



WELLBEING & EDUCATION

# How Outdoor Learning and Nature Influence Wellbeing in Primary Schools with High SEN and Deprivation



# The Challenge: SEN, Deprivation & Wellbeing in Primary Schools

## Disproportionate Barriers

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and those in deprived areas face significant barriers to wellbeing and academic success. These challenges compound, creating cycles of disadvantage that impact their entire educational journey.

## Rising Mental Health Crisis

Mental health issues and social-emotional difficulties are rising dramatically, exacerbated by limited access to enriching environments. The pandemic has intensified these vulnerabilities, leaving many children struggling.

## Limitations of Traditional Approaches

Traditional classroom settings often struggle to meet these complex needs effectively. Rigid structures and indoor-only learning can fail to engage vulnerable learners or address their holistic development needs.

# Outdoor Learning: A Proven Pathway to Social-Emotional Development

## Research-Backed Benefits

Research from Canadian primary educators demonstrates that outdoor learning (OL) actively promotes social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies through unstructured, emergent play. This child-led approach allows for authentic skill development.

## Building Essential Skills

OL fosters self-confidence, creativity, and social skills that are critical for children with SEN. The outdoor environment provides unique opportunities for risk-taking, problem-solving, and relationship-building in ways classrooms cannot replicate.



## Forest Schools Impact

Forest Schools across the UK report remarkable improvements in physical skills and nature appreciation, especially beneficial for vulnerable learners who thrive with hands-on, sensory experiences.

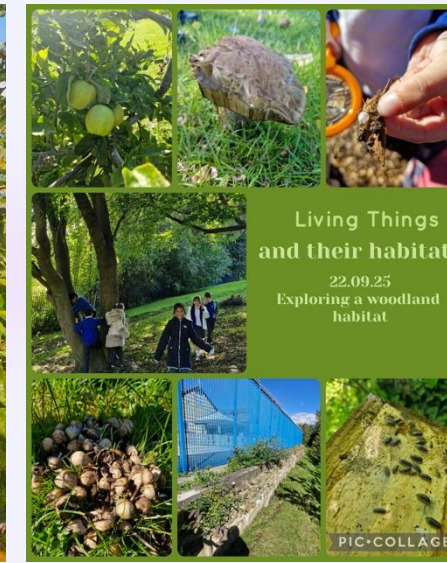


# Academic Gains Through Outdoor Learning in Deprived Contexts



## Closing the Gap

Outdoor curriculum integration can help close attainment gaps linked to socioeconomic disadvantage, offering an equitable approach to raising standards for all learners.



## Newcastle University Trial

A controlled trial of 'Wilderness Schooling' revealed significant improvements in reading, writing, and maths for primary pupils from deprived backgrounds. The structured outdoor curriculum proved highly effective.



## Lasting Cognitive Benefits

Gains continued to grow even after outdoor sessions ended, suggesting profound and lasting cognitive benefits. The learning didn't stop when children returned indoors—it compounded over time.



# Nature's Role in Supporting Wellbeing for SEN Pupils



## Stress Reduction & Pro-Social Behaviour

Outdoor time significantly reduces stress and improves pro-social behaviours such as sharing and cooperation – vital for children with social, emotional, and behavioural needs.



