings. For some the windswept hike over Kinder Scout was a first, and a demanding physical challenge. This triggered a range of emotions with several pupils expressing how it made them feel free and proud.
- **Environmental awareness** – pupils developed a renewed appreciation for the environment. By interacting with nature they spotted new things, wanting to share this interest in nature with others.

Next Steps

The school would like to maintain this momentum and is committed to developing outdoor provision further by providing pupils with regular opportunities to learn in and about wild places. The John Muir Award will form a part of their approach to outdoor learning in the future.

“The children have relished the challenge of earning their John Muir Award. We are left in no doubt that the children of Shirland Primary love the outdoors!”

Mrs K Buxton, Headteacher



‘High Quality Outdoor Learning’, a guide published by the English Outdoor Council identifies key characteristics and outcomes of high quality outdoor learning. It provides support and ideas, and highlights ways to evaluate and further improve the quality of outdoor learning.

10 key outcomes of high quality outdoor learning are identified, including:

- **Enjoyment**
- **Confidence and character**
- **Health and well being**
- **Environmental awareness**

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