

# Children and the Outdoors

LESSONS FOR SCHOOLS



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council

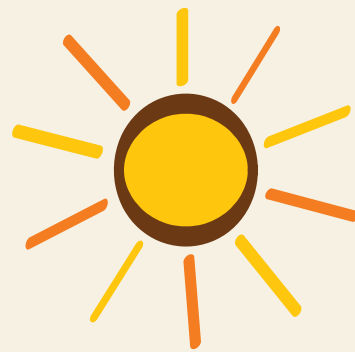


Working for heritage | Working with communities

## Introduction

A growing body of international evidence suggests that play patterns among children are changing; fewer children are playing outdoors and outdoor play is increasingly centred on the home rather than natural settings. This decline has been attributed to a number of factors including a lack of safe spaces for outdoor play, parents' anxieties about their children's safety, and increasing pressure on children to participate in structured activities. Children's reduced contact with nature has given rise to significant concern among those who work for, with and on behalf of children as it is increasingly recognised that regular access to the natural environment is fundamental to children's health, development and wellbeing, and that lack of access to natural spaces infringes children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC).

In light of this widespread concern and a dearth of research on children's access to the outdoors from an Irish perspective, the Heritage Council commissioned a research team from University College Cork to conduct a review of contact with the outdoors and natural heritage among children aged 5-12. The research team comprised members from the Child Law Clinic, School of Law and the Department of Occupational Science.



## What was the aim of the study?

The main aim of the study was to review existing research and relevant literature around children's relationship with the outdoors and natural heritage. This included examining and analysing current trends and identifying gaps in the research from a children's rights perspective, particularly in the Irish context. Through this process, the project aimed to:

- (i) Present an understanding of the barriers to ensuring children's enjoyment of their rights to contact with the outdoors and natural heritage;
- (ii) Identify the impacts and precise benefits to children of contact with the outdoors and natural heritage holistically, including health, education, social and environmental perspectives;
- (iii) Develop precise recommendations for further research and for specific measures for supporting children's engagement with the outdoors and natural heritage.



## How was the study conducted?

The project was set against the backdrop of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and was informed by its principles and provisions. Article 12 of the CRC provides that children have a right to be heard in all matters that affect them and to have their views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. In keeping with the spirit of Article 12, the views of children were a central feature of the research. One school each was chosen from a rural, a town, and a city environment, in order to include the views of more than 120 children from a range of different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. A short survey was conducted with the school principal, and photographs were taken of the school environments. A whole-class art project on the theme of 'what I do in my free time' was conducted with three classes in each school, and focus groups were carried out for eight of the nine classes, comprising 39 children (18 girls, 21 boys). These discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed together with the artwork, using a qualitative analysis software package. In addition, a comprehensive review of relevant law, policy and literature was conducted.



## What are the findings?

As stated, existing research demonstrates that the changing nature of children's lives is a significant issue and that the child-nature connection is under serious threat. Certain groups of children, such as children with disabilities, face particular challenges in this regard. However, there are significant benefits in terms of health and well-being to contact with the outdoors and natural environment as these environments offer opportunities for risk, adventure and challenge.

This research found that, all things being equal, children prefer to be outside rather than inside; they relish the freedom of exploring and playing in an unstructured manner, and they also report enjoying more organised outdoor activities such as gardening and nature walks. Factors such as location, friends, and weather influence the appeal of the outdoor environment, and also affect children's opportunities to be outside.

Given that children spend so much of their time in school, schools are in a unique position to educate and engage children about their connection to the natural world, and encourage children's relationship with nature. Though some elements of the primary school curriculum support children's contact with the outdoors, schools have a high degree of autonomy and the character and ethos of a school will often determine the level of access children have to the outdoor environment. This was found to be the case even where natural areas, such as school gardens and natural play areas are available, resulting in wide variations in children's contact with the outdoors from school to school.

In all three schools that took part in this study, there was a clear demarcation between indoor and outdoor spaces in relation to the curriculum, with the buildings seen as the primary learning space. While it was clear that schools were using creative ways to bring nature into the classroom in the form of artwork, posters and nature tables, it was less evident that schools were utilising outdoor spaces more broadly for children's education. Teachers' attitudes often seemed to influence children's access to the outdoor environment, including their attitudes to the weather, which appeared to play a key role in determining whether children were allowed to spend time outdoors. Children reported a number of restrictions to their access to outdoor and natural spaces in schools, and some pointed to their school's emphasis on maintaining outdoor spaces predominantly for appearance (flower beds, lawns and school gardens) or for sporting activities. The research further identified a risk-averse culture in schools, with pupils often prohibited from running, climbing trees and engaging in other risky activities in the outdoor environment.

## What can schools do to encourage children's contact with outdoors and natural heritage?

Schools have an unmatched potential to foster and promote children's relationship with the natural environment. All of the schools visited had made efforts to do so. Positive features included walk or cycle to school schemes through which children have an opportunity to engage with the outdoors and nature. Children reported that they noticed the natural environment much more when walking as opposed to being driven;

*Well, when I walk I see the leaves falling, sometimes in the autumn. And in the summer I see the sun shining.*

**(Girl, town school, 10-12 years).**

In light of these self-recognised benefits, schools should try to support children to advocate for safer roads and cycle paths so more children can walk or cycle to and from school with confidence.

