



Interview with an SEN Teacher:

The Importance of Outdoor Play and Outdoor Learning for Children with Special Educational Needs

Sara Wood is a Special Education Needs teacher who has taught both mainstream and SEN primary age children across the UK for the past 21 years. She has a wealth of experience teaching children who face a wide range of challenges and special needs, and is a real advocate for outdoor play and outdoor learning and the positive impact that it has on SEN children.

Pentagon met up with her to find out first hand just what it is about outdoor activities that makes such a difference.

How important are outdoor play, outdoor learning and physical outdoor activities for SEN children?

Outdoor play is absolutely essential for so many reasons! It is really important for early development. Having the space to play outside is what helps young children to develop both fine and gross motor skills as well as giving them opportunities to test out and develop appropriate social interactions.

Some of the children that I have taught, unfortunately, don't get the opportunity to play outside by themselves very often, if at all, due to a range of social, cultural or family situations.

So at school children need access to an outside provision to develop their confidence, widen their experiences and enable them to learn in an informal way. Children can progress greatly when they are not actually aware that they are learning.



In what specific ways is outdoor play and outdoor learning so beneficial for SEN children?

For children with sensory sensitivities such as sensory processing disorder, and some children with Autism, outdoor learning can have a positive impact on their experiences simply because it's away from artificial, electric lighting.

Electric lights in a school building can create a buzz that might not be noticeable to some of us, but it causes an upsetting distraction for some SEN children.

Some SEN classrooms never use the main lights because of this and opt for smaller, less powerful table lamps on darker days. But the natural light that you get in an outdoor classroom environment is always preferable.

Busy, noisy classrooms in which sound echoes and bounces off the walls often causes a similar problem. Many SEN classrooms are now carpeted throughout

to try and dull these sounds, but again, this isn't a problem in an outdoor learning environment.

Children with sensory sensitivity are often on the Autistic Spectrum, but not exclusively. Outdoor learning can really benefit these children by giving them the opportunity to explore child led learning which stimulates all of the senses: sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste, and also the vestibular system (balance) and proprioception (body awareness).



It's important to remember that no two children are the same, they might be sensory seekers or sensory avoiders or neither, and what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another. But in my experience, outdoor learning opportunities are really valuable for all of these children in different ways.

Physical outdoor activities such as swinging, spinning (perhaps on a roundabout), riding on a see-saw, throwing and catching a ball or walking on different textured surfaces can help children to develop their vestibular system (their sensory system that controls their sense of balance and spatial awareness so that they can coordinate movement with balance).

Children with under-sensitive vestibular systems seek out sensory sensations, so their needs can really be catered for with these types of activities. Practicing walking smoothly up steps or over curved surfaces such as bridges can help too. Children with over sensitive vestibular systems struggle with sporting activities where movement needs controlling.

They find it hard to stop quickly during an activity and struggle with activities where their head is not upright or their feet are off the ground. A well prepared outdoor space can support these children through clearly marked visual cues, for example to show a finishing line.

Challenges such as "run to the middle of the triangle" or "stop inside the blue square" where there are playground markings are great examples of ways of helping children to practice physical movements that they find difficult. It helps to break these types of activities down into small steps to enable the child to focus on one task at a time.

Children with underdeveloped proprioception, who struggle with body awareness, cannot measure their proximity to other people and judge personal spaces. They find it hard to move around a room without bumping into things or people.

They can benefit hugely from outdoor experiences and a well planned outdoor learning space with clearly zoned areas gives them opportunities to practice and develop this sense.

Resources that allow them to explore where their body is in space and how body parts move are beneficial. Dens, cubby holes and small spaces are good and give children a sense of comfort. Apparatus that places weight against their body or requires them to push and pull too. These children always need to be carefully monitored to keep them safe in an outdoor environment, however well designed.



Another thing to mention is that children with over sensitive proprioception tend to really struggle with both fine motor (manipulating small objects) and gross motor (moving the body as a whole) skills.

Resources that offer opportunities to practice these skills are crucial! Peg boards, lacing boards, tools that require fine motor control and moving objects from one area to another, sensory gardens and sensory trails that encourage children to move around, touch and explore with their hands, are all ideal.

“Crossing the midline” is another developmental area that many SEN children struggle with. Outdoor activities and exercises where they have space to move can really help.

Imagine a line running down the middle of your body. In order for us to properly coordinate the two sides of our body together, we need to be able to cross over that line. Each side of our brain controls the opposite side of our body, but both sides need to be able to work together to develop coordination.

