Workshop:

Setting up the Outdoor Classroom

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What are the Benefits of Nature Play?

- Play, particularly free, unstructured and outdoors is essential for Healthy brain and socioemotional development and in the early years of life is far more important than direct instruction (FROST, 1998; Szalavitz and Perry, 2010)
- Reduces stress. Green plants and vistas reduce stress among highly stressed children. Locations with greater number of plants, greener views, and access to natural play areas show more significant results (Wells and Evans, 2003).
- Nature supports creativity and problem solving. Studies of children in schoolyards found that children engage in more creative forms of play in the green areas. They also played more cooperatively (Bell and Dyment, 2006). Play in nature is especially important for developing capacities for creativity, problem-solving, and intellectual development (Kellert, 2005).
- Improves social relations. Children will be smarter, better able to get along with others, healthier and happier when they have regular opportunities for free and unstructured play in the out-of-doors (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005).
- The opportunity for risk-taking improves children's competencies in risk management and risk perception. In addition, social skills may be enhanced through opportunities for collaboration with older peers, as children collectively decide and learn how to manage risk. (Bundy et al., 2009)
- Play changes the structure of the developing brain in important ways, strengthening the connections of the neurons (nerve cells) in the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain considered to be the executive control centre responsible for solving problems, making plans and regulating emotions. (journalofplay.com Pellis, Pellis and Himmler 2014)
- Nature Supports multiple development domains. Nature is important to children's development in every major way—intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually and physically (Kellert, 2005).
- Access to play improves classroom behaviour and academic performance (Pellegrini and Smith 1998) and enhances their readiness to learn, learning behaviours and ability to problem solve (Ginsburg, 2007)

What's the purpose of play?

"It is a means by which children develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and moral capacities. It is a means of creating and preserving friendships. It also provides a state of mind that, in adults as well as children, is uniquely suited for high-level reasoning, insightful problem solving, and all sorts of creative endeavours."

Peter Gray (Freedom to Learn)

QUESTION: What is the purpose of using nature as the teacher?

SOME TYPES OF PLAY

- Sensory Play
- Physical Play
- Social Play
- Dramatic Play
- Risky Play
- Creative Play
- Game Play

SENSORY PLAY

Sensory play is a key element to a child's development. It develops cognitive skills, language and motor skills as well as helping children to learn and make sense of the world around them. As children play, their senses are stimulated; their 5 main senses and the two additional senses related to balance and proprioception. Having real world experiences is essential for children in developing these sensory systems.

What is needed:

- Opportunities to explore and experiment
- Time
- Space
- A range of materials (loose parts) to manipulate and exercise their curiosity, preferably natural environments

Curiosity, Wonder and Exploration are key elements of sensory play.

Risky Play – 8 Elements

- Great heights
- Rapid speeds
- Dangerous tools
- Dangerous elements
- Rough and tumble
- Disappearing/getting lost
- Vicarious
- Impact

Ellen Sandseter

Schema: is the technical term for play urges. You know, when you ask your child to stop jumping on the couch and they look at you and keep doing it! It's not necessarily that they are defying you but that the urge to jump is just too great. They continue to look at you as you are their safety net. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule and sometimes they know that their parents don't want them to do something, but they just can't help themselves.

Maybe you have gone for a walk and your children are so engrossed in the drain down the road, posting sticks that your suggestion to keep moving feels like it has fallen on deaf ears…for the 10th time. They are acting out the schema of posting and understanding the schema called elements – more on those shortly.

What I have found is that the more parents and teachers understand what these schema or urges are, the less battles there are. Why? Because when you can recognise what the urge is that they are following, you can either leave them to it, redirect it, suggest alternatives or provide other ways for them to play out that urge. For example, do you sometimes find stones, leaves, twigs, nuts etc… inside your children's pockets? Gathering/Collecting is one of the urges that children love to follow. My youngest is very into that now, so I tend to bring a bag with us to places we go so she can put her collections in the bag.

