

Introduction:



"We Believe In Getting Kids Dirty!"

For the Planet ...

According to some scientists the current generations could be the last with the ability to affect the course towards ecological destruction that we are taking. The first species are dying due to climate change, up to 1000 species a day are lost from the "web of life" due to habitat destruction. In the UK thousands of deaths each year are hastened by pollution. The UN predicts that in this century the most common cause of war will be connected to water shortages. From an ecological point of view these are not events without cause and effect, other species are not "scenery or bit players", they are intrinsic to our lives.

But come on, we're talking about children's play here. Surely ecological problems are caused by systems of domination and are problems for society to deal with. This is true, but we are also part of society. It is the alienation of humanity from the planet, that we are part of, that leads us to do something as reckless as destroy our own habitat. As stated by the Black Environment Network in their article "Involving Urban Communities in the Environment"; ***"Why should anyone imagine themselves being asked to be interested in something they are never in touch with? If we have the privilege of contact with nature, through the enjoyment of nature, we will come to love nature, and what follows is that we tend to take care of what we love."***

Environmental play helps lay the foundations for our relationship with the natural world. Through joy, exhilaration, discovery and imagination we overcome alienation and re-root our selves in the Earth. Play is a healing process.

... and for the Individual:

We are one of the results of 4000 million years of evolution. As humans we recognise that our psyches have been evolving for at least 20,000 years. The patterns and forms that shape the "natural" world are also the patterns and forms that shape us. There are myriad direct relations between us and all other life, these are not just physical but also

psychological¹. It has been said that **"the child does not merely grow but evolves out of nature into culture"**². As evolution is cumulative not sequential, one thing develops in relation to another, this does not imply the separation from evolutionary process and nature that a lot of our cultures emphasise (this will be looked at more closely in the section, " Imagination & Diversity").

A relationship with the natural world is of immeasurable value for the; self-esteem, confidence, and security of children. **"Nowhere, it seems, do human concerns matter less. And yet, nowhere else is the simple fact of our existence so exhilaratingly clear. Nowhere do so few trivialising and demeaning assaults on egos exist. Nowhere do humans matter more... By forging connections with plants, animals, and land, by finding some ways to experience some relationship to the Earth, individuals can gain a sense of worth. Herein lies security."** . **"The natural world does not judge. It exists."**³. It provides a place to found your self-esteem. Wild places can be the perfect setting to breakdown barriers of domination. This can often be seen when activities have broken down children's inhibitions, and they literally "run wild". This can be of special importance in empowering young people; **"The land can empower by providing neutral ground for leadership. The earth allows children to be themselves, to be active rather than passive, to take control of their play, their time, their imaginations."**⁴. The gifts the natural world can give us are a definition of self defined in relation to others, including other species, and the security of interconnected relationships to the rest of the world, a counterpoint to isolation and alienation. As stated by Paul Shepard in "Nature and Madness"; **"The culmination of this difference-with-affinity is a firm ground of personal confidence and membership in its largest sense"**.

As parents fears grow for the safety of their children if they are allowed to "play out", children's freedom in this country is being curtailed as never before. The reality of play for most children is supervised in a simplified environment, usually of adult design. If we are not to stunt the development of our children we need to give them the opportunity to unleash their imaginations in a diverse environment, to go some way to giving them back their freedom.

Notes:

1. From the essay "Ecopsychology" by John Seed, <http://www.gn.apc.org/schumachercollege/articles/jseed.htm>
2. from the chapter "The Biocultural Continuum" in "The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood" by Edith Cobb. P.57
3. from the essay "The scripture of maps, the names of trees" by Stephen Trimble, from the collection "The Geography of Childhood, why children need wild places". P.22
4. from the essay "A Land of One's Own" by Stephen Trimble, from the collection "The Geography of Childhood, why children need wild places.". P,64.



Imagination & Diversity; (environment, play, and development.)

**“Imagination is more important than
knowledge”
- Einstein**

*This is a short bit that we thought we'd share with
those who are interested, because it excites some of
us!*

The basis for the development of a child is wonder, a sense of discovery. This is not the surprise of something new, but is the unfolding of the exploration of new things - following the path of their curiosity.

