

Character and Resilience and the Outdoors

Martin Smith – July 2019



‘Outdoor Citizens’ is an ambitious campaign committed to ensuring every childhood is packed with nature, adventure and the outdoors. An entitlement for all - not an extra for the few.

The evidence that being outdoors has a positive impact on the individual, on communities and on the environment is overwhelming. As is the data that shows us engagement in outdoor learning is inequitable. Those who would potentially benefit the most from outdoor experiences access them the least.

The Outdoor Citizens campaign is the result of years of co-operation between leaders in the outdoor sector. It is a shared commitment to an evidence informed programme of work that will ensure that the 750,000 four-year olds entering reception classes in September 2022 will be guaranteed high quality outdoor learning throughout their school life and through a rich set of family, youth work and community experiences.



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outdoorcitizens.uk

The Outdoor Council is an umbrella body for organisations involved in the provision of outdoor education, recreation and development training. Its work involves:

- Lobbying for opportunities for outdoor learning for all young people, including those who could not afford to experience these without financial support,
- Promoting the benefits of progressive outdoor experiences,
- Arguing for a balanced view of risks and benefits and an adventurous approach to life,
- Encouraging high quality, sustainable provision, with proportionate safety assurance,
- Maintaining a future focus on behalf of the outdoor sector.



Character, Resilience and the Outdoors

Over the last 7 years there has been a growing case made for developing non-cognitive skills in young people as well as the more easily identified and measurable cognitive skills. In developing the whole child both sets of skills should be the focus for child development, the two skill sets are inextricably linked.

The recognition that character counts

In 2012 the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues was launched in the House of Lords, with the aim of examining how character virtues impact on individuals and society. The centre focuses on academic excellence in undertaking research and has gone on to produce a wide range of evidenced based reports on the value of character from 2014 to the present day¹. This was and still is a significant organisation in the field of Character Education and really began to raise the profile and importance of character in the development of young people.

In parallel to the work being undertaken by the Jubilee Centre the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, launched their landmark manifesto in 2014 stating that: 'There is a growing body of research linking social mobility to social and emotional skills, which range from empathy and the ability to make and maintain relationships to application, mental toughness, delayed gratification and self-control. These research findings all point to the same conclusion: character counts.'² This report and manifesto was extremely well received and really highlighted, at a governmental level, the importance that character plays in the development of young people and improving social mobility.

Such views were also being mirrored beyond government. For example, the CBI, in their follow up report 'First Steps: A new approach for our schools' (2013) stated that 'Employers want young people who are enthusiastic, confident, creative and resilient – not just exam robots'³. There was now a real sense of momentum behind the need to encourage a range of character traits in young people that would equip them to cope with an ever changing and demanding world around them. To further highlight this need the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, followed up these themes in 2014 highlighting that:

‘The chances of doing well in a job are not determined solely by academic success – the possession of character skills like persistence and ‘grit’ also matter. So do wider opportunities including work experience, extra-curricular activities and careers advice’ (2014)⁴.

In 2014 the growing weight of evidence was finally recognised by Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of State for Education at the time, who stated that England was to become a “global leader” in teaching character, resilience and grit to pupils⁵. This welcome interest has been revitalised through Damian Hinds, the current Secretary of State, who at the Conservative Party Conference on the 3rd October 2018, went on to say that:

“One crucial area in particular I will be saying more on is character and resilience - how this is shaped by your relationships and experiences, the aspirations of those around you, and by taking part in extra-curricular activities from sport, to music, to volunteering, to work experience itself.

You won’t crack social mobility by only focusing on exam results – and this is an area where I believe we need to do more, and indeed understand more.”

It has become very clear that we needed to address the issue of the personal development of all our young people in order that we provide them with the best possible chance to be a positive member of society both now and into the future. ‘Research has shown that non-cognitive skills in general play a key role in determining academic outcomes. Character and resilience are crucial not only in improving academic performance, but longer terms health outcomes and future employment prospects. Character and resilience are also fundamental factors in reducing the chances of participating in risky behaviours’⁶. It was now becoming evident that character traits were important in terms of people’s well-being and associated long-term outcomes.



