

When movement, action and exploration are your principle concerns, you'll learn far better outside, says **Juno Hollyhock...**

What's best for boys?

There is no shortage of evidence suggesting that boys would do better were they to spend a bit more time outside. Foundation Stage statistics tell us that more girls than boys are meeting or exceeding early learning goals. We know that boys' brains develop differently to girls, and it is widely acknowledged that they learn differently as a result – boys, for example, develop concepts of movement and space first, so it makes sense for their learning to take place in an environment such as the outdoors that allows these concepts to become concrete.

We also know that at around the age of four, boys experience an increase in testosterone levels, which can make sitting still for any length of time something of a challenge. One of the ways to overcome this hurdle is to provide them with a multisensory learning environment that can hold their attention while allowing them to move around more.

Boys naturally engage in more rough and tumble than girls, and this can be seen as challenging behaviour (though research suggests that a boy's natural interest in systems that makes him keen on construction toys and outdoor activities develops via a similar process to those interests which emerge in girls as empathy). Simply put, boys are interested in movement, exploration, action and big things, and this is readily provided for in the outdoors, and rather easier to manage than in an internal classroom context.

But enough of the research – and anyway, there will be plenty who'll argue

that the above smacks of generalisation: that many girls also exhibit interest in things mechanical, have excellent spatial awareness and tend to the more boisterous. For some, though, it is undeniable that learning undertaken outdoors is easier, more effective and can overcome some issues.

There's a young chap who lives at the end of my road; his name is Archie. Archie's Dad is a builder. Archie would be the first to say that he's not that enthralled about sitting down counting things and trying to get words and letters to arrange themselves in the right order. You see, for Archie, words and numbers do odd things when they're written down – they sort of turn themselves inside out and bobble around the page quite a lot (this is not unconnected with Archie's tendency to bobble around quite a lot himself). This makes them jolly hard to control, and after a while it becomes really quite frustrating and tiring.

In Archie's experience, things outside tend to make sense; he has more space to bobble around in, there are fewer sounds bouncing around the walls at him, he can breathe better, and he can hold and touch things that don't misbehave in the way that letters and numbers do.

Archie has the basics for a fork lift truck driving qualification, and he can lay a pretty decent brick wall. He knows one end of a pig from the other and looks after his own hens. He sells the hens' eggs in units of 20p because this helps him to handle money. Archie knows how potatoes grow and why you don't want to eat the green

bits; he can skim a concrete surface with the dexterity of a professional, and he understands what layers need to go into the foundations of a house and why.

Archie is a quick and intelligent learner; he is outside every hour he can be, cramming his head with new and relevant information. He exhausts the word 'why' by using it all the time to make sense of the world around him (he exhausts all around him by his use of the word 'why!'). He has an excellent memory. Archie demands a learning outcome from every question that he asks and every new experience that he chases. Archie seeks knowledge relentlessly, pursuing it like a runaway dog as hard as he possibly can.

Archie will probably not achieve a high standard in his GCSEs. Archie is fortunate in that he has far-seeing and supportive parents. Sometimes, watching Archie work, I want to pose the following question to our educationalists: "What exactly are the benefits for Archie of learning inside the classroom?"



about the author

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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