Why is it important for them to follow these urges? In simple terms, they are signs of brain development. They are the building blocks of the brain and by following these urges children are making connections in their brains to help with their learning and development. Enabling children to follow or play out these schema means you are essentially helping their brain to develop into the best brain it can be. The opposite is also true.

The more we know about them, the more we can recognise and support their play urges which in turn helps support their development.

There are many opportunities for schema to play out in an outdoor setting. I feel that schema link well to the concept of child led play as essentially when children are leading their play, there will most likely be a schema in there somewhere. Nature Play is an ideal opportunity for children to play out their urges and develop their brains.

Here is a list of 20 Schema with a brief description of what that might look like and resources or loose parts that can support that schema.

Enclosure -getting inside something e.g. huts, boxes, shelters, bags, washing baskets OR eggs in carton, making pens for animals, wrapping a leaf around an acorn

Gathering/collecting – Gathering items of interest or starting collections with those things e.g. pebbles, stones, shells, sticks, pinecones, leaves. Sometimes there is 'Indian giving' involved (giving a stone to you and then taking it back)

Transporting – carrying what you have collected to another place or moving something form one place to another. E.g. trolley, wheelbarrow, basket, bag, pocket, bucket, push chair

Deconstruction – Taking something apart, knocking it down, wrecking it. E.g. blocks, Duplo or Lego, stones, tee pee huts, piles of leaves

Construction – Putting something together, constructing a model / 3D model. E.g. using clay, sand, dirt, sticks, stones, branches, cones, leaves, pine needles, plywood, nails, planks of wood, tarpaulins, blankets, sheets, pellets

Enveloping / Covering / Burying – Making something disappear or put something under something. E.g. using leaves, soil, sand, sticks, stones, sheets, linen, bedding, paper, cello tape. Use a spade for partial burials

Families – Creating families with people or other items that represent families. E.g. people, dolls, stones, sticks, animals, pillows, blocks, Lego

Posting – Putting something in a space or hole (develops spatial intelligence). E.g. balls, blocks, toy animals, paper in a slot, clothes in a basket, pipe cleaners in a colander, cups, cylinder, acorns into a tree

Trajectory – Throwing something, dropping something, planned or unplanned. Balls, stones, sticks, sand, dirt, leaves, cones, acorns, soft balls, bulls' eye, self (climbing up and jumping). Perspex by sandpit can be useful for throwing sand

Climbing – leaving the ground using hands and feet to pull up. E.g. small platforms, steppingstones, logs, stumps. Crawlers – cushions, pillows, low platforms. Have furniture that is stable, and you are ok about it being climbed on

Jumping – using legs to bend down and push off the ground into the air. Have safe landing areas inside and out where they can test their abilities

Wrestling – Tumbling on the ground in close body contact with one or more people

Running and Chasing – Moving legs fast where both feet end up off the ground. Running after another person to catch them. Some animals play chase for fun

Tug of War – the act of pulling on something while one or more people pull on the other end. Learning to stand their ground using personal power which is critical for wellbeing

Transforming – The art of changing something in form, nature or appearance. E.g. water, soil, sand, stones, leaves, flour/water/salt/yeast, bread to toast, wool into socks. Use real world projects

Orientation – The act of looking at things from a different body perspective. E.g. baby lying, rolling, tummy time, sitting. Child lying, back, side, hanging, over shoulder, up high, dangling, crawling backwards. Can evolve into an intellectual mental attribute

Rotating – The act of turning around as a person or an object. E.g. spinning in a circle on polished flours. Spinning grows brain connections and it alters the way we feel (meditative)

Balancing – establishing a relationship to gravity by oneself or with an object. Babies get a strong core by kicking and rolling. It's essential to crawl, walk, run, jump, hop, skip, climb, balance on edges, hop over stones. Objects like blocks, stones, boxes

Patterning – arranging things in patterns, making patterns. Play unfolds the patterns of intelligence. E.g. decorating sandcastle, sorting, organising, classifying by colour, shape, size, kind, number

Element play – Playing with water, earth, air and fire. Urge to poke a stick in a fire. Fire drum, camping stove, BBQ. Water – watering plants, hoses, water pump, water wall, cleaning, dishes, sink, puddles, shallow stone water courses. Earth – mud pits, gardening, sandpit. Air – swings, jungle gym, kites, planes.

