

Using trees, woods and the outdoors in special schools



We may understand the value of using the outdoors but we don't always know how best to do it. This document will help you get a sense of how you can connect with trees and local woodland to deliver outdoor learning for young people with disabilities and additional needs.

The suggestions in this document are just that, suggestions. They will work for some and hopefully give you enough of an idea of what you can do. We are all so wonderfully diverse that there will be a need for you to join up the dots yourself and find what works for you and your students.

Start at the beginning. What have you got?

Using the outdoors can be hugely beneficial to all of us. The best place to start is by doing a short review of what you have available. Spend some time looking at your spaces. What do you have within the boundaries of your

school? Do you have any space that is suitable to deliver outdoor learning? Preferably with trees, plants, and wildlife present. Think about how using the space may impact on the rest of the school. For example are you right outside someone else's classroom? Consider how you get from your classroom to the space and how that journey will be for your students.

If the space in your school is looking a little lacking in natural materials is there a way you can make some simple improvements? Sometimes you can work as a class to make some positive changes to the outdoors without having to spend lots of money, using pots for instance, or , cut and dried materials. There is also help available to schools to make



improvements such as the Woodland Trust offer of tree packs available through their website www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

*We have also listed some helpful funding ideas at the end of this document.

Start exploring and make a note of what is available near to your site. Is there a local woodland or park with trees that you could easily walk to? Further afield, if you have transport available is there a woodland nearby that could be reached by a short journey? If you are unsure of the area you can start by looking at google maps for local greenspaces or asking colleagues who may be more familiar.

There are many things to consider when using public spaces and school risk assessments will cover many of these. It is worth finding out who owns the site and contacting them to let them know you are planning to use it, they may have information they can share about certain parts of a site that have highlights, are typically quieter or have easier access to facilities such as parking and toilets.

Start small and build it up.

If you are not used to going outdoors as a class, you may need to put some time in to get everyone ready to be outdoors. You may feel it is fine to just take the class outside and get going on some activities which is great. However, if the idea fills you with fear and you can already see difficulties some of your students may face you may want to take a slower approach.

We have worked with some schools that needed a slower approach to getting out starting with some of the basic requirements of getting out. To begin with students might get ready with coats or boots or sun cream, whatever is appropriate. They would do this one to one or in a very small group. They would then go outside and come back in again, repeating this as many times as necessary. The next step would be to go outside and spend around five minutes outside, this may be moving or focusing on something whichever is best. Again, this would be repeated until comfortable. Next would be a focussed activity outdoors, which could take around fifteen minutes. Something like a seeking game is good for this, having to find things within the environment and collect them or photograph them, whatever works for the student. You may also begin to build up the



number of students you involve in this process so the class can get used to being together. Once you are comfortable being outside in your school grounds you can lead on to visiting nearby woodlands.

One class we have previously worked with spent an entire term doing this process. They are now able to take a trip to their local woods every week, walking there and back and enjoying activities when they are there. It took a lot of effort for both the students and staff, but they all feel it has made their week much richer and gives them confidence in what can be achieved.

Be prepared.

When delivering outdoor learning it helps to be prepared. Once you are confident in the location you will need to consider the weather. No one wants to be uncomfortable whether it is being cold and wet or getting sunburnt. This is an important consideration for the safety of your students but also your staff. Often schools have kit for young people but not for their staff and it does not seem reasonable to ask your staff to have a range of outdoor clothing which can be expensive. Schools can put a request out to families to see whether they have spare kit which can be used by

staff and build a collection in school that can be shared between classes. Sometimes it is worth approaching local outdoor companies to see if they have any leftover stock or would like to make a donation to the school, some coats, waterproof trousers, and boots can be very helpful.

We wouldn't expect anyone to deliver outdoor learning in extreme weather but if we get put off by a bit of rain or wind in the UK we would hardly ever get out!

Billy Connolly said, 'There's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing, so get yourself a raincoat and live a little.'

Make sure your resources are prepared too. Have everything ready to use in the order you want to use it, like you would for a sensory story for example. You will most likely be carrying everything you are using with you so pack your resources well. If they are going in a bag, section them up inside the bag so each thing can be brought out at the right time. If you get everything out at once there can be too many interesting and distracting things at the same time. You must also be careful if you are using any sort of tools. Make sure they are stored correctly and everyone knows how they should be used. Do not leave them lying around.



Learn together, you are not expected to know everything!

Many people are put off outdoor learning as they feel it is not something they know anything about. We hear, “I don’t know any birds or which tree is which!” If this feels familiar, then we would say discover together as a class. If you would like to know about the trees in your grounds or your local park, get some simple leaf shape silhouettes and see if you can match them up. If you are out and looking at birds make a note, voice note or take a picture sharing what the bird you see is like and then go and look up what it is when you get back.

We would also say don’t worry about it. Use the outdoors in a way that suits you and your class. This may be identifying all the trees in your park, but it may also be looking up through the canopy and enjoying the way the light comes through the leaves, seeing how they overlap and get light from above. You may want to collect a few different leaves and think about the texture of each one. Do you have a favourite and why? Or put your leaf collection in size order from smallest to biggest. This could be with 3 leaves or 10, depending on your students and their ability. You can use the outdoors to teach anything

from eye gazing to photosynthesis. You know your students best and what will stimulate them. The good thing about being outdoors is you can use all your senses to discover the world around you. Generally once your curiosity has been sparked you will want to know more!

