

2.4: Developing relationships

Meaningful relationships with others and the 'other than human' contribute to positive mental health, wellbeing and happiness^{1 2}.

The development (or reawakening) of effective and caring relationships, whether interpersonal or between people and nature, is both a valuable outcome in its own right and key to achieving additional successful outcomes through outdoor learning.

Research shows that participants achieve improvements in self-confidence, communication skills and the ability to face and overcome challenges as a result of the behaviours and attitudes displayed by practitioners³.

The practitioner plays a central role in fostering relationships at all levels, and how they view or perceive those relationships influences the range of facilitation skills they use to achieve positive outcomes.



Practitioner attributes that promote positive relationships include:

- ✓ Patience, knowledge, empathy and care.
- ✓ The ability to inspire and enthuse.
- ✓ Being approachable and relatable.
- ✓ Fostering the development of autonomy and decision-making capability.
- ✓ Raising awareness for participants, of self, others and the environment, and the choices that they can make.
- ✓ Setting appropriate levels of challenge.
- ✓ Being authentic, developing trust and listening actively.
- ✓ Setting and managing expectations for behaviour and outcomes.

? Questions to develop practice:

Do practitioners:

- » Consider the language (verbal and non-verbal/body) they use?
- » Consider and allow for their own emotions, values and biases?
- » Allow for individual hopes and fears when planning and delivering sessions?
- » Ensure everyone feels valued and welcome?
- » Ask for and listen to participants' points of view?
- » Answer their questions with respect?
- » Offer opportunities for participants to share their thoughts and feelings?
- » Foster an environment that enables everyone to feel safe, physically and emotionally?
- » Adopt fully inclusive practices?
- » Make an effort to learn names?
- » Use praise, and encouragement appropriately?
- » Provide opportunities for time outs and breaks for participants?
- » Set and maintain appropriate behaviour expectations?
- » Allay fears and provide alternative strategies to enable participants to maintain dignity in the face of fear?
- » Recognise where participants often get stuck with something and have strategies to help them move past the difficulty?
- » Develop participants cooperative skills as well as their individual and technical skills?
- » Provide opportunities to engage with nature?
- » Consider the cultural background of their participants and how this influences their relationship with nature?

Human – nature relationships

The relationship that people have with the natural environment is increasingly regarded as critical for developing pro-environmental values, behaviours and attitudes⁴, and repeated interventions that enable people to maintain - or rediscover - the connection have been shown to be the most productive⁵. Again, practitioners play a key role in facilitating opportunities to engage with the natural environment beyond a solely activity-focused approach.

Of equal significance are the views, values and beliefs held by the participants themselves. For example, different peoples (for example, indigenous populations of Aotearoa New Zealand⁶, Australia⁷, North America and India^{8 9}) view their relationship with place very differently to western societies, meaning that outdoor learning practice based on a western perspective may be in conflict with deeply held beliefs, and consequently both culturally inappropriate and ineffective.

For practitioners and providers, this represents an opportunity to both understand the cultural background of their participants in order to meet their needs and also an opportunity to learn from their participants¹⁰.

Developing human-nature relationships is explored further in **2.5 Outdoor learning the environment and sustainable practice**.

Further reading

Adams, D., Lewis, C. and Hughton, C. (2024) *Bee-ing and feeling of place* in Rawlings-Smith, E. and Pike, S. (eds) *Encountering Ideas of Place in Education* Routledge: New York

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See also

- 2.0 Understanding quality in outdoor learning
- 2.1 Underpinning structures
- 2.2 Safety management and safeguarding
- 2.3 Equity diversity inclusion and belonging
- 2.5 Outdoor learning the environment and sustainable practice
- 2.6 Theory of change
- 2.7 Continuity and progression

References

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- 2 Mental Health Foundation (2021). Nature: How connecting with nature benefits our mental health. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf>
- 3 Shooter, W., Sibthorp, J. and Gookin, J. (2010) The Importance of Trust in Outdoor Education: Exploring the Relationship between Trust in Outdoor Leaders and Developmental Outcomes, *Research in Outdoor Education*, Vol. 10 , Article 8. DOI: 10.1353/roe.2010.0006
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- 7 Grey, T. and Piggot, F. (2018) Lasting Lessons in Outdoor Learning: A Facilitation Model Emerging from 30 Years of Reflective Practice. *Ecopsychology* 10 (4). pp195-204.
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- 9 Mathur, A. (2002) A response to the generative paradigm, *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 2:2, 127-129, DOI: 10.1080/14729670285200231
- 10 Cohn, I. (2011). Indigenous ways—fruits of our ancestors. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 11(1), 15–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2010.532992>

