

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT OUTWARD BOUND



THE
OUTWARD
BOUND TRUST



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A young person's learning is as much a social and emotional journey as it is academic. Young people with strong social-emotional skills are more likely to thrive in school, not only academically but also in how they engage with others and approach daily challenges.

This report presents the findings of an evaluation which explored the impact of an Outward Bound course on 24 S4 pupils from St. Paul's RC Academy, Dundee, focusing on social-emotional development alongside school-related outcomes over a six-month period.

Key Outcomes



Belonging & Attendance

- 65% of pupils reported increased sense of belonging 6 months post-course.
- Attendance improved for 68% of pupils
- Punctuality improved for 95%.
- Teachers observed stronger peer relationships amongst pupils and increased empathy back in the classroom following their course.



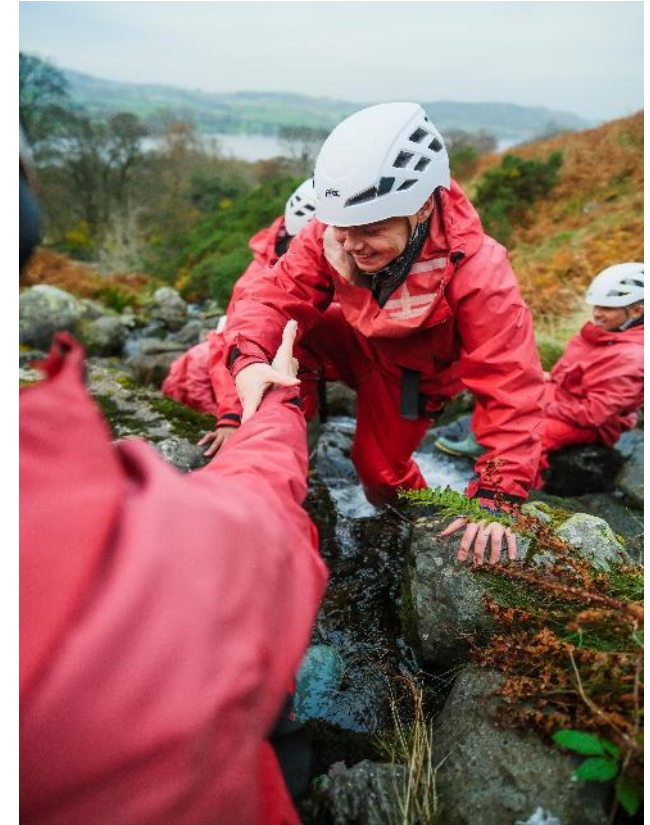
Interpersonal skills & Behaviour

- 81% reported improved interpersonal skills post-course and 76% 6 months later.
- 6 months post-course, the school reported a 36% reduction in behaviour-related referrals
- 45% of students saw a reduction in the number of demerits
- Improved classroom cooperation and confidence noted by staff and parents



Resilience, Decision-making & Academic engagement

- Decision-making skills increased by 86% post-course; 85% at 6 months.
- Resilience increased by 71% post-course and at 6 months.
- Goal-setting improved by 71% post-course; 81% at 6 months.
- 45% of pupils reported improved effort and attitude towards learning at 6 months.
- Teachers observed increased aspirations, perseverance, and academic engagement.



The evaluation indicates Outward Bound enhanced pupils' social-emotional skills, strengthened their school engagement, and contributed to improved attendance, behaviour and academic motivation. These outcomes were sustained over time and supported by feedback from staff, parents, and the young people themselves.

ST. PAUL'S RC ACADEMY, DUNDEE AND OUTWARD BOUND

St. Paul's RC Academy and their young people

St Paul's RC Academy is the most northmost Catholic school in Scotland; indeed, in Europe. The catchment areas for the school are among the most deprived in Scotland with high levels of unemployment, domestic abuse and antisocial behaviour, 74% of the young people live in SIMD 1-4. 45% of the pupils qualify for Pupil Equity Funding and recently, the school has seen a rise in the number of pupils from minority ethnic groups. The young people who came on the residential were in S4 – all working towards their National 5 exams and looking ahead to options after school.