Free outdoor play, particularly in natural environments, has been found to be one of the most natural and effective forms of learning and to also be vital for children's happiness. In order to encourage this, school policies which restrict children's access to the natural environment should be reviewed and should incorporate the outdoors into the curriculum as broadly as possible. Schoolyard greening, including natural landscaping, integrated natural materials, play equipment and school gardens, can increase children's engagement with nature and the outdoors.



In our research we saw fantastic examples of how children's access to these amenities can be integrated into the school day (rather than burdening staff who struggle to meet the demands of the curriculum). Such measures, in addition to field trips, environmental clubs, and other creative approaches facilitate the integration of nature and environmental topics into the existing curriculum. Children not only played in their school garden and learned about nature there, they spent class (as opposed to break-) time there as part of their school day. This encouraged them to 'be' in nature, not just to go there.

In our research, we saw the efforts of principals and teachers to encourage children's learning in the broadest sense, facilitating access to a wide range of enrichment activities, materials and environments for all children. This involves moving beyond a strict academic and risk-averse focus to

the outdoors, by facilitating children's access to nature and the outdoors through adequate outdoor break times and place-based education (for example, in the school grounds, the local area and through organised trips to sites further afield). Engagement with programmes such as the Heritage in Schools Scheme and the Green Flag programme can also instil in children a greater appreciation of and sense of respect for the natural world.

This research adopted a participatory methodology which respects and promotes children's right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. It is an approach which demonstrates that children are experts in their own lives and can often offer unique perspectives which are not always apparent to adults. There is also strong evidence that participation by children and young people in decision-making can support active citizenship and social inclusion at an early stage and is critical for the construction and maintenance of a healthy society. There is also evidence to suggest that nurturing and encouraging children's relationship with nature from an early age will lead to a greater sense of care and appreciation for the natural environment as they grow older. Therefore, any measures taken to support and promote children's access to the outdoors need to incorporate their views in a meaningful and on-going way.

The city school visited as part of the research provides a particularly good example of the effectiveness of adopting a participatory approach; children were involved in the design and development of the outdoor space and are actively involved in integrating the space into the curriculum. In that school, the garden is not simply seen as a place to go during break-times or just as a place to play, it is incorporated into children's daily activities. Children also have access to rain gear in school which encourages them to spend more time outdoors in wet weather than they would at home:

*"...if you were at home and you went out, you would get all wet because you wouldn't think of what you'd be doing in school, like putting on two pants and stuff. You're all soaking and you couldn't go out for the day because you would have your pyjamas on."*

**(City school, 8/9 years, boy)**

Adopting a participatory approach is not only required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it results in more effective and sustainable outcomes for all involved. It is also a central feature of government policy - the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* promotes the importance of children and young people's involvement in decision-making in all areas of their lives with a particular focus on early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems. The policy supports mainstreaming children's participation in education policy, in the running of schools and services, in school inspections and in the curriculum. It is hoped that by incorporating children's views on an on-going basis, nature and the outdoors will play an increasingly central role in children's education.





**The Heritage in Schools Scheme** is Ireland's leading outdoor education programme for primary school children and is operated by the Heritage Council. The Scheme is unique in Ireland and provides a panel of 176 diverse Heritage Specialists who work directly with children in primary schools throughout the country. It is leading the way in promoting outdoor education and encouraging children to engage directly with the natural and cultural heritage that surrounds them.



The scheme facilitates visits to primary schools nationwide by a range of experts on Ireland's natural and cultural heritage. At a time when great value is placed on understanding and using technology we feel that it is just as vital that children have an appreciation of 'place' and respect for the natural and cultural world on which we depend. The aim of this scheme is to encourage both teachers and pupils to engage with their local heritage in a hands-on, interactive and meaningful way. In particular, the scheme aims to address the increasing decline in time spent outdoors by Irish children. In order to achieve these aims, the Heritage Council encourages the Heritage Expert visits to take place outdoors where ever possible, regardless of the 'weather'!

The experts on the Heritage in Schools Scheme are specialists in diverse aspects of Ireland's heritage and share a contagious enthusiasm for their work. The experts' lesson plans are tailored to suit the requirements of the SESE curriculum subjects of History, Geography and Science and many of them have extensive experience of working with children in the classroom setting.

Even with reduced budgets the scheme continues to bring heritage expertise directly into the classroom reaching approximately 120,000 children each year and we look forward to seeing these numbers continue to grow in the coming years. This is due to the support and willingness of the Specialists to reduce costs to ensure as many visits to children as possible can take place throughout the year.

Since the scheme was launched in 2000 it has successfully generated a wider interest, knowledge and appreciation of our heritage in children throughout the country. The Heritage Council hopes that the scheme will continue to support both teachers and pupils as they venture outside the classroom to enjoy their local heritage.

If you have never used the scheme and would like to find out more, go to our website at [www.heritageinschools.ie](http://www.heritageinschools.ie)

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for the full report please go to:  
[www.heritagecouncil.ie/education/publications/](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/education/publications/)

