

# Can nature teach our way to a greener future?

We know that our children's relationship with nature is poor, and getting worse rapidly. According to research by the National Trust the next generation is so unfamiliar with some of our commonest wild creatures that one in three cannot identify a magpie yet nine out of ten can recognise a dalek.

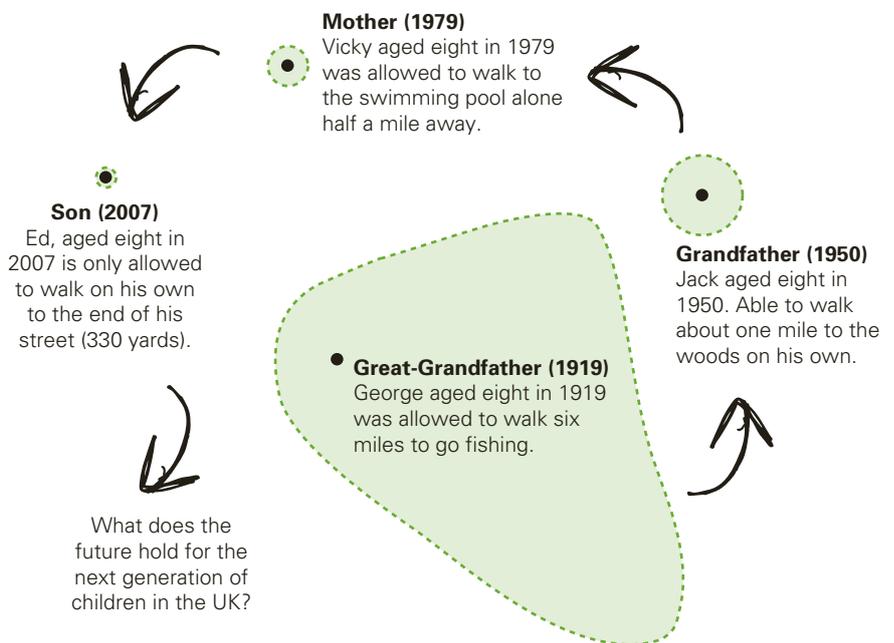
This should not surprise us since other research has revealed that the range children roam away from home has shrunk from several miles to just a few yards in only three generations. Lurid headlines proclaim they spend less time outdoors than prison inmates.

*“On average, children now spend less time outdoors than prison inmates.”*

The Times, 26 March 2016

As well as missing out on the joy that being in nature brings to everyone, this harms children in a variety of ways, including their education. More contact with nature improves the way children learn, both formally and informally.

Interestingly it's not just idealistic Wildlife Trust types who believe this: in 2008 Ofsted (that bastion of standards and educational rigour) concluded that learning outside the classroom 'contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils' personal, social and



In just four generations, the roaming area of an eight year old child has diminished significantly since the turn of the 20th century. Source: Daily Mail 15 June 2007.

emotional development' and 'can also help to combat underachievement'.

More recently the government spent just under a million pounds on a project from 2012 to 2015 in more than 200 schools across the South West of England. It concluded that learning in the natural environment has positive impacts for pupils in key areas such as the enjoyment of lessons, engagement with learning, behaviour and educational attainment.

Here is a little known fact: most Wildlife Trusts' constitutions state that they should pro-actively educate future generations about the natural world just as much as they should care for their nature reserves.

The Wildlife Trusts have a proud record of delivering on this. In 2014 we worked with 4,406 different local schools and education establishments, arranging 5,009 visits or events at nature reserves and education centres. 84% of this contact was

with primary age children. Yet despite this great effort, and that of many other organisations, our children's relationship with nature remains poor, and is getting worse rapidly.

In response to this, the Wildlife Trusts have decided to build on our educational legacy and use the accepted educational benefits of learning in the natural environment even more pro-actively than ever before.

Led by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, a group of four Wildlife Trusts are working together to establish a consortium of new primary schools through the government's free school programme.

# Introducing Nature Schools

  
Nature Schools  
The natural choice for a better education

*“ Learning outside the classroom ‘contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development and can also help to combat under achievement.* ”

Ofsted 2008



© 2016 oliveromg/Shutterstock

Under the working title ‘**Nature Schools**’ these free schools will use the national curriculum for England and Wales as a vehicle to provide high quality education in areas of basic need for school places. They will ensure high academic standards using the local environment and school community as a context that connects pupils’ new knowledge to something to which they can readily relate. Each Nature School will use its local natural environment as an engaging medium for multiple subjects, not as an add-on to other academic studies.

public consultation will be held in each community where a Nature School will be proposed.

Clearly four schools in themselves will not address the issues I raised at the beginning of this article. Those are national concerns. However if we are right, and schools which prioritise learning through the use of their natural environment deliver real educational benefits for their children, then we intend to establish many more using this philosophy.



[twitter.com/UKnatureschool](https://twitter.com/UKnatureschool)



[facebook.com/natureschoolsuk](https://facebook.com/natureschoolsuk)

An application to the Department for Education will be submitted in early 2017. Before then a



**Ed Green**

Chief Executive

☎ 024 7630 2912

[www.natureschools.org.uk](http://www.natureschools.org.uk)