St. Paul's RC Academy and The Outward Bound Trust

Pupils from the school have been coming to Outward Bound since 2015 with a course that focused on employability and soft skills. The five-day residential has run every year since then, apart from during lockdown.

Teachers at the school work together to identify who would most benefit from residentials, often selecting those who show potential but who are not necessarily high-flying, or do not have the family background or support to usually access such opportunities.

The purpose of the Outward Bound course is to help to prepare the young people for their National 5 exams which they take at the end of S4, and their lives beyond secondary school.



“

In my 30+ years in education, going on an Outward Bound residential is one of, if not the most, impactful and life-changing experiences that the young people and staff have had. Over the years, I have seen their confidence grow and an increase in meta-skills, particularly resilience, collaborating, leading and initiative.

Many of the young people have gone on to participate in our school's Duke of Edinburgh programme and to become one of the pupil Senior Leadership Team in S6.

Anna McFarlane, Depute Head Teacher,
St. Paul's RC Academy

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OUR EVALUATION

24 S4 pupils and 2 teachers from St. Paul's RC Academy, Dundee came to our Outward Bound Loch Eil centre in September 2024. The young people were selected for their Outward Bound course based on the following criteria:

- In receipt of Free School Meals
- Live within SIMD 1-4
- Attendance above 80%
- Studying 3 + National Fives

The evaluation explored the impact on young people's social-emotional development alongside school-related outcomes over a six-month period.

The evaluation focussed on the following themes:

- Sense of belonging at school
- Engagement and success in learning
- Relationship building and teamworking skills
- Self-awareness and confidence
- Resilience and openness/willingness



To assess the Outward Bound course's impact on social-emotional skills and school outcomes, data was gathered from multiple sources:

- Young people self-reported on their social and emotional skills and behaviours before, after, and six months post-course¹.
- Teachers provided feedback on young people's social and emotional skills and behaviours at the end of the course and three months afterwards.
- School data (attendance, punctuality, demerits, referrals) were analysed pre- and post-course.
- Parents/guardians completed surveys before and three months after.
- 1:1 interviews were conducted with pupils by the school.

1. To better understand the depth and durability of change, a six-month retrospective pre-course measure was collected 6-months after returning back to school to allow participants to assess their starting point within the learning/school context. By using this measure, we gain rich insight into how pupils' perceptions have evolved over time and how time back in the school context influences their reflection.

PRESENT AND CONNECTED: BELONGING & SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

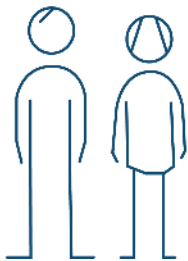
A young person's identity, sense of self and their social skills are strongly influenced by their interactions at school.

A young person who is able to communicate their emotions and ideas effectively, who is able to resolve conflict and collaborate, is more likely to form stronger, more supportive relationships with peers and teachers.

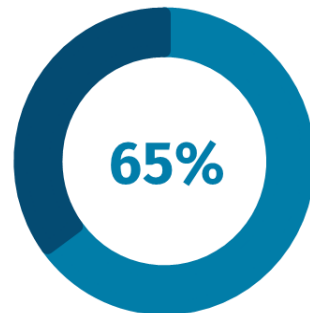
At Outward Bound, communication and teamwork skills are central. When out on the water, in the mountains or during social time, each interaction is key in developing rapport and connection.

Following their Outward Bound course, teachers report improved relationships between the young people² and those around them.

