

Social and Emotional Benefits from Learning in Nature

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” - (CASEL, 2013)

Social and Emotional Learning

SEL builds on an individual's social and emotional competencies, which are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making. Collaborative Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) reports that SEL is not an add-on to the school day; rather, SEL is woven into what teachers are already doing in class. In order to have maximum results in students' well-being, SEL needs to be identified and intentionally focused on throughout the school day. CASEL has created a toolkit to be used by administrations and teachers to gain a better understanding of what social and emotional learning is and how it can be incorporated into the school day for preschool through high school students (CASEL, 2013).



Glossary

Service Learning- A teaching strategy that includes a communities' social and natural systems (Fly, n.d.)

Social Capital- Relationships of trust and reciprocity, that maintain norms and common rules, and strengthen the connectedness to the environment (Pretty, Smith, 2003)

Place-Based Learning- occurs when children, teachers, and adults in the community use the social, cultural, and natural environment in which they live as an inquiry-based learning laboratory (Fly, n.d.)

SEL Competencies-

- self-awareness
- self-management
- social awareness
- relationship management
- responsible decision making

(CASEL, 2013)

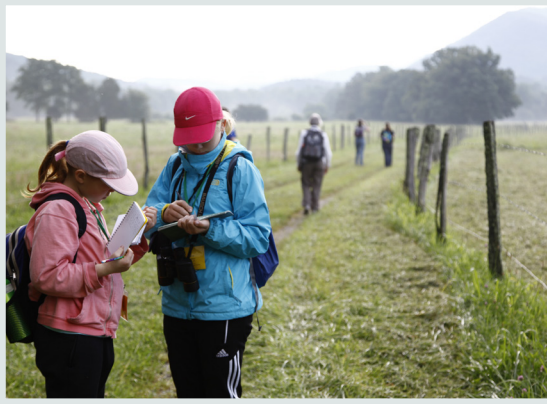
Benefits from Learning in Nature

Students who participate in outdoor learning demonstrate reduced stress, anger, inattention, and their overall well-being improves. In addition, they gain social capital for themselves, their school, and their community when participating in service learning projects in the schoolyard (Chawla et al, 2014; Barton et al, 2016; Fly, n.d.).

In an ethnographic study conducted at six different grade level sites in Maryland and Colorado, researchers studied the importance of green schoolyards and their direct impact on an individual. It was clear to researchers that social and emotional competencies were being built upon within each green schoolyard. Based on student interviews, researchers reported that, out of the 51 high school students participating, 50 stated that their ability to focus on other tasks increased after gardening at school. Parents of students who participated in forested freeplay compared the forest to a “safe space”, “safe haven”, and “carefree area” for their children (Chawla et al, 2014). Students of all ages showed an overall improvement in their mood and reported less stress and anger during the school day (Chawla et al, 2014).

In Barton and colleagues’ study of 130 students, ages 11 to 18 years, students participating in a wilderness experience showed increased self-esteem. Researchers suggest that, because the majority of adolescence is spent in school, curriculum should incorporate nature into class time to give students a proven space to promote well-being. At the beginning of this study, there was a self-esteem gap between boys and girls, with the boys documenting higher confidence than the girls. At the conclusion of the wilderness experience, the gap closed with girls gaining enough self-esteem to be no different than their boy counterparts. Because of this, Barton and colleagues suggests that outdoor opportunities may be significantly important for improving self-esteem and mental health in girls (Barton et al, 2016).

J. Mark Fly suggests that service learning occurs when schools perform community based service projects that coincide with school curriculum. When students explore their schoolyards, they begin to form questions about the land around them and become encouraged to think deeper about their community and how they can support it. By merging this form of service learning with the outdoor classroom, students will be more prepared cognitively and emotionally for life after high school graduation. Service learning in the local community gives students the opportunity to gain social capital for themselves, their school, and their community by synthesizing the scientific data produced during school to present to members of the community (Fly, n.d.).



Service learning projects in the schoolyard, can help students gain social capital for themselves, their school, and their community (Fly, n.d.).

