

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

MAY/JUNE 2014

Are You a Risk-Taker?

This edition of *Wonder* explores one Universal Principle for Connecting the World's Children with Nature:

We believe it is important that children be respected as competent, powerful learners and risk-takers who have a voice in what they create and learn through nature.

(Find the complete list of principles in the Environmental Action Kit at worldforumfoundation.org/nature.)

Did you know that a thesaurus search for the term 'risk-takers' shows the following results: daredevils, madcaps, hotheads, showoffs, gamblers, adventurers, speculators, entrepreneurs, opportunists, wheeler-dealers, fortune hunters . . . ? What an emotionally-charged list! It's no wonder the early childhood community continues to debate and defend the topic of 'appropriate risk.' The following reflections consider the combination of children, nature-filled environments, and risk from many different perspectives. Let's add some new terms to the list!

Condensed Excerpts from
The Role of Risk in Play and Learning
 Joan Almon, United States

Fortunately, there is growing interest in giving children more opportunities for playing in nature, and this means they will encounter more risk. It also means that teachers, parents, park directors, and others should take a fresh look at risk and observe how well children handle it. To get a clearer picture of adventurous play and risk, the Alliance

for Childhood commissioned a study that included interviews with play experts and directors of adventure playgrounds. These playgrounds provide adventuresome play opportunities for school-age children, such as fast-moving zip lines, building materials and tools for constructing play houses (often two or even three stories tall), barrels for rolling down hills, rafts for navigating ponds, and large mud holes for digging and splashing in.

Adventure playgrounds look like a child's dream, but an insurance company's nightmare. The Alliance learned, though, that insurance companies in the United States do not charge parks departments extra for having an adventure playground. This is because accident rates there are the same or lower than at typical playgrounds, and lawsuits are very rare.

A larger study of adventure playgrounds in England concluded that the accident record of adventure playgrounds is far better than that of other forms of playgrounds. These and other findings are summarized in a new publication, *Adventure: The Value of Risk in Children's Play*, (available through the Alliance at www.allianceforchildhood.org). The report's overall message: Provide oversight, but let children play freely and in adventuresome ways. They'll become skilled in risk assessment and have surprisingly few injuries or other problems. And they will learn a lot more and have a lot more fun — and so will the adults!

Original article posted by Community Playthings: www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2013/the-role-of-risk-in-play-and-learning

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Condensed excerpts from
Playing with Emotion
 Jay Beckwith, United States

In a recent online post, columnist Jay Beckwith shares the following comments:

"Over the past year or so I've been trying to come up with a way of integrating and supporting the emotions that children feel during play and to use those understandings in my design process (play apparatus and spaces). Here's an example of how this new perspective can change how we design play spaces. In these days of cookie-cutter playgrounds there is a lot of pushback by parents, educators, and kids that playgrounds are no longer challenging. This observation is no doubt true, but to some extent it misses the point. The impulse to make playgrounds more challenging generally starts off by making them higher. The next common solution is to increase the strength, or coordination, or motor planning

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required by children in the environment. While all of these functional ideas do increase the challenge, and thus the 'fear' factor, they tend to compartmentalize challenge to just the physical aspect of play. They do not go to the core experience, which is vul-

nerability. By reframing 'challenge' into 'vulnerability,' we alter the discussion and design task from adding risk to creating an atmosphere of support where it is less threatening for the children to go beyond their comfort zone. By making a paradigm shift to begin to intentionally

create play spaces that are safe places to be vulnerable, rather than just risky, opens the door to innovation and unanticipated solutions." *Read more at www.pgpnewscenter.com/columnist/jay-beckwith/playing-emotion*

Reflection: Learning from Mother Nature

from Deepak Aryal and Bishnu Bhatta, Nature Action Team 5, Nepal

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The monsoon rain has broken its previous record this year, both in volume and the time of commencement. In addition, many riverside towns and renowned holy spots in the West were reported to have dissolved themselves in the whirl of flooding. On the other hand, the southern sloping geographical structure with the great snow-piled Himalayan range at the top in the North naturally accelerates the current of streams and rivers. An increase in the volume of water in the rivers of Nepal from the snow or the monsoon clouds from the South often terrifies the residents, concerned they may lose their homes and properties. Hundreds of people have been the victims of floods and landslides along with many wild animals and birds. Thus, the rainy season brings both delight and tears to the Nepalese people.

We think the school children should be acquainted with phenomena in the natural world. For this reason, we managed a bus

trip to a river with 34 children and three teachers — our destination: The Narayani River, about 12 kilometers north of the school. The children looked fully alert during the drive as they were having a new experience. Eventually, we arrived at the riverside temple, which overlooks the beautiful landscape of the green hills, from which it seems the Narayani River emerges and flows into the plain. The children gathered together leaning out over the horizontal iron railings, trying to capture the landscape in their minds. They gazed at the river in amazement, raised no questions, but just watched the diversions of nature.

