

Playtime matters



A report comparing playtime worldwide and highlighting the evidence case for making playtime a key part of the school day.

Outdoor Classroom Day, May 2019

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Introduction

This report brings together both previous research and new findings that make the case for playtimes being a key part of the school day. It shows that outdoor play at school helps develop healthy, curious and active kids who are better connected to their environment. It brings together evidence that shows that time outdoors is particularly important for children's mental health – reducing stress, giving a sense of calm and simply making them happier.

Playtime length at primary schools worldwide varies from just 15 minutes to over two hours, in school days that vary from 3.5 hours to over ten. The types of playgrounds children have varied worldwide, from hard courts to landscaped parks. Teachers work in different atmospheres when it comes to playtime, with most thankfully in schools where colleagues value playtime, but still far too many are in schools where their peers think it is a waste of time.

A third (32%) of the schools that responded to our survey say they have now increased playtime since getting involved in the Outdoor Classroom Day campaign. We hope this report will give more schools and those that manage schools the evidence they need to make playtime a key part of the school day.

The evidence is clear. Playtime at school works¹. The benefits are school-wide, and it just makes sense.

Playtime Matters methodology

The research highlighted in this report is adapted from [Muddy Hands](#) – published by [Semble](#) (formerly Project Dirt) in October 2018 – alongside additional material focusing on playtime.

The new findings are the results of the latest Outdoor Classroom Day teacher surveys. Two identical surveys were conducted with teachers who took part in Outdoor Classroom Day in May and November 2018. Responses were received from teachers in 76 countries, from schools serving all ages from nursery to school leaving age (19). The focus of this report is on the primary age group, 6-13, so our data is from the 2,535 respondents from primary schools (reported in sections 2b and 2c), including 1,879 who gave us details of their specific classes' experience of playtime as reported in sections 2a.

Significant differences between age-ranges or countries: Where figures are broken down by age or country, percentages which are statistically significant are highlighted. **Green** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; **yellow** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

About Outdoor Classroom Day

[Outdoor Classroom Day](#) is a global campaign to celebrate and inspire outdoor learning and play. On the day, thousands of schools around the world take lessons outdoors and prioritise playtime. In 2018, over 3.5 million children in over 100 countries got involved. Since 2011 over 5 million children and 50,000 schools have taken part.

¹ Follett, M. (2017); Prisk & Cusworth (2018)

So that schools can participate on a day that fits with their climate and term times, the global campaign has two dates each year. [Visit the website](#) for upcoming dates.

Outdoor Classroom Day is about much more than encouraging teachers to take their classes outdoors on a specific day – it's an ambitious campaign working towards these three longer-term aims:

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

The global Outdoor Classroom Day is led by Semble and supported by Unilever as part of their Dirt is Good movement. Semble works with respected environmental and educational NGOs around the world to deliver locally relevant campaigns, from Finland to Brazil.

But really the campaign is delivered on the ground by teachers, parents and supporters – and brought to life by the millions of children that take part every year.

Why do teacher's think playtime is so important?

"Increased confidence, social and environmental awareness, interest and curiosity in their surroundings and in general. Greater levels of creativity and resilience, problem solving and risk-taking. Practical skills transferred into the classroom and increased concentration. The list is endless." Teacher in UK

"Happy children, happy, cheerful parents and teachers" Teacher in Indonesia

Section 1: Why outdoor play should be part of every school day

Playtime is disappearing to make way for more lessons – but playing outdoors can deliver results that the classroom can't.

Around the world, teachers report that children have less time to play now than they have previously, and research from the US backs that up². A report published in April 2019 by Ed Baines and Pater Blatchford³ tells us that, since 1995 in the UK, the youngest children have lost 45 minutes a week and children aged 11-16 years old have lost over 65 minutes.

The main reasons given were to increase teaching time and manage poor behaviour – a finding that is echoed in previous research published in Muddy Hands⁴. But the wealth of research available worldwide strongly negates that, with all the testimony suggesting that high-quality playtimes hugely benefit children's academic attainment and improve behaviour both in the playground and back in class. What 'high-quality' means is not universally agreed but is consistently associated with generous quantities of space and stuff, lots of nature that children can engage with (trees, bushes, bee hives etc) and exposure to the kinds of risks that dynamic, interesting and ever-changing environments can offer⁵. Time is also a pre-requisite; an optimum seems to be around 15 minutes for every 45 minutes of adult directed instruction⁶.

Outdoor play in general has a huge range of benefits for children. Being out in fresh air, whatever the weather, has been shown to improve mood, reduce stress, improve eyesight and increase physical activity⁷. It can also improve children's educational outcomes⁸. The fun that comes from play is a crucial part of childhood, and is essential to health, wellbeing and learning. [Muddy Hands](#) sets out the evidence that supports the call for longer and better playtimes. In short, it shows that children who spend time outdoors:

1. Have better mental health
2. Are more physically active
3. Have better eyesight
4. Develop social and emotional skills
5. Are more resilient and have better self-worth
6. Are ready to learn when they go back in the classroom
7. Are more creative
8. Will connect with other children of all ages
9. Are more connected to place and the planet – and so are more likely to protect it
And...
10. Teachers report it makes them happier too!