The importance of developing key character skills early on in life and the link this has to mental health outcomes later in life was picked up by a DEMOS report, which highlighted that numerous studies ‘have shown that character attributes are correlated with educational attainment, school attendance and positive attitudes towards school. A recent review from the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) found that good character attributes at the age of 10 were more important than ‘cognitive skills’ (using measures of literacy and numeracy) at that age when it came to predicting mental health and life satisfaction in later life’.⁷

‘The evidence suggests that character attributes not only reinforce academic learning but also have a significant positive influence on various later life outcomes, including those relating to health, wellbeing and careers. It also indicates that participation in non-formal learning activities – semi- structured activities such as sport, drama and debating, which are primarily delivered outside the classroom – play a vital role in developing these attributes’.⁸

More recently there has been a welcome recognition by Ofsted to highlight the importance that character plays within the overall development of young people, in the form of the new Personal Development judgement.

‘Developing pupils’ character, which we define as a set of positive personal traits, dispositions and virtues that informs their motivation and guides their conduct so that they reflect wisely, learn eagerly, behave with integrity and cooperate consistently well with others. This gives pupils the qualities they need to flourish in our society.’⁹

To further support the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility more evidence was emerging regarding the importance of developing key character traits and the link to how this contributed to social mobility. The importance of developing ‘Life Skills’¹⁰ was recognised, by the Sutton Trust, as a major contributor to a young person’s life chances and essential for succeeding in an ever changing work place and wider world. The role of non-cognitive skills in improving life outcomes is now becoming well established. ‘Evidence shows that these outcomes include better mental and physical health, secure relationships, contentment, educational attainment, access to higher education and better careers. As a result, it is vital that schools foster these skills effectively.’¹¹

The Education Endowment Foundation stated in its 2017 Annual report that it expected to grow its focus on social and emotional skills – or 'character' education.

The report states: 'There is growing evidence that children's social and emotional skills – their ability to respond to setbacks, work well with others, build relationships, manage emotions and cope with difficult situations – are associated with success at school, as well as positive outcomes in adulthood.'¹²

The case now seems to be well made for the 'importance of character' from both governmental and non-governmental sources. The challenge now lies in effectively supporting our young people in the development of such life skills.



What do we mean by character and resilience?

There are many different definitions however, probably one of the most compact and accessible definition of the terms ‘resilience’ and ‘character’ has been developed by ADEPIS¹³ as outlined below:

‘Resilience is the capacity of an individual to ‘bounce back’ from adverse experiences¹⁴, and to manage positive resources and skills, such as ‘character’ and ‘grit’, that can allow minimising negative outcomes of adverse circumstances.

Character is a set of capabilities (including application, self-direction, self-regulation, and empathy) and soft skills that allow people to achieve their potential¹⁵.

The ability to manage setbacks and build on them, seeing them in a positive light that young people can learn from is essential. As Einstein noted

‘Failure doesn’t mean you are a failure, it just means you have not succeeded yet’

With the relenting pressure to ‘succeed’, in a test-driven world young people and schools feel constantly under pressure to deliver a curriculum and the associated testing as an illustration of performance. However, this is only part of the story. We have to provide an environment in which our young people can gain a well-rounded learning experience that sets them up for life beyond school.

The ability to deal with, manage and learn from failure is key. With the pressure of testing and the dash through a curriculum, teachers feel the need to constantly ‘move on’. This reduces the ability for young people to learn through experience or have the time to test ideas. It reduces creativity and the ability to experiment and try new ways of doing something.

‘Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new’

- Albert Einstein

In essence we need to create environments where young people feel confident to 'have a go' and accept the concept of 'not yet', 'failure should not be attributed to lack of intelligence or talent, but it should be accepted as part of the learning process'¹⁶. In turn this will support the development of resilience. One of the areas where we do this particularly well is in Early Years settings where children are encouraged to explore and engage with their environment, both inside and outside the classroom and in doing so interact with their peers. In such settings children are encouraged to lead their own learning and naturally develop cooperative and positive relationships with peers. The evidence base for this child centred learning is well researched and established, however, the lessons learned are rarely extend beyond this stage despite the evidenced passed impact that exists.^{17, 18}



Public Health England recognised that resilience is 'shaped and built by experiences, opportunities and relationships, what could be termed the 'social determinants' of resilience'¹⁹. Linked to this are a set of capabilities shaped by the conditions in which people live, and their experiences and opportunities, similar to the social determinants approach. These capabilities of individuals can be described as: 'to do and be that which they have reason to value'²⁰ and links to our definition of character outlined above and to the idea of character virtues developed by the Jubilee Centre. Everyone will have their own interpretation as to what makes up these character virtues, however, one of the key skills that should flow from all of this is the ability to develop and maintain relationships. This is an essential life skill and has relevance both within school and beyond. It can help provide protective factors to deal with adversity or challenges such as transition or negative peer pressure. This can be a two-way street as a resilient character will be better able to manage risky situations or risky relationships – not all relationships will be positive!

