

# *Nurture* through *Nature*



**There is something fundamentally natural and heart-warming to see a child ‘mucked up to the eyeballs’, flushed with excitement, exhausted and happy after time spent outdoors working hard at play. Yet one could argue in this changing society this sight is not as commonplace as it used to be.**

Thankfully many children still enjoy these simple yet valuable experiences - I assume I am speaking to the converted as readers of this heritage magazine you must have an interest and connection to nature and place, and hopefully believe in the importance of early immersion in nature for young children. For a growing number of children however, the opportunity to play robustly in nature with natural resources at hand, such as mud, grass, wood, stone or water, is extremely limited or at worst nonexistent. We are fast becoming a technologically tied, risk averse society and this is filtering down into children’s play. Consider the play spaces and play opportunities of your childhood to the play spaces of today’s children. Play is vital to children’s health and development. As children we were oblivious to the fact that playing outdoors was learning for life, indeed it was life. We learned how to belong, to fit in, to play, to climb, to skip, to build, to imagine, to create, to problem solve, to take decisions, to have fun, to occupy ourselves and to manage ourselves and others. Through our play we learned to learn, to be curious, competent, careful, fearful, and brave; to take risks and to take stands. Not bad when all we thought we were doing was playing. One can argue that children today have much more material (and plastic) possessions but far less freedom and resourcefulness.

Outdoor play and connection to nature is very important for children’s physical development, mental health and well being, but increasingly, concern is being expressed by many at the lack of opportunity for a growing number of children to access and experience play in the outdoors. Increased sedentary lifestyles, bad diets, and less time playing outdoors has detrimental effects on children’s health. Obesity in young children is on the rise. Another aspect that may not immediately spring to mind is the impact on children’s mental health. To be mentally strong children need to build self confidence, resilience and be able to assess and manage risk. How many of us adults use nature and the outdoors to de-stress and indeed to play? Likewise children need outdoor spaces to move, to roar, indeed just to BE. Think back to your childhood and just remember the freedom, the camaraderie and the countless opportunities for fun playing outdoors gave you.

Societal fear of danger is ever present in the minds of many parents and carers of young children, fear of strangers, fear of traffic, fear of drugs, fear of dirt, fear of rain and cold, fear of litigation to name just a few. Of course children’s safety and well being is paramount, and as responsible adults we have a duty of care and to keep them safe, but are we on the road to eliminating vital play experiences for children under the illusion of keeping



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them safe from bumps, bruises, scrapes, and falls? Society's challenge today is how to provide opportunities while protecting from harm. With support children can manage, master and enjoy their surroundings, learn how to recognise danger, assess risk and learn to keep themselves safe.

Right throughout life we draw on these vital skills. Take hurling, swimming and skiing as typical examples of risk assessment - every day people weigh up the risk factors of these sports against the value and benefits of these potentially dangerous activities. They minimise the potential risks by learning how to hurl, swim, or ski, they choose safe places to carry out the activity, and abide by the safety rules of these sports. As a child who assessed risk for you? The risk I talk about here is playing with and manipulating natural materials such as trees, wood, water and stones. Did you decide to climb a tree, play in a stream, swing on a lamppost, based on your own assessment of whether you could or couldn't do it? There were probably times when you assessed risk for yourself and other times when it was assessed for you by adults. Consider the difficulty for a child who has never learned to assess risk. Will they be able to make correct decisions on their own when they outgrow adult supervision? Recently I was concerned to see two 13 year old boys unable to retrieve their ball from a tree without step by step direction from an adult as to what to do, they had no clue or confidence as to where to start



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even though this tree was so climber-friendly that the eight year old who lived in the house could climb it very easily. The boys in fact were probably right not to attempt it by themselves as they had not acquired the skill to do so. There is however something sad about the fact that young boys or girls of this age lack a confidence and capability to enjoy something so enjoyable, skilful, and childlike as climbing trees. But consider the world they are growing up in - 'don't walk on the grass, don't run in the schoolyard, don't make a mess, don't play football in the garden or even on the street, don't climb the trees, don't get dirty, don't go out it's too cold, don't walk to school it's dangerous'....and the list goes on.

