



# Connor Downs Academy



What are we growing?

# Cultivating Futures through outdoor learning



Outdoor learning experiences are often remembered for a lifetime. Connor Downs Academy's ethos is that learning need not take place solely within school buildings. The outdoor environment has massive potential for learning. Therefore, we promise to provide a wealth of outdoor learning opportunities outside of the classroom as well as in it. Learning in the outdoor spaces is central to our school curriculum. Children play and learn outdoors, whatever the weather. A wide range of planned activities change each week to activate the imagination, stimulate the senses and teach the skills needed to be resilient learners. We are extremely fortunate to have such rich coastal and rural environments on our doorsteps and our children's learning experiences can be enhanced by maximising the potential of the outdoors. The staff at Connor Downs are keen to

see all our children having positive learning experiences in a variety of settings. Therefore, we have a bespoke curriculum, investing in the outdoors. Staff here make it clear that the outdoor environment offers motivating, exciting, different, relevant and easily accessible activities from Reception class through to the end of Year 6.

Integrating learning and outdoor experiences, whether through play in the immediate grounds or adventures in our wider community, provides relevance and depth to the curriculum in ways that are difficult to achieve indoors. Learning outdoors can be enjoyable, creative, challenging and adventurous and helps children learn by experience and develop as responsible citizens who value and appreciate the spectacular landscapes, natural heritage and culture of Cornwall.



# What is Cultivating Futures?

Cultivating Futures is the name of our outdoor learning centre. It includes a huge animal area with hens, rabbits, fish, African clawed frogs, a hamster and occasionally tadpoles. Cultivating Futures also refers to our wildlife and pond areas, the amazing outdoor classroom, extensive gardens, outdoor 'theatre', nature trail, a poly-tunnel and cross-curricular activity zones. All of our animals are rescued from approved rescues centres such as The Hen Welfare Trust and Maria's Animal Sanctuary and have very happy lives with us.



## Our aims

Through Cultivating Futures we help our children to be:

**Successful learners** – outdoor learning encourages children to understand the relationship between curriculum areas. This awareness promotes lifelong learning and develops critical thinking skills. Achievement is measured from each pupil's unique starting point, not as a group. Success is judged holistically. Some of our pupils are amazing scientists, artists, musicians, actors and leaders. Whilst it is an important part of overall education, we do not measure success purely by government tests.

**Healthier** – learning outdoors can lead to lifelong recreation. Activities such as walking, running and cycling are ideal for physical and emotional wellbeing contribute to a healthier lifestyle. Many of our children achieve sporting success in team and individual sports. Children with special educational needs attend the local 'Trevictus Games' each year because we believe that disability does not prevent children achieving to a high standard in sport.

**Safer and stronger** – outdoor learning activities span social divisions and can help build stronger communities. We use pyramid club and nurture groups to provide therapeutic programmes where outdoor learning plays a central role. Children and young people have opportunities





to develop skills to assess and manage risk when making decisions.

**Greener** – frequent and regular outdoor learning encourages children and young people to engage with the natural and built heritage. Cornwall's countryside and coastal areas provide ideal settings for children to understand the global significance of sustainability issues and inform personal decisions that contribute towards a greener lifestyle.

**Better** -prepared for adult life – the outdoors provides excellent opportunities to use a wide range of skills and abilities not always visible in the classroom. Becoming aware of such skills can fundamentally change personal, peer and staff perceptions and lead to profound changes in life expectations and success. Cultivating Futures specifically develops resilience, team-work, reflection, tolerance, democracy, challenge, determination, perseverance, trust and friendship.

## How did it all start?

In 2013, we received a grant of £50,000 from the National Lottery. Despite high competition from a range of worthy causes, the public voted that our school deserved this money to enable the school grounds to be developed. We added funds from the school budget and worked with an educational, outdoor learning architect to create the wonderful space we call Cultivating Futures. Our children and their families were involved at every stage, from fund-raising, designing the area, selecting materials, planting trees and flowers to the installation of the outdoor classroom.



## Who looks after Cultivating Futures?

Mr Costello is our outdoor learning leader. He has a degree in environmental science, a diploma in horticulture and various additional qualifications such as gardening for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Mr Costello's favourite topic is climate change and the weather. He is supported by Miss Pedley, a teaching assistant who leads the animal care area of Cultivating Futures. Miss Pedley has a qualification in animal husbandry to support her work. Mr Buxton Dean is a senior leader in school and is responsible for supporting the Cultivating Futures team. Mr Buxton Dean has a degree in ecology.



