

Project encourages pupils to realise benefits of outdoor learning

October 12 2016, by Alan Williams



The Naturally Healthy Devon Schools (NHDS) initiative aims to encourage school aged children to regularly interact with the natural environment. Credit: University of Plymouth

Children are discovering the many and varied benefits of outdoor learning thanks to a partnership project being developed in schools across Devon.

The Naturally Healthy Devon Schools (NHDS) initiative aims to encourage school aged children to regularly interact with Devon's natural environment in order to improve their health and wellbeing.

It is developing ways to embed learning in the natural environment as part of the regular curriculum with 21 schools and teachers.

The project is being supported by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) Devon, the Devon Education for Sustainability Working Group (DESWG), Natural England and the University of Plymouth under the umbrella of the Devon Local Nature Partnership.

Dr Margaret Hall, Chair of East Devon CPRE, said:

"CPRE Devon is pleased to have been able to provide funding for the Naturally Healthy Devon Schools project. One of our aims is to help children to develop an interest and appreciation of the countryside, and to encourage children to be outdoors and to value the outdoor environment. The achievements of the project so far are very positive."

David Weatherly, the outdoor learning lead for Devon Local Nature Partnership and Chair of the Devon Education for Sustainability Working Group (DESWG), added:

"The Naturally Healthy Devon Schools development project exemplifies the importance of people of all ages learning in and through the outdoor environment. There is a growing evidence base that not only the health and esteem of children improves through engagement with the outdoors but also their cognitive development. Learning outside is an important dimension of differentiating learning and making it more accessible and relevant."

The project is working in East Devon, North Devon and Torridge and

headteacher Gavin Scandrett, of Bishops Nympton School, said:

"It was only really in January that we introduced outdoor learning as an idea, as a concept. It has just kind of flourished from there and ultimately it's down to the success of the sessions and what the children are getting out of it."

The NHDS extends the work of the Natural Connections Demonstration Project, which was managed by the University of Plymouth with funding from Defra, Natural England and Historic England. It ran between 2012-2016 working with schools in Bristol, Cornwall, Torbay and Plymouth to develop their curriculum learning outdoors.

Academics from the University have also published several high-profile reports in recent months promoting the benefits of outdoor learning, including Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling, which argued that outdoor learning should be woven within school curricula globally, and Transforming Outdoor Learning in Schools, a guide for teachers, based on the Natural Connections project findings. It is a useful resource that summarises evidence of positive impacts on children and teachers, and explains how 125 Natural Connections schools embedded outdoor learning into their regular practice.

Sue Waite, Associate Professor in Education at the University of Plymouth, said:

"After only one year's involvement with NHDS, all responding schools are reporting positive impacts in enjoyment, engagement with learning and nature, social skills and wellbeing. And more than 80 per cent are seeing positive effects on attainment, behaviour and physical health. With a new research-evidenced toolkit, schools will soon also be able to assess more easily whether health and wellbeing are being supported through their curriculum learning outdoors."

Provided by University of Plymouth

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