² Prisk, C and Cusworth, H. (2018) Muddy Hands, Outdoor Classroom Day

³ Baines, E. and Blatchford, P. (2019) (*forthcoming*)

⁴ Prisk, C and Cusworth, H. (2018)

⁵ Sandseter & Wyver, 2019; Gill, 2019

⁶ Rhea & Rivchun 2018; Sahlberg, P. (2017); Follett, M. (2017)

⁷ Gill, (2011) & (2014); Children and Nature Network, (2018); Dowdell et al, (2011); Herrington, S., & Brussoni, M. (2015); Kellert, S 2013; Maller, C et al, (2006)

⁸ Sobel, D, (2004)

The benefits of outdoor learning and play last beyond early education.

Pre-school children who enjoy large amounts of outdoor time have been shown to consistently score better on standardised tests for executive function, attention and short-term memory than children attending pre-schools with fewer outdoor hours. Those who enjoyed more outdoor time during pre-school continued to score better on standardised testing when they moved into primary education⁹.

But play should not be restricted to the early years – outdoor recreation continues to have benefits for children throughout childhood¹⁰.

Getting outdoors connects us to the places we live and the environments we will want to protect.

Environmental stewardship and connection with place are strongly connected with the amount of time we are immersed in it as children¹¹. David Attenborough has been often quoted as saying:

“No one will protect what they don’t care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”

As Jay Griffiths laid out in her book *Kith*¹², we protect what we love, and we love what we know deeply and intimately.

In Tim Gill’s 2014 review of the literature charting the benefits of children’s engagement with nature¹³ he found that the most robust studies seemed to indicate that more playful interventions – free play or playful learning – are more likely to result in greater concern for the environment and connection to nature, while less playful interventions are most effective for building scientific knowledge. Lessons about the outdoors – gardening, horticulture, activities encouraging thinking about the environment – are all extremely valuable, but just simply being in a place that has a bit of green frequently will have a greater long-term impact.

Distant mountains make for great adventures, but a little play every day is the recipe for growing tomorrow’s environmentally aware adults.

Getting outdoors results in better learning outcomes, across the board.

Getting children outdoors as part of their school day can create improvements across all academic disciplines¹⁴, helping with on-task behaviour, problem-solving, enthusiasm for learning and contributing to improved test scores and grade averages¹⁵. It should not be an ‘added extra’ but an integral part of every school day.

In a robust study comparing two matched classes, Kuo. et al (2018) found that:

“Classroom engagement was significantly better after lessons in nature.”

⁹ Ulset et al. 2017

¹⁰ Vygotsky, L.S. (1967).

¹¹ Louv, 2005; Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Sobel 2013; Williams, 2017; Ballantyne and Packer, 2008

¹² Griffiths, J., 2013.

¹³ Gill, T. (2011)

¹⁴ Sobel 2004, Rhea & Rivchun 2018

¹⁵ In Sobel 2004 p 36

Free play, often characterised as a break from learning, has a vital role in consolidating and enriching what children have absorbed in the classroom:

“Outdoor play provides the opportunity to improve sensory integration skills. These activities involve the child as an active participant and address motor, cognitive, social, and linguistic domains. Viewed in this light, school recess becomes an essential part of a child’s day. It is not surprising that countries that offer more recess to young children see greater academic success among the children as they mature”¹⁶

In 2018, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) wrote about the importance of play, stating that:

“Play is fundamentally important for learning 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity, which require the executive functioning skills that are critical for adult success.”¹⁷

Outdoor play gets kids more active.

Children everywhere are leading significantly less active lives than children a generation ago¹⁸ and this inactivity has important health implications¹⁹. When engaged in play, children will stay active for long periods of time²⁰ and are more active outdoors compared to indoors²¹. Studies done using GPS tracking in the UK show that children are more than two-and-a-half times more active when outdoors compared to indoors²².

Alongside full-body physical strength, many other physical benefits are attributed to time outdoors. More Vitamin D is the most obvious, and better overall proprioception and balance. One alarming health worry is the dramatic increase in the number of children with short eyesight over the last few years, first in Asia and now increasingly in Europe and the Americas. One aspect all the researchers agree on: children who play outdoors are less likely to develop myopia and need glasses. And to re-connect it to physical stamina – children who wear glasses are far more likely to stop doing sport.²³

Time spent outdoors boosts mental health.

Research from around the world points to the ability of nature to restore our sense of wellbeing²⁴. Children feel better and perform better after they have been outdoors²⁵. Getting outdoors helps children – and their teachers – feel calmer, process their day and build the holy grail of capabilities: resilience.

Getting outdoors, playing, exploring, daydreaming, every day and often, in places that you know is – research would suggest – just as important as close family ties, good food and a safe home. Connection to place is as essential for our mental health as connection to

¹⁶Yogman et al, (2018).

¹⁷Yogman et al, (2018).

¹⁸AUSTRALIA 2016; Duncan 2015; Kellert 2013; Planet Ark 2011

¹⁹Tremblay et al, 2016; Active Healthy Kids AUSTRALIA 2016; WHO; Langford

²⁰AUSTRALIA 2016; Baines and Blatchford 2011; Beresin 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010;

²¹Kneeshaw-Price *et al.*, 2013

²²Cooper et al, 2010

²³Yogman et al 2018; Jones et al, 2007; Rose et al, 2008, French et al, 2013

²⁴Williams, 2017.