Both accompanying teachers agreed that as a result of attending the course...



the young people had improved relationships with their peers



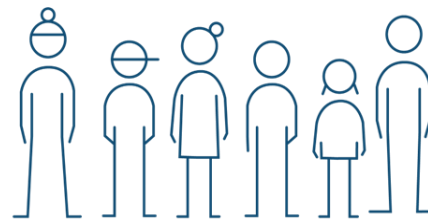
The connections made on the course provide an important foundation on which social skills, awareness and trust develop.



Up to three months after their course, teachers report that young people are understanding of each other and support and encourage their peers more often.

A young person's relationships in turn influence their sense of belonging – their feeling of being accepted and valued.

Belonging is a strong driver of and is foundational to a young person's attendance, motivation and engagement at school; genuine relationships transform school into a place where a young person *wants* to be, where they feel safe, respected and able to contribute.



Of young people reported an increased sense of belonging 6 months after their **COURSE** when compared with their retrospective pre-course score. (N= 20)



I have made many, many memorable friendships [at Outward Bound] with those who I thought I would never be friends with. I now have a trusting bond with a small group of my peers that I wasn't friends with before. I will always cherish the friendship that this course has given me and the fantastic once- in-a-lifetime experience that I was given.

Sarah, St. Paul's RC Academy, commenting 6 months after her Outward Bound course



2. All young people's names have been changed to protect their anonymity; teachers' names have been used only where we have permission to do so.

PRESENT AND CONNECTED: BELONGING & SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Studies have shown that where young people feel connected, accepted and emotionally and physically safe, absenteeism drops and attendance improves³.

Our evaluation echoes this and shows improvements in young people's attendance and punctuality at school in the months following their Outward Bound course.

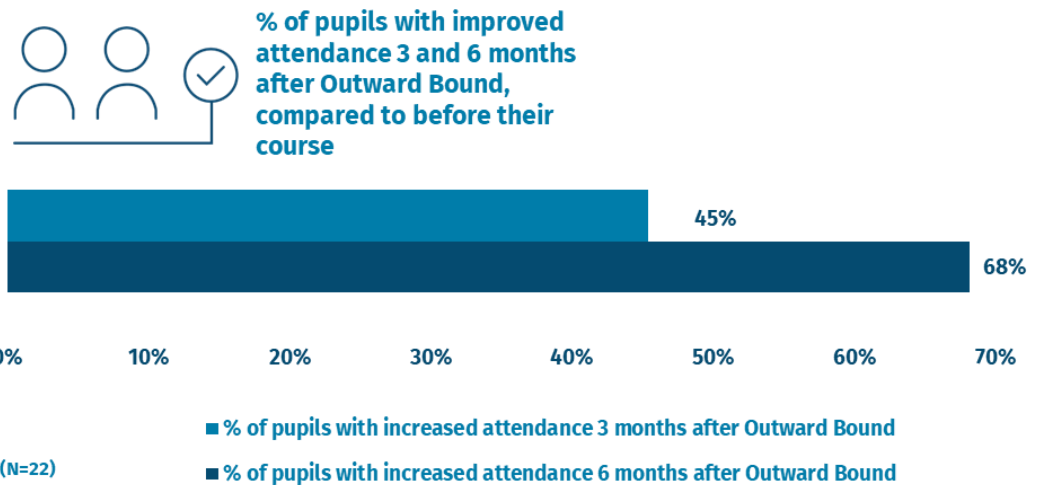
Of the young people who came to Outward Bound, 91% and 95% respectively reported improved punctuality in the 3 and 6 months following their course, compared to before they went.

After Outward Bound, young people reported improved punctuality at school compared to before the course



% reflect young people with reduced instances of lateness (N=22)

As well as improved punctuality, an improvement in pupils' attendance was seen at 3 and 6 months after their Outward Bound course. 45% of pupils reported improved attendance at 3 months post-course which increased to 68% at 6 months post-course.



“

My attitude at school has definitely changed, I feel like more people see me and I definitely am more confident too.

