

A breath of fresh air

Help children to enjoy, engage with and learn from nature by setting up 'outdoor schools'

DARREN EVANS

The background

Kevin Phelps has always harboured a passion for the great outdoors and wanted to instil that in his pupils. Phelps, head of Tavernspite Community Primary School in Pembrokeshire, says: "I became aware that our children weren't having the sort of outdoor experiences we had as children. It wasn't that they didn't want to go outdoors, just that they didn't have enough opportunities to do so."

Buoyed by a survey of pupils who said they would rather play outside than sit inside watching television, Phelps and his friend and fellow Pembrokeshire headteacher Simon Thomas contacted the local authority.

The council agreed that schools were not making enough use of the area's natural resources as a learning tool or to develop pupils' confidence and well-being, and launched an ambitious education project to address the issue.

The project

A professional learning community including heads, teachers and strategic partners – such as the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority – was set up to develop the concept of "outdoor schools".

The aim was to increase children's engagement with the outdoors and develop their fitness and well-being, as well as to help them understand and appreciate their local environment.

Tavernspite became a pilot school for the concept, along with five others. It adopted a nearby National Trust site called Colby Woodland Garden and arranged regular trips for pupils of all ages to develop their familiarity with, confidence in and ownership of the area.

Pupils were given free time to play and explore to develop their love for the outdoors. Many were soon visiting with their families and friends in the evenings and at weekends.

Tips from the scheme

- Get as many partners involved as possible. Tavernspite's partners Sport Pembrokeshire and the Darwin Experience help staff to provide engaging and exciting activities for pupils during their visits.
- Understand that it is good for children to be

outdoors. "Of course health and safety and risk assessment is important," Phelps says, "but you mustn't let that get in the way of allowing children to play and explore."

- Have a whole-school outdoor ethos. "Make sure everybody, from pupils and parents to teachers, is on board," Phelps says.

Evidence that it works?

Wales' schools inspectorate Estyn has highlighted Tavernspite as a model of best practice because of the project's success.

In terms of pupil well-being, a school survey found that: 92 per cent of pupils felt happier and more confident working outdoors; 92 per cent agreed that working outdoors made them feel stronger, fitter and healthier; and 95 per cent said that they now had a better understanding of sustainability issues.

Phelps says results in science have also improved since the scheme launched.



The project

Approach Creating an "outdoor school"

Started September 2011

Leaders Kevin Phelps and Simon Thomas, headteachers

The school

Name Tavernspite Community Primary School

Location Pembrokeshire, Wales
Pupils 198

Age range 3-11

Intake The school serves a large rural catchment area. Only 6 per cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals, well below the local authority and all-Wales average
Estyn overall rating Good (2012)