



THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Leaves, logs and life skills

“GO CLIMB A TREE!” sounds like a demand from a flustered parent reaching the end of their tether. While the context could have many meanings, taking it literally could well lead to a wide range of benefits.

As a man raised not too far from a sleepy, yet picturesque, countryside, camping holidays were an annual experience and they hold a number of fond memories. When I think back, I am reminded of a great sense of independence and many life lessons that were learnt during those trips. It came as no surprise to me, then, that when I entered the primary education sector ten years ago, I found that something called “Outdoor Adventure Activities” (OAA) was seeing something of a resurgence in the curriculum.

Of course, elements of outdoor

learning are nothing new. Early Years children have been encouraged to learn through play for many years, particularly using aspects of the outside environment. Similarly—and with much success—some Reception and Grade 1 classes in the UK in recent years have adopted the Scandinavian concept of “Forest School,” whereby children learn about the environment, how to handle risks and how to use their initiative to solve problems and cooperate with others.

Such is the importance of these skills, and a ‘holistic’ approach to a child’s learning, that the calls by various education authorities to increase the provision of outdoor activities have increased substantially, in both the UK and overseas. Something which prompted this, in my opinion, was a

noticeable shift in viewpoint towards risk and ‘the elements.’ Essentially, something clicked. Numerous studies and industry experts established a theory that many would argue has been obvious for a long time... children’s learning, the outdoors and ‘the elements’ are not mutually exclusive—they work together.

Previously, it seemed as if teachers would seldom take risks due to overly strict health and safety concerns, and so they would generally wrap their class up in cotton wool during the course of the school day for fear of reprisals, particularly where bad weather was concerned. Now, the value that school leaders, teachers and, thankfully, parents themselves place on risk-taking, problem-solving and independence has grown significantly. There seems to be some common ground that, while necessary risk assessments and



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common sense should always prevail, challenging children both physically and mentally in a natural environment will bring a whole host of benefits, including:

- Greater physical and emotional well-being: Perhaps the most obvious of the various benefits is the physical fitness one can feel in the great outdoors. Less obvious are the psychological ones.
- Improving outcomes for at-risk children in terms of disengagement and anti-social behavior: As well as providing children with a much better chance of happiness and success, financially, it is far more cost-effective to find pre-emptive strategies to address these issues rather than attempt to resolve them at a later date.
- Self-awareness and a sense of autonomy: Children can often, for the first time in their young lives, discover

real abilities they never knew they had, and thus gain confidence and self-esteem. I have seen a young boy with reading difficulties shine brightly when assuming a leadership role in an outdoor activity and gain confidence amongst his peers.

- In terms of resilience, young people today need to know how to deal with whatever life throws at them. The aforementioned experiences help to challenge youngsters to find a balance and assess various risky situations.
- In order to build a relationship between the environment and the future leaders of tomorrow, they need to spend time in it and to become more aware of the growing needs within our society.

Fortunately, much like the rest of the world, opportunities for our children in Vietnam to encounter these experiences are becoming more and

more plentiful, and diverse. Recently, our Years 4, 5 and 6 classes had a fantastic residential experience at the Giang Dien site, only an hour drive from Saigon. Not only did the children sharpen various skills, they also bonded and forged strong relationships of which we are still seeing the benefits many weeks later. Furthermore, at the end of the last academic year, I was privileged to witness the resilience of the same children when caught in some heavy monsoon rain in Cat Tien National Park; they chose to carry on cycling in their ponchos until they reached their intended destination. Impressive stuff.

Climb a tree? Why not?! ■