Laura, St. Paul's RC Academy, commenting 6 months after her Outward Bound course

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3. Jerrim, J. & Kaye, N. (2025). The decline in pupils' emotional engagement with school. How does England compare to other countries? (CEPEO Working Paper No. 25-03). UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities. <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:ucl:cepeow:25-03>.

CO-OPERATION AND CALM: INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND BEHAVIOUR

Interpersonal skills play a pivotal role in shaping student behaviour and the culture within a school. When students are encouraged to communicate, collaborate, and resolve conflicts, they're more likely to engage positively with peers and teachers. This leads to fewer behavioural disruptions and a more inclusive learning environment.

At the end of their course, young people reported increased confidence in their interpersonal skills – meeting and working with people who are new to them, this was largely sustained 6 months on.

Young people reported increased confidence in their interpersonal skills

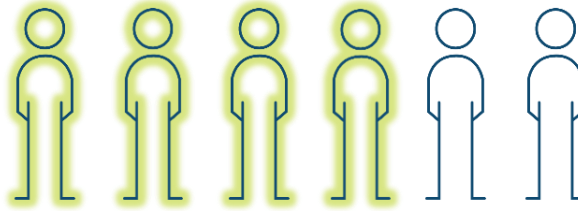


81%
at the end of their course

76%
6 months afterwards

% reflect increases in scores compared to their retrospective pre-course score (N=21)

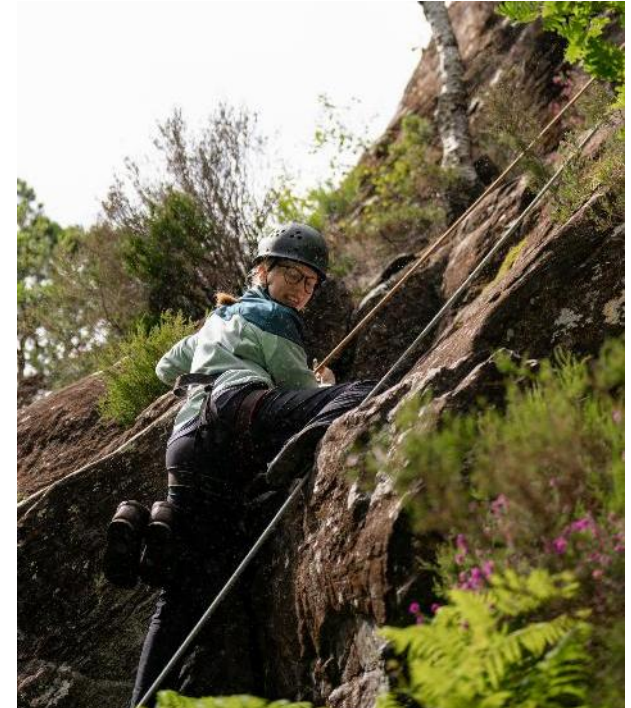
Accompanying staff members observed improvements in the young people's social confidence and in their ability to work collaboratively with others both during the course and up to 3 months afterwards.



3 months after the course, 4 out of 6 (67%) teachers observed young people being more confident in their interactions with peers and adults (N=6).

Research^{4,5} shows that where social-emotional learning and interpersonal skill development are given a focus, it results in:

- Improved classroom co-operation
- Reduced incidents of aggression or defiance
- Increased student engagement and focus



[Since Outward Bound], I feel more confident with sharing my opinions with my classmates and I set myself more goals - I know that I'll struggle, but I'll still try my best and not give up.

Beth, St. Paul's RC Academy, commenting 6 months after her Outward Bound course



4. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Early Intervention Foundation. Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Primary Schools, Guidance report. Cited at <https://www.eef.org.uk/files/pdf/improving-social-and-emotional-learning-in-primary-schools.pdf>

5. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Cited at [Social and emotional learning | EEF](#)

CO-OPERATION AND CALM: INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND BEHAVIOUR

The benefits of investing in social-emotional skill development in an academic context has been widely researched and documented with evidence highlighting reductions in behavioural incidents, improved peer relationships and confidence in communication skills, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds^{6,7}.