The directions it takes are spontaneous, the reward is delight. For those of us who are lucky this sense can be associated with indelible memories of endless summer days. It can be seen where ever small children gather round an overturned log as the fantastical creatures run and slither in every direction, or sit rapt in the world of their imaginary tea party under the dappled light of a hedgerow. These things are easier to observe than write about, but in this section we can take a brief look at why they might be and what are the benefits.

The child's response to their surroundings is direct and natural. Things instantly become part of their world, they are not mediated through the vast array of words and concepts that, as adults, we carry around. **“Nature for the child is sheer sensory experience, although any child can draw in the wings of his surroundings at will and convert the self into a ‘theatre of perception’ in which he is at once producer, dramatist and star.”¹**

So why is the natural world better for this than other environments? Rene Dubos, a writer on psychology and health, states; **“Development of the nervous system and even mental health depend upon a constant exposure to sensory stimuli and new experiences”** Through play and discovery children organise their world, they build themselves. The natural world at its best is rich and chaotic, a torrent of responsive stimuli. It is malleable, irregular, and teeming with other life, the creative materials for a million and one stories. This need for responsive stimulus has recently been noted in children learning to speak. Researchers have noticed that children sat in front of programmes such as “Sesame St.” don't learn to talk as quickly as those engaged in conversation with another

person, as conversation is responsive and you create your own patterns of learning. The term for these direct relationships between mind, body, and environment is “ecology”.

Ecologists see the “self-making” patterns of human development as a cumulative development of the wider “self-making” and “self-organising” of the natural environment. Play moves from the catalyst of wonder and delight to the organising of time and space, adding form and co-ordination, and providing meaning. This is given continuity and sequence by narrative, the stories that children weave around their environments. This mental organising finds its most complex expression in language and culture.

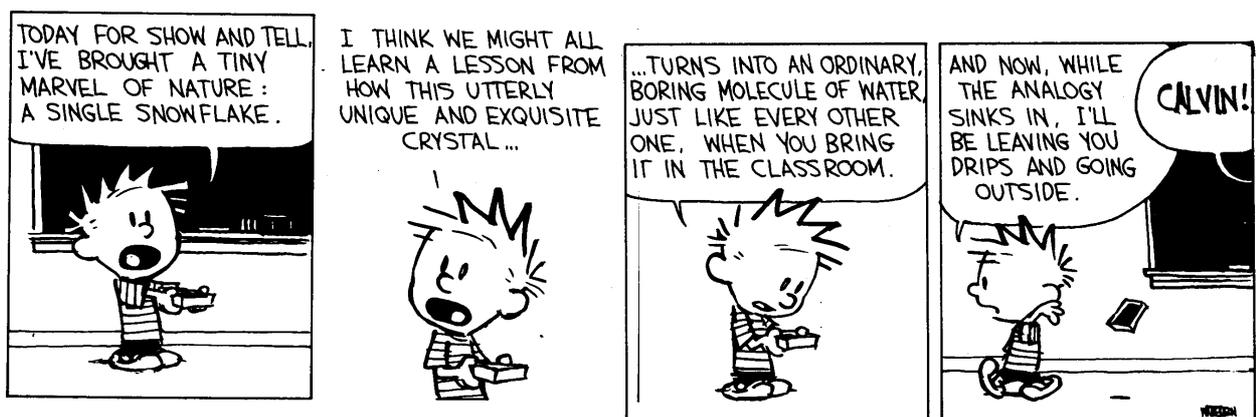
“Although his tools are cultural, the child’s modelling impulses, perceptual and manual, appear to be spontaneous and biologically innate. These impulses are instinctive and inventive, whilst the child’s materials are in the strict sense “natural”. Being artifact as such is not the essential nature of any object. The natural properties of an artifact - its shape, colour, and especially texture and potential use - are the reality along with the identity. Looked at in this way a child’s world making in play is a learning process ... On this basis it is possible to sustain the view that the child does not merely grow but evolves out of nature into culture”².

