

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2012

The Joys of Appropriate Risk-Taking

This edition of Wonder explores one Universal Principle for Connecting the World's Children with Nature:

We believe it is important for families and educators to support children's appropriate risk-taking and exploration in nature.

(Find the complete list of principles in the Environmental Action Kit at worldforumfoundation.org/nature.)

A question that more and more adults are asking, world-wide:

"Have we, in our well-meaning attempts to 'keep our children safe' inadvertently taken much of the joy of

exploration and the thrill of appropriate risk-taking out of childhood?"

Have we inadvertently communicated to them that they are not capable of keeping themselves safe, of competently negotiating the world around them? Many writers and researchers believe so. The research section of the Environmental Action Kit includes the following summary of Joan Almon's 2009 *Exchange* article, "Appropriate risk in outdoor play can minimize accidents." Almon explains that people freely admit they are afraid of accidents in play and want to minimize risk. Yet playgrounds that offer genuine risk tend to have fewer accidents than traditional playgrounds. Almon writes:

"Give children real risk and they rise to it; they learn how to handle it. Give them sanitized play spaces, and children often are less conscious of risk and have accidents, or take outlandish risks for the sheer excitement of it all."

In the personal reflections you are about to read, three people from different parts of the world ask us to consider how we can keep our children safe and empowered at the same time.

References

Almon, J. (2009, March / April). The fear of play. *Exchange*, 186, 42-44.

Future Issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your personal reflections and ideas related to the following *Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature* to Tara (tarah@natureexplore.org):

For Design Professionals: We believe children's voices (children's ideas and adults' observations of children's use of space) should be central to the design process.



Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

Personal Reflection: Children's Appropriate Risk-taking and Adventurous Play in Nature

by Helle Nebelong, Denmark

Imagine that I am a child in your care:

- Is it possible to pick a flower on our playground? Am I allowed to dig holes in the soil?
- Is there access to water, and could I play with both sand and water and maybe even make mud cakes?
- Is the terrain shaped, so I can run up and down hillocks and toboggan during winter?
- Are there plenty of trees and shrubs I can climb and hide in, and that will throw leaves, flowers, seeds, fruit, and cones during the season, which I can pick up for play?
- Are there big stones so that I can practice balancing and climbing and learn how to act in life without getting hurt?
- Are there puddles to stomp in and that freeze in the winter so that I can crunch them?

The current situation around the globe, where urbanization is a growing trend, is that most children lack daily access to nature. Designers and educators design playgrounds to be safe places for children to play. Rules and standards determine the design. Even though access to nature and loose materials on the playground challenges children's motor skills and the senses, and appeals to their creative and kinesthetic development, it is not valued. The child's real need for appropriate risk-taking and adventurous play is ignored by adults who do not take the importance of play seriously.

The standardized playground is a planned area with fixed equipment, and often it's fenced: a 'Kit-Fence-Carpet' playground as the English landscape architect Helen Woolley calls them. The standardized playground has 'fast play' on the menu: nutritionally poor play, which is quickly over and becomes a forgotten pleasure.

The limited learning a child gets from the standardized playground can roughly be reduced to:

- learning to queue up and wait for one's turn (in the queues to the slide and swings), and
- the pleasure of anticipating one's turn is greater than the experience of sliding down itself.

I have for many years argued that the standardized playground is dangerous, just in another way: When the distance between all the rungs in a climbing net or a ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where he puts his feet. Standardization is dangerous because play becomes simplistic and the child does not have to worry about his movements. On the other hand, a natural playground fosters the ability to concentrate on estimating distance and height. Taking risks requires a lot of practice and is necessary for a child to be able to cope successfully with life.

How the schoolyards and playgrounds are arranged has a decisive influence on how much and how children move around. The more space, the more room there is for all kinds of running and playing ball games. It seems obvious! There may also be small surprises: for example, uneven surfaces and other challenges force children to navigate deliberately and move their

bodies in competent ways without getting injured. One must learn to crawl before walking; and you must be able to run, skip, jump, balance, roll, and twist to manage life.

This knowledge is now well documented and should be part of the basic training curriculum of educators' and landscape architects' programs. We are the ones influencing children's and young people's outdoor spaces and we have a huge responsibility to ensure that the sites we design are catering to children's natural and innate desire to play, move, and challenge the body's ability.

Consider this:

- How can you help inform others of the value of designing natural play spaces that encourage children's exploration and risk-taking? How will you help them see the advantages over traditional playground designs?
- How can ideas that support appropriate risk-taking and exploration be incorporated into new or existing designs for children's outdoor spaces in the place(s) you work?

