



Committed to PLAY



OUTDOOR  
CLASSROOM  
DAY

**Transcript of Debate on Motion S5M-14384 Outdoor Classroom Day held at  
Scottish Parliament  
1 November 2018**

**Motion S5M-14384: Ruth Maguire, Cunninghame South, Scottish National  
Party, Date Lodged: 18/10/2018**

**Outdoor Classroom Day**

That the Parliament notes that Outdoor Classroom Day takes place on 1 November 2018; understands that this is a global campaign to celebrate and inspire outdoor learning and play; believes that thousands of schools, including many across Scotland, will be participating by taking lessons outdoors and prioritising playtime; considers that outdoor learning improves children's health, engages them with learning and leads them to develop better social skills, enhanced problem solving and team working skills; commends the work of organisers to promote participation by schools in Outdoor Classroom Day, which takes place on two dates each year to fit with term times, and notes the hope that such events will encourage more time learning outside every day.

**Supported by:** Mark Ruskell, Fulton MacGregor, David Torrance, Stuart McMillan, Colin Beattie, Bill Kidd, John Finnie, Stewart Stevenson, Shona Robison, Kenneth Gibson, Bob Doris, Emma Harper, Neil Findlay, Jenny Gilruth, Angus MacDonald, Rona Mackay, Richard Lyle, John Mason, Clare Adamson, Gordon MacDonald, Angela Constance, Alexander Burnett, Gail Ross, Gillian Martin, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Willie Rennie, Tom Arthur

**Debate  
Outdoor Classroom Day**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):**

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-14384, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on outdoor classroom day. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.



That the Parliament notes that Outdoor Classroom Day takes place on 1 November 2018; understands that this is a global campaign to celebrate and inspire outdoor learning and play; believes that thousands of schools, including many across Scotland, will be participating by taking lessons outdoors and prioritising playtime; considers that outdoor learning improves children's health, engages them with learning and leads them to develop better social skills, enhanced problem solving and team working skills; commends the work of organisers to promote participation by schools in Outdoor Classroom Day, which takes place on two dates each year to fit with term times, and notes the hope that such events will encourage more time learning outside every day.

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):**

I thank all the members who signed my motion on outdoor classroom day and those who are in the chamber to take part in the debate. Outdoor classroom day is a proven catalyst for more time being spent outdoors at school, including playtime. Of course, the campaign is about more than just one day. It is intended to inspire more time outdoors every day—time outdoors playing, learning, exploring and having fun, at school and at home.

To achieve that, the campaign has three aims. Number 1 is for outdoor learning to be part of every school day for every child; number 2 is for every child to have a great playtime at school every day for at least 60 minutes, with the longer-term aim of 90 minutes; and number 3 is for schools to act as advocates for more time outdoors, so that outdoor play becomes part of every child's life every day.

The evidence is clear, compelling and robust that playtime at school and around the school day is important. Play is not just something that is nice to have, and it is not just a shame that children do not play outdoors as much as they used to—it is much more serious than that. Through playing outdoors, our children can improve their physical health. Children are two and a half times more active when they are outdoors than when they are inside, and they sustain physical activity for longer outdoors.

Another benefit is improvements to mental health. We all know that being outdoors makes us happier—we can just think about how we feel when the sun shines on our faces. Multiple research studies from around the world have shown that, whatever the weather, as long as we are dressed right, children and adults feel less stressed, more relaxed and happier if they have been outdoors.

Being outdoors regularly and often helps children to identify a safe, quiet space where they can reflect. Being outdoors and away from screens helps children to build positive relationships, make and sustain friendships and develop the social skills that they will need throughout life.

Outdoor play can also improve academic progress. Children need time to assimilate learning. After playtime outdoors, children are more attentive to lessons and more on task, and they behave better. In a study of more than 2,500 children in Spain, exposure to total surrounding greenness was associated with a 5 per cent increase in progress in working memory, a 6 per cent increase in progress in superior working memory and a 1 per cent reduction in inattentiveness.

Outdoor play also helps children to connect to the places they live in and to the planet around them. We love only what we know. Playing outdoors for sustained periods of time, regularly and often, leads to greater care and concern for the environment. Having more green space in urban neighbourhoods in Scotland is linked to lower levels of perceived stress and improved physiological stress. As Sir David Attenborough says, "No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

Research by Tim Gill, the author of "No Fear", compared outdoor learning with outdoor play and found that, although outdoor learning is important and crucial for understanding scientific facts, outdoor play leaves children with a love of the outdoors, so they want to protect it.



Children who are happier at school and more attentive in lessons and who feel healthy are far more likely to succeed in school and grow up to be happy and healthy for all of their lives.