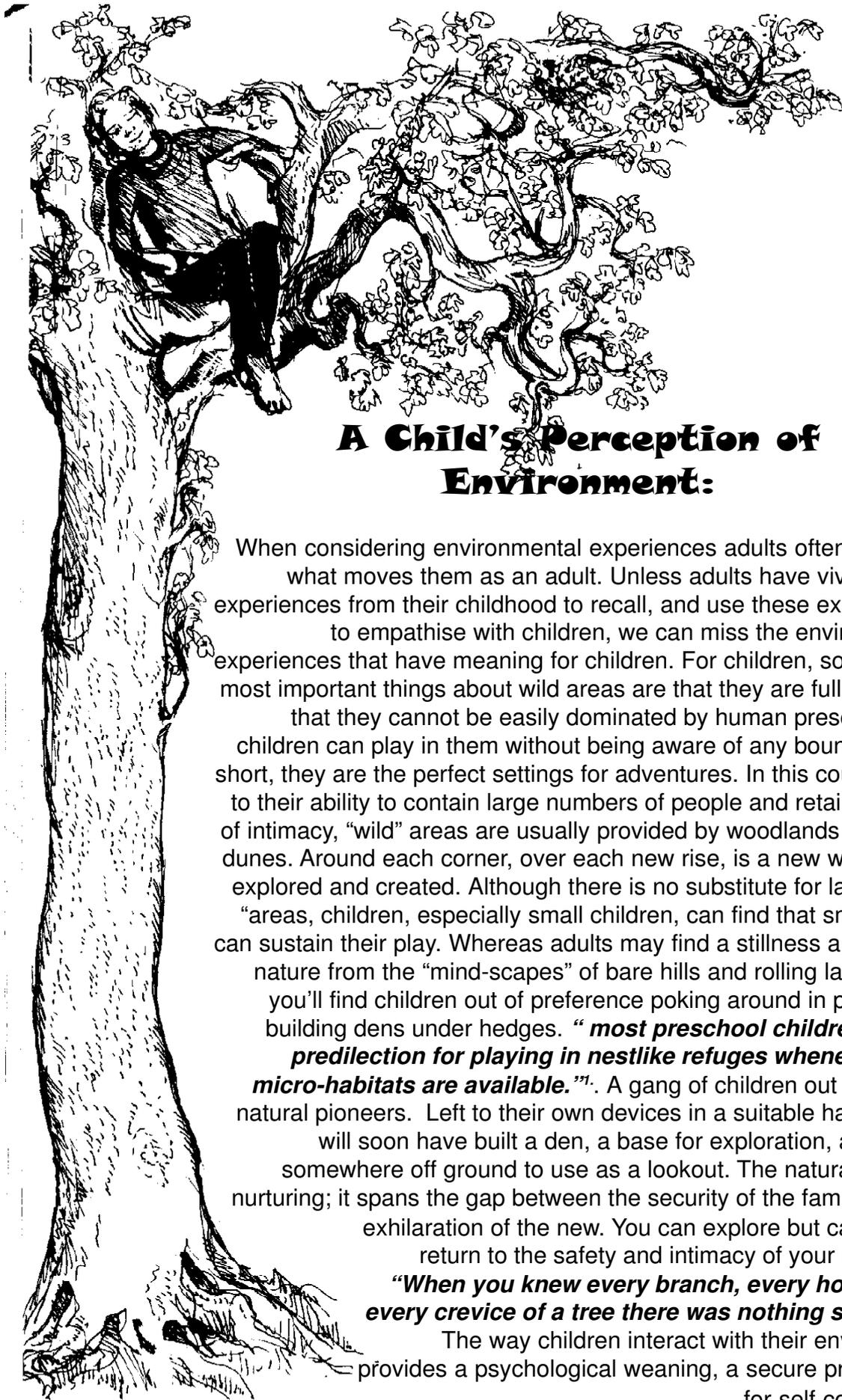
It is this “world making” and direct experience of life that provides confidence. It is the space to reflect that the natural world provides, and the existence rather than judgement of other species, that helps children develop a balanced sense of self. It is at this stage when children are drinking in the world, that a “half knowledge” is developed which may shape all future perceptions of life. The diversity of the natural world is the perfect launch on this journey of discovery.

“Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everybody else and discovering something different” -Albert Szent - Gyorgyi.

1. from the chapter “wonder & knowledge”, from “the Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood”, by Edith Cobb. P.28

2. from the chapter “ the Biocultural continuum”, as above. P.57.





