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[Play in natural environments] fulfills basic childhood needs of freedom, adventure and risk-taking.

Jim Greenman (1993)

Children in the Mindstretchers Nature Kindergartens in Perthshire, Scotland, are skilled at assessing risk. We all have different attitudes to risk and the adults in the Kindergartens take their lead from the children who have done their own risk assessments. What is an acceptable risk to one adult or child might not be acceptable to another. One practitioner might be very happy to allow children to jump two metres off a tree trunk while another might become anxious and prevent children from jumping a metre!

In the Nature Kindergartens we remove hazards that children do not see, so we remove deadwood from the tree canopy. But we do not remove challenges or risks that children do see and then choose to undertake. Children can choose to climb up a tree and determine for themselves how far they feel comfortable climbing. If we remove all challenges, children lose the ability to risk assess. Our philosophy is to be risk-aware and not risk-averse and to employ a sense of perspective when assessing risks; whether they are real or perceived, they are everywhere!

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Children in the centre are aware of the stinging nettles and their dangers, what they can be used for, and the remedy for getting stung as the following conversation demonstrates:

Jago (4): "Do you know what's dangerous about nettles?"

Caitlin (4): "They sting you, you know."

Donald (4): "You can make soup with nettles. You need to put a glove on to pick them."

Caitlin: "Rub ourselves with a dock leaf."

Positive outcomes for children

We feel that risk has a role to play in learning. And as research shows, it has the potential to achieve positive outcomes for children (Lewis, 2005; Nichol, 2000). Some of the learning outcomes are that children:

- Become strong stakeholders in their own development.
- Show an increase in confidence and competence.

Beginnings Workshop

risk it!

by Claire Warden

Claire Warden is an educational consultant in experiential learning. As a lecturer in Primary Education at Strathclyde University, she developed training strategies and courses which have been applied to the work at her company, Mindstretchers. Founded in 1996, Mindstretchers embraces a project approach called 'The Living Classroom,' which explores learning in challenging outdoor spaces across Scotland, resources, and the publication of materials. Claire is the author of many books and materials and the founder of two outdoor nurseries in Scotland where children spend up to 90% time outside. The three spaces of inside, garden, and the wild wood are designed as part of a whole environment and is eco-friendly, down to fair trade resources, organic food, and alternative energy sources. Claire is the European education coordinator of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children, which brings together educators, landscape architects, environmentalists, and health workers to support a multi-disciplinary approach to outdoor educational provision. She invites you to join the collaborative and take forward children's rights to outdoor play around the world. Visit her at www.mindstretchers.co.uk.

Beginnings Workshop

What is an acceptable risk to one adult or child might not be acceptable to another.

- Become independent and responsible for their own actions.
- Develop coping mechanisms, problem-solving capabilities and transferable skills which also increases their self-esteem and self-belief.
- Develop a respect for danger, hazards, and experimentation.

We can add to these potential outcomes by looking at the woodland environment, a natural environment that is characterised by instability. This demands alertness by any user, regardless of age.

A 'progression of experiences'

Offering children a risk-rich environment allows adults to help keep children safe by letting them take more risks, whilst guiding them through a progression of experiences. If risks are managed constructively during the play process, a "child's desire to explore further" can be fueled (O'Brien & Murray, 2006). The best safety lies in learning through play how to deal with it rather than avoiding it.

In the Nature Kindergartens we offer and encourage risky play with adults there to scaffold the activity while the children gain confidence and become more competent both in risk assessing and in mastering the activity. When discussing the possible risks of climbing trees, Jacob (4) stated, "Only go as high as it doesn't scare you," while Francis (7) suggested, "If you can climb up a tree, you need to be able to get down. Only go up as far as you feel safe." Practitioners are demonstrating their belief that children have the right to choose to engage in challenges and test their developing skills.

Children in the Nature Kindergartens have access to a wide range of real tools. Even children aged 2 years have free access to tools such as junior hacksaws, hammers, and loppers and are able to choose the tools they would like to use from a 'Tree-Wrap' suspended between the trees in the woods. Children



also help to build fires and light them using a flint, as we feel that children who have the manual dexterity to use the flint also have the maturity to light the fire. There are a number of policies and procedures in place to ensure that all staff have a knowledge of the safe use of tools and the lighting of fires.

