

Scary stuff?

‘Because it’s exciting’: children enjoy – and need – the experience of danger Forest School can offer. But educators need a deeper understanding to handle it effectively, *Martin Pace* explains

Play, and in particular physical play, is a way for children to test limits and refine skills. As they walk, run, climb and hang, children strengthen the large muscle groups in their bodies and learn how to move through space. Research shows that such gross motor activities are ideally learnt in nature where there are steep slopes, rough cliffs, and trees.

A natural environment affords more intense and varied physical activity than most nursery play areas, and it is especially in natural environments that children will readily engage in risky play. It is with these ideas in mind that at Reflections Nursery in Worthing, West Sussex, we take children into local woodland for Forest School sessions each week.

It is critical to our approach to give children regular opportunities to play in nature where they will climb and jump off trees, swing on rope swings and cross ditches. Since 2009, we have taken some 200 children aged three and four years on more than 500 woodland sessions. We take 12 children on each session for three hours at a time, accompanied by three adults whose principal role is to observe.

During these sessions we recently noted a group of three boys who would frequently play the same game. Usually led by Oscar, the fastest runner in the group, they would give each other non-verbal cues, then chase round and round a clearing in the woodland, at very high speed. They demonstrated amazing skill, avoiding obstacles at an astonishing pace, and often glancing backwards over their shoulders to keep track of each other while running.

Children do, of course, frequently run. But it was the repetition of this activity with small refinements and increasing agility which caught our attention. Children will often seek out thrills in a gradual way, giving them the opportunity to master the chal-



lenges involved. In this case, the children initiated their own play, using the terrain and speed as a challenge. They refined their skills together, becoming more adept as each week passed, each a willing participant in what was clearly a ‘risky’ activity.

AT HOME IN THE TREES

We find that, after only a few weeks of forest sessions, many children can become very skilled in tree climbing. They quickly develop body and spatial awareness and will readily use trees as a vantage point, or a place of relaxation and contemplation. We frequently observe children perfectly balanced and completely at home in trees, often with very little of their bodies actually in contact. However, most important to our approach at Reflections is how children use such skills in pursuit of their own agenda or goals.

In 2013/14 we had a sculpture focus throughout the nursery, helping children to develop their skills working in three dimensions. There was much sculptural work with a range of media and in particular, clay. Adam, a child who had regularly visited the woodland, was engaged in the project and wanted to do some clay work half way up a tree in the nursery garden. At home in a tree, he climbed a structure we had installed against one our trees a few years before and began

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working with some clay he had taken into the tree with him.

As he ran out of clay, Ronnie, who had also attended Forest School, climbed up with more clay to help Adam complete his task. Completely comfortable up the tree, the two boys continued their sculptural work, many feet off the ground.

Research has pointed us towards the fact that children seek out risky play, not just in spite of its inherent dangers but often because of them.

Deb Wilenski, pedagogical advisor at Reflections, queries the language we use as adults about risky play, stat-

ing that she has never heard a child speak of 'risk' or 'risky' play; rather they refer to what they are doing as 'scary', 'exciting', 'dangerous' or 'tricky', and often with some relish.

Children's pursuit of danger raises an interesting question for the role of the adult, especially in the forest. 'What is the "appropriate" way,' Deb asks, 'to meet a muddy hillside, a tree with no hand-holds, a patch of overgrown brambles and thorns?'

If children are showing us they want to encounter danger, what decisions does this leave adults about how to ensure that children are challenged yet safe?

THREE ELEMENTS

As educators, we have a responsibility and a duty to ensure that children get the opportunity to test and refine their physical skills and encounter a reasonable level of danger. And this can only be handled effectively from a standpoint of deep understanding, not a laissez-faire approach.

