

Raising standards by learning outside: St John's Roman Catholic Primary School

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Brief description

This primary school regularly uses learning outside the classroom on its own site, in its local area and on visits and trips to provide rich experiences, promote pupils' safety, raise expectations and attainment for all and narrow the achievement gap across the broad curriculum.

Overview – the school's message

'About six years ago we started trying to make children more aware of environmental issues. We'd visit the woodlands and the locality and realised how wonderful all the learning could be. Learning outside the classroom grew and grew, and now it happens naturally in all subjects across the curriculum. Pupils have a much richer understanding of the real world, the size and scale of places, transport, what's available to them for nothing, and they are excited and enthused by it all. They learn so much by being out. For instance, it enriches their vocabulary and standards of writing have risen.'

Vera Jajechnyk, Deputy Headteacher

'If you're worried about pupils going out, it's better to teach them how to do it safely and confidently. Do you teach a toddler to climb up stairs safely or not? Yes, you do. So we teach our pupils how to use public transport and be safe in the real world.'

Janice Babb, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Problems, solutions and pupil outcomes

How do you get out more? Some school leaders may want to take their pupils outside but see problems about costs and health and safety. They may also perceive that it could detract from improving standards in English and mathematics. But, knowing the [evidence](#), St John's Roman Catholic Primary School, in south east London's inner city, sees learning outside the

classroom as a key solution. Its buildings are stimulating and attractive, but the staff think outside the classroom 'box'. For little or no cost, pupils learn excellently from all kinds of work in different environments, far and near. [The school](#), serving an area with some deprivation, achieves consistently high standards in national testing by Year 6, with very positive value added scores. It puts this down, in large part, to its learning outside the classroom programme which is a constant and integral part of the curriculum.



What learning outside the classroom (LOTC) 'looks like' and its impact

The [range of LOTC](#) is exceptional. Pupils are continually outside and the range of activities has grown and grown as staff see the impact. For example:

- Year 1 pupils went on the Jubilee Line to the sculptures at Canary Wharf, which they had learnt about in class, so that they could stand or sit at the bottom of them and experience their size. A photograph in class could not do this.
- Year 2 pupils went to nearby woodlands to record on whiteboards alliterative phrases for their future writing. They created many, such as 'soft, silky stems', by the direct experience of seeing, discussing and feeling the natural environment.



- Year 4 pupils went to the same woodland (Stave Hill, or 'Russia Dock Woodlands') to use 'pooters' and find 'minibeasts'. One pupil said, 'You learn so much more. I can actually see where these animals live and there's so many of them. This is much better than internet photos on a whiteboard.'
- A visit by Year 2 pupils to the London Fire Brigade museum led to [this much improved recount](#) from a reluctant writer.
- Classes visit the local public library weekly and, in addition, enjoy the author visits available there.
- There are frequent, bus and tube visits to places such as the local market, London Zoo and walks along the River Thames to inspire literacy projects, linked to stories in class. The market visit also shows pupils in Year 1 what fruit, vegetables and fish are like away from the more packaged environment of a supermarket.
- Pupils from different year groups prepare for borough concerts at prestigious venues such as the Royal Festival Hall and the O2 arena.
- The school applied quickly for free tickets for its Year 6 pupils to the Olympic site. It is always on the lookout for such opportunities. This visit also involved a shopping survey in Stratford. Pupils discussed the survey questions they wanted to ask the public in advance. Work by a Year 6 pupil following this visit is available [here](#).
- Year 6 pupils took part in kayaking at the local watersports centre for PE, as part of a local free initiative.



Health and Safety

The more often pupils use public transport, cross roads and step outside the classroom, the better they become at managing risk. The often repeated nature of it helps sustain the learning. The school is well organised and clear about staffing ratios and using high visibility jackets on public transport. Sensible safety rules such as sending eight children to each door on a tube train keep everyone safe. Just as importantly, the school explicitly and consistently teaches safety rules which pupils can also use with their families.



Cost

St John's uses the local area to the full and most of these activities are free. The school uses public transport where possible and rarely hires coaches. For example, a trip to the Harry Potter film set, north of London, for Year 6 is a carefully considered part of the curriculum. Travel is by two trains and a bus, and costs £5 per pupil. The cost of a coach would be six times that, so the saving is huge. And the learning on the journey, says the school, is much better.



Staff are always on the lookout for opportunities, such as the free Olympic tours, and a cheap visit to see 'The Mousetrap' as part of a project for year 6 pupils called 'Mystery Solved'. This involved pupils writing a mystery play. Staff attended training beforehand about writing a good mystery, which can be very difficult and challenging, and ensured high-quality and mysterious results! The winning entries were read by the cast.

Lessons that could be indoors, taken out



Pupils enjoy going out for lessons that could be done in the classroom but are more relevant outdoors. For example, a Year 1 class enjoyed a lesson about place value using a 100 number square, meaning they could move around freely to show tens and units. Mathematics, music and planting outside in the school's compact playgrounds are common features. A Year 6 class walked to a nearby wind turbine. While there, half the class made the case for wind power, the other half against. They readily used vocabulary and ideas learnt in class such as 'greenhouse gases'. This was real, geography fieldwork, which many primary schools find difficult to organise.

'We're free, we have space, we can move around to work and discuss, we've got fresh air and we can see what we're talking about.'

Organisation

The school is well organised. Staff are fully briefed and trained, so that activities are safe and successful. Equipment is ready and waiting for use. In the school's LOTC store, there are:

- Clipboards and pens
- Balls
- Waterproof bags
- Small groundsheets to sit on in the field
- High visibility jackets

'You learn so much more. I can actually see where these animals live and there's so many of them. This is much better than internet photos on a whiteboard.'

In its outdoor environment, the school has playground markings and resources, such as the 100 number square, a music area and a greenhouse made from 1,500 plastic bottles.

Learning outside the classroom must be integral to the curriculum. It should be enjoyable but never a 'treat'. The curriculum, set by subject leaders and class teachers, lends itself to LOTC. Staff are clear about the specific learning objectives; and it is this which adds value and raises the standards. For

example, Year 5 pupils prepared well in class through controlled research using ICT. This was for a science lesson at a local farm where they learnt about the life of bees, viewed them in their hives and tasted fresh honey. For such visits out, there is a [pre-populated, easy to complete form](#) which ensures everything is right.

When the school submitted an application to the [LOTC Council](#) for an award, one of the judges said of this school: 'I'd have loved to be a pupil at this school – there is so much going on, in every year group, all through the year!'

The school's background

[St John's Roman Catholic Primary School](#) is a one-form entry Roman Catholic primary school in Rotherhithe, in the London Borough of Southwark. It serves a mixed catchment area, with pupils whose family heritages are very diverse. It holds the Green Flag eco-schools award.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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