

First steps in outdoor learning

Preparation

Identify where you would like to go for your outdoor learning session. It may be a good idea to start in your school / nursery grounds to build confidence and set boundaries for your pupils. Once you feel confident in your school / nursery grounds, you can then venture further afield if you wish. If you want to leave your grounds and aren't sure where to go, then try the [Find your local greenspace map](#) from NatureScot and [Find your local Green Flag park](#) from Keep Scotland Beautiful.

If you are going to a new site outside your grounds, visit the site on your own or with another staff member to get an idea of any potential hazards / issues and identify good spots for learning or activities. If you are staying in your grounds, walk around the full area to try and find good spots for learning. Make sure that all your children / young people can access the area (taking additional support needs into consideration).

Explain to pupils where you will be going on your first visit and what you will be doing. We would advise that you start with a walk to / from your location or around your grounds as a first step (see below).

Prepare a bag with essentials: first aid kit, spare clothes for the expected weather, snacks, water. Remember to take your mobile phone and, if possible, see if any other staff members could support you.

Start by taking a walk

This may be around your school grounds, or to the location you identified outside your grounds. At this stage you are just going on a walk and returning, focusing on the journey. The next stage will focus on the destination.

Explain to pupils that you are going on a journey and they need to keep all their senses open as you go. Give pupils the challenge of completing the walk in an orderly manner, with good listening to staff / helpers.

Once you get back talk about how everyone found the walk. What did they notice with all their senses? You can give some prompts if needed, but generally let your children / young people discuss what drew their attention and why.

You can also discuss any actual or potential hazards that came up during the walk to ensure everyone knows how to deal with these for future trips.

Get to know your destination

On your next trip start to get to know your destination (this can be within your grounds). Ask pupils to look for different plants and animals, interesting colours and patterns when you get there.

You could try a short activity that can help children and young people feel a connection to their local greenspace: ask your children / young people to look at the veins on their hand and try to find a tree, leaf of plant that matches their pattern. Where they find the tree, leaf or plant is their spot in your outdoor location.

After the walk ask pupils to draw their tree, leaf or plant (this could be the whole tree or part of it, such as a leaf). Discuss how finding their own spot made them feel.

Discuss all the plants, animals, colours and patterns that your children / young people observed on this trip. Which ones did they like? Is there anything they would like to learn more about having observed it in nature?

Develop sensory awareness of your surroundings

On your next trip continue to look for interesting things on the way to and from your destination. Once at your destination go through each of your senses in turn to get to know where you are even better (this can be done standing up or sitting down):

- **Sight:** what can pupils see in their surroundings? Ask them to describe colours, shapes and patterns they can see. Ask them to look really closely at the ground and find the smallest thing they can see. Ask them to look far away and find the biggest thing they can see (you can mention that the sun is the largest thing we can see as it is many times bigger than the earth but remember to tell children not to look directly at the sun).
- **Sound:** ask pupils to close their eyes or focus on a bare area a couple of meters in front of them. What can they hear? Tell them to let the sounds come to them, rather than chasing after them. Ask them to describe the sounds without naming them, for example, low rumbling for traffic, soft swishing for wind in trees. Then ask them if they can identify where the sounds are coming from and what is making them.
- **Smell:** ask pupils to close their eyes or focus on a bare area a couple of meters in front of them. What can they smell? Tell them to let the smells come to them, rather than chasing after them. Ask them to describe the smells without naming them, for example, sweet, fresh smell from cut grass or salty smell from the sea. Then ask them if they can identify where the smells are coming from and what is making them.
- **Touch:** ask pupils to look around and find a textured object. Ask pupils to describe the texture of their object, e.g. rough, smooth, dry, tickly. Ask pupils to swap their objects between them so they can feel different textures.

You can extend the activity by asking pupils to imagine they are an animal moving through the space and think about how they would sense the world differently, for example a fox would smell other animals in the area and a deer would hear movement of other animals very clearly.

When you are back in class ask pupils to write or draw a summary of what they experienced with their senses.

Identify the plants and animals you meet along the way

Now you are getting to know your outdoor learning area, it is time to learn more about the plants and animals that live there. Start by finding a plant or animal and trying to identify it. For animals, you may need to rely on signs that they have been there, such as footprints, feathers, or poo.

The Woodland Trust has some great spotter sheets to help you identify [trees](#), [plants and fungi](#), and [animals](#).

Once you have identified your plant or animal, try to find out a bit more about them. Try to find out what humans have used them for, for example, food, medicine, fuel. Also find out what value each plant / animal is to each other, for example food, place to live, transport of seeds / pollen.

The Woodland Trust has lots of information on [native](#) and [non-native](#) trees. The Wildlife Trusts have lots of information on [animals and plants, including fish](#).

Make your space outdoor learning friendly

You are now getting to know your outdoor learning area. The next step is to make it a lovely place to visit and ready for lots of different activities. Please make sure you have permission before putting up any posters or making any changes to your outdoor learning area.

Start by doing a litter pick around the site. This is a great way to help wildlife in your outdoor learning area and to learn about what items are being dropped. If you are finding a lot of litter, you could put up posters to ask people not to drop litter or write to your local council to ask them to install more bins.

Next, create some seating as this will be helpful for lots of activities. If you are in a woodland area, you could use natural material, such as logs (but ensure you have permission to move things and don't disturb local wildlife). If you are in your grounds, you could use old or outdoor seats and leave them in situ. Alternatively, you could make or source a tarpaulin or waterproof picnic blanket for everyone to sit on. Make sure that all your children / young people can access the area easily (taking additional support needs into consideration).

Next Steps...

Having followed these first steps, make your visits to your outdoor learning area regular, so they become part of your children / young people's routine. You can also visit our [resources page](#) and try some of our activities for outdoor learning in your amazing outdoor space.