

CHILDREN IN WILD NATURE

By Niki Buchan, Company Director and Senior Educational Consultant, Inspired EC Pty Ltd

Niki Buchan has a special interest in nature-based practice and has supported many Australian educators in setting up bush and beach schools. Niki and her team presented Nature-based practice in Australia at the 2015 Early Childhood Education Conference.

Children experiencing close contact with nature in Australia is nothing new. Most adults reminisce fondly of their childhood, often outdoors, where they had time to explore, time to take risks, time to be away from adults and most importantly a time of joyous freedom. Educators need to hold onto these fond memories and facilitate opportunities for children to build equally valuable childhood memories while in care.

Over the past 3 years in Australia there has been a huge movement towards more nature-based education with services undertaking regular excursions to the beach, bush, forest, creek or paddock. For many, although keen, the risks of such excursions are just too great. Experience has shown that many perceived of the risks are not insurmountable.

Risk in itself sadly has unwarranted negative connotation and is misunderstood. In reality risk is about uncertainty, opportunity and challenge. So often we remove all risk from children's lives, considering it as something negative and this leads to other issues that could cause long term damage.

"We deprive children of free, risky play, ostensibly to protect them from danger, but in the process we set them up for mental breakdowns. Children are designed by nature to teach themselves emotional resilience by playing in risky, emotion-inducing ways. In the long run, we endanger them far more by preventing such play than by allowing it. And, we deprive them of fun". (Gray, P. 2014)

Adults should be encouraging a risk taking disposition, where children and adults search for and are prepared to have a go at opportunities. Many children are now so concerned about getting things wrong and

won't even try unless they are assured of success. Stephenson (1998) identified that children who were risk takers outdoors were also prepared to take risks indoors, to seek or accept challenges. This risk taking disposition is also beneficial when tackling new challenges such as those found in reading, mathematics and science.

Risk-taking disposition – persistence in the face of difficulty and uncertainty. Persistence – 'engaging with uncertainty, being prepared to be wrong, risking making a mistake – going on to learn'. Carr (1997, p. 10, cited in Stephenson, 2003, p. 41)

The National Regulations stipulate: 'An approved provider must ensure that every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children from harm and hazard likely to cause injury. The service is to have policies and procedures in place to support the protection of children.' '...services should use risk assessments to identify potential

hazards. The National Law does NOT require services to eliminate ALL risk and challenges from children's play or environments.' (ACECQA regulation section 167)

The Regulations do not stipulate the severity of the injury, nor whether harm is of a physical or emotional nature. This is where a common sense approach is needed; a paper cut is an injury, it takes time to heal but we would not consider removing paper from our lives!

Children are capable and intuitive self-risk assessors from a very early age, well intentioned adults often override this which means children then no longer trust their own instincts. "Allow children to continue to develop their intuitive response to risk and challenge from an early age and they will become competent self-risk assessors. (N Buchan, Children in Wild Nature 2015). The most effective way of keeping children safe is for them to keep





themselves safe, it is therefore important that children are included in the risk assessment process where appropriate. Leonardo (aged 4) of Goodstart Red Hill shares his knowledge “I play rolling down the rocks. You take turns by rolling down the rocks into the water. So you get a rock, and then you climb up to the top (its easier in your gumboots to climb) and you roll it down. You check for people first, you say “watch out!” When it hits the water you go down and get another rock and do it all again! My name is Leonardo and I am 4.”

Good hazards, such as heights, are those where children can judge the risk themselves, where the danger is obvious and where there are benefits to the opportunity while bad hazards and risks are ‘hidden’ and benefits are hard to find “Good risks and hazards are acceptable and hold few surprises. Bad risks offer no obvious developmental or other benefits.” (Ball, D., Gill, T., Spiegel, B. 2008)

So how should risk be assessed? Instead of looking only at the negatives of an opportunity start off with the benefits, what would add value to the child’s development? These are documented to demonstrate that adults have reflected and weighed up the benefits of a situation in relation to its risks and then made an informed decision.

A benefit risk assessment clearly considers the benefits of an opportunity, weighs this up against the possible risks and then puts in place procedures to reduce the risks without removing all the benefits.

Nature and children tend to be unpredictable and it is not always possible to have a written risk assessment completed for every eventuality. This is where a common sense approach and alert adults may do a dynamic benefit risk assessment on the spot to allow the play opportunities to continue. “Dynamic benefit-risk assessment should be valued as supporting children’s uninterrupted flow in play while at the same time ensuring children are as safe as necessary.” (Buchan, N. *Children in Wild Nature* 2015)

At the 2015 Early Childhood Education Conference educators from a variety of settings shared their individual journeys with the audience.

Lenore Hamilton, owner of Lollipoppets Family Day Care in VIC, shared some of her experiences in taking up to 7 children out and about using public transport and forming close relationships with the local community. Regular day excursions to the Dandenong Ranges National Park with children of mixed ages, a place where children can explore and challenge themselves and really connect with nature over time. Lenore demonstrates her trust in the children by allowing them a great degree of freedom while she is constantly alert and assessing risk dynamically.

Fiona Pattinson founded the Wodonga TAFE Nature Playgroup in NSW where children, parents and students experience the benefits of the natural space and how children use this. The playgroup space is on a small ‘island’ surrounded on 3 sides by a creek which the children access after a dynamic risk assessment of the current conditions. Families involved in this program now visit natural spaces during weekends.

Renee Mitchell, director of Goodstart Red Hill in QLD, and her dedicated team initiated a project called Nature in the City where they take children of all ages to the local neighbourhood creek, rainforest or meadow daily. Renee shared how they involved and included parents and the community in this program which was vital to its success. Laura, the toddler group leader, commented on the children using this space, “*They see limitless learning opportunities and an endless array of materials and resources with which to hypothesize about, explore and investigate. It truly is remarkable how deeply engaged the children are in this space and with the learning opportunities it affords.*” As Renee commented, adults need to be brave to start such a program.

Kylie Keane and Lisa Beattie are the founders of Forrest ‘Beyond The Fence’™, a program for OOSHC children in Canberra, ACT.

Families make the choice and the space that is used is literally just beyond the school boundaries. Children successfully make the distinction between the different rules that apply and fully embrace the freedom allowed to climb, construct and just be.

Jenelle Haskew is the Bush Place teacher at Annette’s Place in Young, NSW. They take a group of children aged from 8 months to 5 years to the bush daily which entails a 15 minute bus journey. Here the children have the freedom to explore a large space, they make fires to keep warm or to cook on and when they are tired they can sleep in a hammock. The centre recently had their Assessment and Rating visit and the assessor spent 2 hours in the bush with the group. The centre was assessed as exceeding in all areas with particular mention of the benefits of the children having access to the bush excursions.

There are many forward thinking settings offering excursions into wild nature and many who aspire to do the same. My advice is to put in place your benefit risk assessments and to just do it!

Niki Buchan’s new book *Children in Wild Nature* is available to purchase from the Inspired EC website www.inspiredec.com.

As part of the Starting Out Safely program, ELAA has developed policies for early childhood and Family Day Care services which help address the potential safety issues when taking children out into the community and natural environment. We have also developed Educator Resources, which include practice examples and ideas on how to use excursions to enrich your program. Go to Starting Out Safely on the ELAA website or www.childroadsafety.org.au to download the free policies and resources.