



School's Voice: Buckingham Park Primary School

Buckingham Park Primary School's journey with Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL)



Buckingham Park Primary School, located in Shoreham-by-Sea, embraces outdoor learning in everything that they do. All the staff at the school advocate for outdoor play, ensuring that children are engaged in a stimulating environment that supports them in their personal and social development. Prior to beginning the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) programme, the school had already introduced Forest School and were developing their outdoor resources to improve their infrastructure for play. OPAL has supported the school to improve and develop

this existing provision. We visited Buckingham Park Primary School to learn more about the school's OPAL journey from the Deputy Headteacher, Karyn Astle.

Q: Please could you give us an overview of outdoor education in your setting?

A: We have a rich and extensive outdoor area that we have worked hard to make use of throughout our excellent curriculum. We make good use of our woodland area, pond and playgrounds to enrich curriculum lessons such as geography, maths, art, science and PE. Whilst the children have plenty of space in which to play at break times we recognised that some children found the wide spaces challenging and we therefore wanted to develop our grounds to provide greater opportunities and enjoyment for all children. We wanted to add value to the children's experiences at school, so we began to explore the OPAL programme. OPAL is an 18-month mentor-led programme that supports settings on their journey to plan and provide outstanding play opportunities.



We have introduced new resources and spaces for play, and have expanded children's access to other areas. Some of our resources for play include:

- loose parts, such as barrels, tyres, palettes, tarpaulins
- mud kitchens and water stations, which were built by a parent
- giant chalks
- woodland areas and a pond area
- outdoor sound systems, so the children can dance and sing
- scooter boards and pushchairs

Q: How did you begin your journey with the OPAL programme?

A: We began our OPAL journey in September 2023, with a whole school INSET day for our staff, where we explored the fundamentals of play, and the different forms of play. We discussed creative play and the importance of providing opportunities for children to play imaginatively.



The staff have learned to see the benefits of children taking measured risks, such as climbing trees, rolling in barrels, playing with sticks or in muddy puddles and using the pond at playtimes so rather than preventing children from engaging in more challenging play, they support them to play safely and to assess the risk.

We have always involved the children in risk assessments for geography trips in the local and wider areas and we wanted to expand this to include playtimes. A new child-led risk-benefit system has been implemented, which allows us to involve the children in assessing risk. We ask children whether they feel that the play they want to engage in is safe, and whether they need to make it safer. We have seen a notable increase in the children's confidence, independence and sense of responsibility, which has been extremely positive.

Q: What changes have you made as part of your journey with the OPAL programme?

A: The fundamentals of our OPAL journey have been rooted in good early years practice, which we have expanded across the school, from Reception up to Year 6. This has included providing loose parts to enable children to play imaginatively and express themselves more freely. Many items have been donated by parents and the local community and some children within the setting have also been fundraising to purchase new equipment for play. The children can freely access the resources and are supported to manage their own safety and risk. Our next development will be a large sand play area, which has been requested by the children. We always endeavour to listen to pupil voice and take their suggestions into consideration when introducing new play resources.

Q: What impacts have you seen because of these changes?

A: We are still at the beginning of our OPAL journey but the positive impact of the changes we have made so far has been felt by the whole school. Children report that they are increasingly enjoying playtimes because they have access to all areas and different resources. They are using their imaginations more, being physical in different ways and having a lot of fun trying out new types of adventurous play. Football has become less dominant and we have seen a decrease in the number of friendship issues that sometimes occur in the playground and this has translated into better engagement in classroom learning after breaktimes. Some of the children shared their thoughts with us:

"The woods are fun because we're allowed to play games about things that we've learnt about in class. We play games with our imaginations."

"I like the pond because there's frog spawn and we can see wildlife and learn about science."

"I've made a lot of new friends in different year groups. Everyone is included."

"It's bringing people together".

For more information about the OPAL programme and how it can support your setting, please visit the [OPAL website](#). For more information about Learning Outside the Classroom, please visit the [LOtC page on WSSfS](#), or contact Simon Whitmore, Outdoor Education Officer, at simon.whitmore@westsussex.gov.uk.