²⁵Stixrud and Johnson 2018 p209.

people²⁶. When we are moved too quickly, we say we feel ‘uprooted’, dislocated, ungrounded. Children need to roam in the same way as any growing creature, exploring their neighbourhood and getting to know intimately the spaces and places that hold them as surely as their friends and family. Howler monkeys in the patches of left-over forest in Argentina’s north east are at far higher constant stress levels than their cousins in deep forests, and the effect on their reproduction and immune systems are compromised²⁷.

Children have lost a large proportion of their free roaming capacity over the last 60 years or so²⁸, and the effects of ever-increasing restrictions on their movement are not fully understood. Peter Gray’s seminal article from 2011 *The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents*²⁹ sets out the case for freedom to play clearly and robustly:

“Over the past half century, in the United States and other developed nations, children’s free play with other children has declined sharply. Over the same period, anxiety, depression, suicide, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism have increased sharply in children, adolescents, and young adults. This article documents these historical changes and contends that the decline in play has contributed to the rise in the psychopathology of young people.”

Certainly, we’ve seen a huge rise in children’s mental health problems across the world, with increases in teen suicide, depression, cutting and other manifestations of stress³⁰. The UK Government just announced that it will invest £31.6 million in training educational psychologists³¹, whilst at the same time funding for parks and play spaces, for adventure playgrounds, after school provision, youth clubs and the training of playworkers has almost completely dried up³².

Nine out of ten teachers (88%) surveyed said that children are happier after playing outdoors. In other studies looking at schools that have invested in their school’s playtimes this rises to all teachers³³. Happiness should, arguably, be a critical component of measuring wellbeing at school.

If you want to do one thing right now to boost your mood and help you concentrate, just go get a breath of fresh air. And if you are feeling harassed or stressed just go and listen to the birdsong and wind in the trees. It is absolutely guaranteed to make you feel better. And this works for kids as much as for adults.³⁴

²⁶ Griffiths, J. 2013

²⁷ Martínez-Mota, R. et. al. 2007

²⁸ Skenazy, L. 2017; Griffiths; Kith, 2013; Shaw, B., et. al. 2015

²⁹ Gray, P. 2011

³⁰ Louv, 2008; Reddy, M. 2012; Mission Australia and The Black Dog Institute (2017).

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/multi-million-pound-fund-to-train-more-educational-psychologists-in-schools>

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/26/childrens-services-financial-crisis-big-five-charities>

³³ Follett, M. (2017)

³⁴ Williams, 2017.

Section 2: Results from the Outdoor Classroom Day surveys

2a) Time and space for outdoor playtimes at primary school

The World Health Organisation recommends that children aged 5-18 years old have at least one hour of 'moderate to vigorous physical activity' every day³⁵. Outdoor play is the best mechanism for achieving that for all children, with even the least sporty and active children being more active outdoors, especially if the playtime is longer and the space to play is of good quality³⁶.

The Outdoor Classroom Day survey asked teachers in primary schools to report on:

- The length of time for outdoor playtime/recess on a normal day, excluding time to eat, for a specific class they work with.
- The proportion of the school day that class devoted to outdoor playtime/recess versus adult-led curriculum time.

With almost 2,000 responses, this is the largest survey of time out at play in primary schools so far ever conducted worldwide.

The length of outdoor playtime/recess in a specific class on a usual primary school day

Key findings:

- 40% of primary school teachers worldwide reported that children in their primary school class have less than 30 minutes of outdoor playtime/recess on a normal school day.
- One third (33%) of the primary classes surveyed have over 60 minutes of outdoor playtime/recess on a normal school day.
- In the UK, just over half (51%) of primary classes surveyed have the recommended 60 minutes or more of outdoor playtime/recess every day. A worrying 1 in 6 (16%) have less than 30 minutes.
- Classes for 6-13 year olds in Brazil, Indonesia and the USA have the least amount of time for outdoor playtime/recess every day, with only 7% of Brazilian and Indonesian and 15% of US primary classes offering students at least an hour outdoors.

³⁵ Prisk & Cusworth, 2018

³⁶ Lester, S., Jones, O., and Russell, W. (2011)