Finding the right space for you.

All classes and students have different needs when working outside. It may take you a few tries to find the right place for you and even use different places for different tasks.

We have found that some groups prefer an enclosed space. You may have runners in your group and want to feel that everyone is safe and can explore the space in their own way. This is not always an option, but you can be creative in making boundaries, even if they are only visual, with cones and rope for instance. You may wish a walk around the space to physically demonstrate the boundary you have set at the beginning of the session.

You may be looking for shelter and shade or spaces that are protected from the wind. If you are working with students using power chairs, for example, you may wish to ensure you have some protection to stop your students getting very cold, perhaps near a



line of trees or a fence. You may want to work underneath trees to offer shade on very sunny days. You will also need to look at access into the space so wheels don't get stuck in mud. You can get rollout matting that can be put down and then packed away. This can be a worthwhile investment to open up spaces that do not have fixed paths and allows you to keep a natural feel to spaces rather than putting in permanent surfaces.

Running your sessions in the middle of a field may seem counterintuitive, however it can often have less distractions than being next to fences or planting. You can be in a large circle where you can share what will happen in the session and give instructions without too many distractions. You can then send the group off in different directions if you think it is best for your students to work in small groups.

When doing one to one work you may wish to choose a space that has some protection, either up against a fence or in a corner. Young people also feel safe up on mounds if you have something like that, a space where they can see all around them which gives a sense of control. This may make it easier to focus or if you are using the time to have more difficult conversations.

For some students, repetition will be good

so using the same space, for others variety will help keep the engagement. You know your students best and can help accommodate this.

For some students being outside is very exciting and there is a desire to charge about and let off some steam. This is understandable and can be hugely beneficial to levels of concentration afterwards. If there is an option of having a bit of a walk to get to the space this may offer a release. This could mean walking all around a school building to get to the space you will use, rather than walking directly there. Or you could consider a more physical game to begin the session before the more focussed activity.

Do not give up if it does not work out every time.

We all know that planned activity does not always work out the way we intended. This is no different outdoors. In fact, there are a whole host of variables we will be working with outdoors. If it does not go to plan, then please don't give up. Being outside is an important aspect of all our lives and sometimes for children with disabilities and additional needs, the level of support needed can feel like it is too much to make it worthwhile. But it is worthwhile, so



worthwhile! And even if there is a lot of grumbling before a session, from students and staff, everyone will feel better after some fresh air and vitamin D.

For many of us the classroom can be a very overwhelming space. Lots of colour and stimulation on the walls, strip-lighting overhead, heating turned up high, close proximity to peers. All of this can contribute to overload and a challenge to concentration levels. Although the outdoors may have new sensory experiences that can take a bit of getting used to it also brings many benefits. Green is a very relaxing colour for our eyes to look at, fresh air helps us to stimulate our appetite and sleep better, the acoustics are great as sound is absorbed by natural materials.

Work with what works for you and your students.

As we said, you know your students best. Using the outdoors is the same as indoors and you can use what works best. If it helps to take items that work well inside outside, then do that. If you know a song will help students to release some energy and then focus, play that song outside. If you know your students work well with a timer then make the outdoor

activities timed - you have 2 minutes to find 4 different leaves and bring them back. For example You may want to introduce different styles of behaviour outside and that is great, but you can transfer gradually to make the transition to outdoor learning easier.

If you are unsure if your students (or staff) will be comfortable being outdoors in more adverse weather, then start your programme of outdoor learning in the spring and summer term. Outdoor learning can definitely be done year-round with the right kit but you don't want to put anyone off so a January start may not work best!

Small improvements - help with costs.

If your grounds are looking a little lacking and you think you could make some small improvements then there are a few approaches you can take. If you have someone within your school who is good at fundraising and applying for grants then speak with them about any improvements you think would benefit the outdoors.

Alternatively, you could approach a local garden centre or hardware store to see whether they might give you some plants,



tools or kit. Some have schemes to help their local community or you can write to the store manager or even just pop in and ask. Have something specific to ask for and explain the difference it will make to your school and importantly your students. Remember, anything you ask for or put into your grounds will need to be looked after. Make sure you are confident that trees can be supported to grow for example, and anything in a planter will need to be watered, make sure someone or a class has responsibility for them.

Local rotary clubs or similar will often want to help make a difference and could be willing to offer support to your school. There are also groups and local businesses who will offer labour if you need to make physical changes in your grounds.

If you are looking to visit nearby woodlands and need support to get there a local group

might lend you their minibus, a driver or even give financial support to cover the cost of petrol to help you get there and back. If your local forest or woodland space has paid entry or parking fees you could approach them to see whether they can waive those for your group. If you have a specific ask - say 6 sessions through a term - it may be easier for them to agree and arrange that.

Give it a go!

We would encourage you to get out there and give it a go! Being among trees and woodlands is a great place for learning and growing. You can find a way that suits you and your students. Anything can be taught through the outdoors and there is plenty of guidance out there to show you how. You will see positive rewards from exploring through your senses, so get out there and grow among the trees



Sensory Trust promotes and supports the creation and management of outdoor spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age or ability.

www.sensorytrust.org.uk tel: +44 (0)1726 222900 enquiries@sensorytrust.org.uk

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