Our evaluation shows that working with young people to develop their interpersonal skills whilst at Outward Bound can lay foundations which contribute to improvements back in the classroom as well as at home.

Up to 6 months after the course, we saw a reduction in demerits⁸ and behaviour-related referrals.

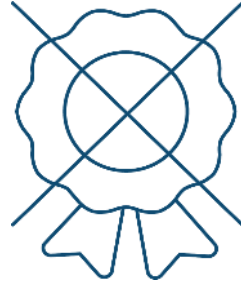
6 months after Outward Bound,



the school reported a

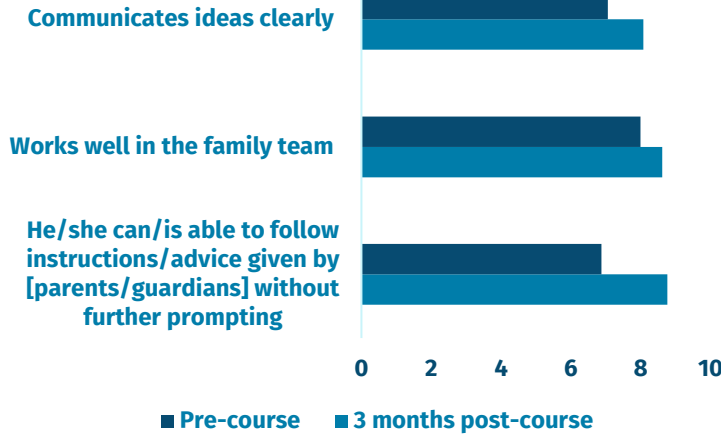
36%
reduction in
behaviour-related referrals
compared to before Outward
Bound (N=22)

6 months after Outward Bound,



45% of students
saw a **reduction**
in **demerits**
compared to before
Outward Bound (N=22)

3 months after the course, parents and guardians shared observations of the young people's improved behaviours and interactions at home;



(N=13) Scale: 1 = No, never; 10 = Yes, always



[Pupils have] grown in confidence and are more vocal in their struggles and successes.

Kelly Christie, Art Teacher, St. Paul's RC Academy



6. Granada A., Hallgarten, J, Hasset A.,(2022) Catalysing Social and Emotional Learning in Schools in England; A policy and practice review. The Centre for Education & youth, Impetus. Cited at [Catalysing-SEL-Report.pdf](#)

7. UCL, [Putting social and emotional skills at the heart of education policy](#) | Research Impact - UCL - University College London

8. Demerit is a mark or record given a pupil for a fault, misconduct, or rule violation

GOAL SETTING, DECISION MAKING, RESILIENCE AND SUCCESS IN LEARNING

When young people have the confidence to set and achieve goals, they gain a sense of direction and purpose — turning aspirations into actionable steps. This builds motivation and focus, which supports academic progress.

At Outward Bound, young people are encouraged to set and work towards communal and individual goals.

At the end of their course, young people report confidence in being able to set personal goals, this was sustained up to 6 months after their course.

Young people report increased confidence in goal setting after Outward Bound



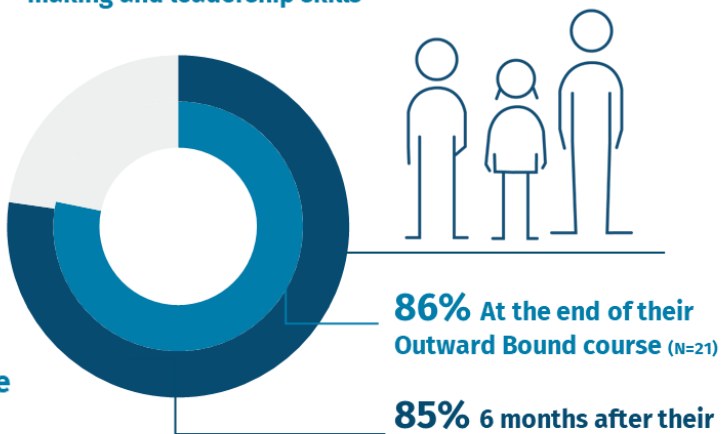
71% At the end of their Outward Bound course (N=21)