Overall, Scottish teachers who responded to the survey were pretty robust. Across the United Kingdom, 24 per cent of teachers said that nothing stops them taking lessons outdoors and 16 per cent said that nothing stops outdoor play. One teacher in Scotland said: *"We usually ignore wet playtime, put on our waterproofs and get outside. I give up my break time to supervise this. Midges can be pretty brutal at times, however we still go outside."*

That is obviously a teacher from the west coast.

Of all of the teachers across the UK who were surveyed, 99 per cent said that they believe that playtime outdoors throughout the day is critical for children to reach their full potential.

The Scottish Government is committed to encouraging and supporting inclusive play-based outdoor learning as part of the outdoor learning coalition, but playtime at school is important, too. Playtime supports children's social, emotional and academic development within the school day.

When schools stand up and tell the world that they believe that outdoor play is important, parents listen and the wider community listens. If we want Scottish

children to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors who want to protect the places that they grow up in and the environment of the planet, they need more time outdoors.

If we want happy children, they need to play outdoors. We have to make playing outdoors every day routine again. By supporting outdoor classroom day—not just today but on 23 May and 7 November next year—and by supporting the goal that playtime at school should be at least 60 minutes long, the Scottish Government can send the message that it believes that outdoor play is important, not just at school but every day.

I am grateful to everyone who signed the motion to let the debate go ahead and I look forward to everyone's contributions. If anyone wants to join me outside for some fresh air afterwards, we can do that too.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

We will move on to the open debate. It is quite heavily subscribed so I ask people to keep their contributions tight and no longer than four minutes, please.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the motion to the chamber. It is an issue that is close to my own heart. There is no doubt that outdoor classroom day is a very important, worthwhile initiative not just in Scotland but globally. Thousands of schools across the world will take part, with the aim of promoting and inspiring outdoor education and play. In 2017, more than 2.3 million children worldwide took part, including 530,000 in the UK and Ireland. This year, more than 540,000 in the UK and Ireland are expected to take part. I commend the initiatives in a number of primary schools in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, such as Letham, Forgandenny, Dunbarney, Fossoway, Portmoak and Muthill primary schools. I have been looking at those initiatives this morning and I am exceptionally impressed by some of them.

I did not need any conversion to the benefits of outdoor learning, partly because I am old enough to be of the generation that was expected to play outside. We were often unsupervised, it has to be said, and played in the company of our friends, so that we made our own fun. I remember very long days outside, perhaps coming home only to eat and to sleep and sometimes not coming home at all until my parents came to find me, and the joy of being able to roam freely in fields and woods and climb up trees with my friends, and playing lots of games and sport. We thought nothing about the risks—perhaps we should have done—but I am clear that the experience built in me a strong resilience, a curiosity about the wider world, and a tolerance, which is something that is much needed in today's world, where it is perhaps sadly missing.

It certainly gave me a personal taste for the wilds of Scotland and the staying power that was required to complete the Munros, particularly on days when I made solo ascents in difficult conditions—I have to tell Ruth Maguire that midges are not just a west coast phenomenon. I was well equipped and very experienced because of my outdoor training, and I want to pass on that passion to many others, particularly young people.

Ruth Maguire has mentioned the scientific and educational information about how valuable this kind of education is. I could not agree more, but I do not think that we needed it all. Common sense tells us all about the advantages for children's wellbeing and behaviour. As a way of lowering anxieties and dealing with the growth of mental health issues, outdoor play and education could hardly be more important. I particularly noticed the recent study by the University of Essex, which has done a lot of quantitative analysis of those issues; it showed that the benefits are impressive.

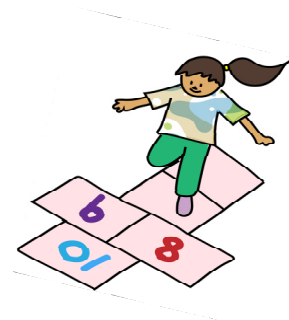
The results of a new study that was commissioned by project dirt—a wonderful term—were that 99 per cent of UK teachers believe that outdoor playtime at school is critical for children to reach their full potential. However, for me, the more important statistic was that 45 per cent of those teachers questioned whether they were able to do that, partly because of curriculum pressures and organisational issues. That is not the only thing that holds us back; much more damaging is the pervasive cotton-wool culture. There is an increasing link to what we call, dare I say, the snowflake generation—the young people I have spoken to about this issue—and that provides us with a lot of food for thought about how we raise our young people and make them resilient. There are too many excuses now for parents to cling to in order to overprotect their children, and the impact of that is that they might miss the most valuable learning.