## Which children access this special learning?

Depending on the season, most children have some learning outdoors each day with their own class teacher. At the very minimum, they have an outdoor session each week. The youngest children in Reception class enjoy 'Welly Wednesdays' every Wednesday morning. Mr Costello and Miss Pedley take each class every week for an afternoon of outdoor learning. They cover topics such as: flowers and insects, seasons and the weather, habitats, the importance of plants, invertebrates and vertebrates, pollination, the importance of water, scientific testing, forces, climate change, investigations, pollution, supporting wild-life, how to health check an animal, pet care plans, the cost of owning an animal, classification of animals, comparing animals to humans, anatomy of animals and much more. They also lead and support children in undertaking charity work for animal causes.

## What happens during Welly Wednesdays?

Each week children explore Cultivating Futures. They observe wildlife, care for the animals, learn about life cycles, learn to recognise plants and birds.

This year, they have followed the development of a tadpole to a froglet. Mr Costello and Miss Pollard plan Cultivating Futures activities based on the Early Years curriculum so they are varied every week and are designed to meet the three prime areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. Along with four specific areas of learning: literacy; mathematics; expressive arts and design; and understanding the world.



## Do children get muddy?

Yes! Children go outside in all weathers and we encourage parents to send old clothes and a rainproof jacket in to school for days when it is wet. Wellies are a vital part of our school uniform. We provide outdoor waterproofs for children in Reception class.



## What about the community?

Cultivating Futures welcomes support from our local community. We have been awarded several grants from local groups and appreciate the support we receive. We also experience great support from parents. We have a parent who is a member of the RSPB and another who works for the environment agency helps us with education on pollution. Mr Costello and many children have taken part in beach cleans with Surfers against Sewage.



## What difference does outdoor learning make to our children?



Outdoor learning offers many opportunities for our children to deepen and contextualise their understanding within curriculum areas, and for linking learning across the curriculum in different contexts and at all developmental stages.

Well-planned learning in the outdoors can make huge contributions to literacy, numeracy, science and health and wellbeing. In literacy, there are opportunities to use different texts: the spoken word, charts, maps, timetables and instructions. In numeracy, there are opportunities to measure angles and calculate bearings and journey times. In health and wellbeing there are opportunities to become physically active in alternative ways and to improve emotional wellbeing and mental health. In science, children learn about fair tests, measurements, ecology, forces, plant and human biology, climate and the weather and much more.

## What does the future hold for Cultivating Futures?

Next steps for the area are to install a weather station and to develop the area outside the poly-tunnel to cultivate more flowers, fruit and vegetables. More activities are also being designed to meet the requirements of the '100 things to do before you leave Connor Downs Academy' project.

## Do the children complete any externally accredited challenges?

This year children across all year groups have taken part in a variety of activities to earn awards through the 'RSPB Wild Challenge'. To achieve this award children have been creating a home for wild-life, including hedgehogs and birds. They have built a mini-beast hotel and have created and used the compost area. They have created new habitat areas within the wider school grounds and have found out what creatures live in our school pond through pond-dipping. You can find out more about this award from <https://www.rspb.org.uk/fun-and-learning/for-families/family-wild-challenge>

Children are also taking part in the RHS Campaign for school Gardening to develop our school gardens whilst earning rewards through the RHS. It is a reward scheme made up of 5 different levels of achievable goals to create a valuable learning resource, Children submit evidence for each activity via the RHS web-site and once all levels are completed the school can earn up to £200. We are currently aiming for level 3 because we have already achieved levels 1 and 2.

## Is there an after-school club in Cultivating Futures?

Mr Costello and Miss Pedley take a club called 'Nature Detectives'. Children help develop the grounds, such as making bird feeders and nesting boxes and clean the animal enclosures. They also create mini-gardens through exploring garden design. They use the willow to create craftwork such as Christmas trees and stick men.

## Do children take part in any STEM activities?



STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This year children in Year 5 and Year 6 have enjoyed STEM events.

Year 5 have had a great time completing an engineering challenge called 'Fly to the line' as part of the RAF 100 years' anniversary. Children had to design, make and improve their gliders to see which one would travel the furthest. The winning team have now got to compete in a regional final at an RAF base. As part of this challenge Year 5 children also visited RAF Cudrose where they spent a day taking part in a range of engineering challenges.

Year 6 children took part in the 'Bloodhound Challenge' called 'Race for the Line' as part of the upcoming world record attempt to beat the land speed record. Children designed and made their own model bloodhound car to learn about aerodynamics. After several improvements, they competed in a regional race against other schools at Camborne STEM centre. Through these opportunities children have been learning about potential future careers in STEM. Our aim is to develop a love of STEM to create engineers of the future.

## How can I find out more?

Contact Mr Costello or Mr Buxton Dean through the school office on 01736 753135.