81% 6 months after their course (N= 21)

% reflect increases in scores compared to their retrospective pre-course score

Strong decision-making skills empower young people to make choices that align with their goals, whether it's managing time, choosing positive peer influences, or seeking help when needed.

Young people report increased confidence in their decision making and leadership skills



% reflect increases in scores compared to their retrospective pre-course score

Together, these skills form a foundation for improved attitudes towards their learning; they foster independence, perseverance, and strategic thinking — all essential for thriving in school and beyond.



My attitude towards school and education has severely increased, having me input my opinions towards things going on and feeling like I have a voice to change things for myself.

Kara, St. Paul's RC Academy, commenting 6 months after her Outward Bound course



GOAL SETTING, DECISION MAKING, RESILIENCE AND SUCCESS IN LEARNING

Resilience helps them bounce back from setbacks like poor grades or social challenges. Instead of giving up, they learn to reflect, adapt, and keep going — a key trait for long-term success.

3 months after the course, all six teachers reported that the young people attempt things they believe are difficult more often and 67% reported that young people keep going when they encounter setbacks and seek out opportunities to challenge themselves more often.

Young people report increased resilience after Outward Bound



71% At the end of their Outward Bound course (N=21)

71% 6 months after their course (N=21)

% reflect increases in scores compared to their retrospective pre-course score

In the months after their course, teachers and young people report on positive changes in their engagement and attitudes in their classroom.

3 months after their course, 4 out of 6 teachers report young people take more of an interest and put more effort into their studies as well as an increased willingness to make mistakes.

6 months after Outward Bound,

45%

of young people report improved effort and attitudes towards overcoming challenges in their school work,

compared to before their course (N= 20)



% reflect increases in scores compared to their retrospective pre-course score



“

I feel as though school is extremely important and will affect my life in the long run. Since coming back [from Outward Bound] I have focused a lot more on my studies securing an A, 2B's and a C in my prelims, giving me a huge confidence boost as I was not sure I'd actually pass.

Sarah, St. Paul's RC Academy, commenting 6 months after her Outward Bound course

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SUMMARY AND THANKS

These outcomes reflect the lasting impact of an Outward Bound experience—not only in strengthening young people’s confidence, resilience, and interpersonal skills, but also in supporting noticeable positive impact academically. The development of these social-emotional foundations helped many pupils re-engage with their learning and persevere through challenges. Notably, seven of the group went on to achieve their target of 3 or more National Fives, demonstrating how emotional growth and self-belief can translate into tangible academic progress.

We’d like to thank the teachers and pupils at St. Paul’s RC Academy for participating in our research.





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GET IN TOUCH

The Outward Bound Trust's Social Impact Report 2024: www.outwardbound.org.uk/our-impact/social-impact-report

Latest Annual Report and Accounts: www.outwardbound.org.uk/trusts-and-foundations

THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST

HEAD OFFICE

Hackthorpe Hall, Hackthorpe, Penrith, Cumbria CA10 2HX
T: 01931 740000 | E: enquiries@outwardbound.org.uk

LONDON OFFICE

4th Floor, 207 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8XD
T: 0203 301 6481 | E: fundraising@outwardbound.org.uk

GLASGOW OFFICE

Robertson House, 152 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4TB
T: 0141 413 0244 | E: enquiriesscotland@outwardbound.org.uk

CENTRES

Aberdovey, Snowdonia, Wales
Ogwen Cottage, Snowdonia, Wales
Eskdale, The Lake District, England
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Ullswater, The Lake District, England
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