**Ruth Maguire:**

Will Liz Smith give way?

**Liz Smith:**

Yes, of course.



**The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

I am afraid that you have come to the end of your contribution. Perhaps someone else will let the leader of the debate come in.

**Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP):**

I congratulate my friend and colleague Ruth Maguire MSP on securing this debate on a topic for which she has campaigned tirelessly since our election in 2016.

Outdoor learning is, of course, central to the ethos of the curriculum for excellence. Ruth Maguire noted the four capacities of the curriculum for excellence, which puts

the learner at its heart. However, although a secondary school teacher to trade, I was perhaps not naturally inclined to outdoor learning. That may be because of the subject specialism of our secondary schools in Scotland, the age group that we teach or the impending doom that afflicts secondary teachers around April—the start of the annual examination diet.

However, when I thought about my experiences in delivering “outdoor learning”, I realised that it had always been part of the education that I had delivered as a teacher: taking Elgin high school pupils to Grannie’s Heilan’ Hame in Dornoch; taking pupils on the annual sponsored walk at the Royal high school in Edinburgh; and taking primary 7 pupils to Dounans in Aberfoyle as part of their residential week at St Columba’s high school. Each of those experiences was formative to me as a teacher, because they allowed me to form relationships with my pupils outwith the formalities of the classroom.

In Scottish educational discourse, we often talk of the impact of actions on such things as pupil attainment. The impact of being an active member of my school community and choosing to take part in those outdoor learning experiences was that I dramatically improved the type of learning and teaching in my classrooms. It was also hugely beneficial in confirming with pupils that my colleagues and I did not, in fact, live under our desks.

What about the impact of outdoor learning on pupils? A report that was published by the University of Plymouth in 2016 confirmed that outdoor learning can have a positive impact on children’s development, and an Australian research paper that was published in 1999 claimed: “outdoor education has clear potential, if well designed, to foster enhancements of personal and social aspects of learning and development.”

We know that access to green space is crucial to improving mental health outcomes.

This week, on Monday, I was delighted to be joined by pupils from the community group at South Parks primary school, in Glenrothes. Earlier in the year, I had been contacted by constituents who had concerns about litter in Riverside park in the town, particularly because 2018 marks the town’s 70th birthday, so I had reached out to the local primary school to see whether it might be able to help.

The pupils excelled themselves. They collected bags and bags of litter and took their jobs as members of the community group very seriously. It was pretty impressive to see—perhaps there are a few aspiring politicians among them. The experience directly involved the pupils in outdoor learning that meant something and was contextualised; it was very different from a lesson on the impact of litter from a teacher in a school. The learning experience was meaningful.

Although I was not able to offer the pupils financial payment, as one of them requested, I promised the community group that I would facilitate a visit to Holyrood in future.

I will quickly mention Thornton primary school, which is taking part in outdoor classroom day today. The entire school is involved and a range of activities is on offer, including den building for younger pupils and an outdoor tour of what is on offer for parents and carers. Primary 7 pupils are taking part in outdoor artwork, and younger pupils are taking part in an environmental print walk. Headteacher Irene Johnson said: *“Outdoor classroom day allows the chance to help children learn about their environment by teaching them about seasonal changes. It’s also important for road safety, now that it is getting darker earlier. It allows children the chance to learn about something different to a classroom environment, which is beneficial for those who get restless and—dare I say it?—bored in indoor lessons.”*

I commend Irene Johnson and the team at Thornton primary school for all their work on ensuring that outdoor classroom day is as meaningful as possible for pupils. We need hard-working teachers such as Irene to make educational opportunities such as outdoor classroom day work.

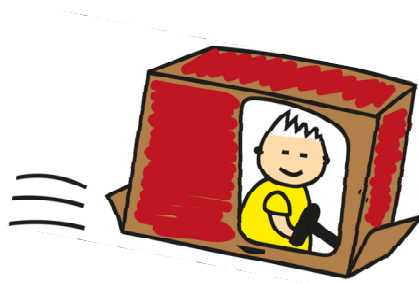
I thank the teachers in my constituency who are making a difference every day. Outdoor classroom day deserves to be celebrated in the Parliament; so, too, do the professionals who ensure that there is outdoor learning in our schools.

**Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):**

I congratulate Ruth Maguire on bringing this important debate to the Parliament, and I thank her.

I want to make a couple of observations, including one that is based on personal experience. A couple of years ago, during the October recess, I went to pick up a couple of young brothers whom I often take out during the school holidays. To my mind, the October school holidays are a beautiful time of year, when every child should be outdoors—the leaves are falling, we get that crisp sunshine and it is not too cold to enjoy the changing of the season.