Employability and skills for life

Character, resilience and a set of life skills are a really important element of a young person's development a fact not lost on Ofsted in their identification of Personal Development as one of the four Ofsted judgements. They recognise the importance of such skills for the development of responsible citizens as well as in terms of the work place. In 2013 the CBI laid out a series of characteristics and values in their report 'First Steps: A new approach for our schools'²¹. They saw determination, optimism and emotional intelligence as three key expectations supported by such characteristics as grit, resilience, self - control, curiosity, enthusiasm, gratitude, confidence and ambition, humanity, creativity, respect and sensitivity to global concerns. They have since gone onto develop a website specifically directed at schools and the need to develop these key employability skills.

These characteristics reflected much of the earlier thinking developed by the QCA in 2006²², which I feel is still relevant today. The QCA developed six key Personal Learning and Thinking skills:

- Independent Enquirers
- Team workers
- Effective participators
- Self-managers
- Reflective learners
- Creative thinkers

All of these characteristics of successful learners were broken down further to better identify and develop these key characteristics which would lead to becoming confident individuals and in turn responsible citizens and continue to provide a relevant framework today. A really valuable is somewhat forgotten framework.

Of course, in helping to develop such skills, in addition to practicing them in school, by far the best environment to develop such skills is in high quality work experiences and of course with the world beyond the classroom and school gate.

‘The Outdoors is character building’

There is compelling evidence built up over many years that children and young people thrive through learning and engaging outside the classroom. Such activity helps children develop character and resilience, it improves their personal, social and emotional development and helps them reach their potential. These experiences should be frequent, continuous and progressive²³ and be utilised as a tool for teaching and learning to build character and resilience.

We know, from Ofsted, that when planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributes significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development’²³. In a recent DfE survey²⁴ 72% of schools said that they used ‘outward bound activities’ to develop positive character traits. Outdoor learning provides opportunities to develop social and emotional resilience, support wider learning and develop broader interests²⁵.



Outdoor and adventure challenges can be easily differentiated to best engage a wide range of needs and develop meaningful progressive experiences as pupils grow. Progressive exposure to learning outdoors provides a route for young people to become more resilient²⁶. The Outdoor Council²⁷ have highlighted the importance of exposing young people to a range of progressive outdoor learning experiences. At all levels young people can be exposed to a sense of adventure whether it is a group of Nursery aged children going 'on a bear hunt' through long grass in the school grounds; exploring a local wood for the first time; discovering the amazing world that exists in a pond; experiencing an overnight residential and spending their first night away from home. All are exciting and challenging for young people and provide an excellent opportunity to develop personal, character and life skills. Most of these experiences are memorable moments, for some life changing. Where such experiences are integrated into learning back at school their value can increase. Fieldwork activities in support of curriculum subjects will have greater meaning and relevance, bringing subjects alive for pupils. In recent research undertaken by James and Williams they conclude that:

'It is obvious from the student responses that they engage with learning and acquire knowledge best when instruction is meaningful, active and experiential. As teachers, we need to strive to immerse our students in the concept of learning of this nature whether in the classroom or fieldBuilding confidence and independence by solving problems on their own and with a team is often an unplanned benefit of experiential outdoor education'.²⁸

In a study investigating the effect of Outdoor Education on the development of students social and emotional competencies within a Physical Education programme that integrated learning beyond the Outdoor and Adventurous Activities programme and towards better engagement in the classroom. The researchers found that by using experiential learning one learns from experience and applies this to one's own goals and expectation. 'By energising the heart and mind through stimulating environment, OE (Outdoor Education) emphasise the active role of the student in building or constructing their own SE (Social and Emotional) understanding and competency especially towards character development'.²⁹

As children grow older such outdoor experiences and extra-curricular activities will become more challenging as young people progress and develop their independence to take part in activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme or the John Muir Award, for example. Others will go abroad and experience other countries and cultures through organised tours all providing a broader more global awareness of the world around them.

