



**Scottish Parent Teacher Council**  
Supporting Parents and Teachers in Scotland



## **OUTDOOR LEARNING AND PLAY: PARENTAL SURVEY REPORT – SEPTEMBER 2010**

### **1. Background**

SPTC joined forces with Grounds for Learning to find out what parents actually think about the outdoor element of their child's school. In essence that covers everything about the outdoor spaces used for playing and learning, and anything else for that matter!

The short survey was completed by 52 respondents, many of whom also added very useful comments and examples – so lots of interesting and thought provoking information! While this is not a representative sample of parents, the information provided is nonetheless useful a thought provoking.

The survey covered a number of specific areas:

- parents views on the importance of outdoor learning and play
- attitudes to issues such as risk, supervision and weather
- the part parents can play in supporting outdoor learning and play

### **2. Survey results**

#### Question 1

Parents were asked to rate their response to the statement: **Practical, hands-on learning outdoors should be an important and regular part of children's education.**

95% of those who responded agreed strongly, with the remaining 5% agreeing. Comments included: "It's a lot easier to learn something...if you are getting involved...touching it, feeling it, exploring it...than just talking about something in a book" and "Playing outside in any environment encourages a child to use their imagination and to look at their surroundings in a different...light". One respondent pointed out that the answer to this would depend on whether the child is at primary or secondary school.

#### Question 2

Parents were asked to rate their response to the statement: **My child's school values and makes the most of the opportunities for learning and play in their school grounds.**

The response to this question was much less clear cut, with 61% agreeing or strongly agreeing, 17% not sure but a significant 22% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Many of the comments highlighted the issues around outdoor play: “My children are in secondary school...I do not think outdoor play is encouraged” and “the fun area of the grounds – trees/bushes/water – are a no access area for the children.” Another said “whenever there is slight rainfall outside playtimes are cancelled” and yet another “a trim trail... was installed but children have very little use of it ...the school quote H&S as the main reason.”

### Question 3

Parents were asked if they would say their **child’s school playgrounds had too much risky play, about the right amount or not enough.**

The majority of parents (65%) believed there is not enough, while 33% believe it is about right. 2% believe there is too much risk. Many parents felt their school grounds are not child friendly, being hard surfaces or empty of any planting or play equipment.

One painted a particularly bleak picture: “the school has tarmac and an area of level grass which is constantly flooded and access to a small millennium forest which remains locked for most of the year as the maintenance cannot be agreed between the council and the school building contractor. The metal outdoor gym equipment has to be constantly supervised as there have been so many accidents and...tends to stay out of bounds...the eco garden ...has to be accessed via a locked gate.”

### Question 4

Parents were asked their view on this statement: **If children have appropriate clothing they should be allowed to play outside in rain or snow at break-time if they wish.**

79% of parents agreed strongly and 18% agreed with this statement. The balance weren’t sure. While many parents were keen to see their children play outside more, it was recognised that schools would need more space for drying and storing clothes – however the Scottish climate was widely acknowledged and the need to see all weather as just the weather, and not necessarily bad.

### Question 5

Parents were asked to respond to the statement: **Having playground bushes and trees to hide in and behind is good for play and good for children.**

74% of parents strongly agreed, 23% agreed and 3% weren’t sure. Most of the comments highlighted the need for the area to be maintained and planted properly. Bullying was also mentioned here and elsewhere as a potential risk where areas are secluded.

### Question 6

Parents were asked to give their opinion on the following statement: **Wet and muddy clothes are a price worth paying for active outdoor learning and play at school.**

78% strongly agreed, 19% agreed and 3% disagreed. The need for changes of clothes (and additional washing) was widely identified, as were the benefits of letting children outdoors whatever the weather.

#### Question 7

Parents were asked their view on the following statement: **If parents at my child's school had access to resources, ideas and advice I think they would be keen to help improve the playground.**

70% agreed strongly with this statement, 24% agreed and 6% weren't sure. Comments on this question covered a great deal of ground, from evidence of actions already taken and plans being made, to worries about willingness of parents to get involved and reluctance of schools/building contractor and local authorities to let parents get involved in this kind of project.

