

The impact of outdoor learning and playtime at school – and beyond



A summary of the survey findings conducted for Outdoor Classroom Day 2018

May 2018

Making outdoor play and learning part of every day, at school and at home

Outdoor Classroom Day is a global campaign to inspire and celebrate outdoor learning and play. On the day, thousands of schools around the world take lessons outside and prioritise playtime. As well as having fun, they show how important and easy it is to give children more time outdoors. The campaign days act as a catalyst to inspire more time outdoors *every day*, both at school and at home. To achieve this, the campaign has three aims:

1. Outdoor learning is part of every school day for every child;
2. Every child has great recess/playtime at school every day for at least 60 minutes, with the longer-term aim of 90 minutes;
3. Schools act as advocates for more time outdoors, so that outdoor play becomes part of every child's everyday life.

These goals support the World Health Organisation's guidance on time needed per day for physical activity, and the Sustainable Development Goals and UNCRC, which expects states to ensure children connect to nature, and have time to play and to be with friends.

To discover more about the impact of the campaign and to identify the barriers to outdoor play and learning, Project Dirt conducted **two surveys across 45 countries with teachers who have participated in the campaign between 2016-2017**. The results are both inspiring and concerning.

Teachers told us that they want:

- more time for children to play outdoors (68%)
- more time to take lessons outside. (87%)

Teachers told us that **children are happier and more engaged with learning after playing outdoors**. They reported that children are also happier when they are learning outdoors, as well as being more engaged with lessons. But despite that, and despite the fact that the teachers surveyed are already supportive of outdoor play and learning, **1 in 6 children (16%) still only have lessons outdoors less than once a month**. Furthermore, **two thirds (65%) of primary schools have less than an hour of playtime a day**, and more than one in ten (12%) schools have less than 30 minutes.

If we extrapolate these findings to the normal population of schools, we can surmise that the time for outdoor play and learning would be much less. Given that **almost every teacher surveyed – 97% globally - said that time to play outdoors is *critical* for children to reach their full potential**, this is extremely concerning).

One fifth (22%) of the teachers that responded to the survey told us that they have increased playtime since taking part in the campaign, and two fifths (44%) have increased time for outdoor lessons – so we know that Outdoor Classroom Day is making a difference. But we still have a long way to go until outdoor play and learning is part of *every day* at every school around the world.

The impact of outdoor learning and playtime at school – and beyond

“I think kids who get outside to play are happier and healthier all around. Their ingenuity in problem solving is also increased.” (Teacher in the USA)

Ninety-seven per cent of teachers surveyed worldwide believe that outdoor playtime throughout the school day is critical for children to reach their full potential. (99% in Australia; 99% in the UK; 99% in the USA and Canada; 96% in South Africa).

Furthermore:

Eighty-seven per cent of teachers worldwide want more time to take lessons outdoors. (93% in the USA; 89% in Canada; 85% in Australia; 85% in South Africa; 81% in the UK).

Sixty-eight per cent of teachers worldwide think that children should play outdoors more. (84% in Canada; 72% in the USA; 69% in Australia; 55% in the UK; 50% in South Africa).

We asked teachers how long the children in their schools normally have outdoors. We were surprised to learn that **sixty-five per cent of primary schools globally get less than one hour of playtime (recess) a day** and 12% get less than 30 minutes. Even when we included Kindergartens, 61% still had less than an hour of play. More positively, a quarter of schools (26%) globally are getting 60-89 minutes, and 9% are getting more than 90 minutes, which meets the campaign goal for schools worldwide.

Around the world:

- **Australian schoolchildren get the most playtime;** 58% get more than one hour a day.
- **Schoolchildren in the USA get the least playtime;** 89% get less than one hour a day.
- In the UK, 60% of schoolchildren get less than one hour of playtime; only 8% get over 90 minutes.
- In Canada, 66% of schoolchildren get less than one hour of playtime; only 10% get more than 90 minutes.
- In South Africa, 68% of schoolchildren get less than one hour of playtime; 14% get more than 90 minutes.*

Teachers from secondary schools made up less than a quarter of survey respondents. As you might expect, they reported that children have even less outdoor playtime/breaktime than their primary school counterparts, with several schools in the US telling us: *“High school students don’t have recess.”*

One interesting factor was the distribution of the time that children have to play. In most school systems, the length of the school day is about the same, between five and seven hours for primary schools. But the length of playtime varied considerably within countries, suggesting that there is no consistent guidance on playtime/breaktime length in education policies. This is an issue to be further explored.

