

# “Confident, socially able and curious...”

School readiness is something we are hearing more and more about. Indeed, depending on where you sit on the ‘too much too early’ campaign, this is beginning to look like something parents should consider pre-birth! I am fully expecting magazine articles and resources on ‘womb music to make your child ready for school’ and ‘If I give birth in a classroom is my child guaranteed better EBacc results?’ problem pages to appear on your news stands shortly. On a more serious note, Ofsted suggested recently that children from ‘disadvantaged families’ should start at school nurseries from the age of two (see [ow.ly/qQMYH](http://ow.ly/qQMYH)).

So, let’s take a closer look at what school readiness means and what role the outdoors has to play in that.

For a teacher it is important to be working with a child who can pay attention, focus and sit still when required; but, as we all know, school readiness is about much more than this. A ‘school-ready’ child needs to be confident with his or her peers, socially able, curious and

With increased emphasis being placed on preparing young children for primary education, the benefits of time spent playing outside can’t be ignored, says **Juno Hollyhock...**

comfortable in his or her space. Activities that take place outdoors often incorporate these skills naturally and in a way that allows the child to be self-directed. Children playing outside often mix with a wide range of age and interest groups in a way that the more prescriptive indoor play does not necessarily allow for.

Additionally, the natural environment develops curiosity and interest that can drive a child’s desire to learn and understand. Children playing outside also have to overcome more obstacles and be more collaborative in their play as they have bigger hurdles to overcome, which often require assistance. This prepares them to integrate with a bigger school community.

But don’t just take my word for it: a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council has shown that outdoor learning and play can make a valuable contribution to helping children make the transition from early years education into primary school (see [ow.ly/qQN4t](http://ow.ly/qQN4t)).

The project highlights what many will already have assumed – that as children go into more formal schooling, the amount of time they spend outdoors drops rapidly. During the research a group of children were given a digital audio recorder that tracked their play and their conversations. In the early years, activity outdoors accounted for about two-thirds of the conversations recorded, but by Year 1 this had

dropped to less than one-third.

But whilst more formal schooling allows less time for going outside, and the free-flow encouraged during the Early Years Foundation Stage is not reflected in primary and secondary schools, there are still opportunities for children to make the most of their playtimes. It is worth the investment of time, as the ESRC study also found that a readiness to learn in children was far more evident when they had experienced a longer transition of play-based outdoor learning. It is well known, too, that in order to be able to access the National Curriculum, children need to have a certain level of literacy. Outdoor activity engages children in a way that encourages and motivates them to have conversations, and it is these conversations that lay down the patterns for the neural pathways that develop their language, reasoning and problem-solving skills. The more that children have to talk about, the more their language skills are refined. The outdoors is multi-sensory, interesting and often surprising; this stimulates the desire to talk.

In the end, whatever age you believe children should receive the more formal education systems that prevail in our schools, there can be no doubt that outdoor play gives them a sound base to build upon. In an ideal world we would hope that early outdoor play would segue neatly into lots of active outdoor learning throughout the primary and secondary years.

## about the author

Juno Hollyhock is executive director of Learning Through Landscapes, a UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. For more information on a range of services and resources for early years settings, visit [ltl.org.uk](http://ltl.org.uk)