Adventure challenges and wilderness experiences, including expeditions to more remote areas of the world provide an opportunity for young people to find out more about themselves and living with others. It can often be an opportunity to take part in social action activities in support of local communities. Long term adventure challenge involving expeditions has been at the very heart of the outdoor movement in Great Britain. The development of the first Outward Bound Centre by Kurt Hahn during the Second World War had the character training of young people at its core. Today the Outward Bound Trust continue to provide a range of longer term adventure training experiences for young people. In 2017 the Outward Bound Social Impact report highlighted that taking part in their courses led to the development of such skills as confidence; resilience; teamwork and leadership; planning and goal setting. The report goes on to say that 95% of teachers observe increased ability in pupils to keep going when they encounter setbacks one month on from a course. In addition, 60% of participants reported an increase in their confidence immediately after the Trust's Skills for Life Award.

In the Outdoor Council document 'High Quality Outdoor Learning'²⁷ the import role that character attributes make towards the development of young people is documented throughout. The document gives a detailed outline of how to recognise the impact of outdoor and adventurous learning on young people and use this information to better design effective programmes.

'Education in its broadest sense is not just about delivering a curriculum. It is about giving children the chance to extend their life skills. It is about developing confidence. It is about fostering resilience and a sense of responsibility. And- let us not forget – it is about the enjoyment, engagement and excitement about venturing out into the real world, with all its capacity for uncertainty, surprise, stimulation and delight.'³⁰

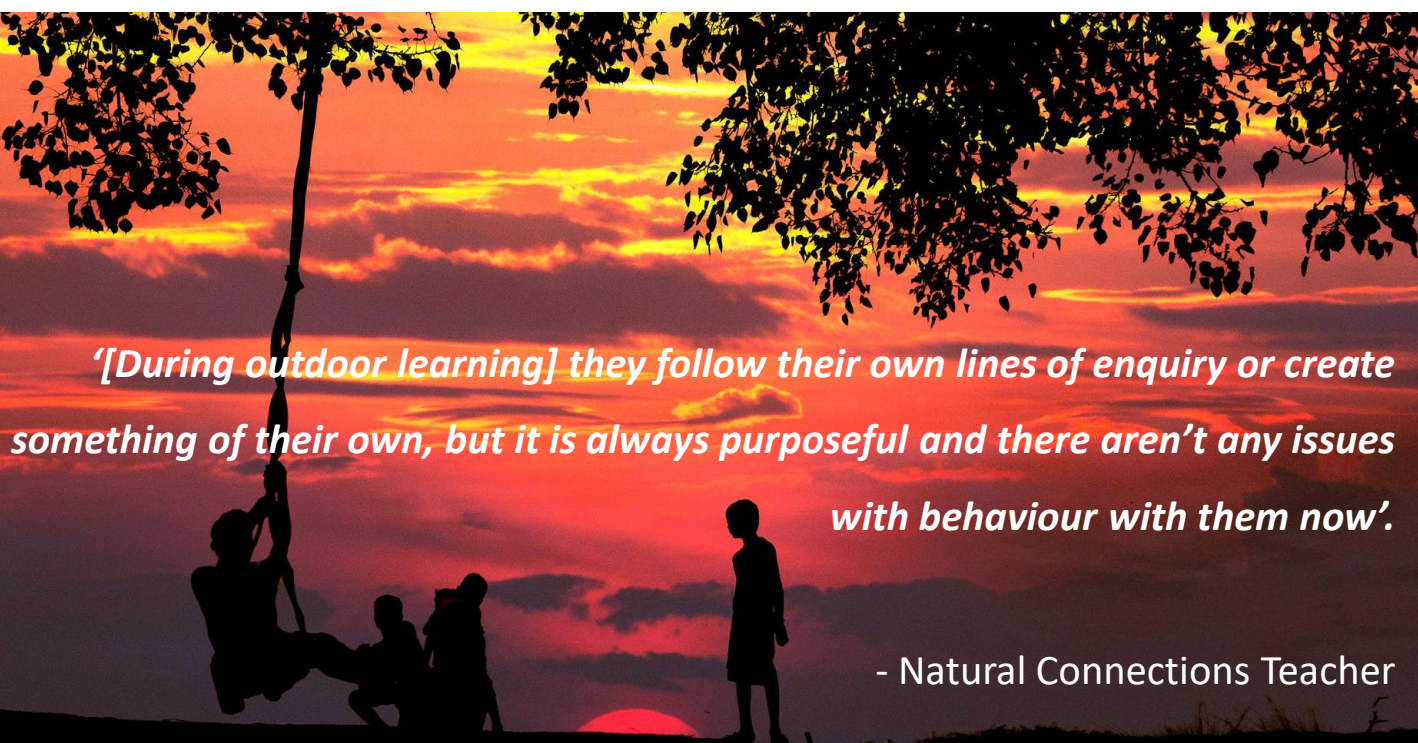
Case-study participants in the Natural Connections Project³¹ (a four year project helping schools to learn in the natural environment) emphasised the value of confidence in successful learning, commenting that outdoor learning often led children to have greater confidence in their own abilities, sometimes through taking more risks, so that they were willing to try different challenges within and outside the classroom.