In my view, three key elements are required:

- a strong awareness of the hazards in any activity. Adults should be able to identify any risk presented and mitigate those risks as required. Forest School training is an excellent starting point in support of this.
- a deep knowledge of the children involved. Having visited outdoor nurseries in Denmark where chil-

dren have much greater levels of independence and risk-taking than in many UK settings, the key factors which make this possible are experienced educators who know their children and work closely with them over time to develop a strong sense of mutual trust.

- educators need to be courageous. Research has shown that as educators, when we are presented with risk in children's activities we can often be concerned with managing our own anxieties, rather than the risk itself. The fear of being evaluated as a poor practitioner or the fear of litigation can override a decision in favour of supporting children's risky play.

At Reflections we talk about environments being as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible. Children have the right to play. I believe that children also have the right to risky play, and that might sometimes require us as educators to take considered risks on their behalf. ■

Martin Pace is director of Reflections Nursery & Forest School and author of I Love Forest School (Bloomsbury 2014). Reflections run professional development days on themes including the Reggio approach; and Forest School. The next professional day is in October 2014, entitled Forest School & Risky Play with guest speaker, Tim Gill. For further details visit www.reflectionsnurseries.co.uk

I LOVE FOREST SCHOOL

I Love Forest School: Transforming early years practice through woodland experiences by Martin Pace (Bloomsbury Publishing) sets out the benefits that children experience when learning through a Forest School approach and explains how these programmes have influenced practice at Reflections Nursery & Forest School, Worthing, an outstanding setting and winner of *Nursery World* UK Nursery of the Year 2009/10.

The book discusses how the concept of children playing in the outdoors is not new, but the rebalancing of our attitudes towards riskier play and enthusiasm for getting

children outside is critical to their development. It also demonstrates the connection between projects in the nursery and the forest and how these have contributed to children's learning.

Themes covered include:

- How to support risky play
- Supporting children's theorising through provocations
- Lessons learned from Danish forest nurseries
- Transforming environments and practice

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Great expectations

Getting it wrong is vital to success, argues *Johann Christoph Arnold*

Children need a chance to learn that failure often teaches us more than success. Everyone goes through hard times, and these can be crucial for the development of a child's moral character. How else will they learn that the greatest triumph is the one that follows a defeat?

In his classic *Basics of Education*, German educator Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster argues that the comforts of contemporary civilisation have cushioned life so completely that many people grow up without the capability to deal with anything that makes demands on them. Faced with the simple unpredictability of life – not to mention pain, suffering, hard work, or sacrifice – they helplessly succumb, Foerster writes, 'as if to hard blows... They do not know what to make of frustration – how to make something constructive of it – and see it only as something that oppresses and irritates...'

The tendency of parents to hover over their children, trying to eliminate all danger, risk, and frustration life, can be damaging. In an article entitled 'Why Parents Need to Let Their Children Fail', teacher Jessica Layey writes: 'I have worked with quite a number of parents who are so overprotective of their children that the children do not learn to take responsibility (and the natural consequences) of their actions. The children may development a sense of entitlement and the parents then find it difficult to work with the school in a trusting, co-operative, and solution-focused manner, which would benefit both child and school.'

'These are the parents who worry me the most – parents who won't let their child learn. You see, teachers don't just teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. We teach responsibility, organisation, manners, restraint, and foresight. These skills may not get assessed on standardised testing, but as children plot their journey into adulthood, they are, by far, the most important skills I teach.'

There are wonderful things to be learned from trying, failing, and trying again. If a project is not up to standard, a good teacher can help a child think about improvement and inspire him to do better. But that lesson is lost if the parent has completed the project for the child. And what message does that communicate? At some point, the child will need to face a challenge without a parent at his side. Will he look around for someone to take over, or will he step up? If parents praise his half-hearted efforts so as not to threaten his 'self-esteem', will he ever know the satisfaction of a difficult job well done?

From Their Name is Today – Reclaiming Childhood in a Hostile World by Johann Christoph Arnold. *Community Playthings* is offering free copies. Visit www.communityplaythings.co.uk