"Where does so much water come from?" Asish asked. The teacher stretched out his right hand facing North and explained, "Can you see the high mountain ranges and hills over there facing South? Well, the snow is the main source of this river besides the brooks and falls originated in the ravines. When it rains over the hills or the snow melts, the waters come together that take the shape of this great river in the same way as twisted thin strings make a strong rope."

After spending time on the temple premises, we decided to let the children feel the river water themselves. They walked to the beach, which was sticky and damp, as the river was gradually receding. The children held water in the palms of their hands and brought it close to their eyes. "It's full of mud!" they shouted. "Is there sand or anything else?" some wondered. They discovered there was not sand, but there were thinner particles of soil that had dissolved in the water. "Maybe it is topsoil. We studied that in science," guessed one student.

While discussing long-term soil formation, one of the teachers mentioned, "It means we are 'exporting' tons of fertile soil to India through the rivers for free. We must take preventive measures to reduce the loss." He asked the children to make suggestions. Children suggested planting trees, growing grass on the hillside and river banks, and making supporting walls on either side of the river to prevent soil erosion and landslides. When the teachers asked the children how the river water was used, the children said sailing boats, generating electricity, operating water mills, irrigating the fields, and keeping fish.

The trip broadened the children's horizons. It was a great opportunity for them to get into deep conversation with one another about what they were seeing. The teachers used the five-hour trip to achieve predetermined teaching objectives.

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If we can follow these teachers' example, I'm sure the days are not far from us when nature as a whole will be unanimously accepted as a well-equipped perfect classroom. For more information please visit www.psdnepal.org.

Consider this:

- What natural phenomena occur where you live?
 - How do you help children have direct experiences with these phenomena?
 - How do children perceive the risks associated with the phenomena and how can you shift their perceptions?
- The teachers described in this reflection planned carefully to achieve their teaching objectives while children experienced nature firsthand. What can you do to intentionally teach with nature?

Reflection: The Power of the Great Outdoors

from Gail Conway, Nature Action Team 44, United States

The World Forum Nature Action Team of the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children issued a Position Paper as part of its Second Illinois Nature Forum, which underscores the importance of connecting children with nature:

Children who regularly engage in play without rules have an opportunity to exercise their curiosity, imagination, and creativity. They learn how to entertain themselves with their own imaginations when they are bored and develop valuable problem-solving skills when they are young, making them more flexible and better prepared to manage our unpredictable and complex world as adults.

There are many providers who wish to expand their classrooms out of doors and take advantage of everything the natural environment has to offer. However, many cite concerns that children will get hurt, which would result in the provider being sued, and fears that this kind of space is out of compliance with licensing standards. The Forum addressed these concerns and offered three key ideas to mitigate them. Together we can support the efforts of professionals to connect more children to nature.

1. Create and incorporate risk policies into school, center, and program policy manuals. These will vary depending on the context of the situation, but are worth the effort to create.
2. Communicate with parents about their concerns. Parents may feel vulnerable talking about their fears. As children's emotional barometers, parents can easily transmit their fears onto them. Common concerns include children getting dirty, being hurt, stung by insects, bitten by animals, or caught in gangs' gunfire. Be honest about the benefits and risks of being outdoors in your particular area and talk to parents about their fears directly.
3. Prepare staff in outdoor first aid and where appropriate, the wilderness. Provide continuing education in the sciences to assist teachers in their ability to describe and interpret what children (and families) experience outdoors. With the right preparation, the outdoors can serve as an amazing extension of the indoor classroom.



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Today's young children are tomorrow's next generation of leaders. An IBM poll of 1,500 CEOs identified creativity as the number one leadership competency of the future needed to solve the problems we all face. The ability to manage fear and be comfortable with risk taking is key to nurturing creativity. Successful CEOs are able to peer around corners, step out and take the lead, and are confident in their ability to manage whatever they may find around the next turn. Nature's classroom is a perfect training ground for young children to gain this invaluable experience with risk taking; to demonstrate their abilities as competent and powerful learners, and to be in an environment that nurtures their ability to continuously create and learn, now and into the future. For more about our Nature Action Campaign or to read the position paper, please go to: www.chicagometroaeyc.org/nature

Consider this:

- How do you address risk in your program handbook or policy manual?
- What are some strategies you can use to educate parents about the positive role risk can play in children's lives?

Consider Taking a Positive Proactive Action to Support and Educate Families:



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE EXPLORE

Create or join a family nature club using the Family Toolkit. Opportunities to talk about appropriate risk for children arise when families play outdoors together. Adults can support each other while providing children the freedom to attempt and conquer the plentiful physical and mental challenges found in nature. This kit, filled with ideas for fun ways to get children and parents outdoors, was developed by the Nature Action Collaborative for Children Leadership Team, a World Forum Foundation Working Group, and Nature Explore. It can be downloaded for free and is available in English, Spanish, and Arabic.

To download and learn more, go to:

www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/families/



The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.

Future Issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your personal reflections and ideas related to the following *Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature* to Tara (tarah@natureexplore.org):

We believe it is important for educators to encourage children's development of a sense of wonder and a sense of environmental stewardship.

Wonder is made possible in part by a grant from the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund. We are very grateful for this support.