A Child's Perception of Environment:

When considering environmental experiences adults often consider what moves them as an adult. Unless adults have vivid natural experiences from their childhood to recall, and use these experiences to empathise with children, we can miss the environmental experiences that have meaning for children. For children, some of the most important things about wild areas are that they are full of things, that they cannot be easily dominated by human presence, and children can play in them without being aware of any boundaries. In short, they are the perfect settings for adventures. In this country, due to their ability to contain large numbers of people and retain a sense of intimacy, "wild" areas are usually provided by woodlands and sand dunes. Around each corner, over each new rise, is a new world to be explored and created. Although there is no substitute for larger "wild" areas, children, especially small children, can find that small areas can sustain their play. Whereas adults may find a stillness and awe of nature from the "mind-scapes" of bare hills and rolling landscapes you'll find children out of preference poking around in ponds and building dens under hedges. **"most preschool children have a predilection for playing in nestlike refuges whenever such micro-habitats are available."**¹. A gang of children out doors are natural pioneers. Left to their own devices in a suitable habitat they will soon have built a den, a base for exploration, and found somewhere off ground to use as a lookout. The natural world is nurturing; it spans the gap between the security of the familiar to the exhilaration of the new. You can explore but can always return to the safety and intimacy of your little area, **"When you knew every branch, every hollow, and every crevice of a tree there was nothing safer;..."**². The way children interact with their environment provides a psychological weaning, a secure preparation for self confidence.

Children build their world from their environment, it is mapped by stories, and adventures, discoveries and information. These may be real or imaginary. A story given to a path, or tree, or place can spark off whole scenarios of play and adventure. This idea of intimacy of knowing a place, of engendering a sense of home defined by adventures and discoveries is an “ecological relationship”, and hence a supportive relationship. A cornerstone of these adventures are the discoveries that result. When defining themselves, and their relationships with others, children have a tendency towards possession, building weird and wonderful collections of objects. These collections are defining, and a form of communication. This tendency can be exploited and left hollow, the scourge of Pokamon Cards, where possession and “one-up-manship” are the rule, or it can find more creative expression in natural collections. A collection of natural objects is a collection of discoveries, each one unique, something your friends haven’t got, therefore something to be shared. Naming and possession have power, but without exploration and discovery they are hollow. Like a shelf full of beautifully bound and titled books with blank pages, there is the pride of possession, the collection on the shelf looks good, but there are no stories behind them. Instead of fostering domination, this expression of possession goes towards removing it. **“With these acts of extension children begin to cultivate relationship - and the concomitant risks and rewards of sharing, of giving, of love. By moving beyond simple ownership they avoid the trap of permanently linking their self-esteem with what is only the first step - acquisition. Eventually, the discovery suffices for power; observation serves as possession; and we leave these objects where we found them, transcending the old dead-end of human domination over nature.”³.**

There also needs to be an awareness that different groups within society can perceive their environment in different ways, and issues can hinder or block involvement with the natural world. This can be pronounced in ethnic groups, different classes, and around gender. A lot of our perceptions about the environment, our ways of describing it, and our feelings for it, are affected by our background and upbringing. When the stories your grand parents or parents tell you are of a different land, the idea of roots or a sense of home may have a different meaning for you. Our experiences of land are tinged with the cultural as well as the physical. Blocks to access to the land might be as seemingly simple as not having suitable clothes, clothes you can get dirty and damaged. You may get children turning up in colourful silks, or designer sports gear because they literally don’t have clothes to rough and tumble in. There may also be a more complex problem to overcome. Why are most people who participate in “environmental things” white and middle class? The Black Environmental Network **“has uncovered what it calls the cycle of participation. All the elements of this cycle is embedded in the white middle class life style. Most of them have gardens, so that children grow up having the opportunity to mess around with soil and plants. At weekends, it is usual to drive out into the countryside for picnics and walks. In other words, being in contact with nature is part of their lives. If one enjoys nature, one naturally grows to love it. If then, one is informed that what one loves is threatened, it is a natural human response to come out fighting for it. In such a scenario environmental participation is a natural phenomenon in white middle class life.**

For many deprived groups, it is therefore important to recognise that the process is missing because the crucial first step - contact with nature and enjoyment of nature - is not in place. If we wish to release the vast missing contribution of ethnic groups and other disadvantaged groups, the environmental movement needs to put into place access to contact with nature in the immediate

environment of such groups, and enable access to nature at large further afield.⁷⁴.

As we can see this is an issue of class as well as ethnicity.

