

Great learning is out there

Hilary Long shares her experience running an outdoor kindergarten in Glasgow, in often rainy western Scotland, to explain the benefits of child-led learning in a natural environment and the practical issues to consider.



When thinking about this article I looked back at the memories I have of my own childhood. My fondest and most poignant are of being released at an early age from a house full of kids with a sandwich and told to go and play and come back when I was hungry! My siblings and I swam in the local river, climbed trees, picked windfall apples, ate berries, walked through beautiful fields full of cowslips, collected bugs and got extremely dirty. My mum had no washing machine and we had little money. We had no television until I was a teenager. And no computers!

I am now the manager of an outdoor kindergarten in Glasgow. The only urban-based

outdoors all-day, in-all-weather kindergarten in Scotland. When I say this to people, they often look at me as if I must be mad! The weather in the west of Scotland can be truly awful.

The other day one of our parents told me that her younger child who attends an indoor nursery had not been out in the fresh air there since October. I felt very sad. To me this is a terrible betrayal of children and of childhood. Also when children do go out it is invariably into dull, boring, concrete spaces – ‘playgrounds’ where plastic toys proliferate.

Deep learning

Why does this make me unhappy? I believe the best

early years practitioners have a deep and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of child development, empathy with what children need and most importantly love them and have a wonder and awe about how they learn and develop. Free, unstructured, child-led and child-initiated play is the bedrock of deep learning. Sadly in Scotland we are bombarded with paper work, 137 experiences and outcomes at the early level of Curriculum for Excellence, assessment, moderation and external scrutiny to judge how we are doing. Not very child-centred in my personal and professional opinion. I support staff to keep bureaucracy to a minimum. We observe

and record important aspects of children’s learning as they experience it and we give lots of verbal feedback to parents and take photographs to share with them and the children. The mantra is ‘people not paper’.

The daily routine

So how do we do things at our kindergarten? We have an indoor base in a local church hall where we get ready for the great outdoors. Appropriate clothing is essential for children and staff. At 9am we head off for the beautiful landscape of Pollok Country Park. We have ‘camps’ there that the children have chosen and here we set up a toilet tent, tarps and hammocks for children to sleep in if they need to. The children

carry their own rucksacks and lunchboxes. They make the decisions about rope swings, rope climbing-frames, dens to build and trees to climb. Often, at the children's request we head off on an 'adventure' to see the Highland cattle, the horses, the gardens around Pollok House, walk along the River Cart, talk to the rangers and the gardeners and in autumn we are invited to help harvest the crops. It is not all about 'knowing' about nature but about what happens to children when they are 'in' nature.

Planning and assessment

I invariably get questioned about planning and assessment and how this can be done. 'What are the children learning?' people ask. Children must play 'constructively', we are told. The team here would dispute what is often defined as constructive play. As for the former, our kids are brilliant learners. They learn in their own way, at their own pace and do not experience that dreadful feeling of failure.

Our ethos, vision, values and aims underpin everything we do and achieve and outdoor learning in the natural environment runs through everything we do. When I interview staff, I do it in the woods – preferably on a day when the weather is at its most challenging! I know straight away if they are up for it. It should be a condition of employment with children, even in an indoor setting, to enjoy and be prepared to play

outdoors in all weathers. We also have the added value of a higher than average number of male practitioners, who often feel more comfortable outdoors than in traditional settings.

Standing back?

Some colleagues in other settings have questioned our ethos. Often they say that parents do not want their children outdoors getting wet and dirty. Getting parents on board involves having a convincing argument, grounded in research, about why children need to play outdoors – preferably with minimum adult interference. Once adults get involved – unless it is at the child's invitation – it changes the dynamics and ownership of their play and learning.

This raises another question about the role of adults in early years settings. Relinquishing control and being 'in the chorus', rather than the conductor of the learning, can be a difficult mindset to change. Standing back and observing is as demanding as being the leader of learning. It means that robust risk assessment is as essential as appropriate clothing. We cannot eliminate all risk but we can manage it.

In the words of Lady Allen of Hurtwood who was President of the World Organisation of Early Childhood Education and campaigned for the passing of the Children's Act in 1948: 'Better a broken bone than a broken spirit'. But I should point out that we haven't had

any broken bones or spirits. More children break bones falling out of bed than trees.

The great outdoors is a wonderful leveller. Often children who find indoor learning daunting thrive outdoors – particularly boys, who have a deep biological need to be out and about being physically active. Unfortunately in Britain we have politicians, policy-makers and educators who think there is no time to 'waste' on running about and playing.

Literacy, maths and much more

So how would we convince them of the advantages? Learning outdoors is multi-sensory and we know that young children learn using all of their senses. We use very few commercial resources – just a few recycled pots, pans and tools for digging. Our children use what they find in the woods and are very creative. The learning environment is open-ended, it reduces stress and anxiety. Attention spans are better. In terms of literacy, children listen to and read stories, identify signs and create letters with pebbles, chalk and so on. Playing pretend games, they communicate with one another in their own language. There are great opportunities for maths too – discovering patterns in the natural world, sorting, matching, grouping and classifying materials.

At a social skills level, children cooperate and negotiate – without adults sorting out all their disputes. Emotional

intelligence is very important to us. In relation to health and well being our children are leaner, better coordinated, have higher activity levels and more robust immune systems. They are very resilient. And we get the joy of seeing them have fun!

On a personal note, swapping my suit for waterproofs and wellington boots has liberated me after 40 years of work. I am happier, healthier and not nearly as stressed. Of course we have rules and routines but they are agreed with children and sensible. We want our children to be questioning rather than just accepting of whatever is put in front of them. On the BBC Newsround website, under a story about whether playgrounds are 'too dangerous', I read this comment by a 13 year old boy:

To be honest, adults can be very stupid at times. They ban everything for health and safety reasons. If they are going to ban very simple stuff (like tag) they might as well lock all kids in empty rooms to keep them safe. Kids should be allowed to experiment and try things. Otherwise when they grow up they will make very stupid mistakes through not getting enough experience in childhood.

I would also really recommend reading Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (updated edition 2008, Algonquin).

Hilary Long, manager at Woodland Outdoor Kindergartens, Glasgow.

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Woodland Outdoor Kindergartens offers courses for practitioners on outdoor learning in a natural environment. See www.woodlandoutdoorkindergartens.com for dates and details.