#### Question 8

Parents were asked is their child's **school playground has a sheltered outdoor space for parents to socialise and chat while dropping off/picking up children.**

89% of parents replied 'no' to this question. Some parents commented that they are discouraged from entering the school grounds and others highlighted the presence of a 'family room' in school, though this is only open at pre-arranged times. Many also thought it was a great idea, particularly when parents are waiting with younger children in the rain! In one case, the old cycle shed had been converted. Some parents felt such an idea would also be good so children could play outside but in a covered area when weather is inclement.

#### Question 9

Parents were asked to comment on the statement: **In the last two years, parents at my child's school have helped to improve the playground by raising money or supporting a practical project.**

58% said yes, 35% said no and 7% didn't know. Once again the level of encouragement from schools/contractors and authorities played an important part, and the difference between primary and secondary school was significant. The pressure on parents to fund other school activities and materials was also highlighted.

#### Question 10

In the final question **parents were asked to select from one of four statements which best describes their child's school playground:**

<b>Fantastic – full of creativity, learning and fun</b> .....	2%
<b>Pretty good with some nice features for learning and play</b> .....	35%
<b>OK but nothing to write home about</b> .....	46%
<b>Poor, with little thought given to encouraging healthy play or outdoor learning</b> ....	17%

While a number of parents identified barren, hard play surfaces and the challenges of winning over both parents and schools/authorities, there was some optimism expressed, with schools and parents working together to improve the play space.

### 3. Discussion

While this was not as statistically relevant survey, it provided a revealing insight into the realities of outdoor learning and play in Scotland’s schools.

In the survey parents gave a strong endorsement of:

- the principle of outdoor learning and play as fundamental to childhood and school life.
- the need for well designed and managed school playgrounds to make this possible
- the importance of risk and challenge in play at school
- the importance of all weather / all year round outdoor learning and play

The survey results also highlight parental willingness to support schools to develop their outdoor spaces, and the gap between parents’ aspirations and actual provision by schools and Local Authorities. This related to both the quality of school playgrounds and the policy framework regarding issues such as wet weather play time, risk and supervision.

The experience of Grounds for Learning is that schools and authorities sometimes claim that parent attitudes hold them back from implementing policies which would support outdoor learning and play: the results of our survey would indicate that this may not be a particularly fair assessment of parental opinion on the matter.

### 4. Comment from SPTC

“There is a great deal of policy and talk around the benefits of outdoor learning and play but at SPTC our sense is that there is a gap between policy and reality.

“Our survey of parents indicates they are keen to see their youngsters having the opportunity to be outdoors, learning about both our natural world and dealing with risk. The benefits are undisputed – the challenge to schools and education authorities is to adopt the policies, and take the necessary practical steps in terms of facilities and space, to make outdoor learning a part of school life.

“Our Parents Voice survey may not be scientific but it provides a snapshot which seems to illustrate that parents understand the benefits of outdoor learning and want our schools to be more proactive in making it happen.”

## **5. Comment from GfL**

“Research evidence is clear on the value of outdoor play and learning for children. It boosts physical activity, stimulates creativity and develops social skills. It helps create an appreciation of the natural world, brings learning to life – and can be a lot of fun! Provision of outdoor play and learning in Scottish school playgrounds is patchy. There are some great examples– but many children grow up in uninspiring asphalt playgrounds with limited opportunities for play.

Schools and local authorities commonly cite parent concerns as a reason for adopting a more restrictive and cautious attitude to outdoor play and learning. We recognise that parents have valid concerns, but this survey suggests that there is generally strong parental support for more active, risky, outdoor play in all weathers.

Making this happen will mean a change in culture and practice for our schools and local authorities. This won't be easy, but it is possible – and the benefits for our children's health, learning and wellbeing are clear.”