

# OUTDOOR LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Cumnor House Sussex Case Study



THE  
**OUTDOOR**  
TEACHER 



# A BALANCED APPROACH TO LEARNING

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At Cumnor House Sussex, outdoor learning forms part of the school's wider philosophy of helping children become confident, curious, kind and capable young people.

Set within 65 acres of countryside, the school has long recognised the value of giving pupils space to explore, play and learn outdoors. This has already been established through Woodpeckers, the school's outdoor learning provision for younger children,

Mike Matthews, Deputy Head (Pastoral) and Designated Safeguarding Lead at Cumnor House Sussex, believes outdoor learning plays an important role in helping children develop confidence, resilience and balance in an increasingly digital world.

A distinctive part of Cumnor House's approach is the way outdoor learning sits alongside the school's digital strategy. While the school is committed to preparing pupils to thrive in a digital world, it also recognises the importance of healthy offline experiences that build empathy, support wellbeing, encourage sensible risk and allow children to be present in the natural world.

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Children absolutely need to become digital natives, but they also need to be healthy, build empathy, embrace sensible risk, and have time simply to play and be present.

*Mike Matthews, Cumnor House Sussex*

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## OUTDOOR LEARNING FOR OLDER PUPILS

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Cumnor House had already seen the benefits of outdoor learning with younger children. The next step was to make sure those benefits did not stop as pupils moved into the senior years.

For Years 7 and 8, outdoor learning provides an important counterbalance at a pivotal stage. Pupils are becoming more independent, experiencing greater academic demands and navigating the social complexity of early adolescence.

Through outdoor learning, the school creates technology-free spaces where pupils can be physically active, work collaboratively, solve problems and develop self-awareness.

The six-week curriculum includes practical modules such as shelter building, ropes and knots, whittling, natural crafts and fire work. The aim is not just to teach outdoor skills, but to help pupils discover what they are capable of when learning is active, relevant and meaningful.

# BUILDING STAFF CONFIDENCE

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To make outdoor learning meaningful and sustainable, Cumnor House wanted more than a set of one-off activities. The school wanted staff to feel confident, safe and well supported in delivering outdoor learning as part of wider school life.

Marina Robb, founder of The Outdoor Teacher and one of the UK's leading voices in outdoor learning, delivered the staff training and supported the development of the programme.

Cumnor House invested in a face-to-face training day with Marina Robb and licences for The Outdoor Teacher's Forest School Activities Online Training. This gave staff practical ideas, hands-on experience and an ongoing resource they could return to over time.



# WHAT TEACHERS ARE SEEING

Teacher reflections show how outdoor learning is already translating into meaningful experiences for pupils.

Canopy and den building has been particularly powerful. Although simple from the outside, teachers described how it brings out problem solving, communication, compromise and leadership. Pupils have had to learn knots, think carefully about structure and safety, and work together to create something purposeful.

Teachers also noticed that outdoor learning gives different children the chance to shine. Pupils who may not always be the first to contribute in a traditional classroom can become more confident when learning is practical, physical and exploratory.

## TEACHER REFLECTIONS



*"One of the most powerful activities so far has been canopy and den building. It looks simple from the outside, but it brings out so much in the pupils: problem-solving, communication, compromise and leadership."*



*"The outdoor classroom is both inspiring and calming."*



*"Pupils who may not always be the first to contribute in a traditional classroom can suddenly come alive."*



# A DIFFERENT WAY FOR CHILDREN TO SHINE

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The teacher feedback reinforces Mike Matthews' view that outdoor learning supports the whole child.

Teachers described the outdoor classroom as both inspiring and calming. For some pupils, being outside can lower anxiety, increase engagement and make learning feel more meaningful. It can also encourage children to take sensible risks, work more collaboratively and reflect on how they contribute within a group.

The result is a learning environment where confidence grows naturally because children experience success in a different setting.



# EMBEDDING OUTDOOR LEARNING INTO SCHOOL LIFE

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The impact of the training is already extending beyond weekly sessions.

Teachers shared that outdoor learning approaches are now being included in holiday camp provision, and Cumnor House is also holding a family event in the outdoor learning area with activities for the wider school community.

This reflects the school's broader ambition to make outdoor learning a consistent thread across school life, rather than a standalone programme.

Cumnor House is also developing a new outdoor classroom in the woods, creating opportunities for children to learn outside in all weathers and for teachers to connect outdoor learning with subjects across the curriculum.



# DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD

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For Cumnor House, outdoor learning is ultimately about balance.

It supports pupils to become capable digital learners, while protecting the offline experiences that help build wellbeing, character and connection.

Mike Matthews describes outdoor learning as a way to develop confidence, resilience, empathy and teamwork in ways that are hard to replicate indoors. In a screen-focused world, it gives children space to play, take appropriate risks, solve problems and reconnect with the real world.

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“This partnership is a practical expression of Cumnor’s balanced approach: equipping children to be confident digital natives while protecting the offline experiences that build wellbeing, character and connection.”

*Mike Matthews, Cumnor House Sussex*

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## SUPPORTING CONFIDENT OUTDOOR LEARNING

The Outdoor Teacher supports schools and educators to build confidence in outdoor learning through practical training, online courses and nature-based educational approaches.

Designed for real educational settings, the training helps schools create meaningful outdoor experiences that support wellbeing, resilience, creativity and engagement.

Find out more at: [www.theoutdoorteacher.com](http://www.theoutdoorteacher.com)