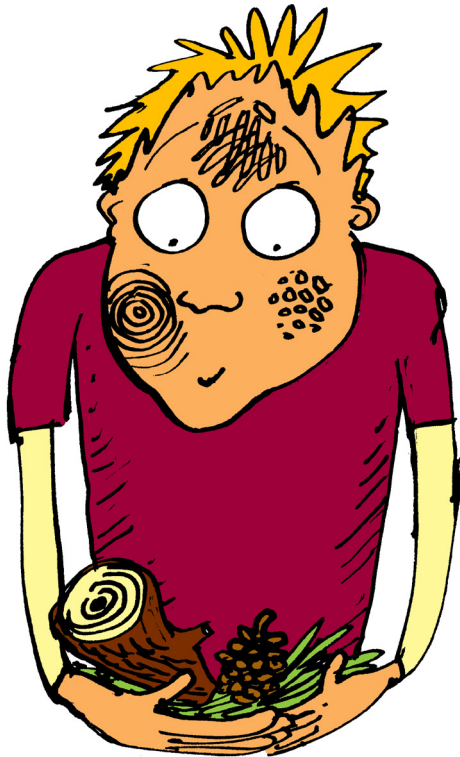


# Getting Going with Outdoor Learning

Or How to do Dirty Teaching



OUTDOOR  
CLASSROOM  
DAY

By Juliet Robertson

Front cover image from Mission:Explore Outside the Classroom.  
Find out more at [www.missionexplore.net](http://www.missionexplore.net)

# GETTING GOING WITH OUTDOOR LEARNING

So you've got involved with Outdoor Classroom Day but you'd like to do more?

No problem! This booklet sets out advice from one teacher to another on how to make outdoor learning – whether maths, science, literacy or personal development – part of your everyday schooling. This is adapted from *Dirty Teaching: A Beginner's Guide to Learning Outdoors* by Juliet Robertson, a former head teacher from Scotland who has advised teachers all over the world.

The first few times you take your class outside, one overarching aim is to acclimatise to the process. It is about putting routines and expectations in place around learning outside – just like you do inside with a new class. These suggestions are the starting points for demonstrating that the environment itself is the main resource and stimulus for learning outside.

Whilst on your outdoor learning journey it is also useful to keep a reflective diary yourself, and include reflections from the children too, to see both how quickly they become used to learning outdoors, but also how much they retain and develop from their outdoor lessons. You might be surprised – and you'll find out why outdoor learning, using the natural and built environment as your resource – is becoming so popular around the world!



Photo: Jane Hewitt Photography and Education

For the past ten years I have been working to promote learning outside the classroom at a local, national and international level. I support and empower others to develop outdoor curriculum projects, writing training and guidance and facilitating courses that educators find inspiring and useful. I am currently writing a second book called *Messy Maths*.

I have found learning outdoors to be a highly effective approach to raising attainment in schools. Children are generally more engaged and focused when working outside especially in a natural setting such as a woodland. They are more physically active and less stressed.

My interest began in 1987 when working in a Puerto Rican neighbourhood in Philadelphia with a group of teenagers. We had little money but devised games and activities to do in the local area outside. As a teacher, I found challenging classes responded positively to woodland sessions. In 1996 I spent a year working at an outdoor education centre in Canada and this sowed many seeds of ideas that I am still planting and growing.

I am interested in simple doable outdoor lesson that take little time or preparation. Please visit my website ([www.creativestarlearning.co.uk](http://www.creativestarlearning.co.uk)) for 600+ ideas, advice and resources to help you make every day an Outdoor Classroom Day.

Juliet Robertson, B.Sc (Hons), PGCE (Primary), SQH (Scottish Qualification for Headship)

[www.creativestarlearning.co.uk](http://www.creativestarlearning.co.uk)

# HOW DO I MAKE OUTDOOR LEARNING HAPPEN ON A DAILY BASIS?

All these ideas will work in most outdoor spaces or natural environments, so they can be used for spontaneous or planned activities in a park, on a beach or in the school grounds, both tarmac play spaces and more natural spaces. Do let us know how you get on...

The first few sessions checklist

Have you:

- Decided your line-up routine with children and how you are going to exit the school?
- Chosen a suitable gathering place and activities that will help children gather there quickly?
- Put together a few circle games, familiar games and activities that you and your children already know, such as traditional playground games? Think about how these could be adapted to class interests and themes and used during outdoor sessions for outdoor circle times.
- Planned a series of outdoor sessions based on the ideas in this book and elsewhere?
- Planned how this will be followed up back in class or the next time you are outside?
- Alternative indoor activities ready, if needed?