At lunch time, after spending the morning in my office in Dundee, I went to pick up the boys from their out-of-school club. I asked them what they had been doing, and they said that they had been sitting inside all morning watching Disney’s “Frozen”—and it was not the first time in that beautiful week, when the sun was splitting the pavements of Dundee, that they had been inside watching “Frozen”.



I support the motion and everything that it says about outdoor classrooms and encouraging teachers to take children outdoors for lessons. There is a lot of value in that. I am also concerned that during the school holidays not enough children in Scotland are outside playing. As Ruth Maguire said in her excellent speech, there is even more evidence about outdoor play than there is about outdoor learning.

I am therefore concerned about the quality of the care that is provided in the school holidays. I recognise that at after-school clubs there is homework to be done and children are tired, so there might be more reasons for children to be inside. During the school holidays, however, there is absolutely no excuse for out-of-school clubs holding children inside to watch repeats of Disney films. I think that that is disgraceful.

I have done a little investigation about the regulation of out-of-school clubs. I think that the responsibilities rest with local authorities and the Care Inspectorate, but I do not know whether much has been done in that regard. I would be interested to hear what the minister says in her response to the debate and to see whether we can have standards across the board, given that there are private providers and local authority providers. When kids attend those clubs, because their parents have to work, how much time are they getting outside? There should be a heavy presumption that kids should be outside unless the weather really does not allow that.

One of the obvious benefits for children of being outside is the benefit to their health, and I want to talk about that in the time that remains. *The Scotsman* reported three years ago that there are instances in Scotland of rickets—a disease that we thought we had seen the back of in the 1930s. There was a recurrence of it in the 1960s in Dundee and I have heard reports recently that it is recurring now. That is partly due to a lack of exposure to vitamin D from sunshine.

I have vitamin D supplements for my baby son and they are given out at bookbug sessions and sessions organised by health visitors across the country. However, the best thing that we can do is to get our children outside in the sunshine. There are huge health benefits in that. There is now also a recorded risk of multiple sclerosis as a result of a lack of exposure to sunshine. There are those health benefits as well as the benefits for children's wellbeing and mental health that Ruth Maguire outlined. Liz Smith also made some good points about children's robustness. We need to get children outdoors as much as possible.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):**

I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Outdoor learning is, and should always have been, a hugely important part of children's education. I look back to the dark ages when I was at school and it was literally that—no daylight during class time except to play netball for a physical



education lesson, and only then if it was deemed sunny enough. The times are definitely changing for the better.

However, as has been mentioned, for the past decade or more children have been spending well over the recommended daily time playing video games and watching television, and way under the recommended time outdoors. I agree wholeheartedly with Jenny Marra's excellent point about holiday and after-school clubs, which is an issue that I had not even considered.

Spending too much time inside negatively affects not only children's health and obesity levels but their academic performance and ability to concentrate during class. A recent survey of children from 125 schools found that, after spending time learning outdoors, 90 per cent of pupils felt happier and 92 per cent enjoyed their lessons more. Likewise, 85 per cent of teachers saw a positive impact on pupils' behaviour and 92 per cent found their pupils to be more engaged with learning.

Children who spend more time learning outdoors also develop problem solving and communication skills at a much faster rate than those who learn only inside the classroom and, crucially, learning outdoors helps children with attention deficit disorders. We need to teach children from a young age that learning is an on-going, exciting process that occurs not just within the confines of the school walls but everywhere and all the time.

Of course, outdoor play and learning begins before school, which is why I am delighted with the rise in the popularity of forest nurseries. I have an excellent one in my constituency. All of the early years providers that I have visited in my constituency prioritise having outside space for children to play in all weathers—such a change from 20 years ago when my son was at nursery. It is important to remember that children do not mind rain, wind or snow; it is adults who object to that, which can often affect children's attitudes to going outdoors when they are older.

Scouts Scotland is an expert in outdoor learning and I thank it for its briefing. The scouts prepare young people with skills for life; I know that to be true because my niece and nephew are both active scouts and are flourishing as a result of their involvement with the organisation. Scouts Scotland is the largest co-educational youth movement in Scotland, with 51,000 or so members. Last year, 26,000 young people took part in outdoor learning at the three scout adventure centres. The scouts believe that learning in the outdoors gives young people the chance to develop skills for life that are useful not only outdoors but in the classroom. Building fires, learning how to cook and being part of a team are all skills that many children miss out on but which would enhance their future pathways.

Scouts Scotland believes that learning in the outdoors, away from school or home, can have a powerful, positive impact on young people's academic achievement. That is backed up by what we have heard today.

