



## Outdoor classroom day – so kids can play, and learn, outdoors

*Children are not getting outside as much as they used to. Enter Outdoor Classroom Day, a global initiative to get kids playing and learning outdoors. JODY HOPKINSON looks at why New Zealand schools need this as much as any those in any other country.*

By **Education Review** - September 7, 2018

Globally, children are spending more time inside than ever before. A mix of what has been termed a “digital winter”, over-scheduled kids and time-poor parents, and a greater awareness of danger – both real and perceived – outside the school means some of our children are spending less time outdoors than those serving time in prison. The roll-on effects of this inward retreat are dire, warn children development experts, educators and employers, as they impact our ability to create, learn, survive and thrive.

To counter this, a worldwide campaign to encourage schools to ensure children have time to play and learn outdoors again has come to New Zealand. More than 20,000 schools and close to two million children take part in Outdoor Classroom Day which is run twice a year – on May 17 and again on November 1. With 42 Kiwi schools signed up to take part with more than half of those in Auckland and the North, teachers, parents and kids alike are looking forward to spending an entire school day learning and playing outdoors.

Teachers who took their learning outdoors reported powerful impacts, says Cath Prisk, the global director for the Outdoor Classroom Day campaign.

“The effects of simply going outdoors more regularly are profound. Children’s behaviour improves, their attention is more focussed, and teachers tell us that individuals who felt inhibited by the curriculum often thrive in an outdoor environment. When adults think back to their own happiest memories of childhood, they frequently recall the joy of playing outdoors. Play is not only central to children’s enjoyment of life but also to their solving of problems, their team work and creativity.”

Countries from Colombia to Scotland and everywhere in between are taking part, with schools from remote communities such as the Australian Torres Straits and far into the Yukon in Canada, as well as schools in the middle of Auckland, Sydney, New York and London.

“Last year, we were contacted by a class in a refugee camp in Greece who made birdfeeders during their day outside the classroom.

“We had a class in South Africa where the classroom where the teacher reported that being outside really helped the kids open up and start talking about there being so many guns around the place and they decided that rather than using their fingers to pretend to be guns they would use their fingers for painting.

“In Australia a teacher told us about one of her students who was elective mute, who after repeated time outdoors opened up, and started to speak.”

The day began in 2012 in just a few schools in London. It was a depressing time for play, explains Cath.

“Schools were cutting recess and not letting children play outside. Abnba Portch, the campaign’s founder decided, let’s celebrate play and learning outside and encourage more people to go outside.”

In 2015 Unilever – Persil, here in New Zealand – got on board and provided funding for running the day in the UK.

“Worldwide, we are now working with NGOs in ten different countries all with the same purpose: every child gets to play outside everyday.

“The feedback is amazing – what comes through is if kids don’t play outside very often they don’t really want to go outside much at all. But the more they do play outside, the more they want to be outside. Staff have found that it is not as hard as they thought. The kids love it and so do the teachers do– they’ve said the children quickly begin to have a sense of guardianship of the land – kaitiaki, as you say in New Zealand.”

A recent study showed that one in seven children in London never connects with nature, and Cath says that connection or lack of it may decide the very future of our planet.

“Connection determines who will care about the Earth. You can give kids a whole lot of worksheets about bees and about sustainable living and they might learn about those

causes. But if the kids play outside every day they are committed to where they play. It is as David Attenborough said, "you only protect what you love and you only love what you know".

Play future-proofs us in other ways. Cath points to a recent American Association of Paediatrician recommendation to all doctors to prescribe play to parents.

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Cath explains that while Outdoor Classroom Day began as one day of celebration, it is now a movement to build every day change.

"Now we are standing up for kids' right to be outdoors to learn and play. We have three goals. First, every child must have 90 minutes of play every day at or around the school day.

Secondly, every child takes at least one class outdoors every week. And thirdly – that schools champion the importance of the outdoors for children to parents and the wider community.

It would be easy to think of a lack of time outdoors during school time and after school as being the problem of schools in more heavily populated, less sunny countries than our own. But schools in Australia have also cut recess times to catch up in other areas and while Australian kids, for example, spend more time outdoors than any other country in the world, studies show it is a lot less than their parents did, says Griffin Longley founder and CEO of Nature Play which is helping to facilitate Outdoor Classroom Day in Australia and New Zealand.

"One of the interesting things I think both here and New Zealand is that we have this cultural identity which is "outdoorsy" and bound up in being outdoors. But our lived reality doesn't match up. In Norway, children in their early years spend 60 per cent of their learning time outside in the summer and 31 per cent of their time outdoors in the winter. That is more than our kids spend outdoors here in Australia. Those cultures have evolved in the dark spaces and they've learned about the threat to kids' states of mind with too much time inside. They know that they *must* get outside and it's serving them

well. We're not doing it as much. I liken our "digital winter" to their Arctic winter. We need to reinvent those outdoor memories."

He says teachers know that learning outside is better than learning in a classroom.

"We've found teachers have a pent up appetite for finding curriculum based reasons to get kids outdoors. They know we need to get outside to learn, they're just pressured with everything else they have to do.

"Kids learn better when they're outside. We know ourselves how we feel when we go for a drive to a beautiful piece of bush or the beach, how we get out of the car and give a big sigh of release. The stress hormone cortisol builds up and marinades in our bodies being indoors. It just drops away when we go out into natural spaces – we have evolved to feel comfortable in nature.

That's what we give to our kids by going outside to play and learn – we allow their bodies to go from a certain level of fight or flight and move into a receptive state."

He says our senses dullen indoors but come alive again in the sensory rich outdoors.

"Our memories work better outside and we learn more when we're physically active. We *want* our kids to be red faced and bright-eyed."

He also explains that it is perfectly natural for parents to interpret their children's experience of childhood as the same as their own.

"We remember our childhoods haring around outside when the reality now is quite different. It's no longer sensible to let children run around near where there is a four lane motorway. We need to recognise that shift, and find new ways to get our kids outdoors. And we can make the school environment an outdoor sanctuary."

Here in New Zealand, Persil's purpose is "Dirt is Good", encouraging all parents to embrace an outdoors lifestyle, to share 'moments that mark' and for children to have real play every day. In 2015, they partnered with the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Human Potential Centre to understand the state of play in Aotearoa.

Their State of Play Survey released in 2015 showed that 66.2 per cent of New Zealand parents believe that relaxing the safety rules and introducing 'risky' play practices and equipment in schools would enhance children's development but this contrasts with a

finding that only 14.8 per cent of our children are often allowed to play outside in the rain.

It also found that more than 80 per cent of Kiwi children are spending more than two hours a day in front of a screen during the week, with even more doing the same on the weekend.

Parents who like the sound of Outdoor Classroom Day can contact their schools and encourage them to take part, says Cath.

“Teachers can sign up their class, or even better head teachers can get the whole school involved. Both the global and Australian websites have tons of resources and inspiration on them, good for both parents, teachers and after school providers.

“It costs nothing to make the day happen. Schools sign up online and then spend the day learning outdoors in whatever way they want. For inspiration they can go to our website, and then we encourage schools to share what they do on the day along with two million other kids learning outside of the classroom on the same day. ”

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