You can use these ideas to get children used to being outdoors, as a lesson in themselves or to prepare them for your main lesson which might be maths, science, language, music or social studies. If you can teach it indoors you can do it outdoors!

## 1. MAKE LINING UP A CHALLENGE

Lining up works well as a class challenge. At the beginning, discuss tactics for ensuring everyone gets outside with the minimum of fuss. Ask the class to consider:

- Why is it worthwhile getting outside quickly and quietly?
- What will we need to do to ensure this happens (e.g. go to toilet, wash hands, pick up clothes, change shoes, collect equipment, line up)?
- What will we see and hear if this works well?
- How long do we think this will take us?

Once children are lined up, have a quick review of how the class got on. Ask them to think about what worked well and what could be even better the next time. Note the suggestions and, at the next outdoor session, remind the class to try out their ideas. This sets in motion the review-plan-do process.

## 2. AMBULATORY ACTIVITIES

Ambulatory activities are those which happen on the move. If you are in a classroom that requires a walk to get out of the building, then this can be part of your lesson. For example:

- Can the children move along the corridor and outside in different ways? - *e.g. tiptoe like a mouse, stride like a giant, amble like an elephant*
- Do a chant or sing a song at the same time.
- Play 'follow my leader' – with everyone copying the actions of the person at the front of the line.

Remind children to keep doing the ambulatory activity until they reach the gathering circle (see below). Otherwise, most children will get to the outside door and... run!

### 3. CREATE A GATHERING PLACE

A gathering circle is a lovely way of building a collaborative, shared learning experience. A circle lends itself naturally to discussions, reflections and reviewing tasks, as well as games and action activities. The first time you take a class outside, it is worthwhile spending time getting children used to gathering and doing circle-based activities. The circle can become a unique and special part of being outside. You can create a gathering circle by using portable seats or a rope to mark the edge. Chalk can also be used to draw a circle.

### 4. STICKY CIRCLES

The sticky circle is a useful alternative to asking children to hold hands when making a circle.

When you call out:

- ‘Sticky feet’ the children need to ensure their feet are touching those of the two people standing either side of them.
- ‘Sticky elbows’ involves putting hands on hips and having elbows touching.
- ‘Sticky tips’ is standing with arms outstretched and fingertips touching.
- ‘Sticky shoulders’ is a group huddle – do this so that you can hear each other speak more easily. The sound seems to get magnified slightly in a tight circle.

### 5. CIRCLE TIME

Think about some of the games your class plays in a circle. These can be useful to begin working outside as the children know to expect. For example, I often get children to play ‘Everybody Up’. The class has to sit down facing inwards and holding hands. On the count of three, everyone tries to stand up without breaking hands.



## **6. MOVING AWAY FROM THE GATHERING CIRCLE**

The next step is to introduce activities which involve children moving away from the gathering circle and coming back. You may wish to identify clear working boundaries. If necessary, mark these with visual objects such as scarves tied on trees or a line drawn on the ground. Being able to call children back to the circle is a valuable time-saver and keeps activities flowing smoothly. The children can devise gathering calls and signals. Let them experiment to find out which one can be heard best outside. Often one that changes pitch works well.

## **7. RUN AND TOUCH**

This technique is about reinforcing boundaries so that children know where they may go outside. It also helps children to see their environment in a different way - for learning. Call out instructions such as 'Run and touch something... green... rough and flat... you can sit on... natural... man-made...' and so on. After each instruction ask children to stand beside their findings. Then call the class back to the gathering circle. Call 'Quick Circle' and count aloud to encourage a speedy return. Remember you can use the opportunity to count in different languages or using different number patterns. You can link this to any theme or work, e.g. in a music lesson you may run and touch something which makes a soft sound... a hard sound... that you can tap out a beat on... that you can't hear...

## **8. STONE HUNT**

Pass around a bag of stones and ask each child to take one. When you give the signal, the children have to run and put the stone somewhere and come back to the circle. Count to 10 so that the children are encouraged to put the stones down and come back quickly. The next part is to challenge the children to find a different stone to their original one and to bring it back to the circle. How quickly can the children then return their new stone to its original owner? Is it possible for a class to undertake this activity in silence?