The scouts believe that many parents or carers may not have the confidence or skills to participate in outdoor learning with their children. Time could also be a factor. The scouts run parent and child camps, not just for scouts but for anyone who wants to enjoy outdoor family experiences.

The facts are clear: outdoor learning leads to healthier, happier young people and healthier, happier adults. Let us support outdoor classroom day.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):**

I thank Ruth Maguire for securing the debate. I know that she is passionate about the issue, as am I. Indeed, I asked a question to the minister a few weeks ago. I welcomed the response, which highlighted that

"Play-based learning is an effective and appropriate way to deliver education, and curriculum for excellence gives teachers the flexibility to introduce play in early primary and beyond."—[*Official Report*, 3 October 2018; c 6.]

I also met Turid Boholm when she was in Scotland talking about the Norwegian outdoor kindergarten model, which was very interesting. In the part of Norway where that model operates, the weather is often very cold, and there are even points in the year when there are few to no hours of daylight, but there is an almost entirely outdoor-based model, and the results are fantastic. When she gave her lecture here, she asked why Scotland, where the weather is much better, could not have such a system. If members have the opportunity or time to check out Turid Boholm's work, I encourage them to do so.

Ruth Maguire and other members have made the case well about the benefits of play and the outdoors on development, learning and mental health, so I will spend the rest of my time commenting on a couple of examples in my constituency. It would be fair to say that I could mention any school in my area and pick out some amazing examples but, for now, I will focus on just three.

One school that strives to incorporate outdoor learning, not just on this day but every day, is Glenmanor primary school in Moodiesburn. I have visited its pupils' fantastic vegetable garden, and I understand that they are currently harvesting the last of the year's veg and preparing the vegetable beds for winter, while composting old leaves and veg. There are so many lessons to be learned from something as simple as a vegetable garden: responsibility, nutrition and cooking skills, the science of how things grow, patience, how to be more environmentally friendly, and how to reduce food waste. All those issues are important.

Another great example is Townhead primary school in Coatbridge. Today, the whole school is involved in a full day of activities. For example, pupils are having their numeracy lessons outside, recognising shapes in their environment, planting shrubs and flowers and having a bug hunt. The children are also involved in building bug hotels and hedgehog homes, and they have even taken their literacy outside by finding things around the ground from which to make a poem. Of course, like in Glenmanor and other schools, outdoor learning is already an important part of the curriculum there.

Townhead is one of the first schools to be part of the seven lochs project, which is a two-year project that takes place every Friday at Drumpellier lochs. It involves linking the community, the environment and schools with outdoor learning. Pentland school, which is a primary school for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, also takes part in the project and, today, pupils are out on their scooters for outdoor learning.

My final example is St Timothy's primary school in Coatbridge. Pupils have been involved in outdoor learning activities all week. For example, the primary 1s went on a forest walk to learn about autumn and apply what they had learned to science. The school has a partnership with the fabulous Parent Action for Safe Play that involves children working with their gardener in the orchard and polytunnel, which have been developed on the grounds of the school. The school's nursery classes regularly go on forest walks in Drumpellier country park.

Fantastic work is being done throughout by area. As I said, I could have mentioned many other schools—I know that from my son's nursery forest walks.

It is not just schools. The Boys Brigade, the air cadets and others that are based in my constituency do fantastic work in promoting outdoor learning. Recently, I attended, and presented at, the 1st Coatbridge Boys Brigade prize giving, where I heard about the camping and other outdoor work for which some members were receiving prizes.

I try, where possible, to practise what I have said myself, so I am very much looking forward to getting out with my children at the weekend, regardless of the weather, because, as other members have said, children do not care. We will make use of the great spaces that my area has to offer, such as Gartcosh nature reserve, Drumpellier lochs and Dunbeth park, to name but a few.

**Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con):**

I am pleased to speak in today's members' business debate on outdoor classroom day, and I thank Ruth Maguire for securing it.

As we all know, today is outdoor classroom day and, worldwide, children are taking to the outdoors to learn. Here in Scotland, more than 600 schools are participating,

which will give thousands of children the opportunity to head outdoors to learn, play and develop. It is important that our children get the chance to do that, because the world of today is very different from how it was 30, 20 or even 10 years ago.

Back in my day—perhaps mostly because there was a lack of other things to do—children would often go out to play with their friends as soon as the school bell rang. We did not have computers, mobile phones and so on. A 2016 survey by Persil found that, these days, nearly three quarters of children in the United Kingdom spend less than an hour playing outdoors each day. One notable reason for that is the fear that it is no longer safe to let children play outdoors on their own.