Graph a) The length of outdoor playtime/recess on a usual primary school day

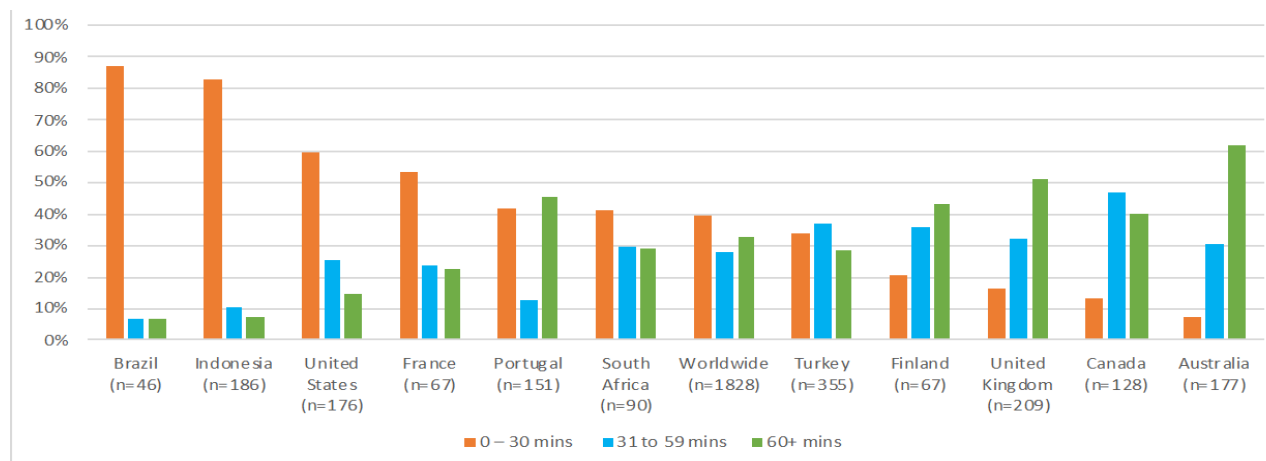


Table a) Length of outdoor playtime/recess on a usual primary school day by country (Average Class Age 6-13)

	0 – 30 mins	31 to 59 mins	60+ mins
Brazil (n=46)	87%	7%	7%
Indonesia (n=186)	83%	10%	7%
United States (n=176)	60%	26%	15%
France (n=67)	54%	24%	22%
Portugal (n=151)	42%	13%	46%
South Africa (n=90)	41%	30%	29%
Worldwide (n=1828)	39%	28%	33%
Turkey (n=355)	34%	37%	29%
Finland (n=67)	21%	36%	43%
United Kingdom (n=209)	16%	33%	51%
Canada (n=128)	13%	47%	40%
Australia (n=177)	7%	31%	62%

Note: Green highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; yellow highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

Amount of outdoor playtime/recess on a usual school day (as a percentage of the school day)

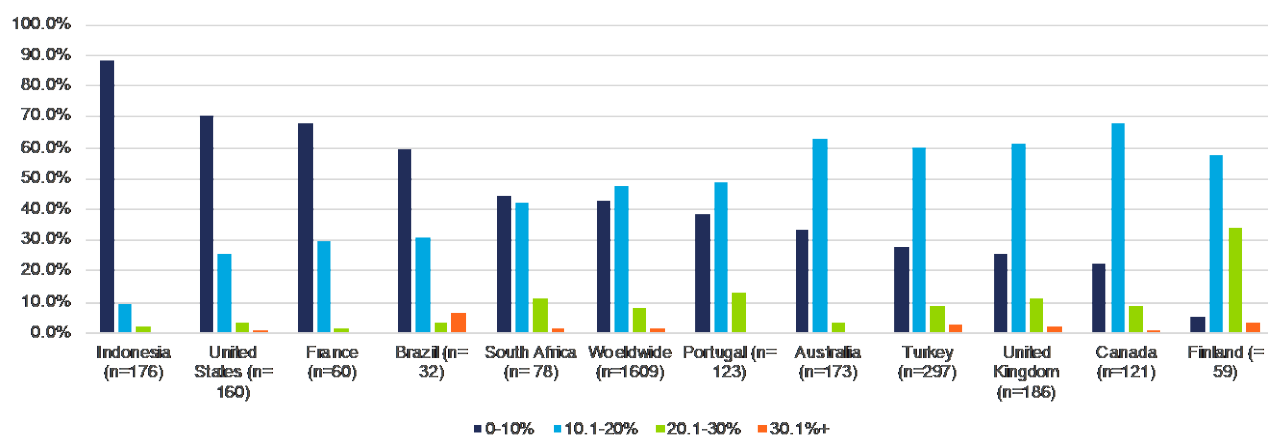
The length of time children spend at school in lessons varies between countries significantly.

In Finland and Brazil, most teachers reported that their class has a 4-5 hour day, in France most are 8-9 hours. In Thailand, most primary school teachers reported that their class is in school for at least 7 hours, and 1 in 10 (12%) had a day of over 9 hours.

Most English-speaking countries – the UK, US, Australia, Canada and South Africa – were close to the worldwide average of 6-7 hours.

Because of this variation in time spent at school we wanted to look at how much playtime pupils get as a proportion of the school day.

Graph b) Playtime as a proportion of the school day



Key Findings:

- In 43% of primary classes worldwide, outdoor playtime/recess makes up only 0-10% of the usual school day. So, in a 6-hour school day that’s 36 minutes maximum across all breaktimes.
- Indonesia and the US have the least amount of time in the day to play outdoors.
- In 47% of primary classes worldwide, outdoor playtime/recess makes up only 10.1-20% of the usual school day.
- Outdoor playtime/recess makes up over 20% of the usual school day in fewer than 10% of schools worldwide.
- Note that one third (34%) of Finnish primary school teachers reported their class has 20.1-30% of their day dedicated to outdoor play.