Children who avoid crossing the midline work their right side with their right hand and their left side with their left hand, or else they turn their bodies to avoid crossing the midline altogether. This makes motor tasks very difficult, and they might struggle with day to day activities such as using a knife and fork, tying shoelaces or reading and writing.

Exercises and resources that encourage children to cross over that midline, for example to move their right arm across to the left side of their body and vice versa, really help.

I have come across some really good activity play panels, where children need to transfer an object across a board from one side to another on a large scale, and it’s almost impossible for them to complete without crossing the midline!

Using a giant chalkboard, and drawing a great big horizontal figure of eight on it using only one hand, works on fine motor skills and requires children to cross over that midline to complete the figure too.

How do you find that you like to use your outdoor space most of all for SEN children to play and learn?

I use Forest Schools a lot. It’s a really inspirational, hands on concept that promotes outdoor learning, and is fantastic for so many children with Special Education Needs. The outdoor area is the perfect place for a sensory break, to refresh children, bring them back into their zone, help them to focus and get them ready for learning.

On top of that, I also like to take main curriculum maths, English and science based lessons outside too, where I can. I use a lot of chalk!

The outdoors offers space. The ground, the walls and big chalk boards are great for large scale demonstrations, for example demonstrating compass points, position, direction and angles. It’s about offering a multi sensory approach to learning and it really works for SEN children.

We look for shapes in the environment, we learn phonics and search for sounds outside. We study reflection and light and dark shadows, art in the environment and so on.

I love to have an outdoor reading area and sensory stories in particular offer a great experience to all children, bringing stories to life and helping them to visualise and experience words and meanings.



We take pooters (insect aspirators) outside to search for and examine insects and mini beasts close up. The children love anything to do with bugs! Bug hotels and wildlife zones are brilliant as there is usually plenty of insect life scurrying around them so we don’t struggle for subjects.

Weather stations, water cycles and concepts such as evaporation are best studied outdoors and water based resources that can be used for demonstrations are really useful too.

Are there any real obstacles that you face, as an SEN teacher, to getting children outdoors for regular physical exercise and for outdoor learning activities?

Honestly there are very few obstacles if you have a good outdoor provision! For SEN children in particular, outdoor learning needs to be planned into the day and featured on a visual timetable so they know when it’s going to happen.

Some SEN children are quite rigid and take comfort and reassurance from knowing what to expect or what is going to happen on a particular day, following a routine. Because of this, shelter is really important.

Canopies and covered outdoor classroom areas are essential so that outdoor learning doesn't have to be cancelled due to bad weather, which some SEN children would find very difficult to cope with. Shelter from strong wind is important as high winds can work children up.



Children with particular sensitivities such as heart conditions also need protection from more extreme weather conditions, cold winds etc. Covered outdoor classrooms mean that they get to benefit from being outdoors in the fresh air all year round.

Some SEN children have relatively short attention spans so it's important to break activities down into manageable chunks and have regular rest breaks, somewhere to sit down and take a breather, and process what is coming next.

The World Health Organisation reports that childhood obesity is one of the biggest health problems of the 21st century, and that the UK is one of the worst countries in Western Europe for high levels of childhood obesity, particularly among primary school children. Have you noticed this as an issue? Could more be done to support SEN children to stay fit and healthy?

Childhood obesity is clearly on the increase. Children are spending too much time on screens which is a big issue. In many cases, unfortunately, it's because offering a child a screen is an easier parenting option and coping mechanism for many busy parents who are struggling to balance everything.

It's a self-fulfilling prophecy though, because once an SEN child reaches a certain weight, it becomes an even greater barrier to access and to what activities they can participate in and enjoy, especially if they need physical support to move around. These children need more and better access to sporting clubs and facilities.

Children who attend a specialist SEN school do not necessarily live in the local area and they often arrive on transport. This causes a logistical challenge in terms of how much time and access to sporting activities they can actually get. Many only have access to lunchtime clubs within school hours as they don't have access or transport to after school and weekend clubs.

Some SEN children don't get to go out on their own very much to enjoy informal, social exercise, usually because it is not safe for them to be alone and they need somebody with them all the time. They can't necessarily just be dropped off at a local sports club, for example, because they need extra support whether physical or emotional.

So it's really important that SEN schools have a good outdoor provision for all of these children to maximise lunch and break times for physical activities.

What can be done to support visually impaired children facing barriers to outdoor play, sports and learning? Is there a better way in which outdoor spaces can be designed to include them?

Different textured surfaces help visually impaired children to feel the ground beneath their feet, to recognise where boundaries are and move about with freedom and confidence.

In terms of playground resources, sensory toys and equipment, are good too as they make outdoor playtime more fun and engaging and allow children to explore and recognise different textures. Tactile elements are important for mobility and orientation.