Reference: http://www.nature-play.co.uk/blog/schemas-in-childrens-play
Reference: The Sacred Urge to Play by Penelope Brownlee
Reference: http://www.flyingstart.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Schema.pdf
Schemata were introduced into psychology and education through the work of the British psychologist **Sir Frederic Bartlett** (1886–1969).

Loose Parts Play

Loose parts facilitate communication and negotiation skills when added to an outdoor space (Maxwell, Mitchell and Evans, 2008). Benefits of playing with loose parts include increasing levels of creative and imaginative play, children play co-operatively and socialise more, and children are physically more active. (Hyndman, Benson, Ullah and Telford, 2014)

In **play**, **loose parts** are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials. **Loose parts** can be natural or synthetic.

Having "loose parts" available in a play space allows children to use these materials as they choose. Often you will find that children would rather play with materials that they can use and adapt as they please, rather than expensive pieces of play equipment.

Learning injuries and life altering injuries

There is a difference between life altering injuries and learning injuries. We are trying to prevent the life altering injuries. Scratches, bruises, cuts, bumps and even some broken bones fall under learning injuries.

Risk Profile

When looking at our own risk profile we are considering if we are more of a risk taker or more risk adverse. It is a continuum so we can sit anywhere along the continuum and it can change depending on the situation.

Being aware of our risk profile is important as it can have an impact on the children we work with. For example, if you are more of a risk taker, the children may engage in activities that put them more at risk of significant harm. If you are more risk adverse, the children can become restricted in their activities and not able to develop themselves due to the restrictions.

Being able to identify what your risk profile is and the impact it has on the children you work with is a wonderful skill to have. Sometimes that might mean keeping quiet and just watching and other times that might be questioning the risks that are present and stepping in more.

Risk adverse

Risk Taker

What Schema, Loose Parts and Risky Play are available?

What's missing / What could enhance your space?

Other Questions:

- What would make it more interesting for children's play?
- Are different skill levels catered for?
- What do different ages need?

Loose Parts Brainstorm:

Large Loose Parts

Small Loose Parts

Teachers role in the Outdoor Classroom:

The teacher's role is critical to supporting children's skill development in self-initiated experiences in a Nature Explore (environment). The teacher needs to be physically in proximity of children, offer observations, ask thought-provoking questions, follow children's lead without taking over, and trust children to make decisions."

(Veselack, Cain-Chang & Miller, 2010)

What considerations are there:

1. Build strong relationships
2. Know your purpose
3. Provide enough resources
4. Manage significant risks and hazards
5. Provide enough space
6. Observe what is going on
7. Be there for any social challenges that occur that the children can't resolve themselves
8. Extend learning as and when opportunity arises

Some of the roles we can play as adults:

- Observation/onlooker
- Facilitation
- Scaffolding
- Support/helper
- Play enhancer
- Commentator

The Art of Observation

One of the key roles of the adult in children's play is observation. Use your eyes in proportion to your mouth!

Through observation we can see what is happening, what they are learning, what resources they are needing, what challenges they are facing, what social dynamics they are part of…this list goes on. When we see these things we can then make a decision on how we respond, if we need to respond or if we continue to observe.

Social Challenges

Our role is to keep children safe both physically and emotionally. That does not mean we step in and solve all their social problems. They are still so young and need to be guided at times, but if we step in all the time we are taking away valuable skills and learning opportunities that they need in their life.

- Know your children
- Allow them time to work it out
- Facilitate (neutral) discussion
- Step in when necessary

How can their learning be extended?