Risk-benefit analysis

We feel that you should not make a judgment about risk without at the same time making a judgment about what benefits it might bring to children. For all the activities children need and want to undertake in our settings we do a benefit-risk analysis, a comparison of the risk of a situation relative to its related benefits. As Adams and Thompson (2002), put it, "Risk management that pursues only the objective of

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getting it wrong will be oblivious to significant opportunity costs.”

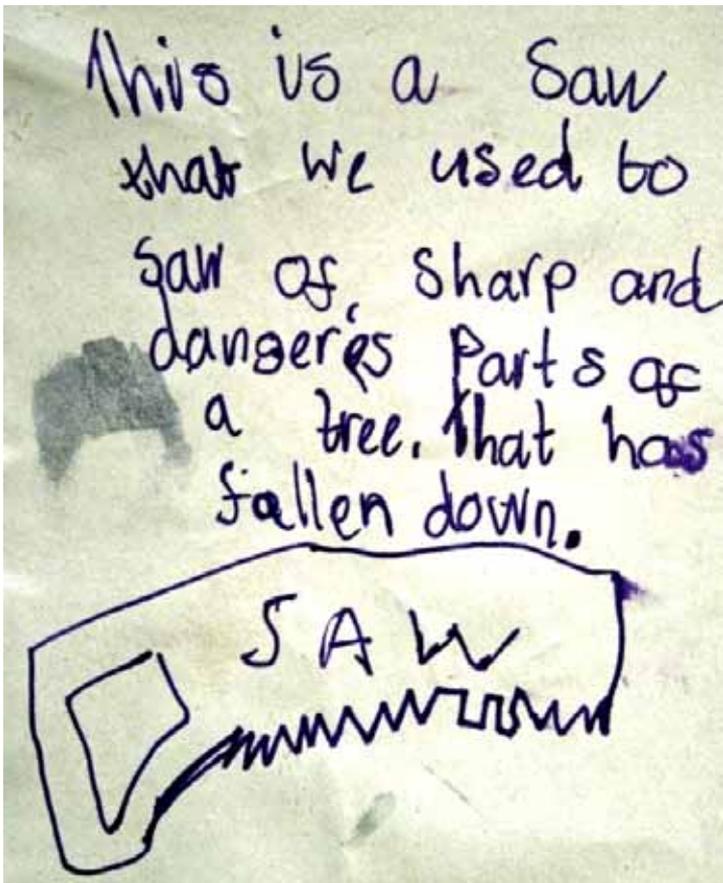
Children seek challenge. In Denmark they refer to that ‘knot in the stomach’ feeling as ‘is i maven’ (which translates as ‘ice in the stomach’). This is seen as a positive emotion and one that both children and adults seek. Sandsester (2009) suggests that we “Keep the exhilaration bordering on the feeling of pure fear; but if pure fear occurs, the play ends with withdrawal.”

We believe that a benefit-risk assessment is not simply a technical matter, but needs to be a value-based exercise, which is dependent on the practitioner’s knowledge about children’s capacities, their resilience, and their ability to make judgments. They also need to understand the benefits of at least some accidents and that some things can only be learnt through experience.

Case Study:

The children at Auchlone Nature Kindergarten discovered a large fallen tree and eagerly explored it. A child scratched herself on one of the sharp branches

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and the group decided that they needed to make the tree safe. They gathered to discuss the risks and suggested ways of making the tree a safer place to play on. Tools were selected and children worked together as a group using a variety of tools they had selected themselves. Some of the comments were:

“You can get bark in your eyes.”

“You might fall when the bark comes off; I need a metal hammer to break the loose bits.”

“I am getting all these bits off so children don’t get splinters.”

“This is a really sharp bit. Pass me the mallet so I can chop it off.”

“Is it safe to hold on? It is a bit wobbly.”



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The adult pointed out a hazard the children had not been aware of — a dead branch suspended in another tree above the space the children were working in! After a discussion, it was decided that the adult needed to climb up and tie a rope onto the branch. Then the children would work together to pull the dangerous branch off and away from the space. The children persevered at this task for nearly a week and at the end declared that they had created the best climbing frame ever! We agreed!

As Bundy (2009) concluded, “The real risk is . . . there is ‘no risk.’” Children need the challenges inherent in outdoor play and adults’ encouragement in this “risky” play.

References

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