Given the research set out in section one, we hope those in charge of education will take note of the opportunity missed for children’s wellbeing and development by simply increasing playtime.

Table b) Playtime as a proportion of the school day (Average Class Age 6-13)

Country	Median school day	0-10%	10.1-20%	20.1-30%	30.1%+
Indonesia (n=176)	5-6 hours	88.1%	9.6%	2.3%	0.0%
United States (n= 160)	7-8 hours	70.7%	25.6%	3.1%	0.6%
France (n=60)	8-9 hours	68.3%	30.0%	1.7%	0.0%
Brazil (n= 32)	4 – 5 hours	59.3%	31.3%	3.1%	6.3%
South Africa (n= 78)	6 - 7 hours	44.9%	42.3%	11.5%	1.3%

Worldwide (n=1609)	6 - 7 hours	42.9%	47.4%	8.4%	1.3%
Portugal (n= 123)	8 – 9 hours	38.2%	48.8%	13.0%	0.0%
Australia (n=173)	6 - 7 hours	33.5%	63.0%	3.5%	0.0%
Turkey (n=297)	5 – 6 hours	28.2%	60.3%	9.1%	2.4%
United Kingdom (n=186)	6 - 7 hours	25.3%	61.3%	11.3%	2.2%
Canada (n=121)	6 - 7 hours	22.3%	67.8%	9.1%	0.8%
Finland (= 59)	4 – 5 hours	5.1%	57.6%	33.9%	3.4%

Note: **Green** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; **yellow** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

2b) Access to outdoor space

The kind of space that schools have easy access to, without using transport, will often determine how easy it is to offer high-quality playtimes.

Grass and ‘green’ spaces will, all the research shows, improve behaviour, reduce stress and foster connections to the environment. Hard spaces are essential for many games, especially with large numbers of children. Spaces to socialise, be creative, be alone and be physically active – that includes climbing as well as games like football – also make a big difference.

Key findings:

- Only Finland has consistently got the four key types of surface available, and almost all (94%) of their primary schools have structures specifically for play.
- This compares with Turkey, Indonesia and France, where less than 30% of primary schools have dedicated structures for play.
- 79% of schools worldwide have access to a hard surface outdoor space.
- 76% of schools worldwide have access to a garden, field or ‘green’ space.
- Perhaps surprisingly, less than 1% of schools worldwide said they have no access to outdoor space, though that could be because schools with no outdoor space don’t get involved in the Outdoor Classroom Day campaign – or because even if they don’t have a playground, they have other outdoor spaces they can use.
- Over 80% of UK schools have both hard spaces and green spaces.

Graph c) Access to outdoor space

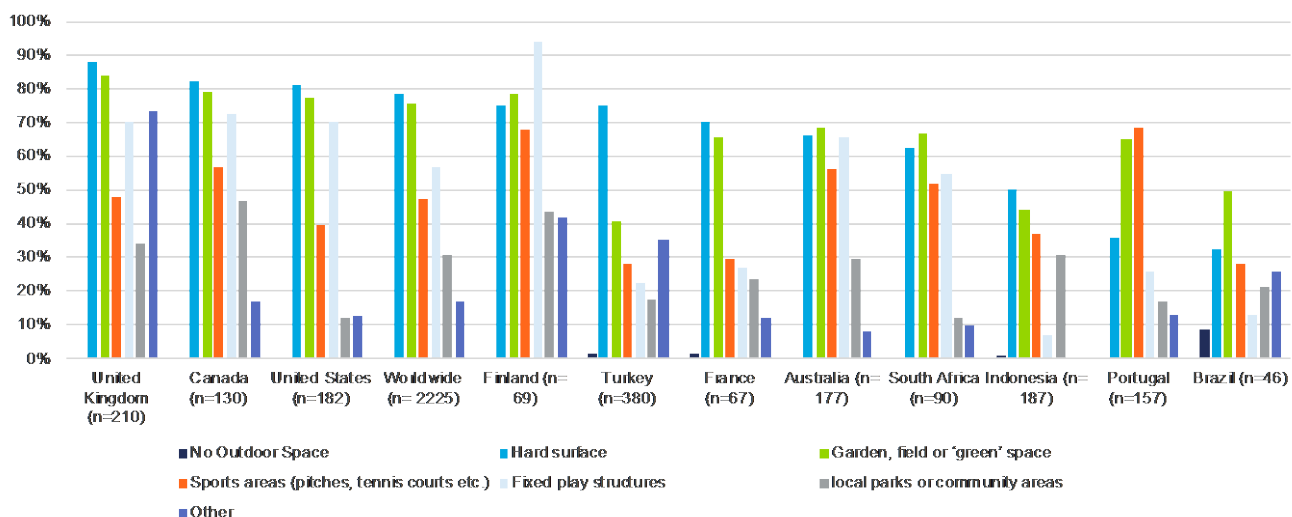


Table c) Types of outdoor space at school

Country	No Outdoor Space	Hard surface	Garden, field or 'green' space	Sports areas (pitches, tennis courts etc.)	Fixed play structures	local parks or community areas	Other
Turkey	2%	75%	41%	28%	23%	18%	35%
United Kingdom	0%	88%	84%	48%	70%	34%	73%
Indonesia	1%	50%	44%	37%	7%	31%	1%
United States	0%	81%	78%	40%	70%	12%	13%
Australia	0%	66%	68%	57%	66%	30%	9%
Portugal	0%	36%	65%	69%	26%	17%	13%
Canada	0%	82%	79%	57%	72%	47%	17%
South Africa	0%	62%	67%	52%	54%	12%	10%
Finland	0%	75%	78%	68%	94%	44%	42%
France	2%	70%	66%	30%	27%	24%	12%
Brazil	9%	33%	50%	28%	13%	22%	26%
Worldwide	1%	79%	76%	48%	57%	31%	17%

