

# Outdoor learning and play for Scotland's children

Scottish Real World Learning Partnership Briefing for MSPs



June 2011

## 1 Introduction

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Childhood in Scotland has changed dramatically in the space of a generation. For thousands of years, childhood has been characterised by engagement with the natural world and local community through active outdoor learning and play

Today, Scottish children spend less than half the time playing outdoors than their parents did and are less likely to spend time outdoors at school. They are growing up in an increasingly indoor, sedentary and virtual world, ever more divorced from the real world around them. This has significant impacts on their physical health, emotional wellbeing, social competence and their connection with the natural world and their local communities.

The Scottish Real World Learning Partnership is a coalition of charitable and public sector organisations that is tackling these issues by helping children and young people, along with their teachers and parents, to re-engage with the natural world through outdoor learning, adventurous activities and play. Our members include: Association for Science Education, Play Scotland, John Muir Trust, RSPB Scotland, Woodland Trust, National Trust for Scotland, Grounds for Learning, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Field Studies Council, Eco-Schools Scotland, Scottish Advisory Panel on Outdoor Education, Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Play Scotland, Creative Star Learning Company, Royal Scottish Geographical Society, Royal Highland Educational Trust, Scottish Outdoor Education Centres.



## 2 Why outdoor learning and play matters for children

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The following table briefly outlines the importance of outdoor learning and play to some of Scotland's most pressing childhood issues.

Issue	Challenge	The role of outdoor learning and play
Emotional Health	9.5% of Scottish school children report that they are not very happy or not happy at all <sup>i</sup>	There is a wide body of research demonstrating the positive impact of nature on emotional wellbeing. <sup>ii</sup> “In outdoor learning, pupils develop more positive relationships with each other, with their teachers and with the wider community. It can develop community pride and a greater sense of place, belonging and community.” <sup>iii</sup>
Physical Health	18.3% of Scottish 10-11 year olds are classified as obese <sup>iv</sup> . One third of Scottish children are failing to meet the World Health Organisation’s target of at least one hour of moderate activity on most days of the week <sup>v</sup>	<p>Playing and learning outdoors can improve muscular strength, co-ordination, balance, dexterity and aerobic fitness.</p> <p>Children can burn as many calories in an active outdoor play session as in a PE lesson.</p> <p>Enjoying the outdoors in childhood leads to a greater use of the outdoors for active recreation in childhood and later life.</p>
Nature Deficit	British children’s contact with nature has halved in a generation <sup>vi</sup>	<p>“Outdoor learning connects children and young people with the natural world.”<sup>vii</sup></p> <p>Positive experiences of nature in childhood have a significant impact on environmental attitudes and behaviours in adulthood. Now, more than ever, this is essential if we are to ask people to change their lifestyles and be more environmentally aware.</p>
Learning	“Too many youngsters leave school without qualifications or skills that matter in the labour market. Many ... find it difficult to comprehend its relevance.” <sup>viii</sup>	“Outdoor learning helps develop the skills of inquiry, critical thinking and reflection necessary for our children and young people to meet the social, economic and environmental challenges of life in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century. Opportunities for outdoor learning exist across all curriculum areas”. <sup>ix</sup> It is active, hands on and involves learning from real-life situations in a way that energises and motivates, particularly for pupils who have different learning styles or find classroom learning unappealing.
Behaviour	Around 1 in 12 pupils say they have been bullied. Scotland has a relatively high rate of fighting when compared cross-nationally <sup>x</sup>	“The outdoor environment encourages staff and students to see each other in a different light, building positive relationships and improving self awareness and understanding of others. It offers opportunities for personal development in areas such as communication, problem solving and working with others.” <sup>xi</sup>

### 3 Issues that need your support

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The last few years have seen growing policy support for this agenda, however significant challenges remain.

**Risk.** Assessing, experiencing and managing appropriate levels of risk is a vital part of childhood. Inappropriate and complex risk assessment procedures currently restrict teacher's abilities to take children outdoors. Widely varying Local Authority processes need to be streamlined and replaced with clear national guidance. These should also cover the provision of more adventurous play and learning in school playgrounds.

**Teacher skills.** Many Scottish teachers lack an awareness of why outdoor learning and play are important and the skills and confidence to teach outdoors. They need access to CPD approaches that have demonstrated success in enabling teachers to teach effectively outdoors across.

**School Inspections:** HMIE inspections need to be more active in examining outdoor learning and play provision.

**Learning Teaching Scotland:** The valuable support offered by LTS for outdoor learning over the last 2 years looks uncertain beyond the end of July 2011. If this support ceases, national leadership of outdoor learning will be set back by years.

**School Playgrounds:** For many children, school playgrounds offer the only or main opportunity left for outdoor play. For many teachers they are they are the first step in taking pupils outdoors<sup>vi</sup>. The small SNH school grounds grant that stimulated so much investment in these spaces has become an unfortunate casualty of concordat funding and needs to be re-instated. The design and provision of natural and learning spaces in new school playgrounds needs to be improved.

**Initial Teacher Education:** The majority of Scotland's trainee teachers receive little or no training in how to teach outdoors or support outdoor play. We believe that this should be a core element of all teacher training courses.



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<sup>i</sup> Mental well-being among schoolchildren in Scotland: age and gender patterns, trends and cross-national comparisons. [www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/publications/factsheets\\_downloads/BriefingPaper\\_2.pdf](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/publications/factsheets_downloads/BriefingPaper_2.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> For example, “Green Exercise: Complementary Roles of Nature, Exercise and Diet in Physical and Emotional Well-Being and Implications for Public Health Policy”

[www.essex.ac.uk/ces/esu/occasionalpapers/GreenExercise.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/ces/esu/occasionalpapers/GreenExercise.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Taking Learning Outdoors. Learning Teaching Scotland, 2007

<sup>iv</sup> 2010 Annual Evidence Update - Obesity - Childhood obesity: surveillance and prevention.

[www.library.nhs.uk/PUBLICHEALTH/ViewResource.aspx?resID=346755&pgID=2](http://www.library.nhs.uk/PUBLICHEALTH/ViewResource.aspx?resID=346755&pgID=2)

<sup>v</sup> Five Year Review of 'Let's Make Scotland More Active' - A strategy for physical activity

[www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/9159-1150-HS%20PA%205yr%20Review%20Final.pdf](http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/9159-1150-HS%20PA%205yr%20Review%20Final.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Childhood and nature: a survey on changing relationships with nature across generations

[www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Childhood%20and%20Nature%20Survey\\_tcm6-10515.pdf](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Childhood%20and%20Nature%20Survey_tcm6-10515.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning

[www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal\\_tcm4-596061.pdf](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Reviews of National Policies for Education - Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland

[www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_39263231\\_39744402\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37455,00.html#1](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_39263231_39744402_1_1_1_37455,00.html#1)

<sup>ix</sup> Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning

[www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal\\_tcm4-596061.pdf](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> Bullying and fighting among schoolchildren in Scotland: age and gender patterns, trends and cross-national comparisons. [www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/publications/factsheets\\_downloads/BriefingPaper\\_8.pdf](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/publications/factsheets_downloads/BriefingPaper_8.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning

[www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal\\_tcm4-596061.pdf](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/Images/cfeoutdoorlearningfinal_tcm4-596061.pdf)

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