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## Case Studies

# ST COLM'S CONNECTING WITH NATURE

St Colms High School is just one of WWF's Green Ambassador schools where outdoor learning has many positive benefits.

Clare Devlin is certain about what helps children do their best at school. "Being happy," she says immediately. "If a child is happy, they'll be in a better position to succeed. When they're happy the attendance goes up, the confidence, the results, the engagement. It's remarkable."

Devlin, 49, is a science teacher at St Colm's High School, Draperstown, a small town near Derry in Northern Ireland, and has seen 24 years-worth of pupils through the school. She's also its eco-coordinator, and has overseen an explosion of projects in the past few years, from biodiversity trail-planting, habitat creation, tree-planting and food growing.

She's absolutely convinced these projects have had a critical part to play in improving the mental health of not just the students at the school, but people living in the local area who are able to visit, enjoy and help maintain them.

Northern Ireland has a higher rate of suicide than other UK nations - The Samaritans says the male rate of suicide has increased 82% over the last three decades to almost 30 men per 100,000 in 2015.

Those statistics came home to roost for Devlin when she, her colleagues – and some of the school’s 450 pupils – decided to set up remembrance tree-planting area within the school’s 1-acre biodiversity garden. The Area of Reflection in Susan’s Trail’s now has almost 200 native trees planted in memory of family and friends of local residents. She remembers being awed by the sheer number of people she knew had been affected by mental health issues. “What upset me the most was that I’d taught some of those people as children, and I had no idea at the time that they might have needed help.”



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This year, the school developed a Health Walk through the trail for use by the local community and produced educational resources from pre-school to A-Level. Devlin and her team designed large information signs, planted a native orchard, finished the boundary hedging and had a natural stone entrance wall built.

This, along with a raft of other initiatives including litter picking, a Health Day, birdwatching surveys, vegetable and fruit growing has needed – and got – commitment and involvement from St Colm’s pupils of all ages and interest.

Devlin says the inclusivity of many of the activities has helped draw out children who may find some elements of school challenging. “We have a few children who maybe find it quite difficult to be social. In a conventional setting they might be quite isolated, but when they go to eco activities, they talk to people from different year groups,” she says.

“Everyone can plant. Everyone can paint, or dig, or water. They’re able to go outside and take part.”

Being outside, focusing on activities with a clear purpose – renovating a greenhouse, painting bird feeders, weeding a bed – is therapeutic, says Devlin. “Fresh air, doing a bit of exercise – and the friendships which are made – are hugely beneficial,” she stresses. She also sees a direct correlation to the school’s academic success. “Our eco work is filtering down into how these children behave and achieve generally. They take a pride in what they do in and outside of the classroom.” She talks about growth mindsets, building resilience and positive attitudes as being as important as any spelling test.

What is also important – and hugely successful – is the school’s link with its local community. As well as surrounding primary schools, which often come together at St Colms for events such as WWF’s Wear it Wild day, the school also works with STEPS, a local mental health charity, and volunteers from MenShed, who also work alongside Devlin and the children on most of the projects.

One of them is Malachy McGuigan, 72, whose son Ronan committed suicide in 2000 aged 28. “The children really benefit from being outside, in the flow of the task,” he observes. “Being outdoors is one of the most important things to keep mentally healthy. If you’re going to sit inside all day, you’re not meeting people, talking, breathing the fresh air.”

He feels that the stigma of mental health has changed since he lost his son. “Young people are talking more now. I think Ronan’s life might have been different if he’d had places and people to talk to – like we have here,” he observes.



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