

The way school grounds are developed, used and managed can have a significant impact on pupils' attitudes and behaviour towards school, each other, the wider environment and society. Pupils can spend as much as 25% of their time in the school grounds. That's more than one day a week, so it's important that the experiences they have there are the best and most positive they can be.



Young people read messages and meanings from the quality of their surroundings. They interpret the condition of their surroundings as a reflection of the value adults place on the environment and the children who are the main users.

Children can receive mixed messages from adults. For example, they may be taught that 'the environment' is important and that they should take care of it and then see grounds that are poorly designed and badly cared for. In order to support what is said inside the classroom, practical ideas need to be applied outside. These could include recycling and composting in the grounds, introducing native plant species to encourage wildlife, using recycled materials for creating elements within the grounds or maintaining the grounds using organic methods.

School grounds are also rich in heritage and can be a source of inspiration for learning about changes in society, why and how these have happened and their impact on the environment. Much of the formal curriculum can be taught outside and indeed some aspects of learning can only be taught outside. However, many other elements of the curriculum benefit from the use of the outdoor environment.

In order to learn outside, children need their grounds to be developed and managed accordingly. School grounds can be designed and used as a setting for lessons – using the outdoors to teach small groups or a whole class. This requires suitable places for pupils to gather, seating for different sizes of groups, shade and shelter from the sun, wind and rain, seating that is created for the young people who are going to use it and appropriate for how it is to be used.

Pupils can learn about the outdoors through books, videos and the internet. However, children will learn much more if they can actually experience the things they are learning about. They will remember the mini-beasts they are discovering if they get to handle them rather than just see the pictures. They will understand how the sun moves around the sky creating different shadows at different times of year and day if they see it happen in their own school grounds.

Pupils learn in different ways and for some, sitting at a desk will be a difficult task. For many of these pupils, the chance to go outside will make lessons more interesting just because they are free from the constraints

of sitting indoors. Many teachers speak about the amazing changes they see in pupils who have struggled to learn in traditional ways, whilst more able pupils also enjoy the challenge of learning in a more practical way.

Play and lunchtimes are very important to pupils. At primary school children play a variety of games, some active, some thoughtful, some creative and some social in nature. All these different aspects of play need to be accommodated and the grounds developed in such a way as to support this.

At secondary schools the issues change. The social aspects of the school grounds become more important and play is sidelined, unless it is football! However, these periods outside are still important, as an opportunity for young people to engage with their environment and with each other.

At secondary school level there is the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the environment and sustainable development through geography, science, IT and design technology and the chance to get directly involved through citizenship studies.

### **Further information**

See how other Eco-Schools have improved their school grounds in the Case Studies section. The National Initiatives section contains important information about how the Eco-Schools programme delivers the Learning Outside the Classroom agenda, whilst the Links and Resources section provides details of organisations that can help you improve your school grounds.