Note: Green highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; yellow highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

2c) Attitudes towards outdoor playtimes/recess in primary schools

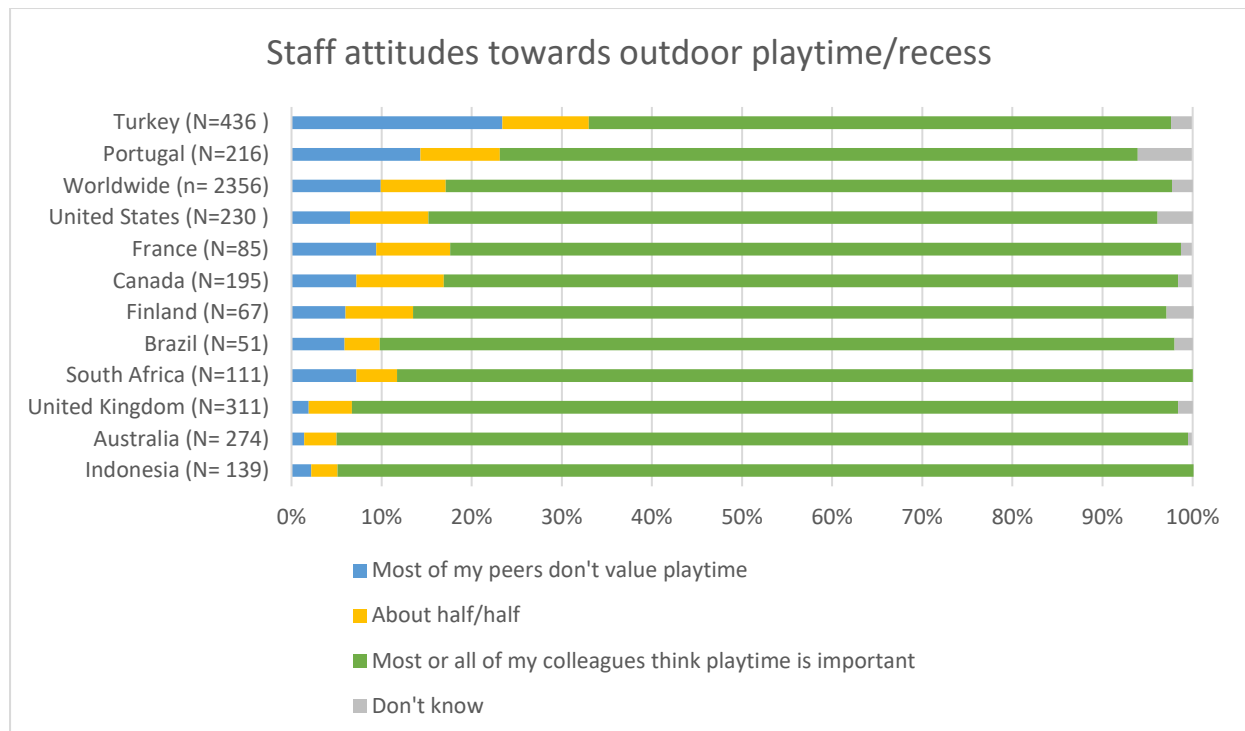
Extensive research in psychology and other disciplines has shown that people tend to do what most other people around them are doing. It is hard to refuse a doughnut when everyone else in the staff room is having one. Similarly, it is hard to be the lone supporter of outdoor breaks and play in a staff room where the majority of your peers think it's a waste of time. Conversely, if a headteacher is in a school where most staff believe playtime is valuable, they are more likely to invest in it³⁷.

Do your peers encourage and support children's playtimes and breaks?

Key findings:

- Teachers in Turkey and Portugal are most likely to work in schools where the majority of their peers don't value playtime.
- This is the only chart in this report where we clearly see 'worldwide' coming out as a figure that isn't an average of the countries we are highlighting. This means that in the 65 countries that had less than 50 respondents, 1 in 10 teachers are working in schools where most or all of their peers don't value playtime.
- Interestingly, in Indonesia – where less than half the schools have access to a hard surface or green space, and 4 in 5 schools have less than 30 minutes of recess – most teachers say that almost all or all of their peers' value children's playtime.
- In the UK and Australia, almost all teachers value playtime.

