

Faith and contemplation



The term 'awe and wonder' is surely made for describing the feelings we have when we experience the scale and grandeur of the world around us. And where better for children to learn about their feelings and emotions as they relate to the world than in an outdoor setting?

Outdoors children not only see beauty and the way we care for the world, but they may also see things that disturb them – such as a dead bird or children being unkind to each other in the playground. What they see – as well as what they can hear or touch – can become the focus of quiet contemplation and reflection within your grounds and an important element of your religious education curriculum.

Outdoors is an ideal place to create special spaces for contemplation. These spaces can take many forms, from a small garden or an area with works of art, and may reflect the ethos and beliefs of your school or be the one place your pupils can be still in their otherwise hectic lives.

Take a tour

Why not go on a journey through your school grounds, as if you are on a pilgrimage? A pilgrimage is a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance. The journey could be planned to include important areas in your school grounds – the entrance, for example, the growing area, the friendship bench – where the 'pilgrims' could stop and contemplate. Alternatively, there may be a pilgrim's route near your school that you could walk as a group or class.



Getting in touch

Use your outdoors to encourage children to experience and become aware of all their five senses. This will help them develop a sense of awe and wonder in the world around them.

Sight Features such as colourful planting, patterns and textures in the hard landscaping (mosaics, for example) and shapes for children to look at can help focus their thinking.

Touch Add elements that children can touch when sitting in the space, such as smooth pebbles, soft foliage or patterns carved into stonework.

Hearing A space that is away from traffic and other busy sounds, with the sound of running water, wind chimes, a gong or even music, will help create a sense of calm.

Smell From lavender and thyme to roses and honeysuckle, plants can have both exciting and calming scents. Include these in your planting schemes.

Taste Sharing food outdoors is always stimulating. Why not try different types of bread, and talk about the flavours, textures and the significance of bread in daily life?



Activities to inspire

Use these activities to help children become mindful of the world around them.

A silent walk

Silent, contemplative walks can provide children with a chance to take time away from the bustle of the world around them. The way staff run this type of activity is key to its success – modelling how they expect the children to behave through their own actions. If there is no suitable seating take carpet samples or something similar for the children to sit on. As the children walk silently around the grounds they sit down just far enough apart from each other to feel alone, yet near enough to ensure that everyone is safely in view of others. Give the children enough time to settle. You can build up to longer times of silence as they get used to being quiet. You may also wish to give the children a word, picture or theme to focus on, especially if this is a new idea for them.

Questioning poems

Take the class outside and let them find a natural feature they would like to write about. Ask them to think about questions they would like to ask about the feature. The idea is to encourage children to think about the world as something more than just physical objects; that they learn to look at the natural world as something that provides us with beautiful experiences that touch us emotionally and spiritually. Encourage abstract and creative questioning. For example, why is a tree just that shade of green? Why does the bird choose to sing that song? What would happen if the tree was cut down? These questions can become a framework for the pupils' poems – they may try to provide answers or leave the questions just as they are. These poems could then be printed as part of a trail around the grounds.

Contemplating life and death

A dead animal in your grounds can provide you with a chance to help children gain an understanding of death in a supportive setting in which they are not suffering acute loss themselves. Find a quiet space in your grounds and lay the animal out so the children can gather around and see it. Ask them to describe how it looks as it lies there, and encourage questions from the group as well as

posing questions of your own. These might include:

- Does the animal look peaceful or disturbed?
- Was the animal young or old?
- How do you think it might have died?
- Do you think an animal dying is the same as a human dying?
- Do you think that animals have feelings?
- Do you think animals are sad when other animals die?
- Have you had a pet that has died?
- How did that make you feel?
- How do you feel about the animal in front of you?
- Why do animals and humans have to die?
- What do you think happens to animals, and humans, when they die?

Collecting bags

Give each pupil a notebook and collecting bag so that they can collect their thoughts, experiences and small items from around the grounds. Allow them plenty of time to explore the grounds, finding space away from others so that they can gather their thoughts and record them in their books. They can use the collecting bags to save things they found meaningful, adding their note books which record words and images about their explorations.

The bags should be kept safe so that they can be returned to and added to over their time in school, helping the children remember their first tour of the grounds, and repeat visits as they move up through the school.

Making space for memory

As a community we often put up memorials. What memorials are there in your locality – or even in your school? What people or events do they commemorate? What story is behind them? Examples of memorials could include a sculpture or statue, memorial bench, memorial tree or plant – even a memorial garden. Discuss with the children memory and the purpose of memorials and get them to identify a suitable space within your grounds and design a suitable memorial for it. They will need to think about who might use it and how. Are there people in the community who might be involved – faith leaders, for example? And how can it be made into a special place in the grounds?