Although a range of factors contribute to that statistic, it is no coincidence that the fall in outdoor play has happened at the same time as a rise in computerised play. The same survey also showed that children now spend twice as long playing on screens as they do outside. Although I believe that the huge advances in technology have been beneficial and should be fully taken advantage of, it is important to encourage a balance in children's lives as they grow up.

It has been shown in studies and in practice that outdoor learning has many positive effects. Perhaps most obviously, it improves children's health. Taking part in outdoor classes gives them the opportunity to get their daily hour outside. Beyond health, educational benefits have been observed, including the development of critical thinking, problem solving, concentration and even social skills—the more I say, the more I think that I should join Ruth Maguire outside afterwards for some fresh air. The benefits to education have been witnessed by teachers and early learning and childcare providers, who have said that the change in environment gives children new topics to think of and encourages them to display leadership and teamwork in accomplishing tasks.

However, teachers and childcare providers have highlighted some barriers to outdoor learning. A teacher who spoke to my office praised the idea of outdoor learning in principle but said that, among teachers, there was a general feeling of a lack of understanding of what the desired learning intentions and outcomes were meant to be. As someone who graduated with a degree in primary teaching in the past three years, she added that she had experienced a distinct lack of training in the delivery of outdoor classes, which she said led many teachers to avoid the practice due to lack of confidence. That view is shared by other educationalists across the country.



On top of that, a couple of drawbacks exist. First, extra care needs to be taken to ensure the safety of the children, and that has a cost attached to it. Secondly, being based in Scotland, we are perhaps less well equipped for all-year-round outdoor learning than countries such as Australia, which, in many ways, pioneered the outdoor learning project. Let us encourage our children to learn outdoors, but let us leave the decision on the level of outdoor learning to the qualified professionals—Scotland’s teachers and early learning providers. They should be the ones to decide how to approach the delivery of outdoor learning.

On outdoor classroom day, I welcome the promotion of outdoor learning. It is one solution to the problem of encouraging Scotland’s children outdoors, and it lets them experience the joy of being outdoors. Perhaps more training could be provided to our teachers in the delivery of outdoor learning, because studies have shown that, if it is done correctly, it can improve our children’s attainment and their health and can help to build character. I certainly think that it is important to have a balance between outdoor and indoor classroom learning.

I will leave members with the words of the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Liz Truss. As she once put it, *“Our children should be climbing trees, not the walls.”*

**Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):**

It is a real pleasure to have the opportunity to take part in this afternoon’s debate, and I thank my colleague Ruth Maguire for securing it. I thank all the speakers who preceded me for an array of very thoughtful contributions, which have certainly helped me to develop my understanding of the benefits of outdoor learning and outdoor play.

Many of the arguments have been well rehearsed already. Outdoor learning has the potential to improve socialisation and physical and mental health and wellbeing. Another key area that has been touched on is its pedagogical utility. I have always felt that there is a strong correlation between excitement about a subject and one’s capacity to learn it. In my pre-political life, I was a piano tutor, which did not afford much opportunity for outdoor teaching. However, I know from my experience that a method of teaching that involved the child simply sitting at the piano and not having the opportunity to get up, to dance, to sing or to engage in a broader degree of physicality would be quite limiting. Having that opportunity is an incredibly important part of the process of learning to play a musical instrument, and that applies to academic subjects, too.

I was struck by the comments about the advance of computerised play. I can divide my childhood into two separate eras: before PlayStation and after PlayStation. I was fortunate to grow up in Barrhead, where my parents’ property backed on to the Lavern burn. There was nothing that I loved more as a kid than to go in the burn,

building dams, fishing and going on adventures. Just a short walk away was the foot of the Fereneze braes, where my brothers and I would also go and play.

I will give an example of the impact that childhood experiences can have later in life. When I was growing up, one of the favourite holiday locations of my family was Rosneath Castle caravan park at Garelochhead. My younger brother, Martin, would regularly go down to the beach and disappear for hours collecting eels, crabs and all sorts of other beasties that he could find. He went on to study psychology at university and he did not enjoy it. At almost 30 years old, he is now studying zoology and absolutely loving it—he is completely engaged. After years of not being engaged, it is fascinating that he has returned to the original experience that enchanted and energised him as a child.

It is vital that our children and young people have exposure to the outdoors. We know all the benefits that it brings, particularly in areas such as problem solving. Children will acquire skills and abilities through outdoor learning that would be simply impossible to deliver in the classroom.