PHOTO BY HELLE NEBELONG



Personal Reflection: Let's Keep Children as Safe as Necessary, Not as Safe as Possible!

by Johanna Booth-Miner, United States

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Over time, risk-taking and its view in society have changed even in the short span from my childhood to that of my young grandchildren. We live in a litigious society in the United States (and increasingly, in other parts of the world as well) and it takes a continuous effort to not overlook this important ingredient of childhood. I strongly believe that children gain and grow through risk-taking and exploration in the natural world; the natural environment lends itself to scaffolding of risk-taking skills for young children. Here at Live & Learn Early Learning Center in Lee, New Hampshire, we have set up the outdoor classrooms to include ways for children to appropriately take risks as they develop and grow. There are real tools for digging and large sticks and planks for moving and building. We have set up ropes for balance and climbing, as well as rope swings. Our climbing areas are created from large branches from trees. Our preschoolers and kindergartners can explore a stream by walking in it and investigate with sticks. The environment is a 25-acre farm with animals that lends itself to a whole variety of discoveries daily.

All of this requires that we have our families on board with our approach to risk-taking. Part of our family orientation includes visiting and playing in our outdoor classrooms. The families are the clients and must be comfortable with their children coming home dirty, sometimes with a skinned knee or scrape, and full of stories of new discoveries and adventures. We hold 'stay and play' afternoons where families engage with their children in many of our activities. We engage in conversations about thoughts and fears that we all own as adults and how we can give their children new and acceptable risks to build fundamental skills. Here at Live & Learn, having both male and female staff helps balance risks and exploration in nature. We make it a priority to take time to have the one-on-one conversations with families and make sure we are listening with curiosity to them.

There are two key ingredients to risk-taking with children: one is the adults and the other is time. As the adults in early learning centers, we must model exploration with enthusiasm, provide permission and support to take risks, and slow down to give children time to dream, imagine, touch, feel, and construct. Through acceptable risk children build upon their own ideas, feel empowered physically and emotionally, and develop a sense of place or belonging in the environment. I do not want to be responsible for raising a generation of children who have been bubble wrapped. What will happen when there is no caution tape or six warnings before the child reaches the edge? Healthy risk-taking prepares us all to be observant and make good decisions.

Consider this:

- How do you help children make decisions?
- What do you do to help children learn to try and sometimes fail?
- What experiences do children need to support their explorations?
- How do you communicate the value of this work with families?



PHOTO BY JOHANNA BOOTH-MINER

Personal Reflection: You Have to Let it Happen

by Kierna Corr, Northern Ireland

I am a nursery teacher in a primary school in Northern Ireland. The children in my class are aged 3 and 4 and spend one year with me before moving on to primary school. In the past six years, I have completely changed my approach to outdoor play and risk-taking. I attended a course with the brilliant Margaret Edgington who spoke on developing outdoor play areas using tyres, milk crates, tree stumps, etc. Something she said resonated with me: "If you can't think of three good reasons (apart from a real safety issue) of why a child shouldn't do something, you have to let it happen."

Now in my playground, children play with sticks, climb up the slide, move large items around the playground, and play and dig in mud. I have had no serious injuries beyond the usual bumps and bruises one would expect in any early childhood setting. Actually, I have observed an improvement in gross- and fine-motor skills, language and vocabulary, as well as problem solving. I am very up front with new parents about our program's outdoor play approach during parent inductions and through a blog. In fact, I have found that many parents choose my nursery program *because* of this.

When I am working with children, I gradually introduce materials and include many opportunities for safety checks. As the weeks progress, I add different pieces of equipment to the playground that allow the children a greater range of exploration with 'loose parts.' The mantra for all adults outdoors is: 'If they can get up, they can get down.' We would never lift a child up onto anything. They have to be able to navigate that for themselves.

This kind of play extends beyond our playground. We have regular visits to local woodland areas. Here children climb trees and explore in a safe, natural environment. When we have joined up with other schools that do not share our approach, there is a marked difference between my class and others. The children from my class who have experienced open play with a wide range of materials move about more independently. It is wonderful to see young children scramble up steep banks, use a rope, climb trees, and fish in ponds with confidence in their own skills and a sense of independence separate from adults.

Recently, during a course I attended, a photo was presented to the teachers. It showed a child standing on some crates pouring water down a large pipe. This photo looked like it could have been taken in my playground on any given day. I was quite shocked when it drew gasps from the room of nursery teachers. I had assumed everyone was engaged in this type of play. Many teachers in my area are not yet informed of the value of children's risk-taking, but awareness is on the rise.

Since beginning my blog (www.nosuchthingsasbadweather.blogspot.com), I have met other bloggers around the world who also encourage their classes to take risks and be responsible, active learners. This makes me hopeful for the next generation. One key initial step I encourage for all practitioners is to be honest with parents and bring them on board with your risk-taking approach. The benefits are well established and I assure you that I have seen the benefits firsthand.

Consider this:

- How does your outdoor safety approach teach children, encouraging them to learn about their capabilities and limitations?
- How do you communicate with families in your program about the value of children's risk-taking and rambunctious outdoor play?
- As an educator, are you a responsible risk-taker? (Read "Giving Ourselves Permission to Take Risks" by Elizabeth Jones in the July / August 2012 issue of *Exchange* to learn more about why we all grow from taking risks.)
- How do you scaffold rather than forbid children's risk-taking?

References

Jones, E. (2012, July / August). Giving ourselves permission to take risks. *Exchange*, 206, 46-51.



PHOTO BY KIERNA CORR