

Connecting and Reconnecting with Nature

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Recently in New Zealand, many early childhood settings have taken up the work of connecting children with nature in and around their communities. They are taking up the opportunities where they find them and literally going the extra mile to provide children with the valuable and timely experience of being immersed in natural and wild environments, and the benefits of providing this reconnect are proving to be rich, varied and numerous. This article will look at why Early Childhood Teachers are finding such a strong need to offer nature experiences, what children are gaining from it and how every early childhood setting can provide connections to nature within their local community.



Risk Averse Cultures

"If we deny them direct experience of nature, we deny them access to a fundamental part of their humanity" - Richard Louv

It is generally acknowledged that children today do not enjoy the freedom of previous generations of children who got to wander their communities. With time on their hands, alone or with friends, they explored the suburban spaces and patches of wilderness within walking or biking distance until darkness or hunger drove them home. Where does the lack of freedom, autonomy and exploration leave this new generation of New Zealanders whose national culture so values an active, outdoor lifestyle? Are they to be left without a connection to wilderness and nature, unable to experience the unstructured time and space we know offers such rich benefits?

Richard Louv, author of 'Last Child in the Woods' has coined the phrase 'Nature Deficit Disorder' to describe essentially a disorder of society that has brought about a profound change in the relationship between children and nature, leading to a disconnection from nature. While older generations will remember a 'free range' childhood where you left home in the morning and returned in time for dinner, this has not been the experience of recent generations. Louv points out that the parents of preschool children today are the first generation who were themselves separated from nature and that those parents have been fooled by the news media into thinking the dangers to children are a lot worse than they actually are. He suggests these parents are 'scared to death' for their children's safety and as a result have become increasingly risk-averse.

New Zealand has not escaped this risk-averse culture. Grant Schofield, Professor of Public Health at AUT University, tells us New Zealand parents, in a bid to protect their children, are literally 'driving them toward a bubble wrapped generation' and this is spilling over into education with restrictions placed on children's play and learning in the name of safety. He points out that research has found that, as humans, we are designed to be in an 'unstable, outdoor environment, in constant motion' and when we are confined, we suffer both physically and psychologically. The paradox is that risk-aversion leads to children being 'less able to handle risk' in the long run. The part of brain which manages risk, the prefrontal cortex, develops through childhood as and when it is exposed to risk. In his Christchurch TED talk, he asks, when it is best to learn about risk - *"when you're 6, up a tree, or 16 behind the wheel of a Subaru Legacy with the police chasing you?"* (Schofield, G., 2011)

Claire Warden, an educator and founder of nature kindergartens in Scotland, agrees many children are not allowed to explore and test themselves in play. She argues that risk and challenge needs to be part of childhood and it is the point where a child feels challenged that they learn self confidence, emotional resilience, and the ability to assess risk for themselves. This disposition to learn through challenge and risk in nature, fits well with what Margaret Carr describes as persisting with difficulty *"It is about engaging with uncertainty, being prepared to be wrong, risking making a mistake - going on to learn."* (Carr, 1997). Claire writes children need to 'feel in control of being 'out of control' and, in the 'Nature Kindergartens' children, supported by adults, are offered and encouraged into risky play situations allowing them to recognize, assess and deal

with risk. She makes the point that too many restrictions take away the learning moment and we need to see children as capable, competent learners. (Warden, 2011) *"Our philosophy is to be hazard-aware and not risk-averse. Children are encouraged to be their own risk assessors and they are good at it"*. (Warden, 2011 p. 13)

Grant Schofield suggests parents and teachers make a risk analysis, comparing the levels of actual risk to the benefits of an activity and calls it a 'no brainer' when the benefits outstrip risk. Early childhood settings who are taking children on excursions into nature environments are assessing the benefits as exceptionally high and meeting our risk averse culture head on. While working to ensure children are safe, teachers are empowering them to be on the edge of learning, acknowledging their competence to assess their own limits and building their confidence to persist with difficulty across contexts. The odd scraped knee is seen as the learning experience it is and dealt with, by child and teacher, in a matter of fact way. Grant Schofield echoes this disposition to accept some consequences of risk taking when he says *"Perhaps we could rethink successful parenting as not being the number of activities we've taken our children to but the number of bandaids we've used that week!"* (Schofield, G., 2011).

Learning in Nature

"Nature is reflected in our capacity for wonder" - Richard Louv

Te Whāriki guides teachers to the potential of environment to affect learning and states: *"It is clearly acknowledged that the relationships and the environments that children experience have a direct impact on their learning and development"* (Te Whāriki forward.) With the disconnect from nature children are now experiencing, there appears to be a necessity to make links between educational settings and natural environments to provide the benefits to children's learning.

In his book, *The Nature Principle*, Louv tells us children, families and whole communities need contact with the natural world to become happier, healthier and smarter. As human beings we are drawn to nature, it brings our senses alive and nurtures our natural creativity while stimulating our physical and psychological well-being. Claire Warden agrees that we are drawn to nature and that children, in particular, show an interest and passion for natural spaces and resources, with research showing this is due to the *"overwhelming play potential of such spaces"* (Warden, 2011. p. 14) In her article 'Following a Fascination, Is It Folly?' Claire writes of children's fascination with nature and the importance of this fascination to the meaning making and working theories children construct. She refers to Csikszentmihalyi's theory of Flow, and asserts that children need time to 'be' and to consider and process their experience. *"In flow, the emotions are not just contained and channeled but are positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. This focus of awareness is an optimal state for the brain to retain information for deep level assimilation of learning."* Just as Te Whāriki requires that children learn through active exploration of the environment where they

develop working theories for making sense of the world, Warden affirms it is these kind of fascinations that afford us all a deep level connection to nature and make it such a powerful and rich learning environment. (Warden, 2012).

