

Outdoor adventure learning

Moderate impact for moderate cost, based on limited evidence.

£ £ £ £ £
cost per pupil

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
evidence rating

+ 3
months

What is it?

Outdoor adventure learning typically involve outdoor experiences, such as climbing or mountaineering, survival, ropes or assault courses, or outdoor sports, such as orienteering, sailing and canoeing. These can be organised as intensive block experiences or shorter courses run in schools or local outdoor centres.

Adventure education usually involves collaborative learning experiences with a high level of physical (and often emotional) challenge. Practical problem-solving, explicit reflection and discussion of thinking (see also Meta-cognition and self-regulation) may also be involved.

Adventure learning interventions typically do not include a formal academic component. This summary does therefore not include approaches to outdoor learning, such as Forest Schools or field trips.

How effective is it?

Overall, studies of adventure learning interventions consistently show positive benefits on academic learning, and wider outcomes such as self-confidence. On average, pupils who participate in adventure learning interventions appear to make approximately three months additional progress over the course of a year. The evidence suggests that the impact is greater for longer courses (more than a week), and those in a 'wilderness' setting, though other types of intervention still show some positive impacts.

Understanding why adventure learning interventions appear to improve academic outcomes is not straightforward. One assumption might be that non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and resilience are developed through adventure learning and that these skills have a knock-on impact on academic outcomes. However, it should be noted that the wider evidence base on the relationship between these types of non-cognitive skills is underdeveloped. If adventure learning interventions are effective because of their impact on non-cognitive skills, then explicitly encouraging students to actively apply these skills in the classroom is likely to increase effectiveness.

How secure is the evidence?

The existing base on adventure learning interventions is limited and relatively inconsistent. The most recent studies, which use more robust methodologies, show smaller effects than older studies, though on average both older and more recent studies show a positive impact on academic attainment. Our overall assessment of potential progress is therefore weighted towards more recent studies.

The existing qualitative evidence is more consistent than the quantitative findings, showing that in most cases young people perceive adventure learning interventions to have had a positive impact on their lives and attitudes.

What are the costs?

Costs vary with a 10 day adventure sailing experience costing about £900 and an 8 day Outward Bound course about £500. An adventure ropes course costs about £30 for a day. Costs are estimated at £500 per pupil per year and are therefore moderate.

What do I need to know?

- A wide range of adventure activities are linked with increased academic achievement.
- Experiences of over a week tend to have greater impact and tend to produce effects of a longer duration.
- The main effects tend to be on self-confidence, self-efficacy and motivation and for some pupils explicit links may need to be made to ensure lasting impact on academic attainment.
- It is important to work with well-trained and well-qualified staff as adventure experiences can pose very different physical and emotional risks to those in schools.