

Developing Character in Schools with the John Muir Award



The John Muir Award is a UK-wide environmental award scheme focussed on wild places. It encourages people from all backgrounds to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places in a spirit of fun, adventure and exploration. When used in a school setting it supports experiential learning outside the classroom; it acknowledges and celebrates achievement in, and beyond, formal education.

Schools across the UK recognise that building 'character' has a key role to play in raising pupils' attainment and aspirations, improving wellbeing, and influencing their capacity to reach their full potential. Many schools and other organisations use the John Muir Award in their approach to developing character. Its flexible framework - Discover a wild place, Explore it, Conserve it, Share your experiences - gives schools freedom to develop activities that reflect specific values and needs, whilst supporting whole school aims such as attainment¹, wellbeing², behaviour and inclusion³. It can also contribute to achieving curriculum outcomes, helping to balance academic and non-academic learning.

“During these times in education, with increased pressure on children to perform academically, involvement in the John Muir Award is a breath of much needed fresh air. Its focus on practical learning and connection with nature, enjoyment and involvement in the outdoors is exactly what pupils should be experiencing. Definitely a highlight in our school year!”

Jonathan Humble, Class Teacher, St Oswald's Primary School, Kendal

Find out more about how the John Muir Award relates to the [National Curriculum](#) in England and Wales and [Curriculum for Excellence](#) in Scotland.

The John Muir Award supports character development. It can be used to:

- Encourage responsibility, care and stewardship of the natural environment.
- Promote social action and contribute to the local community by encouraging young people to engage in practical activity to improve an area.
- Respond to the needs of all, including those outside mainstream education.
- Celebrate achievement of young people beyond formal qualifications.
- Promote pupils' physical and emotional wellbeing, encouraging active lifestyles and reflection.
- Bring focus to extracurricular activities and a framework to link wider activities.
- Complement and add value to other award schemes and initiatives e.g. National Citizen Service.
- Encourage working in partnership with others, including other schools and organisations.
- Support parental and whole family involvement in shared outdoor experiences.
- Reinforce values-based learning through a 'Head, Heart, Hand'⁴ approach.

¹ ['Attainment and the John Muir Award in Scotland' – How attainment is being interpreted in Scotland](#)

² [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#)

³ ['Inclusion, wild places and the John Muir Award' – A showcase of inclusion related John Muir Award activity](#)

⁴ John Muir Award Information Handbook p22, an educational model promoted by Patrick Geddes

The John Muir Award & character development in Action

There are many examples showing how the John Muir Award is used to support character development in schools and more widely. Click on the links to view related John Muir Award case studies and resources.

The Curriculum

Schools use the John Muir Award to support learning across the curriculum in a range of creative and practical ways, from debating on environmental issues in Citizenship lessons to developing empathy with nature in Science and exploring values in Religious and Moral Education. For Pannal Primary School, one outcome of John Muir Award involvement is the opportunity for pupils to reflect upon their place in the world and to express their gratitude for nature.

“Before the John Muir Award, I thought of nature as a thing aside from humanity. I was wrong. I have learned that nature is something unique, and nothing can match how stunning it really is.”

Year 6 Pupil, Pannal Primary School, North Yorkshire

Outdoor Learning

The John Muir Award encourages active participation in outdoor activities and can support formative experiences in nature that inspire awareness and responsibility. For [Shirland Primary School](#) it led to an increase in learning outdoors, resulting in greater opportunities for pupils to demonstrate strong personal capabilities. Staff noted that learning in the natural environment and developing pupils’ character went hand in hand.



© Shirland Primary School

“They flourished and rose to every new challenge with enthusiasm and confidence. We witnessed their increased curiosity, appreciation and engagement.”

Amy Hukins, Deputy Head Teacher, Shirland Primary School, Derbyshire

Residential

Residential experiences can nurture a sense of self-belief and provide opportunities to demonstrate resilience and grit. [Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre](#) integrates the John Muir Award into its residential programme of activities to give an environmental focus to pupils’ experiences. For Donibristle School, who return to the centre year after year, the impact of these combined experiences on pupils’ character development is clear.



© Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre

“We’ve seen that pupils who participate in the John Muir Award become more resilient, confident, responsible, reflective, better at goal setting and at being team players.”

Sharon Clark, Depute Head Teacher, Donibristle Primary School, Fife

Employability and Life Skills

The John Muir Award is used by schools and colleges across the UK to help develop, practise and nurture a wide set of core skills that can assist young people (and adults) to thrive academically, in the [world of work](#)⁵ and within society. SkillForce is an educational charity that works with young people in schools throughout the UK to develop character, skills and core values. They use the John Muir Award to give added purpose and context to conservation activities, and to provide a valuable addition to participants' achievement portfolio.

“Getting out into the open can break down barriers and give hard-to-reach students common ground. They are all given a chance to show their dedication and commitment to achieving set goals.” Carl Blackburn, SkillForce Instructor, Central North

Community and Social Action

Participation in civic activities such as volunteering, fundraising and campaigning can contribute to a thriving society and build individual character traits such as confidence, respect and empathy. Many pupils, families and school staff get involved in community action projects – particularly with an environmental focus - as a way of meeting the [‘Conserve’](#) Challenge⁶ of the John Muir Award. As part of Samworth Church Academy's commitment to environmental stewardship and service, staff organise ‘Make a Difference’ activities and pupils get stuck in to local conservation activities alongside the Forestry Commission. The John Muir Award adds value to the Academy's engagement with its community - and helps to share and celebrate achievements both within the school and more widely.

“Our ‘Make a Difference’ tasks took on a new dimension when we linked it to the principles of the John Muir Award. Students became far more aware of the scientific, ecological and social implications of the conservation they were involved in and of the positive effect they were having on their local community.”

Angela Owen, Class Teacher, Samworth Church Academy, Mansfield

The UK-wide #iwill campaign aims to make social action the norm for as many 10-20 year olds as possible. Find out more about the campaign and the John Muir Trust's pledge at www.iwill.org.uk.

Get involved

Visit our website www.johnmuiraward.org, where you can:

- watch a 10 minute introductory film
- download an Information Handbook – for detailed guidance on delivering the John Muir Award
- see a wide range of case studies and supporting information
- find out more about John Muir (via www.discoverjohnmuir.com)

Contact us at education@johnmuiraward.org Tel: 01796 484968

⁵ [‘Employability and the John Muir Award’](#) - How the John Muir Award is being used to help move Award participants towards employment

⁶ [‘John Muir Award Conserve Audit 2015’](#) - A document summarising Conserve Challenge activity in 2015