



# The Learning Institute

## Taking learning outdoors Part 4: Mindfulness through art

### Overview

The purpose of this CPD relating to outdoor learning is to encourage practitioners to think more deeply about the role outdoor learning might have in the support of health and wellbeing.

It explores how the act of 'mindfulness' or a 'mindfulness approach' can be adapted to deliver art in the natural environment by focussing attention to the present moment.

The CPD is suitable for anyone working with - or wanting to work with - young children and/or anyone who simply has an interest in outdoor learning.

It should also provide inspiration for parents, TAs and teachers to use outdoor contexts as part of their everyday teaching by making use of outdoor environments, be it a garden, a school setting or a local open space as a free resource for outdoor learning.

### Target audience

Early years workers, teaching assistants, teachers of EYFS and KS1-KS4 and beyond

### Duration

Approximately 1 hour

The Learning Institute provides opportunities for individuals and communities through high quality education, training and research programmes that challenge personal barriers and promote social inclusion. To find out more, please get in touch.

## Introduction

The links with outdoor learning and children's health and wellbeing has been widely accepted and recognised by researchers (Wood et al., 2016; Morgan and Waite, 2017) and policymakers (DEFRA, 2018; Ho, 2014) with key benefits also being identified for adults within schools in the findings of the Natural Connections Demonstration project (Waite et al., 2016).

Schools and educational settings can provide a universal access point to counteract many contemporary physical and mental health challenges that our children and young people face through the delivery of preventive strategies such as green exercise and nature experiences (Public Health England, 2014).

The act of becoming aware of your own immediate thoughts, feelings and the world around you, in order to experience a sense of being 'in the moment' (Geller and Greenberg, 2011) can help raise a greater awareness of our place in nature (Nisbet et al., 2019). This act, or process, is sometimes called **mindfulness**.

This CPD will consider how mindfulness carried out in nature can be used to support art activities, whilst at the same time supporting the wellbeing and mental health within a school community.

## Objectives

- To explore your setting identifying 'sit spots' for reflective practice
- To reflect on your own feelings and emotions using reflection and mindfulness
- To observe an introduction to an art session using a mindfulness approach which could then be adapted in your own setting
- To consider your own setting in the light of recent evidence linking outdoor spaces to improved mental health outcomes

## Resources

Pen and paper for note taking

Internet access to following:

- Mindfulness and art [video], available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRchE4TTxg>

## Task 1: Mindfulness - unlocking the potential your own outdoor setting

Increasing numbers of studies, backed by scientific research, suggest that slowing down and being more 'in the present' in nature can help alleviate feelings of anxiety, depression and stress (Geller and Greenberg, 2011). However, before we expect our children to be mindful it is important that we, ourselves, become mindful; to introduce this to a setting it will need to begin with YOU!

So how can we start?

Becoming more aware, or growing an 'awareness' of something and being 'in the present' with it is one of the most important elements of mindfulness. So how can this be achieved in a busy setting?

One approach might be to find a space where you can focus on a particular object or point of nature that can be found in your setting. This might be a stone, a pebble, a crack in the ground, gnarled bark from a tree, a feather or even a single leaf.

Consider your own setting. What areas do you have where this might be done? Do you have any quiet spots, tucked away areas, dappled shaded areas, a forest school area?

- Make a list of the potential areas you can think of.
- Next, ask other people if they can think of places that you haven't thought of and add them to your list. You might be surprised at the spaces that other people regard as helpful for contemplation and solace.

## Task 2: Reflecting on your own mindfulness

Research has shown that observing and looking closely at nature improves our ability to restore concentration and maintain focus for longer periods of time (Lambert et al., 2020). This can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness and so this would be an important skill to nurture for learners, particularly those who are easily distracted or need help to calm down if suffering from anxiety or stress.

Before you use mindfulness as a strategy with learners, it is important that you can experience the potential of the practice of mindfulness for yourself. Try this activity yourself.

- Go outside and explore your setting with 'fresh eyes'.
- As you look around you, you may find an object that 'catches your eye' to use as a focus. This could be a pebble, a stone, a leaf .....
- Sit down at that point so that you can study it, or find a quiet 'sit spot' that you can take it to.
- As you sit, focus on your object .... immerse yourself in the object.
- Take the time to slowly observe every detail.
- If other things enter your mind then simply re-focus on your object.

When you feel you have done this then take the time to become aware of your other senses.

- What can you feel underneath you?
- What can you hear? What sounds are far away? What can you hear that is closer? Closest?
- Take a breath. What can you smell?
- Breathe again, a bit more deeply and become aware of what is happening around you.

This might take multiple attempts but each time try to extend the time or depth of being 'in the moment'.

### Task 3: Introducing mindfulness in a setting using art

The mindful approach raises awareness of small details in the 'present'. So how can this be harnessed in the context of curriculum delivery?

The film clip below demonstrates how a mindful approach might be used to introduce observational drawing as one element of an art lesson. It shows how the Key Stage 2 art objective 'Pupils should be taught to create sketchbooks to record their observations' (Department for Education, 2014, p.226) can be introduced.

Watch the short clip *Mindfulness and art*, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRchE4TTxg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRchE4TTxg), (2 minutes), to see how this can be used to start an art lesson.

Now, try the activity yourself.

Following the activity, consider the following:

- Do you think you have a greater sense of 'awareness' of your focus?
- What would you keep the same? Give reasons for this.
- What would you do differently? Give reasons for your changes.
- Where and how could this be delivered in your setting?

Think about who might be the best person in your setting to share this with, in order to discuss if and how these ideas could be implemented.

### Task 4: Reflection on learning

Note down your responses to the following questions:

- What knowledge did I already have that has been refreshed by this CPD?
- How has this CPD developed my knowledge and understanding?
- How can I apply what I now know to my practice?

### Sources

Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2018) *A Green Future: our 25 year plan to improve the environment*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan> (Accessed: 22 June 2020)

Department for Education (2014) *The national curriculum in England: complete framework for key stages 1 to 4*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4> (Accessed: 26 June 2020).

Geller, S. and Greenberg, L. (2011) *Therapeutic Presence: A Mindful Approach to Effective Therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Public Health England (2014) *Local action on health inequalities: Improving access to green spaces*. Health Equity Briefing 8. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/355792/Briefing8\\_Green\\_spaces\\_health\\_inequalities.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/355792/Briefing8_Green_spaces_health_inequalities.pdf) (Accessed: 22 June 2020).

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Wood, C., Bragg, R. and Pretty, J. (2016) 'The benefits of green exercise for children', in Barton, J., et al. (eds.) *Green Exercise: Linking Nature, Health and Well-being*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 46–52.

## Further reading

Find useful resources by visiting the Mindfulness in Schools Project, available at <https://mindfulnessinschools.org/free-resources/>

Visit the Nature Friendly Schools website, available at [www.naturefriendlyschools.co.uk](http://www.naturefriendlyschools.co.uk), to find out more about government support for outdoor learning.

To find out more about the benefits of outdoor learning, visit the Institute of Outdoor Learning website, available at <https://www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Research-Resources/About-Outdoor-Learning>

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