Access to the natural environment can hold many problems for girls. **“Cultural barriers and fears keep many of our daughters away from the woods and the fields. Tomboys are acceptable only until they reach the threshold of adolescence. Then, they are told, they must climb down from the trees they love and act ‘a proper lady.’**

At this point, young women begin to live within a paradox. They are taught to spend their time attracting men, but they also are taught to fear violence from men. As a result, women may crave solitude but many fear being alone in the landscape. Over and over, they tell me that they feel vulnerable; they fear danger - not from the land, but from men. They fear violence and never quite forget about its most disturbing expression: rape.⁷⁵.

Children as well have their own rules about what different sexes can do, but play in natural areas can subvert this, as roles are blurred by the excitement of exploration and abandonment. So, although girls may need extra encouragement to relax into the environment, or absorbing activities to distract them from cultural barriers, environmental play holds many benefits in raising self-esteem and breaking down stereotyped roles.

The natural world to children is immediate and real. It is not the backdrops or scenery for the mind that adults value, its something personal, something to get involved with.

“ ... that was the main thing about kids then: we spent an awful lot of time doing nothing ... All of us, for a long time, spent a long time picking wild flowers.

Catching tadpoles. Looking for arrowheads. Getting our feet wet. Playing with mud. And sand. And water. You understand, not doing anything. What there was to do with sand was to let it run through your fingers. What there was to do with mud was to pat it, ... lift it up and throw it down ... My world as a kid was full of things that grown-ups didn't care about.

- Robert Paul Smith; “Where did you go?” “out” “What did you do?” “Nothing.”

Notes:

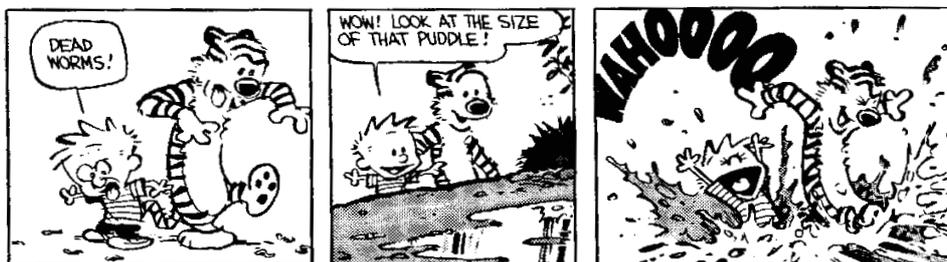
1. from the essay “A Childs Sense of Wildness”, by Gary Paul Nabhan, in the collection; “The Geography of Childhood; why children need wild places”. P.8.

2. from the reflections of a character in “The Temple of My Familiar”, by Alice Walker.

3. from the essay “The Scripture of Maps the Names of Trees”, by Stephen Trimble, in the collection; “The Geography of Childhood; why children need wild places”. P.26.

4. from the article “The Cycle of Participation”, by Judy Ling Wong FRSA, from “Ethnic Environmental Participation; Key articles Volume 1” (Produced by the Black Environment Network).

5. from the essay “A Land of Ones Own”, by Stephen Trimble, in the collection; “The Geography of Childhood; why children need wild places”. P.60.



Outdoor play and risk:

Risks.

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool,
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To reach out for another is to risk involvement.
To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.
To place your ideas, your dreams before a crowd
is to risk their loss.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.
To live is to risk dying.
To hope is to risk despair.
To try is to risk failure.
But risks must be taken
because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing.
They may avoid suffering and sorrow but they cannot
learn, feel, change, grow, love, live.
Chained by their certitudes they are a slave,
they have forfeited their freedom.
Only a person who risks is free.

Anon.

To an extent life is about taking risks. Its a cumulative process of experience, discovery and change. Risk is taking a step forward on that journey. Although this is vital for all of us, it is of special importance during the accelerated period of development, childhood. If we believe that life is cumulative - a process of growth and development, rather than a succession of sequential events, then the experiences a child has are essential foundations for the person the child will become in the future, as well as the richness of the child's life in the present.