Graph d) Staff attitudes towards play



³⁷ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/after-service/201705/the-science-behind-why-people-follow-the-crowd>

Table d) Staff attitudes towards play

Country	Most of my peers don't value playtime	About half/half	Most or all of my colleagues think playtime is important	Don't know
Indonesia (N= 139)	2%	3%	95%	0%
Australia (N= 274)	1%	4%	95%	0%
United Kingdom (N=311)	2%	5%	92%	2%
South Africa (N=111)	7%	5%	88%	0%
Brazil (N=51)	6%	4%	88%	2%
Finland (N=67)	6%	8%	84%	3%
Canada (N=195)	7%	10%	82%	2%
France (N=85)	9%	8%	81%	1%
United States (N=230)	7%	9%	81%	4%
Worldwide (n= 2356)	10%	7%	81%	2%
Portugal (N=216)	14%	9%	71%	6%
Turkey (N=436)	23%	10%	65%	2%

Note: **Green** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; **yellow** highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

Do you think children should have more time to play?

Worldwide, three quarters of teachers (76%) said that children at their school should have more time to play outside.

Table e) Do you think children should have more time to play outside?

Country	No	Yes	Current time is about right
Turkey (N= 405)	2%	87%	12%
United States (N=184)	3%	81%	16%
Canada (N=166)	2%	81%	17%
Portugal (N=215)	3%	80%	17%
Brazil (N=51)	0%	77%	24%
Worldwide (N= 1625)	2%	76%	22%

Country	No	Yes	Current time is about right
United Kingdom (N=207)	2%	65%	33%
Finland (N=67)	2%	58%	40%
South Africa (N=72)	0%	56%	44%
France (N=85)	11%	55%	34%

Note: This question was only asked of countries that participated in May, hence no data for Indonesia and Australia as those countries only took part in November.

Do you think playing outdoors is important for children’s overall wellbeing?

Eighty-four per cent of teachers worldwide think that playing outdoors is important or extremely important for children’s overall wellbeing. So, with such overwhelming support – backed up by research with parents from Australia, the UK and the US – why isn’t this recognised in school policies and practices worldwide?

Table f) Do you think playing outdoors is important for children’s overall wellbeing?

Countries	Somewhat important	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Extremely important
United Kingdom	0%	0%	5%	84%
South Africa	0%	0%	18%	68%
Australia	3%	0%	21%	67%
Worldwide	1%	1%	23%	61%
United States	0%	0%	20%	58%
Turkey	6%	0%	33%	45%
Indonesia	1%	3%	34%	45%

Note: This question was only asked of countries that participated in November, hence no data for Portugal, France, Brazil and Finland as those countries only took part in May.

In the UK, 84% of the teachers who responded agreed that outdoor playtimes/recess is extremely important for children’s overall wellbeing.

In the UK, playtime is not a legal requirement. In fact, in most of the world there is no requirement to give children a break between lessons. As far as we are aware, only in Finland has the research into the importance of regular breaks, of high-quality outdoor spaces and regular time outdoors been fully recognised and embraced. The impact of that investment can be seen in not only the children’s high academic results, but in their overall happiness.

Section 3: What teachers think about outdoor playtimes/recess

Teachers around the world have a lot to say about the effects of outdoor playtimes. Below is a collection of quotes in response to the question:

What, if any, are the positive effects of outdoor play?

*“Increased confidence, social and environmental awareness, interest and curiosity in their surroundings and in general. **Greater levels of creativity and resilience, problem solving and risk-taking.** Practical skills transferred into the classroom and increased concentration. The list is endless.”* Teacher in UK

*“It increases **self-confidence** and develops communication skills.”* Teacher in Turkey

*“The children get to **explore the natural environment**, problem solve, risk assess, collaborate, get messy and develop vocabulary.”* Teacher in Bermuda

*“Children are more **motivated**. They need to step out of the classroom to realise that learning is not confined in the four walls of the classroom.”* Teacher in Cote d'Ivoire

*“Children and adults need more time outside. In our society today, we are experiencing all time high rates of **ADHD, depression, suicide** and many other dilemmas. It has been documented through scientific research that **spending time outdoors can improve all of these problems.**”* Teacher in the USA

*“We believe that Chinese students do not get nearly enough time outdoors – either at school or after school. Chinese cities have a reputation for being concrete jungles, and to a certain extent, this is true. However, **there are many opportunities to get outside and learn** and we want to show kids and their parents how to do this, and how it won't affect their grades (in a negative way).”* Teacher in China

*“It's a wonderful experience for the children. **Their faces are transformed with happiness**, their teamwork is strengthened, and they overcome their differences.”* Teacher in Colombia

*“I always believe that harnessing the children potentials in their natural element and language of play. The outdoor is non-restrictive and gives value to their innate ability to be creative and imaginative. **Sticks, sand, flowers, leaves become a house** or something that surprises adults.”* Teacher in Cote d'Ivoire

*“**Happy children**, happy, cheerful parents and teachers.”* Teacher in Indonesia

*“We are an inner-city school. We do not have any children who live in a house with garden. **These experiences are crucial!!**”* Teacher in UK

*“Fresh air, healthy, **best way to fight off colds**, space to learn in a relaxed way, space for child-initiated play, fun and freedom.”* Teacher in UK

*“To see children behave in a different way than indoors, I have seen the positive of children nurturing others and also **conversations emerge easier** than when indoors.”* Teacher in UK