Irish society has changed dramatically over a short period of time and while there have been many improvements in childrens lives, these have not come without losses too. Today, children's play tends to be more structured and supervised. Gone are the many hours of unmitigated freedom to roam, run, build and play, with siblings or friends as companions and minders. The freedom we experience as children is fast disappearing. Supervision of children is at an all time high and this impacts on how children view themselves. We want them to feel capable and competent, but when adults control situations and always come up with the answer or the solution, children learn helplessness rather than develop a mastery orientation to life.

It is hard to engage deeply in play when closely monitored, limited in time and space. When all you have





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to play with offers little to the imagination and only happens on rubber safety surfaced playgrounds. While the provision of the many new playgrounds in Ireland is an extremely welcome addition to the landscape for children and families, there are other options that we should explore and provide to enhance our children's lives. Imagine playgrounds that have a more natural arrangement. Places that enabled the children play in a small patch of woodland where they could build dens, sail corks down a trickle of water, dig in muck, and explore stones. We probably all played in such places as a child. Many of the larger parks around the country have these spaces naturally but how often are children driven to the carparks, brought into the all weather rubber surfaced playground to climb and swing, and ushered back to the car when they have finished without much thought to the additional wonders and possibilities of nature around them.

Children develop and learn through play. Playing means moving, talking, sensing, and experiencing, which the outdoors provides for on a grand scale. It provides opportunity for exploration and discovery of self, of others and of the world around them. It is vital that children have concrete experiences in their natural environments. We expect them to have abstract ideas of the natural world and particularly in the current climate of environmental awareness we educate them to respect and care for the natural world. Yet, are some children missing the first vital steps of this education, the messy and enjoyable part, the hands on experience of nature? How can we expect them to appreciate the importance of saving the rain forest if they have no concept of a forest and no experience of ever having walked in the





rain? They often know considerable facts about the Amazonian rainforest, but cannot identify the flora, fauna, or birdlife in their garden or street. Consider the child looking at a picture of a flower without ever having touched one, or listening to a story about the beauty, wonder and power of the sea without ever having heard, seen, or touched a wave.

Children learn through their senses, so what natural environments and experiences are we providing to support them in developing a real affinity with nature that will last a lifetime and enrich their lives with a continuing sense of wonder and appreciation? Yesteryear this happened more naturally as children were likely to spend lots of their time outdoors, nowadays childhood can be very different i.e. regulated childcare, supervised activities, the pull of the computer games console and 24 hour TV, children with their own bedroom/indoor playspace, smaller families etc. Although these are factors that have improved our quality of life, the realities are they mitigate greatly against outdoor play. Childhood may have changed, yet we still want the best for our children, we seek the elusive balance, the best of both worlds. Our children need to live in their 21st century technological world but they also need their outdoor heritage.

So stop and think of the opportunities your child has for outdoor play, what type of play can they engage in and how eager are they to play outdoors. You may need to swop the plastic Wendy house for the homebuilt den /tepee, or the plastic food for the pot of muck, leaves, and stones. Just remember the fun of it, and be confident in the fact that you are supporting their imagination, creativity and overall well being and development.

**Carol Duffy**, Childhood Specialist, IPPA

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## The Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA)

The IPPA is a voluntary organisation working for young children and their families in Ireland. The IPPA's 2630 members run playgroups, parent and toddler groups, daycare crèches, and after school groups. In excess of 50,000 children attend services provided by IPPA members. We are committed to supporting our members in their provision of quality education, play and care for children. Outdoor play is one of the elements which we promote.

One of our current projects is to design and exhibit a natural play space for children at this years Bloom festival in the Phoenix Park, June 3-7th. We are delighted to acknowledge The Heritage Council as part sponsors of this project. Our engaging space is called IPPA's *Nature Playground of Possibilities*. The theme of the space is 'Playing Naturally: the sky is the limit, the earth is the canvas, natural materials are the tools, and imagination is the architect'.

The purpose of this space is to promote natural playscapes for children to foster their development, creativity, imagination, and connection to nature. We plan to provide a natural playspace with the natural toys of yesteryear-sticks, stones, hay, mud, dens and a few surprises.