

**A Practitioner's Guide
to
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING**
Children's Parliament Guest Blog
**Guest Blogger : Children's Parliament
team member and current student-
teacher Catrin**

**Catrin's Story- my outdoor
learning experiences!**

In this blog post, Children's Parliament team member and current student-teacher Catrin discusses her experiences of playing and learning outdoors and what can get in the way of children realising their right to play and their right to reach their full potential through education.

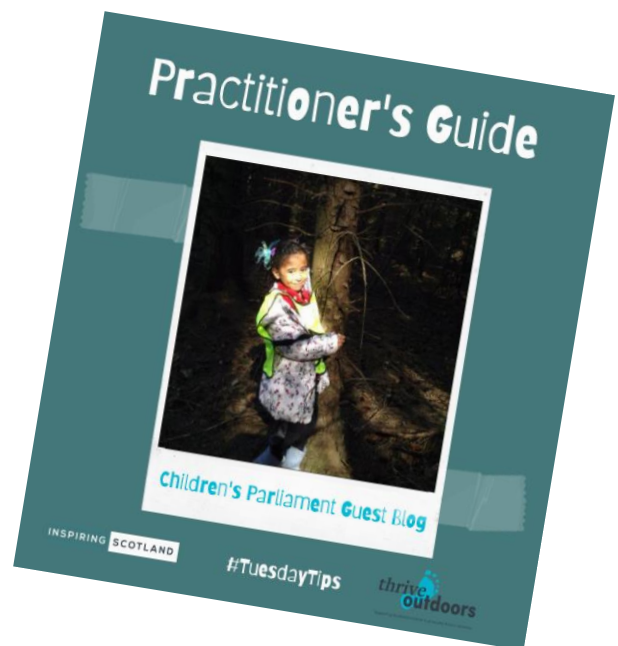
A typical day....

I arrive at school on Wednesday full of glee. As do the smiling wee faces of Logie Durno's P1-3 class. We're kitted out in our welly boots, waterproofs, hats and gloves, sun glasses and sun cream. It is March in rural Aberdeenshire and we are taking a trip to the local woods, whatever the weather. Packed with us are our snacks, tarpaulins, ropes, pegs and tattie peelers. This is our weekly ritual, and we spend all morning at the woods playing, building dens, listening to birds, watching lambs, making art and eating together. The children share the staff's absolute love of this time together:

'I like when I have free play in the woods. There are so many dens to make and things to climb.' P1 learner.

'I like climbing trees because it is fun.' P2 learner.

'I like looking at animals like deer. Being outside is good for you because you get fresh air.' P2 learner.



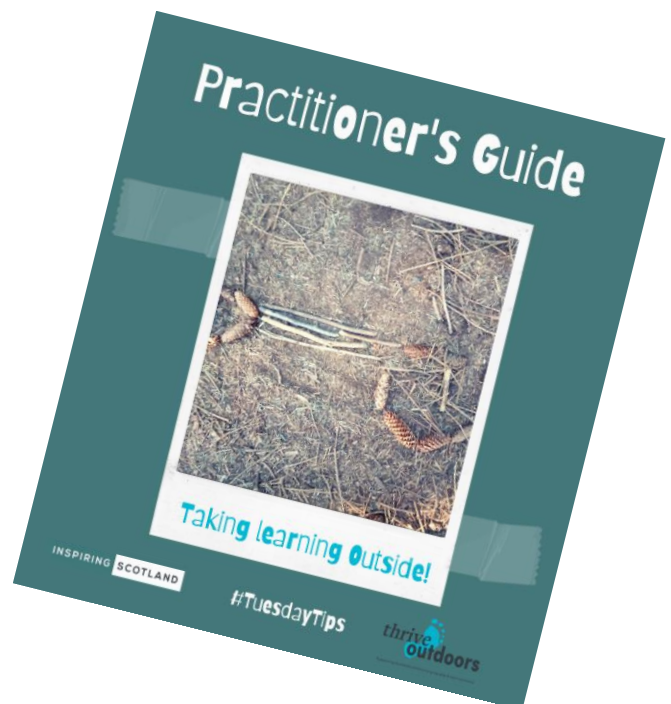
'I like when I hear the birds when I walk and then I can make nests for the birds. I love playing out in nature.' P1 learner.