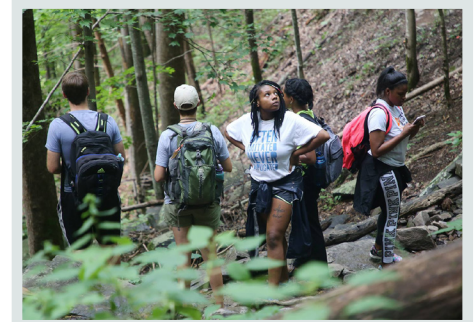
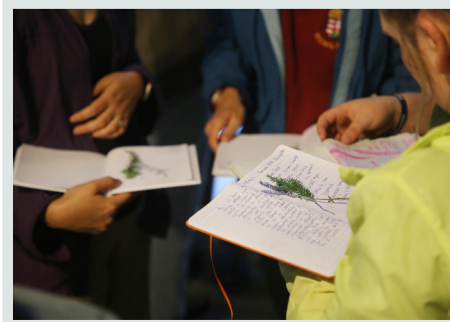


*“...outdoor opportunities may be significantly important for improving self-esteem and mental health in girls”
(Chawla et al, 2014).*

Place-based Education and How it Can Positively Affect SEL

Place-based education (PBE) is a way for schools to use the resources that are already accessible in their community to create a cross-curricular approach to learning. PBE “occurs when children, teachers, and adults in the community use the social, cultural, and natural environment in which they live as an inquiry-based learning laboratory (Fly, n.d.).” A placed-based curriculum tends to be dynamic and allows students to learn about the natural world to build towards their sense of place, sense of identity, pride for their geographic location, and understanding conservation ethics (Fly, n.d.).

Benefits of place-based outdoor education include: “better social interaction skills, greater independence and self-reliance, improved mental health, more understanding of their relationship to nature, and nurtured connections with friends, teachers and members of the community (Fly, n.d.).” Fly, a professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville suggests in his Place-Based Education Model for K-12 schools in Tennessee that students need to learn communicating, inferring, predicting, analysing, and observing skills as well as the content to become lifelong learners and to build on CASEL’s competencies. Although Fly’s model has not been implemented in Tennessee, his work to solidify a fluid track between PBE and in-school science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) should not be overlooked, and is a great resource for schools looking to incorporate PBE into their curriculum.

