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# The inclusive destination

*Lynsey Robinson explores how to make school visits accessible and rewarding for all*

The opportunity to interact with nature and enjoy outdoor environments is an essential part of everyone's lives, with potentially enormous benefits for physical and mental wellbeing. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv talks of nature deficit disorder, the idea that children are spending much less time in the natural environment and are subsequently experiencing a range of behavioural difficulties and health issues. Fewer natural environments for children to experience (particularly in built up areas), greater anxiety about health, safety and security on the part of parents, carers and teachers, and the lure of technology and the screen mean that school visits to outdoor locations are more important than ever.

At the same time, outdoor environments can be testing destinations, presenting a variety of challenges for children with disabilities and SEN. Risk

## *Outdoor environments can be testing destinations, presenting a variety of challenges for children with disabilities and SEN*

assessments for outdoor environments need to include considerations as diverse as appropriate clothing and footwear, the weather and contact with animals. The natural environment can be unpredictable; facilities may be scarce and locations can be remote. On top of all that, careful consideration needs to be given to planning the trip, acquiring necessary permissions and organising transport for the journey. So how do you ensure a successful visit?

The Sensory Trust has been working to improve access to outdoor environments for all people regardless of age, disability or social background for over fifteen years. We work with land managers, education teams, schools and community groups as well as individual visitors, bringing them all together to investigate the challenges that outdoor environments can present and to come up with practical and realistic solutions. Working in this way has given us an awareness of both sides of the coin. We have developed an understanding of the barriers that often prevent people from getting out and enjoying the natural environment. At the same time, we recognise the challenges, concerns and apprehensions that land managers and visit hosts can experience.

If you examine a typical visit to an outdoor location, you will see that it can be broken up into a chain of

events beginning with the decision to undertake the trip, proceeding through planning and preparation, arrival and orientation, on to the visit itself with the on-site experience, and through to the journey home. Those preparing for school visits (group leaders as well as education teams and other hosts) should recognise that if there is a barrier at any stage in this process, such as a lack of accessible pre-visit information on facilities and staff, or inadequate seating or shelter, then the visit will end in disappointment and frustration, if it takes place at all.

This access chain approach moves beyond the legally based access guidelines that focus solely on the physical aspects of a location and its facilities, such as path widths, gradients, surfaces and steps. While knowledge and understanding of these areas is undoubtedly important in improving access, they only go so far. A more holistic approach should cover all of the features that impact on the complete visitor experience. In particular, it should encourage exploration of the accessibility of the visit experience itself, including examining what a site has to offer in terms of sensory as well as physical accessibility. Looking carefully at a visit and a location in terms of its appeal to the various senses can make a visit engaging, enjoyable and memorable.

*When exhibits are designed, careful consideration is given to the range of sensory stimulation they can deliver*

Undoubtedly, the most important strategy for successful visits is to build relationships between site managers, staff, visitors and group leaders. One of the most common problems at sites is simply a lack of confidence on the part of the host site managers and staff. This lack of confidence is usually due to a lack of experience, knowledge and understanding. We are all intimidated or nervous about things that are new to us and the only way to overcome this barrier is through practice.

For visitors and group leaders, making contact and forming relationships with the people responsible for managing your visit at the destination is vital. In addition, gathering information about the site in advance will not only avoid any nasty surprises, it may well highlight previously unconsidered benefits. Communicating with your host directly to find out more about their site, to inform them about who is coming, what appeals to them and what they enjoy,

may present a challenge but also gives them the opportunity to think about what their site has to offer, such as seasonal or sensory highlights, or what assistance might be available during a visit. This knowledge gives the host the opportunity to be creative, to consider all aspects of the visit, and helps build confidence. Without this information and communication the host has to rely on their previous experience and knowledge which may or may not be appropriate for your group.

Visit hosts can also gain knowledge and confidence through the involvement of representative organisations that bring expertise about particular user groups or, more sustainably, by engaging directly with visitors and potential visitors.

The Eden Project in Cornwall, an educational charity that explores our relationship with the natural world, is one of the UK's leading visitor attractions. The Sensory Trust has worked in partnership with Eden since its inception to help create an inclusive, accessible visitor experience. Mencap also worked with Eden as part of a national project looking at how accessible the creative arts were to visitors with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

Members of the charity and Eden also spent time with children from local special schools, which was really informative for all concerned, and results were shared through the Mencap website on accessing the arts. Indeed, sharing information, and promoting good practice are crucial if we are to further the aim of supporting better access for all.

Eden exists to help build a sustainable future; to many people this creates the impression of being focused on the environment, but the social aspect of sustainability is just as important. The organisation believes in celebrating diversity and encouraging others to do the same. The approach it takes to the facilities and services it offers reflects this. When exhibits are designed, careful consideration is given

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The Eden Project



Visiting Eden's Mediterranean biome.

to the range of sensory stimulation they can deliver to ensure that all visitors have a good experience. This approach is particularly important for some visitors with disabilities and SEN and it sometimes means being quite brave in terms of what is offered to the public; the exhibit designers have to accept that not everything put on display will last and even plants may need to be replenished. For example, the perfume exhibit in the Mediterranean Biome includes a range of scented plants at different heights which are meant to be touched and smelled. When you get up to 15,000 visitors a day, clearly individual plants may not last that long. However, a system is in place for the plants to be taken away when they are getting tired, replaced with spares and then grown back up so they can return to the exhibit again.

Eden is also keen to place plant and other organic material, such as large pieces of cork, within easy reach of visitors so they can be picked up, touched and explored. These have proved particularly popular with students with PMLD as they provide a very tactile experience and students can take their time to discover them.

Over the years, Eden has developed its use of Widgit symbols for its signage.

To begin with, signs featured one or two symbols which outlined the main content of the sign. However, this has now progressed to a short symbol sentence explaining what the exhibit is about, so symbol readers can now access this information for themselves. In addition, a range of information about the Project's new developments is available in Braille, large print, Widgit Symbols, easy English and different languages.

For any attraction, visitor feedback is essential to help improve services and ensure that facilities are meeting needs. Over the years, numerous groups and individuals with disabilities and SEN have shared their personal knowledge and experiences of the site with the staff at Eden. As well as providing valuable input into planning and preparation (which can save time and money), this involvement provides crucial on the job training for staff and gives them direct experience of dealing with specific issues and visitor groups. By working closely with individuals and groups to address their particular needs, staff can more easily recognise potential problems and understand how things they had not previously considered might present significant barriers to some people taking part in and enjoying

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the visit. These experiences stay with staff and can help to inform their future design and management decisions.

These types of strategies and approaches are applicable for all types of destination. The Trust is currently engaged in a project working with individual farmers to provide sensory rich, engaging visits to their farms. The farmers are being encouraged and helped to talk to people in their area, to build relationships with special schools, disability groups and residential care providers, and to really explore their sites to improve their appeal as well as their accessibility. By continuing to build relationships and encouraging visitors and hosts to look at everything a visit has to offer, particularly in terms of the visitors' needs, tastes and abilities, all concerned can ensure that a visit is a success and well worth all the effort. **SEN**

### Let Nature Feed Your Senses

The Sensory Trust, in partnership with LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming), is offering special schools and disability groups the opportunity to take part in visits to farms to explore food, farming and nature through the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project. For more information about the national network of farms taking part, visit:

[www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org](http://www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org)



### Further information

Lynsey Robinson is the Inclusive Designer at the Sensory Trust, a charity which promotes and implements an inclusive approach to design and management of outdoor space:

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