We also benefit socially with exposure to natural environments with researchers finding people more likely to nurture relationships and value community. Louv cites research from Sweden, Australia, Canada and the U.S., which has found replacing play structure dominated environments with open grassy areas planted with shrubs resulted in children's engagement with more fantasy play and encouraged language skills, creativity and inventiveness, decreasing bullying and allowing children to play together in egalitarian ways. (Louv, 2013) Nature also gives children and adults the opportunity to learn together in the spirit of Ako, where the learner becomes the teacher and the teacher becomes the learner. *"It's a good thing to learn more about nature in order to share their knowledge with children; it's even better if the adult and child learn about nature together. And it's a lot more fun."* (Louv, 2010, p. 164).

Forest Schools/Nature Kindergartens

Some New Zealand early childhood settings who have taken up the opportunity to establish 'Bush Kindergarten', 'Nature Discovery' and other variously named nature excursions, may have been guided by the ideas of Forest Schools. Forest Schools originated in Denmark in the 1950's, followed quickly by Norwegian Nature Kindergartens and other European countries such as Germany which now boasts around 700 Waldkindergartens. There is a well known saying, amongst Scandinavian Forest Schools which is: 'There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing' which is apt when images of children outside in snow all day are viewed on Youtube clips or in photos of the many visitors to such places.

The proliferation of Forest Schools in Europe appears to be driven by an interest in the educational benefits along with a love for the forest. Sara Knight, author of 'Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years' writes *"Their concepts of early childhood education in Scandinavia are rooted firmly in the philosophies of Froebel with free play, creativity, socialisation and emotional stability at its centre"*. (Knight, 2007. p. 5) She also notes that regular access to the environment is the norm for most of the population leading to practical attitudes toward risk taking, campfires, knives and clothing and notes differences in legislative requirements around health and safety to other countries.

Sarah Knight's description of the Scandinavian cultural norms sits well with New Zealand's own active, outdoor culture and our early childhood education curriculum. She makes links and comparisons to Te Whāriki highlighting the principles of Te Whāriki as having parallel aspiration to the Forest School ethos in terms of empowerment, holistic learning, family and community and relationships. She also notes that Learning Stories could be useful to Forest School. Along with Te Whāriki

she looks at how the Forest School ethos fits with philosophies of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Steiner, the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches and the wisdom of Guy Claxton's Building Learning Power and Ken Robinson's ideas for creativity and Dahlberg and Moss's 'pedagogy of listening' and writes: "*Forest School can be seen as a manifestation of the way in which some theorists are rethinking how we should be encouraging children to learn. It is about creating confident, communicative and creative children who can make the most of their potential. No one who has experienced Forest School denies the powerfulness of the experience.*" (Knight, 2007. p.68)

In New Zealand, Fiordland Kindergarten appears to be among those leading the way in the development of such nature experiences, with a research project on: "*the effects on the holistic development and wellbeing of children being in nature on a regular basis in a New Zealand context.*" (Maley-Shaw, 2013) which has culminated with the recent publication of the beautifully produced book, 'Fiordland Kindergarten Nature Discovery'. Author Claire Marley-Shaw writes: "*We believe that by our children experiencing nature on a regular basis, not just walking through it but 'being in it' they will become 'nature-literate' and that they will grow into adults with a lifelong love of, passion of and a desire to care for their environment.*" (Marley-Shaw, 2013. p. 15).



In an earlier article in 'The Space Magazine' teachers at Fiordland Kindergarten talked about how they felt all New Zealand children would benefit from having experience with nature and they hope their example will spread and say, "*New Zealand sells itself on its clean and green image; if we want to keep it that way our children need to be in nature in its wildest forms so that they become true nga kaitiaki (guardians) of our whenua (land)*" The book 'Nature Discovery' is full to the brim of coloured photographs depicting children's experience of their own special wilderness and the freedom, exploration, risk taking, collaboration and learning they are engaged in. The principles of Te Whāriki are evident throughout the book, both in the pictures and the teacher, child and parent/whānau voices. One can't help but think, when reading this book, that this kind of experience and learning is the very best of what educational theorists believe 21st century learning is meant to be.

Searching out wild spaces

"Nature is imperfectly perfect, filled with loose parts and possibilities, with mud and dust, nettles and sky, transcendent hands-on moments and skinned knees".
- Richard Louv.

In response to the 'nature deficit disorder', Louv suggests that this generation of children will need to be connected with nature in new and different ways and offers solutions which suggest it is possible to offer children the experience and advantages of nature at a local level. Some settings have gone to lengths to search out wilderness areas suitable for children to explore, in collaboration with the Department of Conservation and/or local Councils. Others have provided significant experiences in nature with a meandering walk in their community or by taking advantage of patches of green space close by.

For those teaching in urban environments we need only look around for the patches of wilderness, be it wooded areas, river, lake or park reserves within walking distance. Louv says "*The young don't demand dramatic adventures or vacations in Africa. They need only a taste, a sight, a sound, a touch ... to reconnect with that receding world of the senses. Go beyond that play area, to woods, fields, and streams, and the parts become looser and even more potent to the imagination.*" (Louv, 2010)

Whatever reasons or influences initiates teacher's decision to use the natural environment, it is evident that the experience gives children opportunities to develop deep connections to and fascination for nature, with all the cognitive, physical, social, spiritual and emotional benefits that brings and has the capacity to be a rich and ideal environment for learning the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for a 21st century life.

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