

EXTRA EXTRA!

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Ditching the classroom boosts children's mental health

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Three years ago, the teacher Simon Poote spotted a disused strip of land on the grounds of Long Crendon school in Aylesbury. Poote saw a chance to create an outdoor learning space for the primary's year 1 to 6 students. The only snag was how to pay for the plot's transformation.

"We have lots of space but not much money," says headteacher Sue Stamp. The school therefore appealed to parents, local businesses and the community to donate everything from landfill material to create small hills, to unwanted play equipment to build a trim trail and tunnels for the children to explore.

Many of the outdoor activities they undertake are linked to curriculum subjects, and complement classroom lessons. A factor which Stamp believes has played a part in the school's continuing exam success. But outdoor learning is far more than an academic exercise – the head claims the impact on children's mental health and wellbeing is undeniable.

"We have seen an amazing difference in



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some children," she says. "Children who just didn't engage in the classroom suddenly come into their own when they get outside."

A 2010 study from the University of Rochester found that spending time outdoors not only makes you happier, it can lead to an increased sense of vitality. It has also been found to have a calming effect on the mind, ease depression, spark creativity and improve attention and focus.

A five-year study, which examined 500 children from 14 primary schools across Melbourne, Australia, found that those children who spend break times in more natural playgrounds as opposed to asphalt ones feel more able to concentrate back in the classroom. The researchers discovered that had a direct correlation to exam results.

But despite these findings, three-quarters of UK children spend less time outside than prison inmates. This means schools have an opportunity to make a huge difference to young people's mental health by increasing time spent outdoors.

TRUE OR FALSE?

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