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How children  
benefit from

**outdoor  
learning**

The Inter-Community School is committed to providing a supportive and enabling learning environment in which all members of the community are challenged to achieve their individual potential, encouraged to pursue their passions, and expected to fulfil their responsibilities.





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How children benefit from

# outdoor learning

Schools in Switzerland, a country renowned for its natural beauty, have embraced the outdoors as an essential component of children's education.

It's partly a response to the fact that—thanks to the rise in urbanisation and the ubiquity of technology—children are spending less time outside, even in a nature-rich environment such as Switzerland. In a 2016 study commissioned by Swiss youth support organisation Pro Juventute, Swiss children play outdoors for less than an hour each day, a sharp decline from the multiple hours they spent outside just a few decades ago.

Furthermore, and even more surprisingly, 15 percent of Swiss children did not play outdoors at all during the surveyed period of time.

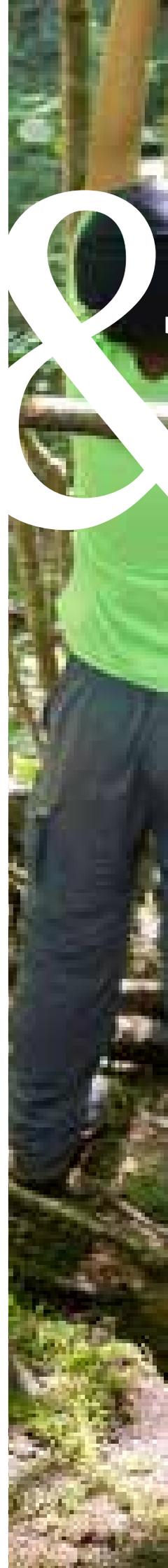
## Outdoor Education in Switzerland

Providing substantial opportunity to spend time outdoors during the school day is not just about playtime, though. Some early-education schools in Switzerland and other European countries offer the exciting "forest kindergarten", a type of outdoor kindergarten education that takes place outside—all day long, rain, sun or snow. At ICS, outdoor learning plays a significant role in the Preschool and Kindergarten. Together we spend one morning a week in the forest exploring the natural environment throughout the seasons. The special nature of the outdoors in Switzerland offers children

opportunities to move on a large scale, to use all their senses, to be active and to express feelings and ideas. Children have access to two courtyards just outside of the classrooms as well as a mud kitchen, vegetable patch and pond all on campus, as well as a large wood chipped playground.

The idea of using the forest as an unstructured classroom piqued international interest; it's a far cry from the four walls and desks to which most people are so accustomed. A recent documentary following one such Swiss forest kindergarten, *School's Out: Lessons From a Forest Kindergarten*, generated worldwide news coverage that explored the benefits of nature on children's education.

But the various positive effects the natural world has on the physical and mental well-being of children and adults has been a subject of interest for years. First, a connection between humans and nature was detailed: the biophilia hypothesis, which states that humans have an innate desire to connect with nature and other living things, was coined in 1973 and popularised a decade later. These days, biophilia pops up everywhere—city planning, interior design, workspace development and, of course, education for all ages—as a way to improve wellbeing.



# play



In addition to improved cognitive function, those who spend time in nature may also see a reduced risk of depression, according to Stanford researchers. Overall mood and contentedness also improved with exposure to nature. Green space, it turns out, is healthy for the brain no matter the age.

### **Cognitive benefits**

Both children and adults can benefit from the outdoors, educationally or not. In early education years, children who spend more time outdoors have shown higher levels of self-confidence and greater independence, engaging spontaneously in learning through play. Certain behavioural issues or disorders may also be mitigated through increased connectedness to nature; in one study, children with ADHD showed marked improvements in concentration after just a 20-minute walk in the park.

But children without ADHD can also reap those benefits. Psychology researchers from the University of Michigan showed that people who spent an hour interacting with nature exhibited a 20 percent improvement in memory performance and attention span. Nature's impact on these important cognitive functions can vastly support learning.

### **Physical benefits**

The benefits of outdoor learning extend beyond the brain and to the body. While obesity rates in Switzerland are low for both adults and children in comparison to other European countries, children are still getting less exercise, instead spending more time with technology—as much as six hours per day according to some estimates—than with peers. When outside, however,

children are “more than doubly active”, which can contribute to fewer instances of childhood obesity.

More interestingly and perhaps less intuitively, outdoor activity impacts eyesight. Research has suggested that natural light may assist in the development of the eyes in growing children, keeping vision in focus by supporting the distance between the lens and the retina. A reliance on indoor lighting (and artificial lighting from digital screens) can contribute to the development of myopia, or near-sightedness.

### **Cultural benefits**

Learning outdoors can also support cultural education. As being outdoors encourages learning through play, children may engage with those of a different cultural background—strengthening their compassion and understanding for those outside of their immediate, familiar community. Children learn to work together to solve problems on their own, as they are not restricted to a desk or a written assignment.

Field trips to foreign countries are also a way to implement outdoor education, giving children the unique opportunity to combine travel with learning and increasing the exposure to different cultures.

### **The classroom**

International schools in Switzerland often provide the opportunity for outdoor learning, and not just because of its impressive countryside. Outdoor education programmes allow young students to make connections with nature and culture, learning more about the world while improving their overall wellbeing.

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### **Outdoor Education**

At ICS, engagement with the outdoor environment is at the heart of many of our educational experiences. These can range from the regular Waldkinder trips as part of the Early Years Forest Programme, through to the more challenging activities, such as rock-climbing, abseiling and kayaking, undertaken by older students.

Outdoor activities at ICS provide a range of benefits to our students. Often integrated into units of inquiry or the curriculum in the case of Secondary students, these activities provide a real-world connection between the classroom and the environment. Outdoor experiences also offer students the opportunity to build skills and confidence as they take part in limited-risk activities, suited to their age and physical capabilities. They also provide students with the chance to learn and exercise leadership skills through physical and adventure-based challenges.



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