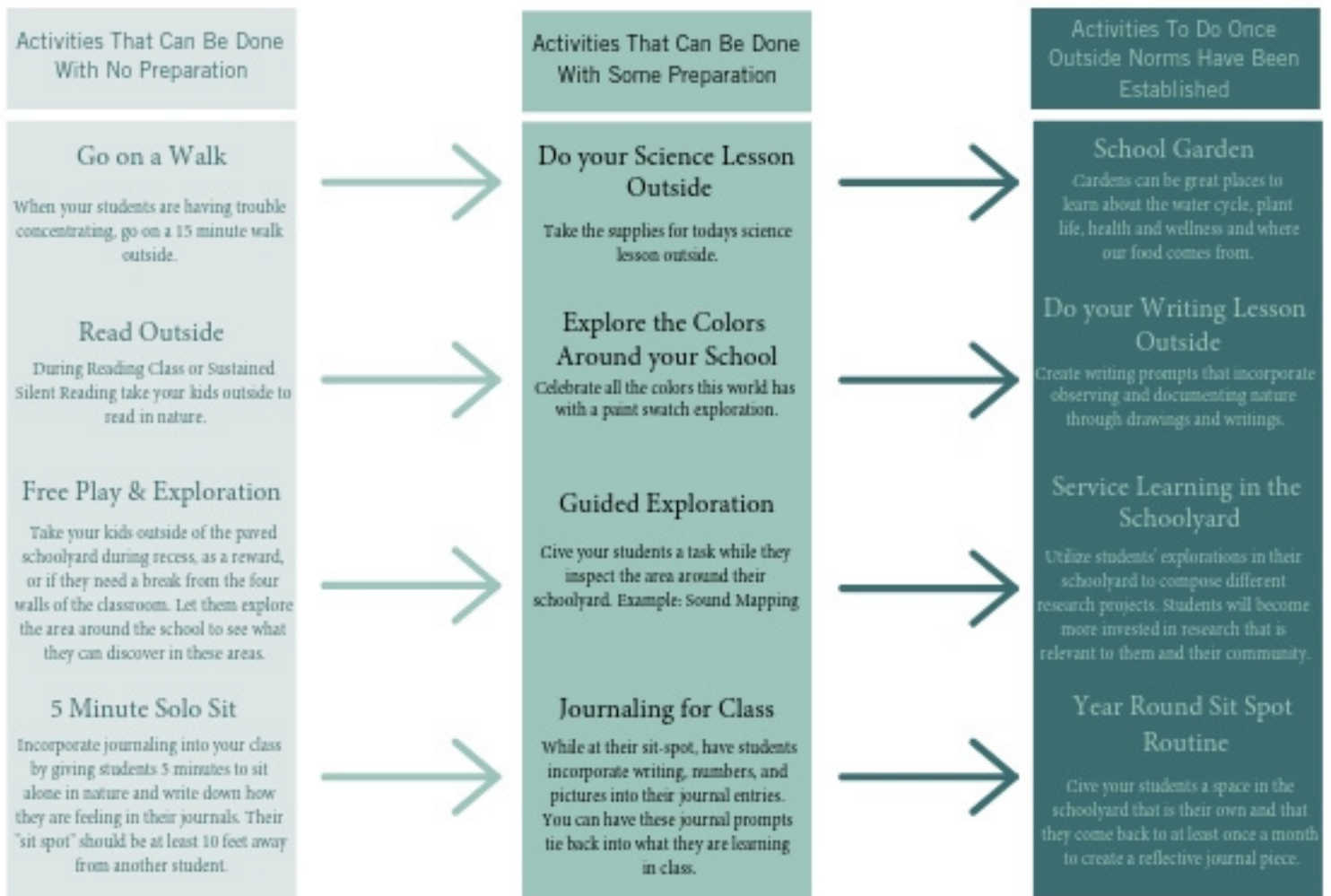


Blend SEL Into Outdoor Lessons

To provide quality SEL for students, educators should intertwine social and emotional competencies with other subjects throughout the school day, rather than have these techniques as stand-alone lessons. It is important to provide students with a positive student-centered learning environment in the classroom by creating respectful and supportive relationships between student and educator. Doing this will help students reduce their stress and anger and get them to a place of personal well-being. Blending SEL into your outdoor classing will build student’s self esteem and social capital.

By incorporating simple activities, like those below, into your lessons, students are given time and space to build their social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2013).

Blend SEL Into Outdoor Lessons Using These Activities



“I took my first period outside for 10 minutes once we got all work done in class. What I loved about this was these big 8th graders chose to just run around and play tag. The other kids who were too cool for school started to wiggle around and move too. It was really refreshing to see them act like kids again. There was no fight, no anger, just peace.”

- Knox County Science Teacher, 8th grade

Supporting Research:

- Barton, J., Bragg, R., Pretty, J., Roberts, J., & Wood, C. (2016) The Wilderness Expedition: An Effective Life Course Intervention to Improve Young People's Well-Being and Connectedness to Nature. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 29(1). 59-72.
- CASEL (2013). CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs. Chicago, IL: CASEL.
- Chawla, L., Keena, K., Pevec, I., & Stanley, E. (2014). Green Schoolyards as Havens from Stress and Resources for Resilience in Childhood and Adolescence. *Health & Place International Journal*, 28, 1-13.
- Fly, M. J. (n.d.) A Place-based Model for K-12 Education in Tennessee. Retrieved from http://web.utk.edu/~markfly/documents/Place-Based%20K-12%20Education%20Proposal%205_10_10.pdf.
- Pretty, J & Smith, D. (2003). Social Capital in Biodiversity Conservation and Management. *World Development*, 29. 209-227.