Top tip
Some children can take a while to settle so allow plenty of time when taking them outdoors for contemplative activities



Start the day in silence then undertake a short task outdoors



Subject links

Below are a few suggestions of how faith and contemplation in school grounds can link to other areas of the curriculum:

- **English** Explore the language of faith and contemplation. Are there different words used by different faiths to describe life, death and creation that are particularly good for expressing feelings and emotions? Why not laminate important words, take them outdoors and find appropriate places to put them?
- **Art and design** Using symbols and designs from different faiths create pieces of art to become features for quiet contemplation within a specific space in your grounds. Work with local faith groups to ensure that you use appropriate symbols in a way that is sensitive to their beliefs.
- **Science** If looking at death you can make links to learning about life cycles and treating animals with care and sensitivity.
- **Geography** The children can describe places as well as expressing their views about their environment – this should go deeper than just the physical aspects of a place, looking at the feelings and emotions that a place provokes.
- **PSHE and citizenship** Through contemplation of specific issues children can be taught to recognise choices they can make and see the difference between right and wrong. Find out what's living in your grounds and talk about how your school can provide the best environment to care for them.

Get topical!

There are many different ways of using contemplation and different techniques to help create a suitable atmosphere or focus. Here are just a few that are used by different faith groups that you may be studying as your topic for the term or year.

Christianity Chants have been used over the centuries by Christians to aid contemplation. Taizé is an ecumenical (unity between different denominations) monastery in France that uses simple chants every day (see 'Further resources'). These easy-to-learn songs can be sung by groups of children as they gather outside for worship and reflection. The music is available on CDs and in books.

Islam One Islamic saying is that 'An hour's contemplation is better than a year's adoration.' Within this context, ask the children to find a quiet place to sit outside and reflect on something that has happened to them recently that they may have either enjoyed or found difficult.

Judaism Candles are used to represent different aspects of the Jewish faith. One way in which they are used is to symbolise the human soul with the flame flickering and ultimately fading away, reminding us of the fragility of our own lives. Create a space where you can place candles or light

a small fire, and gather the children around to sit quietly and consider how the flames grow, move and finally die down and how this is reflected by our own lives.

Buddhism Contemplative practices are seen as ways of developing insight, following in the example of Buddha. Children should be encouraged to listen, to be aware of their thoughts and emotions and develop empathy and compassion. Outside there is often enough space so that children can take time to find stillness and quiet, and focus on an idea without being disturbed by those around them.

Hinduism If you have a Hindu community in your area you could ask local parents to come in and tell you about how different elements are used in their worship. They may for example decorate a quiet space outside with bells, fruit and flowers, symbols and lamps.

Sikhism Sikhs believe it is good to start the day with an act of meditation. They also have three duties to follow – to pray, work and give. Why not combine these together by starting the day outside – coming together in silence, then undertaking a short task outdoors.



'The children are given time outdoors to think – about themselves, those they care about and the world'



Taking time to think

When **The Coombes CE Primary School** in Berkshire was opened over 30 years ago there were no trees on the site. Many have been planted over the years around the boundary, creating a natural environment through which the children can walk, sit and play. And the children are regularly given the opportunity and the time in these spaces outdoors to think – about themselves, those they care about and the world around them.

In the summer of 2010 Learning through Landscapes held their summer conference at The Coombes Primary School in Berkshire and delegates were able to watch the children take part in one of their regular activities – a silent walk. Ginny Wright, LTL development officer, observed the walk:

'About 18 children were led by their teacher in single file on a

journey around the grounds. The children carried carpet squares with them and you could feel a sense of calm settle over them.

'At various point the teacher would stop and signal for the next child to sit down at that spot. They settled down quietly in their own space and were given time to be alone and quiet in the natural environment – an experience not many children are able to have in their hurried, 21st century lives. Then their teacher returned, and they rejoined the line and followed on the journey back to their classroom.'

As well as the silent walks the children regularly create labyrinths to walk around – sometimes with a sound artist accompanying them, playing bells, percussion instruments and a cello in contrast to the sounds around them, of traffic or even birdsong.



A space for faith

These features can all help create an environment for contemplation.

Labyrinths have been used by many faiths as a way to focus the user's thoughts as they walk in silence around its path. Along the pathway you may leave words, passages from scripture or pictures for the user to contemplate on the way, or you could have a sculpture in the centre of your labyrinth as a focus for the walk (see 'Further resources').

Water is used in many faiths to represent cleansing and life. Using sustainable energy sources to move water – for example, with solar panels – can help children focus on stewardship and care for the world around us. Still water can also be very calming and tranquil, bringing a sense of stillness to the space for those who visit.

Art works can be used to highlight the theme or focus of an area. A sculpture, a representation of a deity, an abstract image or a line of scripture or poetry can all be used to help bring thoughts together.

Natural features should be key to any space for contemplation. Children have an inbuilt affinity with the natural world and research has shown that nature has a calming and restorative affect. Establish plants, trees, growing areas etc in your grounds.

A quiet space provides a good spot for contemplation, especially if it is small as it will feel more intimate. Create a sense of seclusion while still allowing supervision of the area with planting, trellis, or a wall with a window through. Think too about using colours, symbols or images and

natural materials. You may wish to focus on a particular theme – a peace garden or garden honouring the memories of loved ones. Archways and the seating design will also have an impact on the atmosphere.

Further resources

- Activity *Creating and using a labyrinth* available for members to download for free from our website www.ltl.org.uk.
- There are several websites that focus on meditation for children, including www.mindfulnessinschools.org.
- Music from the Taizé community is available on CDs and in books. Find more information about the community at www.taize.fr.



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