

Early Childhood Action

Young children's need for natural, unforced early learning

MARIE-LOUISE CHARLTON
and **RICHARD HOUSE**
Co-Founders
Early Childhood Action

*It is not half so important to know as to feel,
when introducing a child to the natural world.*
Rachel Carson

The new early-years organisation Early Childhood Action (ECA) is currently creating a framework document for early childhood that will be published later this year, constituting a direct ideological challenge to England's revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Below we show how ECA's central values are consistent with an approach to early experience that is deeply rooted in environmental and ecological concerns.

Stephen Moss's new National Trust report on 'natural childhood' maintains that children's health and education are suffering because they do not have sufficient experience of nature: a modern condition sometimes known as 'nature deficit disorder', with today's 'cotton-wool culture' seriously disrupting children's opportunities for experiential learning. According to Moss, less than 10 per cent of children are now playing in wild spaces: disturbingly down from 50 per cent just 30 years ago.

It is essential that today's young children come to experience from an early age nature's joys and beauty. As mature citizens they will have the stewardship



Learning through play

responsibility for protecting and caring for our world, and for passing it on to future generations intact; yet we continually deny children their right to explore and wonder, and become knowledgeable about, the mysteries of our planet.

The benefits of outdoors experience for young children are legion. For example, embodied, experiential learning is privileged, rather than narrow cognitive learning; children directly experience the changing seasons and the archetypal rhythms of life: birth, development, decay, death and rebirth; they can move, and run, learning experientially about their own bodies and their limits, pitting themselves against the natural world: climbing trees, balancing on walls and developing gross motor skills in the process. They learn about caring for the environment; they experience wonder, with space for learning about calmness and serenity. And, last but not least, the outdoors is NOT a television screen or a computer game!

The outdoors can (thankfully!) displace alienating technology, as Britain's recently retiring Olympic medalist Amy Williams recently declared when praising her own TV-free childhood.

Conversely, denying children access to the outdoors is detrimental on many levels. Adults need to access the outdoors, with lack of sun-light

having damaging physical and mental health effects; but for 'adults in the making', these needs are even greater. Moreover, outdoors, children spontaneously initiate imaginative play in which deep-level learning takes place—such an essential aspect of healthy early development and learning.

The term 'nature deficit disorder' recognises that many of young people's problems are due to lifestyles far removed from our original roots. Our human propensity is to interact in and with the natural world, and not with non-human technologies. Despite our rapid evolution, we are simply not ready for a sedentary, predominantly computerised world. Our basic biological needs must be met if we are to maintain physical and mental health, and function optimally.

Learning through practical experiences naturally precedes abstract learning, especially for children. Learning through play in a living, engaging outdoor environment not only 'scaffolds' later learning, but reduces the risk of obesity, stress and depression. If practitioners and children choose to interact with the wealth of natural resources that surround them outdoors, then—appropriately, perhaps, inadvertently!—all areas of learning will be addressed. Many programmes helping children with additional needs are also closely involved with nature and living things.

Young children need to be able to make judgements based on experiential knowledge of what they can do; and if such proactive exploratory learning is missed early on, children will assess risk less competently. Being in charge of their own activity in a testing environment raises confidence and self-esteem, encouraging perseverance and developing resilience. These qualities are all highly desirable not only in life in general but also when immersed in a learning situation. Skills and qualities adopted and strengthened in the outdoors can therefore be transferred to, and accommodated in, all learning situations to positive effect. Thus, Howard Gardner has updated his celebrated theory of 'multiple intelligences' to include 'naturalist intelligence' for which there is now a list of descriptors that marry well with, and are transferrable to, other intelligences, and which some teachers are making good use of.

As founder-members of Early Childhood Action (ECA), launched to challenge the 'too much, too soon' mentality that dominates the government's legally mandatory Early Years Foundation Stage 'curriculum' to which all England's young children from birth to 5 are statutorily subject, we are highly sympathetic to those who place learning through nature at the centre of early childhood experience. Whilst ECA is not campaigning explicitly for an exclusively outdoors early-years curriculum,

all of the above arguments are ones which we enthusiastically embrace in our approach to early development and learning.



It's all gone a bit Whinnie-the-Pooh

all of the above arguments are ones which we enthusiastically embrace in our approach to early development and learning.

More information—

For further information about ECA and to offer your support, please visit www.earlychildhoodaction.com

Further Reading—

- Carson, R. (1999) *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins.
- House, R. (ed.) (2011), *Too Much, Too Soon?* Stroud: Hawthorn Press.
- Knight, S. (2011) *Risk and Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play: Learning from Forest Schools*. London: Sage.
- Louv, R. (2007) *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Moss, S. (2012) *Natural Childhood*. National Trust; available at: www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/National-Trust-natural_childhood.pdf (accessed 30 April 2012)
- Palmer, S. (2008) *Detoxing Childhood*. London: Orion.
- Schweizer, S. (2009) *Under the Sky: Playing, Working and Enjoying Adventures in the Open Air*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press

Marie-Louise Charlton is an Independent Early Years Consultant, and Richard House is Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy, University of Roehampton and a trained Steiner Kindergarten teacher. Correspondence: shadinsky1@yahoo.co.uk or r.house@roehampton.ac.uk



Challenging behaviour