I commend the work of Wallace primary school in Elderslie in my constituency, which is seeking funding from the Aviva community fund. Votes for that fund close very soon. There is a wooded area within the perimeter of the school, and the school is seeking to develop it to enhance its outdoor learning offer to children and young people. I commend Wallace primary school on its endeavours and encourage all constituents in Elderslie and across Renfrewshire South to back the project.

I highlight the work of Elderslie community council, which is also seeking funding through the Aviva community fund to install a play park in Elderslie, where one is currently lacking. Although it is important that our children have the opportunity for outdoor play and learning at school, we want to make sure that they are able to do that outwith school hours, too, particularly during the summer holidays, as other members have alluded to.

Finally, I extend an invitation to the Minister for Children and Young People to come along and see the wonderful work that is going on at Wallace primary school for herself.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):**

Tom Arthur describes his experience of play as before and after PlayStation. It is probably fair to say that mine is before and after Etch A Sketch, which, at the time, was regarded as quite high-tech.

I thank Ruth Maguire for bringing the subject to the chamber. It is important and it deserves more attention and recognition than it gets. I, too, would like to thank the

organisations, such as the scouts, that provided briefings for today and that have demonstrated a long-standing commitment to getting our young people outside and helping them to develop an appreciation of the outdoors and its many benefits. I also want to thank **Play Scotland** for its on-going work on this agenda.

As Rona Mackay has pointed out, the scouts are calling for more investment to help parents and carers take part in outdoor learning with their children, and they run parent and child camps that are open to people who are not involved with the scouts. Good work is going on, including in this city, where Cramond primary school runs its forest kindergarten at Lauriston castle. That is part of a City of Edinburgh Council pilot scheme offering 600 hours of nursery and 500 hours of forest annually. Every child would benefit from that—the children there are definitely experiencing a lot of benefits. I believe that the minister is aware of that pilot.

It is no accident that the entire shortlist of the United Kingdom's best nurseries in last year's *Nursery World* awards was made up of outdoor operators.

The children at Lauriston castle do not bat an eyelid when it is raining, but that is not the case everywhere. This March, *The Independent* reported a survey of parents, which found that children use wet weather, fears about getting muddy, tiredness and a dislike of the cold as excuses for not playing outside. It noted that *"One in 10 children said they would rather stay indoors to avoid getting dirty or touching germs" and that "Thirty per cent have been too engrossed in a video game to go out"*.

There is work to be done. There is a culture, but we have to develop a habit in children and ensure that they understand what fun they can have outdoors. Outdoor classroom day is very important. It is about not only encouraging more time to learn outside, but learning through play every day. It is clear that more focus on that is required.

As an athletics coach, I know that outdoor play is crucial for developing physical literacy: self-confidence, strength, balance and co-ordination. **Children and play should just go together—those words should go together, should they not? Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child tells us that every child has the right to play,** but too many children in 2018 sadly do not. We know that, in other parts of the globe, children as young as five are going out to work all day, every day, in situations that we in Scotland can barely imagine, such as factories, mines and quarries.

We too, however, in this wealthy, affluent country need to do all that we can to ensure that we are contributing to that right to play, ensuring that it happens and not hindering it. Unstructured outdoor play can be transformational. Children benefit so much from the fact that they have overcome a big challenge or have taken a risk. Taking risks and failing to do something the first time that they try it,

but getting there eventually, is key to building resilience and to good mental and physical health.

I look forward to hearing the minister elaborate on how she will take this agenda further in Scotland. It is clear that good things are going on, but it is also clear that we could do more.

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd):**

I am absolutely delighted to have the opportunity of closing today's timely debate on outdoor classroom day. I thank my colleague Ruth Maguire for highlighting this important educational initiative, and for all the hard work that she has done in campaigning on the issue. I am also delighted that the Parliament is celebrating the initiative, and to find that it has so many passionate advocates across the chamber. I feel very passionate about it, perhaps because I grew up in west Highland territory, with all the midges and mountains.

**Liz Smith:**

Not all the midges.

**Maree Todd:**

It has most of the midges.

We know that the benefits of outdoor learning, exercise and play are significant for children. Playing, learning and having fun outdoors help to improve wellbeing and resilience, increase health through physical activity and provide children with the opportunity to develop a lifelong appreciation of the natural world—and naturally encourage good stewardship of the environment. A growing body of research also shows a positive impact on educational attainment, which a number of members mentioned. We should therefore be very proud that Scotland is a country that recognises, values and promotes outdoor learning and play. The Government is committed to continuing that tradition throughout all stages of the learner journey. That is why we have created a policy framework in which outdoor play can be delivered as a foundation of the educational experience.