But **playtime is not the only time that children should be outdoors.** We asked teachers how often they make use of the environment around the school – the playground, sports fields, streets and nearby parks – as places to deliver lessons such as maths, music or physical education (sports).

At primary schools around the world (ages 5-11) around two thirds (63%) go out for lessons once a week or more, which is great. However, 1 in 6 (**16%**) of teachers surveyed said that they take lessons outdoors less than once a month. This again suggests that outdoor lessons are much less frequent in the wider population.

- In Australia, 72% of primary schools take lessons outdoors once a week or more; 15% go out every day; 17% go out less than once a month.
- In Brazil, 67% of elementary schools take lessons outdoors once a week or more, none (0%) reported going out every day; 11% go out less than once a month.
- In Indonesia 66% of elementary schools take lessons outdoors once a week or more; 2% go out every day; 9% go out less than once a month.
- In the UK, 64% of primary schools take lessons outdoors once a week or more; 12% go out every day; 12% go out less than once a month.
- In the USA, 55% of elementary schools take lessons outdoors once a week or more; 10% go out every day; 29% go out less than once a month.

Benefits of outdoor playtime

“They solve creative problems; they come back in with new ideas and creative solutions.” (Teacher in South Africa)

Time for outdoor play is not just a way for children to let off steam. The teachers surveyed told us that after an outdoor playtime they saw improvements in:

- **Social skills** (99% in Australia; 98% in the UK; **97% globally**; 97% in Canada; 96% in the USA; 88% in South Africa).
- **Imagination and creativity** (98% in Australia; 96% in South Africa; **94% globally**; 94% in the UK; 93% in Canada; 92% in the USA).
- **Engagement with learning** (80% in Canada; **80% globally**; 77% in Australia; 70% in South Africa; 65% in the USA; 57% in the UK).
- **Concentration** (81% in the USA; **77% globally**; 78% in Canada; 78% in Australia; 75% in the UK).
- **Behaviour** (72% in Canada; 68% in the USA; **67% globally**; 67% in South Africa; 65% in Australia; 58% in the UK).

And perhaps most critically, **children are happier after playing outdoors** (90% in Canada; 89% in Australia; **88% globally**; 85% in South Africa; 85% in the USA; 84% in the UK).

This shouldn't surprise anyone, although we might question what is happening in the 12% of schools where children are not noticeably happier. A whole body of research has found that outdoor play makes children happy and that happy children learn better, so we know that it has a key place in formal schooling systems worldwide. The question is: why isn't time outdoors at school written into policy as standard already?

Benefits of outdoor learning

*“Children are calmer, more regulated in their behaviour and open to learning.”
(Teacher in Australia)*

The teachers surveyed told us that when they take lessons outdoors children are more:

- **Engaged in learning** (91% in the USA; 90% in the UK; **88% globally**; 88% in South Africa; 87% in Canada; 84% in Australia).
- **Better able to concentrate** (72% in the UK; 72% in South Africa; 69% in the USA; **68% globally**; 62% in Australia; 59% in Canada).
- **Better behaved** (68% in the USA; 66% in Canada; **65% globally**; 63% in Australia; 63% in the UK; 58% in South Africa).

As before, teachers emphatically said that **children are happier when they learn outdoors** (96% in South Africa; 91% in the UK; **89% globally**; 88% in the USA; 87% in Canada; 85% in Australia).

It is important to note here that ‘the outdoors’ is not a subject. It is an alternative classroom that can engage hearts and minds, provide endless stimulation and provide the chance for hands-on learning. In the comments that teachers submitted they talk about children being independent learners, having the confidence to try, and having fun when they are learning outdoors.