'[Learning outside] has a huge impact on confidence, self-esteem and language ... massive, we do see other things ... but those are the things that are most obvious. We do think of it as like a magic wand.' (Natural Connections Teacher Comment)

Natural Connections schools reported that learning in natural environments had a positive impact on their pupils social skills (93%), health and wellbeing (92%) and behaviour (85%).

Specifically, outdoor learning was seen to encourage and develop communication, teamwork, new friendships, kindness and leadership. Schools and teachers reported that outdoor learning consistently enthused and motivated children resulting in greater engagement with learning.

The opportunities to develop confidence and self-esteem, motivation, communication, teamwork, kindness, risk and ownership of their own learning in contexts outside the classroom contributed to improved behaviour, according to headteachers and teachers.



'[During outdoor learning] they follow their own lines of enquiry or create something of their own, but it is always purposeful and there aren't any issues with behaviour with them now'.

- Natural Connections Teacher

Character and social mobility

Some of the evidence outlined above highlights the importance of developing character as one of the tools to increase social mobility.³²

It is also clear that those young people from 'better-off'³³ families have not only a much better start in life but, as a result of the opportunities they gain beyond the curriculum, they have better outcomes. This was clearly identified in the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's document, *Cracking the Code: how schools can improve social mobility*. The quote below neatly sums this up:

'The chances of doing well in a job are not determined solely by academic success – the possession of character skills like persistence and 'grit' also matter. So too do wider opportunities including work experience, extra-curricular activities and careers advice. But, from the earliest ages, social background strongly influences who has these other predictors of later success, meaning that the better-off are multiply advantaged when it comes to winning the race for good jobs'.³³

This issue of inequality around extra-curricular activities has since been highlighted by the Sutton Trust in their report 'Extra-curricular Inequalities'³⁴, an area where outdoor learning is often engaged in and one that plays a role in building character, something also picked up by Angela Duckworth in her book 'Grit'³⁵.

A Learning Away study³⁶ which assessed the quantity, type and quality of residentials delivered in schools over a five-year period found that far too many children were missing out on these powerful learning and life experiences, with only one in five children experiencing a residential every year. More worryingly still, the study found a picture of patchy and inequitable access with young people in the poorest areas the least likely to participate. Furthermore, only around half of teachers said they believed the residentials they delivered in their schools were affordable to all pupils.

The fact there is inequality is clearly made, so how can the benefits of character and resilience education best impact on pupils? In effect this can only realistically take place within a range of educational settings where all pupils have access. How can schools best deliver this? The DEMOS report Character Nation³⁷ gave some good practice recommendations on how schools could implement character as part of a 'whole School' approach and this has since been developed by Nottingham City Council in their educational resource 'Developing a framework for character curriculum'³⁸ which highlights 12 areas of good practice schools can develop to effectively implement a character curriculum as well as providing a whole school audit to support the implementation.



In relation to the good practice the best outcomes occur when classroom-based learning is applied beyond classroom settings, this could be as part of work experience placements or during off-site visits and extra-curricular activities. In terms of outdoor and adventurous activities this approach was encourage following research led by Richmond, D et al³⁹. Where they concluded that 'this study underscored how educators can take advantage of experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom to build social connectedness, foster positive self-efficacy beliefs and provide opportunities for students to explore their personal sense of self....Intentionally designed OAE programs offer an intriguing option for schools interested in cultivating noncognitive factors that carry over to the classroom and support student success.'