Where children have some limited vision, bright yellow markings at the edges of boundaries, pathways, steps, slides and other surfaces are important for safety and alert children to potential changes beneath their feet.

Anything that is labelled should be labelled in a large, clear font with boldly contrasted colours, e.g black on white or yellow. Don't use a background colour similar to the font colour as it makes the text hard to see.

Are there any specific ways in which you support children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health concerns through physical activity and using the outdoors?

What do you do if children come into school and they are "bubbling"? Does an outdoor environment help in any way, or could it?

A change of environment can often make a big difference. Having easy, ready access to the outdoors whatever the weather really helps as sometimes just being able to move outside, away from the busy classroom or out of a situation is what is needed. It's a case of stop, change, reward and motivation.

Yoga and meditation is becoming more popular in schools generally, not just SEN classes, for helping children maintain good mental health. Relaxing outdoor spaces, gazebos etc which can facilitate this are really useful.

Very large open spaces can be completely overwhelming for some SEN children, so it's good to be able to break up larger playground areas with things like pagodas, natural or colourful fencing, or specific

zoned play areas broken up by larger equipment/resources.

Large open spaces are also not helpful for SEN teachers when there are children in a class with a tendency to run if they get upset or overwhelmed. It can be very difficult to reach them, calm them and bring them back to a happier place. On a practical level, well thought out fencing which keeps children safe and secure, but which also looks good, compliments the outdoor play environment and doesn't make children feel caged in, would be ideal!

Kinesthetic learning is a much preferred learning style for SEN children. It means that learning happens through children carrying out physical activities, moving and playing, rather than listening to a lecture or just watching demonstrations. If an SEN child has a short attention span then it is very difficult for them to try and concentrate and learn through more traditional teaching methods. Kinesthetic learning means that children are actively involved in hands on learning. So of course the outdoor environment is perfect for this. Role play resources in an outdoor playground can help children to work through any social or emotional issues that they may be struggling with, and help them learn how to confront situations that might otherwise be difficult for them.

How do you promote physical activity for children who are physically disabled and have restricted mobility? How would you expect to see a playground be better adapted to ensure that they can be included in outdoor activities?

The most important thing is to make the area accessible so that everyone can enjoy being outdoors. Level surfaces that a wheelchair can travel across are essential. Loose gravel, muddy fields and uneven concrete or paving flags with cracks and holes are an absolute no go!

Pathways and gates need to be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair, as do doorways into outdoor classrooms. Use ramps as well as steps. Sufficient space needs to be left between play equipment to allow a wheelchair to travel around them, so that all children can get in on the action.

Mud kitchens can be great for wheelchair users due to their raised nature, especially if they have a counter surface which a wheelchair can fit under comfortably.



Raised planters allow children with mobility issues to enjoy sensory gardens. When they can reach to touch all the different plants and textures and experience tactile learning, rather than just looking at them, it makes such a difference to their overall learning experience.

In a dream scenario, what would an ideal inclusive playground/ outdoor learning area to support SEN children look like to you?

Even playground surfacing and a nice big canopy would be a great start! Sectioned off areas with “friendly-looking” fencing as I mentioned before, to allow children freedom to move and run around, but to stop those who tend to run off from running too far.

It would be wonderful to have an exclusive SEN “den” as a calming retreat, especially in mainstream schools, to allow SEN children to escape the hustle and bustle when they become overwhelmed.

A rotating library (to maintain interest) of toys and equipment to develop balance, spatial awareness, fine and gross motor skills, and to promote sharing and turn taking and increase self esteem and creativity, that can be stored outside for easy access, would be ideal.

Play frames and other larger resources that can support each of these development areas would be a great addition. Magnetic marble runs, giant peg boards, water walls where children get to build their own course, these types of resources which present

both physical and logical challenges are just fantastic for SEN children.

Animal therapy is also a wonderful idea and I would love to see more of that for SEN children. Some SEN schools even have a “hoof licence” so that they can keep donkeys on site!

But if that would be too much of a logistical challenge then some chickens or guinea pigs would be perfect! Provided that they have plenty of space and safe pens or fenced areas to keep them happy and healthy, and someone who can look after them out of school hours, then children really benefit from learning how to look after animals and taking on that responsibility.

Schools that have plenty of outdoor space should really think about whether they can offer this, as it is something that many SEN children will not be lucky enough to experience at home.

Thank you so much for your time Sara! This has been a wonderful and valuable insight into the world of outdoor learning for SEN children, and how the outdoor environment can be used to really benefit SEN children. We have really enjoyed talking to you.



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