Barriers to outdoor playtime

“We usually ignore wet playtime and put our waterproofs on and get outside. I give up my break time to supervise this. Midges can be pretty brutal at times; however, we still go outside.” (Teacher in Scotland)

Given how critical and beneficial playtime is, we asked teachers what stops them from taking lessons outdoors. Reasons included:

- **Poor behaviour in class** (43% in the UK; 28% in the USA; **22% globally**; 18% in Australia; 18% in Canada; 15% in South Africa).
- **Children are required to finish homework or classwork** (38% in the UK; **29% globally**; 24% in Canada; 24% in the USA; 22% in Australia; 15% in South Africa).
- **The weather** (83% in Canada; 81% Australia; 80% in the USA; **79% globally**; 76% in the UK; 59% in South Africa). *It is important to note here that, in Australia, Canada and South Africa, some very extreme weather conditions were cited as very good reasons for not going outside!*

An encouraging 1 in 7 of respondents worldwide said that **nothing prevents children from playing outdoors** (26% in South Africa; 20% in Australia; 16% in the UK; **14% globally**; 11% in Canada; 6% in the USA).

Barriers to outdoor learning

“For the most part, nothing keeps our children indoors. I do frequently (at least once a week) have to provide clothing to allow them to partake in outdoor activities.”
(Teacher in Canada)

Taking children outdoors for lessons at primary and secondary school is most often instigated by individual teachers as opposed to being at the centre of whole-school policies. With that in mind, we asked what stops teachers taking lessons outdoors. They told us:

- **Pressures caused by curriculum work** (47% in the USA; 45% in the UK; **40.5% globally**; 39% in Australia; 35% in South Africa; 33% in Canada).
- **Health and safety fears** (17% in Canada; 17% in the UK; **15% globally**; 14% in the USA; 9% in Australia).
- **The weather** (81% in South Africa; 79% in Canada; 77% in the USA; **70% globally**; 68% in Australia; 58% in the UK).

Again, a promising 17% of teachers worldwide said that **nothing prevents them from taking classes outside** (24% in the UK; 23% in South Africa; 18% in Australia; **17% globally**; 15% in Canada; 6% in the USA).

The impact of taking part in Outdoor Classroom Day

“A child with selective mutism (where a child doesn't speak to people other than close family), started to relax outside (over 6 months period) and then actually spoke to her friends at outside time. Over time she did this at inside time too.” (Teacher in Australia)

Outdoor Classroom Day has been going since 2012, when a few schools in South London, England, got involved. Through Project Dirt's partnerships with leading education and environment NGOs in thirteen countries, as well as the valuable support of Unilever's Dirt is Good brands, the campaign reached over 19,000 schools in 2017. We asked teachers what changes they had made since participating in the campaign. They told us:

- **Globally, 22% of teachers said that they increased playtime** (27% in South Africa; 23% in Canada; 19% in the UK; 18% in Australia; 17% in the USA).
- **Globally, 44% of teachers said that they take lessons outdoors more often** (46% in South Africa; 42% in Canada; 41% in the USA; 38% in the UK; 33% in Australia).

The future?

These findings are encouraging as they show that there is a fast-growing number of schools worldwide that recognise how important outdoor learning and play is for children, teachers and whole schools, as well as parents and the wider community. This is part of a wider growing movement, backed by research spanning neuroscience to biology, that recognises unequivocally that time outdoors – and time to play - is important for *all* children.

In a time when we need mentally well-balanced, creative and adaptable humans, who are ready, as Sir Ken Robinson often reminds us, for an ever-changing world, then we will do well to remember that simply playing and learning outdoors is a key ingredient.

We believe that together, we can encourage schools worldwide to make outdoor learning and play an essential part of every day. And the tens of thousands of teachers around the world getting involved in 2018 believe it too – from the Finnish Arctic Circle to the Falkland Islands, from Honolulu to Hackney.

Find out more and join the movement at: www.outdoorclassroomday.com

About Outdoor Classroom Day

The global Outdoor Classroom Day campaign is led by Project Dirt, in partnership with Unilever as part of their Dirt is Good movement. The partners support local NGOs and Dirt is Good teams to deliver the campaign in countries around the world.

Methodology

Two surveys of teachers that have taken part in Outdoor Classroom Day in 2016-2017; A third for more than one campaign. Over 600 responses were gathered from a dataset of over 13,000 teachers and head teachers. Forty-five countries are represented, three quarters (74%) of respondents were from primary schools or 'all through', with school days longer than five hours (87%).

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** This result is from a small dataset of only 22 respondents.*

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