Ros Coward a writer on children's issues, after interviewing Norwegian educationalist Asbjorn Flemmen has said; "**Authentic play comes to children naturally with two related impulses, to use the body to its fullest while interacting with others socially. Inevitably it involves risk, conflict and even fighting but these are the 'thrilling' experiences that children seek out and they drive forward physical and social development ... There is a will and a drive to develop and it happens through real play. What this means is using the body as it can be used, finding out for themselves what the body is capable of. ... Much of children's play is about finding out what they are capable of and pushing themselves on.**"¹.

We feel that one of the most fully expressed forms of this type of play is when children play unsupervised in the natural environment. When children play their emphasis is on increasing their excitement and range of experiences. When adults supervise children's play their concerns are often to maintain control, and to limit the risk of "harm" for the children. Children's play areas often reflect these "adult" concerns. They are usually stark so that children can be supervised, and are designed to limit the children's use of the equipment to activities seen as acceptable by adults. The wider built environment is constructed for one species, the human adult, and mainly in relation to economically profitable activities with a few areas for sanctioned sports activities and playgrounds where children can "pass the time" safely. In contrast with this the natural environment, the

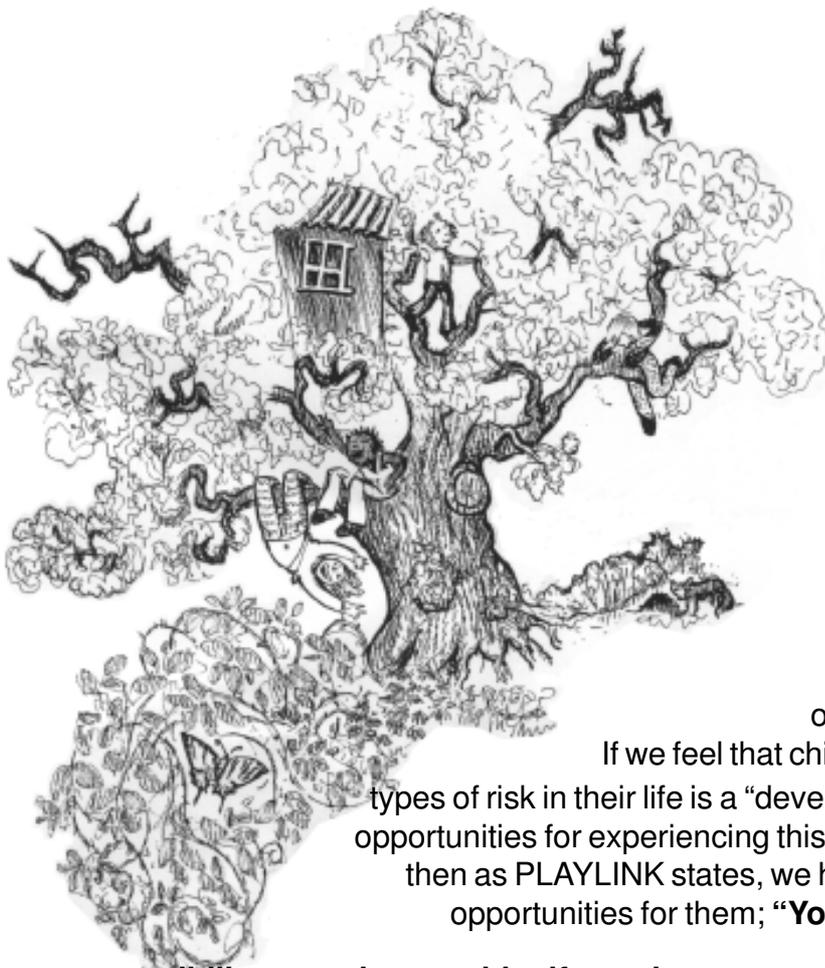
scrub lands, woodlands, pond sides, and river banks are an endless tale of possible adventures.

From climbing trees to damming rivers the possibilities are endless, the varied terrain provides different worlds populated by a variety of species, where imagination rules. Cuts, scrapes, splinters, stings and stomach aches are all parts of the childhood exploration of the boundaries of those adventures.

Dr. Pat Petrie, a senior research lecturer at the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the Institute of Education, has noted that; “... **children learned from one another and from experience what was safe and what was dangerous. I would like to comment that such a wise knowledge base can only exist amongst children who are not over protected and so, over time (some generations of children) have developed their own cultural understandings of the environment and how it should be treated.**”².