Scaffolding is a term that was first coined by Lev Vygotsky (1978) who described the process as something that allows children to move their current level of understandings to a more advanced one.

This process helps children to undertake activities that they usually would not be able to without the help of others. The idea is that new lessons and concepts can be more readily understood and comprehended if support is given to a child as they're learning.

It can also involve teaching a child something new by utilizing things they already know or can already do.

Recognising

- Teachable moments
- If we are not looking, we do not see
- Look for curiosity
- Look for frustration
- Fully engage when children have questions

Responding

- Thought provoking questions
- Demonstration
- Thinking through alternatives and making suggestions
- Encouragement
- Fully listen
- Watch, wait, support
- Create teachable moments
- Ask if they want any help
- Provide further resources

Our Language

Our language and the way in which we ask questions or make observations is important.

Discuss these two statements:

'Get down from there, you are too high. You might fall'

AND

'I am feeling nervous seeing you up so high. How are you feeling?'

Reflection:

PLAY FROM THE PAST

- What has changed since you were a child in regards to play?
- What has stayed the same?

As we explore some of the types of play and the ways that children play it is great to reflect on our own play environments from when we were younger.

While child led play in ECE is appropriate for a majority of the time and through till about 7 years old in primary, when we move beyond that age range, it's about finding that balance. Children still need child led play time but this can be balanced out with adult led play and play based learning pedagogies.

Thinking about your definition of play and the importance of child led play, consider the following reflective questions and note your thoughts and ideas.

CHILD LED QUESTIONS

1. When does child-led play stop being child-led?
2. Is it our responsibility as educators to provide child led play opportunities or, is it the parents or, both? Why?
3. Would your children say there is a good amount of child led play or not enough? Why do you think that?
4. On reflection, do you think you sometimes interfere in children's play? Please explain?
5. As an educator do you think 'we' allow enough time for children to play and figure things out for themselves? OR are we as educators interfering too often and taking away from deeper learning?
6. What is the difference between adult led play and play based learning from your own understanding?
7. What could a balance of child led play, play based learning and adult led play look like in your setting?

PROVOCATIONS

8. Are you currently using play invitations in your outdoor classroom?
    a. If yes, do you get much interest from the children when you set these up? How do they respond?
    b. If no, is this something that you think could help your children's engagement in play in the outdoor classroom?
9. Have a brainstorm and think about what play invitations does nature or your outdoor classroom naturally provide already?

ACTIVITY:
This activity is about noticing, being present and paying attention to the play.
Take some time to watch a few children playing in your outdoor setting. Try and be back away rather than involved in the play.

What do you see? Close your eyes - what do you hear? What do you feel – what emotions are coming up? What types of play they are engaging in? What schema or risky play are they engaged in? What loose parts are supporting their play? Can you think of anything e.g. resources that would help support their play?

Observe and reflect on what we have considered throughout the workshop.

ACTIVITY:
Find an item from nature e.g. a stone, a leaf, a piece of driftwood, a shell or something else. Have a look and take note of what it is.

Now place it in your hands and look closely at your taonga. Explore it with your eyes, turn it over and look for differences, similarities, and uniqueness. What shapes and colours do you see? Notice.

Close your eyes. Gently feel the taonga and get to know it by feeling every piece of it. What does it feel like, smooth, jagged, sharp, soft, spiky? What about if you rub it on your arm or your cheek. Keeping your eyes clothes bring it to your nose. What do you smell, does it smell, is it a strong smell or a faint smell, do you like the smell? Bring it to your ear and listen. Is there a sound, what do you hear, is it loud, soft, faint or do you just hear the sounds around you?

Open your eyes. Look at your taonga. Is there anything different that you notice now that you did not before? Is there anything standing out more than it did before. Is there a colour you did not notice that you now see?

- What do you notice from when you first saw it compared with after you had explored it?
- Do you have a different connection to this taonga than before? Explore why this is.