*“Fun, encourages imagination, **encourages healthy lifestyle**, encourages turn taking and sharing.”* Teacher in UK

*“Healthy, engaged children who **learn to value and respect the natural world** and one another.”* Teacher in UK

*“Confidence, **independence** and exploration.”* Teacher in UK

“There is a lot more interest in nature, in growing plants, caring for nature that one sees from the older students. The **staff is also enthusiastic** about events like Outdoor Classroom Day or Nature day.” Teacher in India

“Our pre-schoolers have **fewer behavior problems**, use more language and negotiation skills and have more respect for living things.” Teacher in USA

“Children are calmer, they learn to notice and enjoy more wonders in nature over time, nature provides an **ever-changing learning environment**, nature makes children healthier.” Teacher in USA

“**It Soothes students**, makes them environmentally friendly...” Teacher in Portugal

“The kids were **happier**.” Teacher in USA

Section 4: Impact of Outdoor Classroom Day

Outdoor Classroom Day has been growing since 2012, having been started by teachers and educators to showcase the amazing impact of simply going outdoors. To date, over 5 million children have got involved in over 30,000 schools worldwide. That includes children in Hawaii, in Saudi Arabia, in France and Spain, in Tasmania and Toronto. It also includes children in Palu, Sulawesi who were affected by the 2018 Tsunami.

When asked ‘what kind of school are you’, instead of ticking ‘state’ or ‘private, one school wrote: “**Lonely**.”

Outdoor Classroom Day builds a community, one that supports its members to make outdoor playtime just a normal part of every day.

Since getting involved in Outdoor Classroom Day schools have increased playtime

One of the campaign’s longer-term goals is to encourage all schools to offer children at least 60 minutes of outdoor playtime every day. The growing body of evidence for this is compelling and robust. In Finland, children in primary schools have 15 minutes of playtime for every 45 minutes of instruction because that is what the research says is optimum for academic progress as well as children’s wellbeing.

Almost one in three (32%) of teachers surveyed said that their school has increased outdoor playtime since getting involved in Outdoor Classroom Day. This proportion increases the longer they have got involved.

Table g) Percentage of schools that increased playtime since getting involved in Outdoor Classroom Day (by year first involved)

Year first involved	Stayed same	Increased	Decreased
Before 2016 (N=73)	38%	58%	4%
2016 (N=93)	58%	39%	3%
2017 (N=722)	67%	32%	1%
2018 (N=858)	67%	29%	4%
Worldwide	65%	32%	3%

Note: Green highlighting shows percentages which are significantly higher compared to others in the column; yellow highlighting shows percentages which are significantly lower compared to others in the column.

Whilst we have not yet the resources to carry out a full evaluation trial, these results are encouraging. When schools get involved in this programme, they tell us they see the benefit, it's easier to discuss with those in charge of school timetables and show them the evidence of why playtime matters.

Conclusion

In summary, outdoor play creates healthier kids, who come to school more often, can concentrate better, can physically sit at their desks for longer, can see better and can learn more³⁸. Active free play is critical in helping children develop balance, coordination and improved motor fitness³⁹, and children who are outdoors in nearby spaces often love their environment and grow up wanting to protect it.⁴⁰ The fun that comes from play is a crucial part of childhood, and is essential to health, wellbeing and learning – as well as a foundation for a good adulthood.⁴¹

Schools that see the clear benefit of outdoor play are leading the way by making playtime a key part of the school day and telling parents why time for play is critical after school, at the weekend and in the holidays.

In 2018, Governments in Scotland, Australia, Indonesia and India made commitments to support outdoor play as part of their Outdoor Classroom Day campaigns. It's shocking that in many, if not most, countries there is still no legal requirement, and certainly no consistent legal requirement, for children to have a break at school. Nor is there a recognition of how important the environment for play in schools is.

As the evidence builds, we are hoping Governments worldwide will make a consistent minimum commitment to 60 minutes of playtime a day for every child, and where the day is longer than six hours then playtimes should be at least 90 minutes.

Alongside this, schools should look to provide the best environments for play – something networks of NGOs and experts such as the [International School Grounds Alliance](#) and the [International Play Association](#) have been calling for, over many years. Their websites – and their members' websites – have a wealth of resources and guidance to help schools develop opportunities for play, in particular the [ISGA's Activity Guide](#) which has hundreds of inspirational ideas contributed by teachers from all over the world.

When schools sign up to take part in Outdoor Classroom Day they are showing the world that children's playtime and the spaces they play in are important, they send the clear message to children, families and Governments that getting outdoors and having great spaces to play are critical to children's wellbeing and development.

Find out more and get involved in Outdoor Classroom Day at:
www.outdoorclassroomday.com

³⁸ Langford et al, (2014), Brussoni et al, (2015); Robinson & Aronica, (2018); Strauss & Hanscomb, (2014).

³⁹ Fjørtoft 2001, (2004).

⁴⁰ Louv, (2008); Gill, (2014).

⁴¹ Prisk, C and Cusworth, H. (2018)

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Contact

For more information about this report or to arrange an interview with a spokesperson, contact Claire Colvine, Global Communications Manager, on +44 7931 424 416 or claire@outdoorclassroomday.com.