Kate Moorcock, a researcher for Families for Freedom, suggests that this knowledge is of great value to children, and that: “**Risk taking is a developmental necessity and goes along way beyond simply taking physical risks... Interacting with ones peers provides different opportunities at different ages. Generally speaking what children are doing when they are out playing or hanging out is two things. They are building a bridge from the confines of their immediate concrete experience into the ability to think abstractly. This allows them to plan, plot and develop thoughts and actions. This ability is so integral to our daily lives that we take it for granted but it is the difference between a human being and a monkey**³. The autonomous individual that most of us want them to grow into is very much a socially driven thing and has to be learned. Far from being overconcerned with themselves as they are often accused of being, they are striving to understand what a self is and to become one. To know one has a mind that is different from other people’s is a very difficult thing to do. Children do this very difficult thing with only the vaguest and most subliminal help from grown-ups. By the time they are twelve, children can talk about a persons character with ease, ... playing, hanging about and nattering with one’s friends all demand risk taken on behalf of children, Emotional, intellectual and physical risks are of equal importance in **developing into a competent and autonomous adult.**”⁴.

If this type of play is of such benefit to the development of the whole child then what opportunities do they have to gain these experiences. In a 1995 Banardo’s Survey half of parents interviewed said they never let their children play outside without adult supervision. A 1999 study by the NSPCC claimed 8 out of 10 parents were too frightened to allow kids to play unsupervised in parks⁵. Kate Moorcock points out that “**The independent mobility range or how far children are allowed out to play has shrunk for a nine-year-old to a ninth of what it was in the 1970’s.**”⁶. The journey to and from school which for many children was a source of unsupervised adventure and mischief has been curtailed by most children now being driven to school. As Dr. Frank Furedi has said “ **the adult world has become converted to the belief that children, by definition, are ‘at risk’**,”⁷. He has identified many factors which contribute to this including; paranoia induced by the media, increased fear of bullying, an obsession with risks, communities being carved up by roads, and isolation of parents and erosion of the community. These factors have increased the restriction of children’s freedom. This has been exacerbated by a culture which has professionalised child rearing, to the extent that parents are afraid to be seen to be doing it wrong, to be accused of being bad or negligent parents. A concern that Furedi has, that especially effects us as play and educational workers, is his view about “**the erosion of adult solidarity and co-operation in the rearing of children. The relation of trust between parents, teachers, nursery workers and carers has**



become highly ambiguous. Instead of regarding other adults as a potential source of assistance in the task of childrearing, parents regard them with a degree of suspicion. In particular, adults who are 'strangers' are treated with apprehension. Since most adults are by definition 'strangers', concern for children can often acquire a pathological character."⁸. This is in dramatic contrast with the idea voiced in a saying from Africa that "it takes a whole village to raise one good child".

If we feel that children experiencing a variety of types of risk in their life is a "developmental necessity" and their opportunities for experiencing this type of risk are being curtailed, then as PLAYLINK states, we have a duty to provide these opportunities for them; **"You will be failing in your**

responsibility as a play provider if you do not create opportunities that allow children to explore and experience themselves and their world through the medium of play. This is done by offering children opportunities to take acceptable risks (that is, to freely undertake actions and involve themselves in situations that push against the boundaries of their own capacities) in an environment that is challenging and stimulating. This process fosters the development of skills and is broadly educative in that it allows children to learn what cannot be taught, what they have to find out for themselves. This is in part what play provision is for. Without such opportunities children's development is inhibited, undermining their capacity to deal with the wider - unsupervised - world. If play provision does not offer varied and interesting experiences, it is reasonable to be concerned that children may seek challenge and stimulation elsewhere, in areas that may contain unacceptable levels of risk. Equally, if children are denied opportunities to access some risks for themselves in a variety of settings and situations, then it is reasonable to be concerned that they will lack the experience and skills to distinguish between levels of risk in the wider world."⁹. At the end of his speech to the PL14AYLINK conference "Reared in captivity, restoring the freedom to play", Frank Furedi gave this exhortation to the gathered play workers; **"The demise of children's freedom represents a major challenge to play workers. Professionals can either echo and reinforce the restrictive mood of our time or challenge it. Looking around the audience, I am sure you will want to do what you can to help children reclaim the outdoors."**

If we are to accept this challenge our task is two fold. One is to challenge the assumption that risk should be eliminated from children's lives, and the other is to create the opportunities for children to "push against the boundaries of their own capacities".

