

Explain how learning and development through play has been implemented during own Forest School programme. A reflection by M.Wateterworth

My starting point for play in the outdoors is to think back to my own childhood... What did I like to do with my friends in the outdoors? What could I do and what did I avoid doing? Playing freely is what is most memorable; exploring natural spaces such as woods, gardens, parks, rivers and beaches; Running through the hills of long grass with my siblings, climbing hills in all weathers, collecting pebbles, conkers and shells'; Making petal perfumes with my cousin, riding our bikes or playing Tig. All those things above that I can see the children I teach enjoying today.

Reflecting on my practise, I would say that my approach and sessions take the shape of Froebel's play principles:

OPEN-ENDED, CREATIVE PLAY AND EXPLORATION:

The plan I have is adaptable, flexible and often rewritten by the children based on their interests for the day. I do ensure that there is the option for all play types; risky play, dangerous elements, tool work, fast pace play, rough play and exploring the woodland so that when children request it, they know they can do it and my team of adults are prepared for it. The resources I have built up with the children are easily accessible and the children have developed the culture to 'ask'. Just because they might not see it, doesn't mean we don't have it or can't make it. This wonderful group of children have a willingness to share their thoughts and learning with others.

THE KEY ROLE OF THE ADULT IN OBSERVING, SUPPORTING AND EXTENDING PLAY AND LEARNING:

My most reflective moment has been when I observed a group of boys that wanted to play cricket (having played it with the sports co-ordinator a few days before). Encouraging imagination, problem solving and team work, we made our own cricket set; twig wickets and bails, leaf and string ball and a large long log from the 'loose parts' area. Their sense of achievement was delightful to see and they were so proud that they wanted to show a 'cricket fanatic' in Year 6 what they had made.

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ALL LIVING THINGS & LIVING AND LEARNING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE:

To begin my sessions, I play a lot of team building games with the children and model appropriate phrases of how to work with each other socially. Without them realising it, (through the games and movement around the site) they are exploring the different woodland areas, getting a feel for the weather and which areas they would like to go back to themselves. The children always know that the activities that follow are opt in/out but they have been given the 'appropriate play' strategies if they choose to engage in their own play.

A FREEDOM WITH GUIDANCE:

I always encourage other adults to avoid putting limitations on the children's play; allow them to explore their own limitations and it is crucial that the adults join in with play to show the children that play is joyful and for any age. The children often show the adults how to play and interpret their natural surroundings in many different ways.

WHOLENESS AND CONNECTEDNESS - EVERYTHING LINKS:

Any activity that the children see as their own choice and not led by a facilitator they love to call 'free play'. They are well enough established in the Forest School sessions to know that as long as they are healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well being - each one of them 'Matters'.