

**Section
3**

Learning outside the school – your local area



This section contains ideas for using the local area as a resource for teaching and learning. The ideas and suggestions are based on activities that have been successfully carried out with children, and cover learning both in and about the local area.

Why use the local area as a learning environment?

Before children can begin to find out about other countries, or even other parts of Britain, they must have an understanding of the place where they live. Learning about the local area gives children a sense of place. It helps them to learn about the people, buildings and natural environment of their locality, and gives them an awareness of how they fit in to the local community – as children and future adults.

In the past, most children would have lived very close to their school, and walked or cycled there. They would experience their local environment every day, seeing the people who lived and worked in the area, the different buildings, the houses and gardens, the plants and the animals. They were able to use all of their senses to fully experience what their local area was like; they would notice what changed and what remained the same. However, due to issues such as road safety and the fact that many children now live further away from school, travelling to school by car has become much more common. Car travel provides fewer opportunities for children to use their senses, as well as denying them the time to socialise and engage in a healthy and ‘green’ activity. Teachers, too, often do not live near to the school and travel to work by car or public transport. This means that teachers have much less awareness of the character and features of the local area. Therefore, incorporating local studies into school is essential, so that children and teachers can learn more about the place where their school is situated. It also gives them opportunities to take exercise and to experience the weather and seasons.

For some children, the local area may be their only experience of the outside world. Some children may not even have travelled to the nearest big town or city. This can be true of children who live in rural or coastal villages, as well as those who live in city suburbs which have their own shops and amenities.

Learning about the local area can play a huge role in community cohesion, particularly in areas where people of several different cultures live. Children can learn to appreciate and celebrate the diversity of their local area, through observing different lifestyles and beliefs first-hand.

An awareness and understanding of the local area can also inspire a sense of pride in children. This is especially true when they take part in projects which help to improve the local environment or involve the local community. If children are enthusiastic about, and interested in, their local area, then they are more likely to try to engage and involve their parents, and less likely to want to participate in antisocial or destructive behaviour. They are also more likely to want to stay in the local area when they grow up, which helps to create sustainable communities.

Fieldwork in the local area is a logical progression from work in the school grounds. It covers many areas of the curriculum in an engaging way, and puts learning into a meaningful context (e.g. seeing weather or forces in action, or working on a real environmental issue). It is also a great way to talk with children about being safe (e.g. when crossing the road or near water, knowing about safe people they can speak to).

Learning in the local environment can also have a positive impact on the social skills and world view of lower-achieving children. According to the ‘Engaging Places’ project (see Useful resources), low achievers are often ‘social-bonders’, which means that they tend to only relate to those immediately around them, and find it difficult to relate to the wider world. In comparison, high achievers tend to be ‘social-bridgers’, which means that they are able to connect with different social groups and have a broader world view. Engaging with their local environment and community, in a way that is well organised and safe, can encourage social-bonders to become social-bridgers.