The diversity of stimulus and opportunities that are available in the natural world can be the perfect setting for this to happen. Children don't melt in the rain, and holes in knees as well as clothes can be a valuable part of growing up.

Notes:

1. from "Risk and freedom in a Norwegian Playspace" by Ros Coward, in Reared In Captivity; Restoring the freedom to play, by PLAYLINK.
2. from "Transforming Childhoods" by Dr Pat Petrie, in Reared In Captivity; Restoring the freedom to play, by PLAYLINK.
3. a brief editorial comment; scientists have recently concluded that monkeys (in this case Baboons), like humans and apes, are capable of abstract thought. The world is more amazing than most people give it credit for.
4. & 6. from "Don't blame the parents" by Kate Moorcock, in Reared In Captivity; Restoring the freedom to play, by PLAYLINK.
- 5.,6. & 8. from "Why are we afraid for our children" by Dr Frank Furedi, in Reared In Captivity; Restoring the freedom to play, by PLAYLINK.
9. from PLAYLINK, Risk Assessment Play Workshop Summary.

A taste of adventure and a touch of magic.

"An adventure is an inconvenience rightly considered."

-Chesterton.

An adventure has a lot to do with how it's framed, what setting its given. You can go orienteering around a wood finding the numbered posts, or you can be given a faded old map and challenged to a quest to find "lost secrets" at mysteriously named destinations around the woods. The actuality of the activity is very similar, the resulting experience is much richer.

As Steve Van Matre says in his book "Earth Education, a new beginning", "**the very nature of adventure is immersing yourself in new sensory stimuli. On an adventure you know you will see and smell and hear and taste and touch new things. That is why adventures in the natural world work so well; you always have the continued bubbling and churning of life to stimulate you. ... You always go adventuring in the belief that something special will happen. You expect to find new things. It is that sense of setting out knowing that you are going to find something new that propels you over the hurdles. And you are willing to take some risks in order to make those discoveries happen. Adventure then always includes a bit of the unknown.**" Adventure can be used to add an extra dimension to activities. You become the central character in something that is much bigger than yourself, this can make seemingly ordinary activities take on an edge of excitement that can transform them, "the audience enters the play". By weaving activities together into an adventure linked by a themed story, a set of activities can become more than the sum of its parts. This can be especially useful when simulating "risky" activities that children undertake in unsupervised free play. The excitement of setting your own challenges and being away from adult eyes can be replaced by the excitement of being caught in an adventure with a quest to fulfil.

Some ways of adding adventure to a series of activities include:

Setting it up - Offer a challenge, Suggest a trip, Reverse the commonplace, Send a map,

Leave a note in a bottle, Introduce a mission, Ask for help, Present a mystery to be solved, Organise an expedition, Pretend its a bit risky, Add an unknown element, Include a break in the routine, Create vivid images of the possibilities, Bring in something exotic as the focal point, Make it multisensory.

Getting ready - Gather data (guides, maps, photos), Chart your course, Study the terrain, Review the bare necessities (food, water, shelter), Prepare your gear, Practice needed skills, Learn about the natives (language, customs, costumes), Decide on your role, Make a journal, Think about what you are going to bring back.

The other thing that really catalyses an adventure is a touch of “magic”. Magic is something that is “mysteriously enchanting”. As the child has stepped into the play, and is a central character, it is easier for them to enter the conspiracy and suspend their disbelief. What could be considered as a lie, but told with a twinkle in your eye, can be accepted because of the additional excitement it will create, a touch of fantasy, make believe. The essential ingredient that children crave in most of their games.

Some ways of making “Magic”:

Weave a story, Add a pinch of fantasy, Set up a discovery, Work on the details, Prepare a surprise, Send a secret message, Confound with something amazing, Suggest a presence, Use clues and riddles, Create an appealing atmosphere, Do the unexpected, Add something to make it unusual, Forecast events to build anticipation, Consider all the senses, Wear a costume, Watch for special moments, Demonstrate your care with light hearted gifts, Remember to be a good taker (you are not the star of the show).

And above all have fun, make sure the children are swept along by events yet feel that they are controlling their direction.

Note:

Ideas based on “do create magical learning adventures” in “Earth Education ... a new beginning” by Steve Van Matre

