

# In Sweden, teaching outside is in <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Children & Nature Network

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 23 Oct 2015

## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

With its well-established tradition of forest schools and deeply held belief that nature is essential to healthy children, Sweden is often considered a leader when it comes to outdoor learning. Preschoolers here are more likely to spend their days digging for earth worms and scaling boulders, than they are learning wall words and practicing handwriting. But as the children get older, they typically spend less and less time learning outside. Now a coalition of dedicated researchers, educators and outdoor nonprofit groups in Sweden have joined forces to give teachers the tools they need to bring the classroom outside.

"Studies show that if you alternate outdoor and indoor learning, and the teacher is prepared, you get good results," said Anders Szczepanski, director of the National Center for Outdoor Education at Linköping University, Sweden.

"But if a teacher hasn't been trained in or practiced outdoor education and doesn't understand when, where, how and why he or she should take the class outside, and how to link the outdoors to the curriculum, well then it's a little bit like seeing a nurse who has never seen a patient."

Through sixth grade many teachers in Sweden use the schoolyard and nearby nature areas to teach math, science, history and other subjects. In the higher grades the students' schedules become more hectic and even if they want to take their students outside, many teachers simply don't know how to do it in a meaningful way. Even though the national curriculum for grade school in Sweden mandates outdoor recreation, the task of fulfilling this requirement often falls on a school's lone PE teacher.

Torbjörn Wrange, an outdoor education consultant, said the goal is to get more teachers involved in using outdoor recreation as a method to teach traditional academic subjects, as well as improve students' health and strengthen their bond with nature. Over the past three years he has helped train over 1,200 Swedish grade school teachers to reach this goal. The training is offered annually to all school systems in Sweden and so far the limited spots have filled up quickly. What makes this project unique is that it is organized by a coalition of environmental education centers, a national conservation organization and a nonprofit sports fishing association. In addition to fishing, the training includes exercises in mindfulness, pedagogic flow and outdoor cooking, as well as hands-on advice for how nearby nature areas can be used to enhance classes.

"By working with a fishing association we're approaching this from a perspective that is non-existent in the curriculum," Wrange said. "Starting out with a neutral subject like fishing has been fantastic, as it comes naturally to everybody."

This is not the only initiative to get more Swedish teachers outside. Since 2007, a national network for outdoor learning has been drawing up to 1,000 participants to each of its semi-annual conferences "Ute är inne," which mixes outdoor workshops with seminars about the latest research in the field. Outdoor math, edible schoolyards, place-based education and team building in nature are a few of the topics.

"What's special about Sweden is that we have this long-held agreement that it's good for children to be outside, regardless of the weather, so that's not something that teachers need to argue with the parents about," said Eva Kätting, who co-organizes the conference.

Kätting is also the director of studies for the master's program in Outdoor Environmental Education and Outdoor Life at Linköping University, which is the only program of its kind in the world that is geared directly toward schools.

"We tend to think that children today know so much because they have all these electronics at their fingertips," Kätting said. "But what it really means is that teachers have a different role now. The teachers don't need to pass on as much information as they used to, but they need to teach the students how to transform all this information into knowledge. In order to do that they need practical experience."

The outdoors, it turns out, is the perfect place for children to get that experience. It is also good for their health, which is one of the reasons why the interest in outdoor education has increased considerably in Sweden in the past 20 years, according to Szczepanski, who estimates that he has trained upward of 7,000 teachers in the Swedish outdoor education model in countries like China, Turkey, Singapore, Japan and Greece. "Today we have so much scientific data regarding nature's effect on stress, diabetes and ADHD, and we know that it's healthy for children to be physically active," he said. "There are certain parts of the brain that are stimulated when we move around and have fun in

a varied environment. We turn on our intuition when we go outside – and we need to do it more often.”

Enthusiasm for outdoor learning among teachers is not the only sign that the method is more than a fad. Next year, the Swedish government will spend nearly \$60 million on improving schoolyards across the country, making them more suitable for outdoor learning. “This means that more teachers who want to move classes outside will be able to do so,” Szczepanski said.

Some public school systems even advertise their use of outdoor learning to get a competitive edge and attract young families to the area. “These schools and principals are really in the vanguard, and I’m convinced that we’re going to see more of it,” Kätting said. “As a teacher I can tell that children have so little practical experience today that they need outdoor learning more than previous generations.”

-reprinted from Children & Nature Network

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[4]</sup>

nature <sup>[5]</sup>

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