

FEATURES

Rise of the analogue parents: why learning is now thriving outdoors

Getting children off their devices to play outside is part of the fight against digital, says *Lucy Denyer*

As any parent can attest, the battle to prise children away from the glow of their screens seems endless. Nursery-age children now spend eight hours a week online, according to a new Ofcom report, with 65 per cent of three- to four-year-olds using tablets – up 10 per cent from last year. Over a quarter of 10-year-olds are active on Facebook and Twitter.

It is statistics like these that have prompted a return to analogue education, with outdoor play chief among the ways the anti-digital fightback is beginning; just a few weeks ago, an Ipswich academy announced it would be sending its pupils out in the rain at playtime – inappropriate footwear notwithstanding.

It seems that there is a growing realisation that a return to a simpler way of doing things may not be so bad when it comes to our little ones. After all, we live in troubling times – mental health issues are on the rise among teenagers, thanks to the perils of social media, and our children are seemingly fatter and unhealthier than ever before – last week it was reported that surgeons are performing hip replacements on children as young as 10 because of the damage caused by obesity.

"We're hopeful that the culture is beginning to move in a different direction," says Richard Louv, an outdoor education guru and author of *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature Rich Life*. "We're seeing a new appreciation for these issues among parents, educators, doctors and others. And we're seeing some strong countertrends – such as the growth of nature-orientated schools."

In Britain, outdoor schools are proving ever more popular. The Forest School Association has seen its membership grow from 200 in 2012 to over 2,000 today, and earlier this year, a new Academy Trust, Red Kite, formed – it is now in the process of submitting an application to start four Nature Schools, in Wiltshire, Warwickshire, Devon and the West Midlands. Dandelion Education, a nursery in Norfolk that keeps



Wet play: more schools are now taking children offline and outside to learn

its children outside whatever the weather, playing only with toys they have made themselves, was recently named Nursery of the Year.

But common-or-garden state primaries are starting to jump on the bandwagon, too. Five years ago, Elaine Wylie, at the time the head teacher of a large primary school in Stirling, realised the children in her school were unfit. She started her pupils running around a field every day for 15 minutes – after a month, everyone was hooked. The Daily Mile, which gets children running for 15 minutes a day, has now become a global movement, with over 3,000 schools internationally signed up and every London borough represented.

The aforementioned Piper's Vale Primary in Ipswich was taken over earlier this year by the Paradigm Trust, whose policy it is to send children in all of its six schools outside for "wet play" when it is raining.

"Being outside having fresh air and doing exercise can only be a good thing," says Caroline Wagstaff, of Paradigm Trust, which takes on schools that are particularly in need of help. "Everything we do is about improving life chances for children."

It's not hard to see the benefits of such initiatives: last year, the Natural Connections Demonstration Project, a four-year scheme designed to get children outdoors, published its findings – 92 per cent of teachers surveyed said that pupils were more engaged with learning when outdoors and 85 per cent saw a positive impact on their behaviour. "I've seen such

a tremendous change in Lily," says Henny Clarke of her five-year-old daughter, who started at The Willow on the Farm pre-school in Oxfordshire in September. "Lily is learning to count with carrots they've dug up from the garden, squishing blackberries between her fingers and painting with them, and taking tractor rides down to the stream to learn about things that float or sink. Her speech has improved, her confidence has increased no end, she is more grounded, has more patience, sleeps better, eats better and is interested in what she's eating, too."

While some schools have jumped enthusiastically on the digital bandwagon (witness the rise of online tools such as Class Dojo, which updates parents throughout the day on their child's behaviour), "international research from the OECD and other organisations clearly shows that countries that moderate their tech use do better," says Chris McGovern, a former DfE adviser and chairman of the Campaign for Real Education. And, he adds: "It's much safer for children to do physical activity than let them loose on the internet."

And we do need to set the example ourselves. "When parents rediscover their sense of wonder, so do most kids," adds Louv. So get out those board games, go for a walk in the woods or light a fire with your kids. Whether it's nostalgia or not, our children are likely to thank us for it. As Louv says: "People seldom look back on their childhoods and recall the best day they ever spent watching TV."