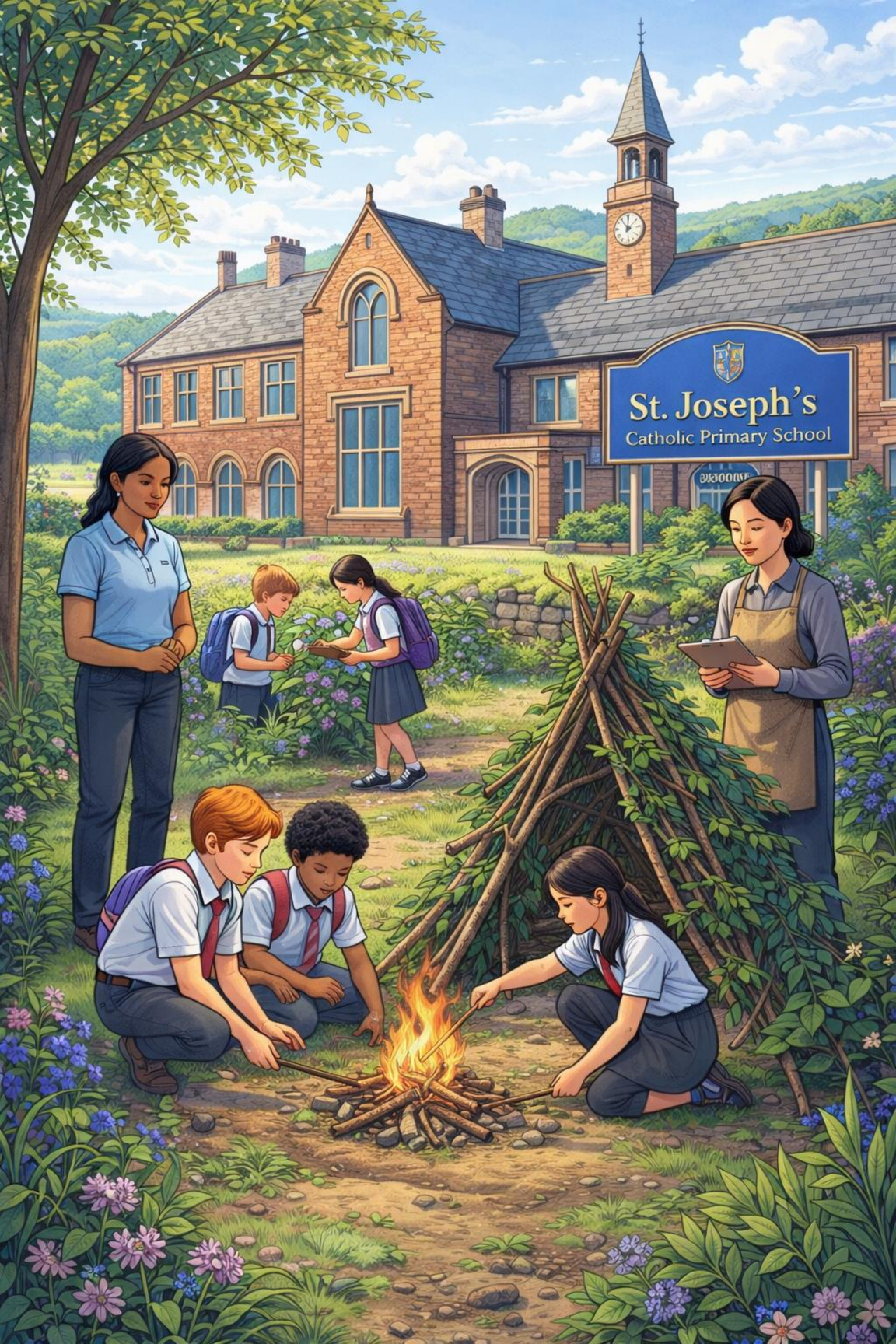
## Duration Matters

Research shows longer, less frequent outdoor sessions yield better social outcomes than short bursts. Quality immersive time in nature creates deeper impact than brief, rushed visits.



## Independence & Problem-Solving

Outdoor learning encourages independence, problem-solving, and negotiation skills, enhancing inclusion and engagement for all pupils, particularly those who struggle in traditional settings.



# Barriers and Solutions: Making Outdoor Learning Work in Challenging Schools

## Common Barriers

- Teacher confidence and training gaps
- Curriculum constraints and time pressures
- Weather concerns and seasonal challenges
- Limited access to natural spaces
- Lack of systemic support and resources

## Proven Solutions

Successful Bradford district initiatives such as **Forest School programmes in Keighley** demonstrate that teacher-led outdoor learning can thrive with the right training and support.

Training providers like **Get Out More CIC** equip teachers with practical woodland learning skills, enabling schools to run regular outdoor sessions that build confidence, teamwork and environmental awareness.

Additionally, programmes such as **Grow to School** support Bradford schools in creating food-growing spaces and curriculum-linked outdoor learning activities within school grounds.

# Equity and Access: Why Outdoor Learning Matters Most in High-Deprivation Schools

24%

High Deprivation Areas

Schools in high deprivation areas that embed outdoor learning fully (WWF-UK, 2024)

35%

Other Areas

Schools elsewhere with embedded outdoor learning—revealing a significant equity gap

📄 **Critical Reality:** Children in deprived urban settings often lack safe, accessible green spaces outside school hours. School-based nature connection becomes their only opportunity.

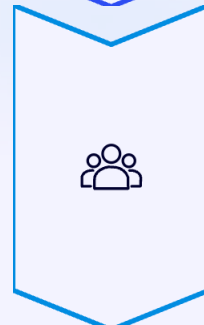
Integrating nature-based learning during school hours offers a vital, equitable route to wellbeing and academic success for those who need it most. It's not just beneficial—it's essential for social justice in education.

# Conclusion: A Call to Action for Schools and Policymakers



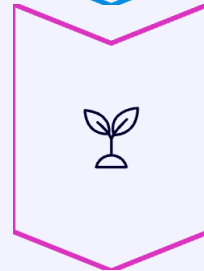
## Evidence-Backed Impact

Outdoor learning is a powerful, evidence-backed tool to support wellbeing and learning for SEN and deprived primary pupils. The research is conclusive and compelling.



## Systemic Support Required

Systemic support, comprehensive teacher training, and curriculum flexibility are essential to scale these benefits across all schools, particularly those serving vulnerable communities.



## Universal Entitlement

Every child deserves regular, meaningful connection with nature to thrive – let's make it happen. Nature-based learning must become a right, not a privilege.