Residentials

There is compelling evidence that the impact of residential experiences on young people and staff who take part in them are particularly profound. The personal and social impacts of outdoor learning have been identified in a number of studies⁴⁰ with such impacts being particularly marked when young people take part in residential experiences. Residentials are a surprisingly powerful developmental experience⁴¹ and young people have been found to develop their social skills and foster new relationships both with their peers and accompanying adults⁴². Research undertaken by the Field Studies Council in 2009, based on 35,000 pupils from London going away on residentials between 2004 and 2008, found strong evidence for the impact on young people. These outcomes included developing friendships and relationships; developing team building and leadership skills; personal development, increased self-confidence, independence and self-esteem⁴³.

The impact of residential experiences is often sustained back in school or other settings. The integration of residential experiences⁴⁴ and indeed all outdoor learning experiences back into the school setting is seen as key in maximising learning impact and getting the most value for learning from these experiences. The greatest impact occurs when the learning is embedded and sustained and in fact a majority of schools that sit at the top of the current accountability framework and success measures use outdoor and residential programmes 'as an important and valuable part of the education they provide'³.

Increased confidence was the most common outcome identified by students and staff of the Learning Away⁴² action research project, which examined the impact of residential learning across 60 schools over a 5-year period.

It found that students were more willing to ask for help, try something new including 'scary things', push themselves and participate in class; they also had more self-belief.

78% of KS2 pupils and 87% of secondary students had felt more confident to try new things they would not have done before the residential.

“I feel like I can fail in front of people and just be all right about it”

- Learning Away Student

The Learning Away findings suggest that students have improved confidence and resilience because they:

- Enjoy the student-centred collaborative approaches (e.g. co-designing residentials and being involved in problem-solving tasks) and learning 'by doing'
- Are involved in experiences that are different and removed from everyday life, yet with real-world relevance
- Undertake challenging activities that provide new opportunities to experience success
- Feel supported by their teachers and peers, with whom they enjoy better relationships.



“Their confidence has increased. They hold themselves in higher esteem. We’re very good in schools at judging on levels and recording achievement based on targets. Camp showed them that we’re able to value them in different ways.”

The Evidence

We know that outdoor learning experiences can improve a young person's feeling of well-being. A meta-analysis of 96 studies⁴⁵ shows that there are significant improvements in independence, confidence, self-efficacy, self-understanding, assertiveness, internal focus of control and decision-making as a result of outdoor adventure programmes. This work, supported by John Hattie, has been further developed by him and in a presentation to the New Zealand Treasury he identified Outdoor/Adventure interventions as one of the 'must have' influences on pupil progress⁴⁶. The importance of such large meta-analyses further strengthened the evidence base for suggesting that Outdoor and Adventure Education is an effective intervention when Neil and Richards published their report in 1998. They concluded that 'large meta-analyses of the impact of outdoor education programmes have shown that they do indeed have a positive impact on participants suggesting that 65% of these who participate in adventure programmes are better off than those who do not participate'⁴⁷.

More recently these findings have been reinforced by Richmond et al, who recognised that; 'research and summative literature have found clear connections between OAE (Outdoor Adventure Education) participation and increased self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-regulation and problem-solving skills as well as group related outcomes like social cohesion, communication and team functioning'⁴⁸.

There has been a long tradition in the field of outdoor learning and adventure education that exposure to well managed risk, sharing such challenges and experiences with others promote both positive relations and a range of character traits. Although such experiences have an impact in isolation, when part of a progressive, integrated and well-planned curriculum the impact grows and can be sustained.

Looking at a study undertaken in Malaysia it was found that 'outdoor education does have impact on behavioural changes of the participants. The four constructs studied cooperation skills, leadership ability, self-confidence and ability to cope with changes are closely related to

individual personalities. Thus, if this change can be achieved through activities such as outdoor education, the personality of an individual can be upgraded towards a more positive attitude. Furthermore, this study showed that the changes occur after exposure to the programme remain in an individual for a certain amount of time.’⁴⁹

The evidence would seem to be clear the outdoors, adventure and challenge activities have a real impact on the character development of young people, the **outdoors is character building**.



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**In 2035 every 18 year old
will be an Outdoor Citizen**



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