## **9. MOVING ABOUT GAMES**

It is quite likely that your class will have experience of doing PE or physical games and activities outside. So, beginning with activities that involve a lot of moving about and action help them tune into learning outside in ways that are already familiar to them. Your class will probably know several suitable games. These can be played outside whilst you all get used to being there.

## **10. FIND SOMETHING INTERESTING**

Ask your class to ‘find something interesting’. First, check to see if there is anything the children should not bring back to the gathering circle, and why, before they dash off. The responses are almost always sensible, such as no ‘sharp objects’, ‘dirty stuff’ and ‘live animals’. We can also teach sustainability by discussing gathering only a little bit of something too. Always put a size and time limit on this activity or you will find some children come back with big items and take a long time to do so! The items brought back to the circle usually end up being placed on a white sheet. This helps the objects stand out and be easily seen.

You need to have a plan for the gathered objects once the session is finished. You may decide to put the objects back in the same place you found them, place any litter gathered in a bin, or bring objects into class for follow-up work and display purposes.

It’s worth brainstorming ideas for using found objects for your subject or age and the use of the white sheet as a focus, such as:

## **11. THE SAME AND DIFFERENT GAME**

At the gathering circle, ask the children to pair off with the person beside them. Each pair looks at their objects and asks, ‘What’s the same about these things?’ and ‘What’s different?’ They must come up with two or three similarities and differences. This activity helps children look closely at objects to distinguish key characteristics and features. It is a useful springboard to literacy work or science investigations.

## **12. USE POETRY IN ALL SUBJECTS**

Poems are useful to introduce children to writing outside. They can be completed as a whole class, in trios, pairs or through working alone. Write poetry based upon the found objects: do an online search beforehand for simple structures that work well outside such as cinquains, diamante, haiku or tanka poems.

## **13. TWENTY QUESTIONS**

Play variations of guessing games using the objects the children have collected. One child should silently choose one of the objects brought to the gathering circle. The other children then take turns asking a question which helps everyone to work out which object is the chosen one. The responder can only answer 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know'. A direct question may only be asked three times e.g. 'Is it the long, brown stick?'

## **14. GETTING IT SORTED**

When the children have brought their object to the gathering circle, ask them to put it on a piece of light-coloured cloth in the centre of the circle and silently sort the objects by colour. Challenge the class to work out how you are sorting them. Then ask the children to think about how the materials could be sorted in other ways and invite them to take turns to arrange the materials (e.g. by size, living and non-living, shape, weight, rough and smooth).

# EXAMPLE ACTIVITY – CREATING A VALUES MAP!

## HOW DO YOU VALUE YOUR SCHOOL GROUNDS?

Whether a square of tarmac or a landscaped field with access to woodlands, most schools have some land outdoors that children use during breaks, for sports or for outdoor lessons. This lesson idea can be used to place a ‘Values map’ of your school grounds, supporting the children in the school in building character and key emotional skills, and helping the whole school community see the value of the spaces just outside their doorsteps.

## GETTING STARTED...

Each group of three or four children needs a map of the school grounds. Prior to going outside, discuss what values are important to the class, the school and the country. Make a list and encourage each group to make a copy. If you wish, each value can be given a colour code so that the collation of results is easier.

The challenge is for each group to find a place outside, no matter how big or small that reflects each value. For example:

PLACE	VALUE	REASON
A quiet corner	Peace	It is a place to be alone away from other children.
A bird feeder	Compassion	We feed the birds daily.
Entrance	Care	It is clean, tidy and feels cared for.

Each place is marked on the children's map.

Afterwards, the children can look at each other's ideas and discuss them. Do the school grounds reflect the values we have? If not, what actions can be taken to ensure that they do?

For a bigger project, the children can present their maps and results as a collective data handling opportunity and create an action plan of change.

For a simple activity, the children can make their rough maps presentable and write a personal opinion about the findings of their group.

How could you extend this to involve the whole school community?

## **GOOD LUCK!**

We hope you have a wonderful time playing and learning outdoors. These ideas are intended to help get you started - as well as sharing how you get on, we would love to hear about the other ways you are taking your lessons outdoors. Please get in touch on:  
[info@outdoorclassromday.com](mailto:info@outdoorclassromday.com)

Extract taken from:

*Dirty Teaching: A Beginner's Guide to Learning Outdoors*

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ISBN 9781781351079

Readers of this guide can purchase a copy of the book from the Crown House web site at a 20% discount. To take advantage of this offer visit [www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk) and use the promotional code Dirty20.