This morning, I visited Happy Days nursery in Dalkeith, where we shook apples off a tree and I fell off a scooter—I had a great start to outdoor classroom day. It was also great to hear from Carley Sefton, who is chief executive officer of the Learning Through Landscapes Trust, that Scotland is leading the UK in promoting outdoor learning and—as she mentioned—the world. Quite rightly, she recognised that academics from all over the world are coming to Scotland to learn from what we are doing.

In my portfolio, we have provided £862,000 of funding to Inspiring Scotland to support eight local authorities across Scotland to develop and increase access to the outdoors as a focus of the expansion of funded early learning and childcare. I



am determined that that expansion will provide an opportunity for us to define outdoor learning as part of our children's early experience.

**Liz Smith:**

I am very grateful to the minister for giving way and I entirely agree with what she said—a lot of really good things are happening in the early years. However, to pick up the point that Jenny Marra made, the next stage is vital. As children grow slightly older, many of them drop out of these activities, so we really need to focus on continuing the interest in outdoor education. There are a lot of issues about staffing and provision there. Does the minister agree with that?

**Maree Todd:**

Certainly, and I will respond shortly to Jenny Marra's point.

Outdoor access and play are already central to the new health and social care standards. We will ensure that outdoor play is also a key component of the new national standard for early learning and childcare.

Just last week, we launched a position statement in partnership with Scotland's national coalition on outdoor play-based learning, which is an important coalition of 50 organisations and national bodies that have committed to work together to embed playing and learning outdoors as an everyday activity and to celebrate it as a fundamental part of growing up in Scotland.

Our commitment to early learning and play definitely extends beyond early learning and childcare. In the curriculum for excellence we have a framework through which outdoor learning and play can be used to deliver education in all curricular areas between the ages of three and 18. We encourage teachers to engage with motivating, exciting and diverse activities in outdoor environments, through continued support provided by Education Scotland. We have also taken the important step of embedding outdoor learning in the curricular theme of learning for sustainability. Scotland has a world-leading reputation in the field of sustainability education. We recognise that contact with the natural world will help our young people to understand the importance of environmental sustainability.

In response to Jenny Marra's point, I can say that we are developing a strategic framework for after-school and holiday childcare, which we recognise is a really significant part of tackling the attainment gap. Given our commitment to outdoor play and our track record so far, I have absolutely no doubt that outdoor learning will be a part of that.

**Jenny Marra:**

I thank the minister for that commitment. Will she go so far as to say that during the school holidays, in out-of-school care clubs, there should be a presumption that the children should be outdoors as much as possible?

**Maree Todd:**

I will certainly consider that. I would go further. In the after-school clubs that I have visited, outdoor learning is an important component. It is really important that children can play outdoors every single day. I would not restrict my intentions for embedding outdoor play just to the holidays.

**Alison Johnstone:**

At the cross-party group on children and young people we had a discussion about the fact that some children do not have appropriate clothing or footwear for wet days. We discussed the need to make that part and parcel of school kit in cloakrooms and to ensure that there are wellies and appropriate clothing for all children to use for these very important excursions.

**Maree Todd:**

Certainly, in early years such clothing is almost universally provided as part of nursery equipment.

Children and young people have many rich opportunities to engage in outdoor learning and play activities as part of their education. However, play and access to the outdoors needs to continue beyond the school and nursery gates. Our **play strategy**, which was launched in 2013, recognised that and sought to deliver a range of actions that will enable Scotland to be the best place in the world in which to grow up.

We have provided funding to the go2play programme, which was recently renamed thrive outdoors. It is doing incredible work, which includes the play ranger programme.

Inspiring Scotland's work as part of the active play programme has been proven to increase physical activity and is definitely linked to improved emotional, social and cognitive development.

I have lots more to say, because this is a personal passion of mine, but I will conclude by thanking all members for their thoughtful contributions. Outdoor learning and play are vital to enriching the educational and social development of our children and young people. Outdoor classroom day is a fantastic vehicle by which the associated benefits can be delivered.

I am delighted to accept Tom Arthur's invitation and I would be willing to accept any invitations from other colleagues to visit outdoor learning initiatives in their constituencies. I restate the Government's commitment to this agenda and our desire to ensure that outdoor learning and play are delivered not just today but every day for the benefit of all our children and young people.

-END-

### Notes

You can find full the full **Briefing paper on Outdoor Classroom Day** at <http://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/outdoor-classroom-day/>

Further information on **Playful Learning** can be found at <http://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/>

Download Play Scotland's **Play Types Toolkit: bringing more play into the school day** at <http://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day/>

Information on **Managing Risk in Play Provision** can be found at <http://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/managing-risk-play-provision/>



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