At Logie Durno PS, outdoor learning and play are central to the school's ethos. This is reflected in the routines I see around me: every lunchtime staff take children to the local park to play on grass and use the equipment; the P4-7 class participate in the Daily Mile; inter-disciplinary learning focuses on the experiential and explores the local environment including the woods; every child at school has a clear plastic box next to their clothes peg with all-weather gear; and on a Friday afternoon the whole school takes over the playground for a Big Play session. This is in line with guidance from the Scottish Government on Curriculum for Excellence in the Recovery Phase, but it is strengthened by the Logie Durno team's recognition that play and being outdoors are fundamental rights and a key component of a child's development at all stages of school life.



The benefits of outdoor play and learning!

The benefits of outdoor play and learning are well cited; children who spend more time in nature are more likely to have fewer social, emotional and behavioural issues (Richardson et al., 2017), better retention of information and concentration levels (Dadv et al., 2015) and are more likely to engage in risky play, which supports their development of self-esteem, problem-solving and ability to assess risk. (Maynard, Waters & Clement, 2013). For me, teaching outdoors allows me to see children, who might struggle in the classroom due to barriers to learning, thrive within these natural habitats. My feeling is that this is down to the change in expectations and notions around achievement that exist within the school context. Change that context, and we remove those barriers. In its essence, this is a step towards realising a child's right to education as stipulated in Article 29 of the UNCRC for these children.



Taking learning Outdoors....

In the International Council of Education Advisers' 2020 report, a key recommendation made for the future of Scottish education is for further provision and opportunity to take learning outdoors. Their vision for Scotland is an education system that builds capacity amongst staff to teach all curricular areas outdoors and where the architecture of schools prioritises learning among nature. This recommendation, though welcomed by Children's Parliament, feels overly familiar. It is an ask we have heard from children across Scotland, repeatedly since our first Eco-City project in 1992: 'give us more break time to play outside with friends', 'make our playgrounds full of grass, soft ground and trees for exploring' and 'make outdoor learning a priority – we are interested in growing plants, learning about nature and den building'. As duty-bears, what is holding us back from ensuring children have these outdoor opportunities?

Barriers to outdoor learning...

One experience I had in a school illustrates a systematic problem that prevents outdoor learning and playing from happening. The school was situated in a small town with a very short walk to a woodland and meadow area with a river. Many of the teachers were Forest School trained and highly experienced in teaching different curricular areas immersed in this natural wildlife, and the children expressed a love of getting to the woods and learning there. The knowledge, practice and values existed but where the challenge came was the risk-averse culture. The Local Authority would only allow children, during school time, to cross the two (relatively) quiet roads if they were accompanied by a certain ratio of adults. The same Local Authority had produced a general risk assessment for all schools, that prevented parent/ carer helpers from supporting during the Covid outbreak. This resulted in the children having to stay in school and the playground for their full school day. The irony of this is that at 3pm, when the school bell rang, most children in the senior part of school walked home unaccompanied, crossing whatever roads they needed to. This example highlights that the needs of children (and common sense) can be replaced by a culture of fear, where risk-adverse policy impacting on risk-beneficial practice.

Top Tips

With the UNCRC being incorporated into Scots Law, it feels like this mindset can no longer be permissible. As adults and duty-bearers, in order to support this change in culture and to ensure all children have their right to play and to reach their full potential through education, we need to:



- **Be Unfearties:** be brave and challenge any infringements of children's rights.
- Listen to children: act on their ideas.
- Take a Risk Benefit approach to assessing risk, as championed by Play Theorist Tim Gill.
- Invest in waterproofs and wellies! The benefits of being in nature extend beyond children. There is plenty of room for adults to have fun too.

Enjoy this blog? Do you have top tips that you would like to share?

Join in the conversation, add your pictures, or just chat with us at:

Facebook @ThriveOutdoorsScot,

Twitter @Thrive_Outdoors

Instagram @thrive_outdoors

or by email to amy@inspiringscotland.org.uk

Useful Links

Our handy hints and tips on #outdoorplay

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/thrive/>

Children's Parliament is Scotland's centre of excellence for children's human rights, participation & engagement. Keep up to date here:

<https://www.childreparliament.org.uk/>