



Practitioner Researcher

## **The outdoor environment, enriching or not? The quest to find out: A brief review of the literature**

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There are many reasons as to why the quality of an outdoor environment in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting is important for children's learning and development. Current literature suggests that children thrive in a natural or naturalised outdoor environment. This paper will endeavour to present the major themes highlighted in literature relating to this topic. These are: the need for enriching natural environments; the areas in which children's development greatly benefits from such environments; and, lastly, what an 'ideal' naturalised outdoor environment should consist of.

### ***The need for natural environments in ECE settings***

Pica (2007) points out that a sad reality for many children today is that their parents are too busy to take them to local parks, beaches and other outdoor places for them to play and explore. Nedovic and Morrissey (2013) suggest that another reason for avoidance of natural environments could be due to parents and educators trying to eliminate risks and accidents that are not generally prevalent in the static home and ECE environments. Dowdell, Gray and Malone (2011) reiterate the importance of risks by saying that eliminating them "often leads to inappropriate risk-taking in a fearless and destructive manner in an attempt to make play more exciting"... "denies them the opportunity to learn about risks and risk management in the real world" (p. 25). This lack of enrichment also deprives children of the opportunity to connect with nature, thus implying that children are possibly spending more time playing with technology devices or in front of the television (Natural Learning Initiative, 2014). Richard Louv describes this as 'nature-deficit disorder' (cited in Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013), arguing that "direct exposure to nature is essential for physical and emotional health, with children exposed to natural settings generally experiencing lower stress levels and enhanced cognitive functioning" (p. 282). Having an affinity for nature is instinctual due to the evolution of humans and the reliance humans have had on nature for basic survival. However, according to Louv children who are not exposed to natural environments, over generations, lose the affinity and appreciation of natural environments. This can result in a loss of any contact with human nature itself, and what it means to be human (Dowdell et al., 2011).

### ***Learning and development benefits for children***

The ECE environment is commonly referred to as 'The third teacher'. When relating to the outdoors, this would imply that there are many learning and



developmental experiences to be had if the environment is planned around, or created to include, natural elements (Torquati & Ernst, 2013). The outdoor environment not only provides physical benefits, but also cognitive and social-emotional as well (Pica, 2007).

Physically, children develop when exposed to the outdoors and nature, due to fewer constraints on their movement (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005); furthermore, being able to run, jump, roll, climb and build in natural spaces is far more beneficial to children's balance, agility and fine/gross motor skills than the experiences in playing on man-made playground equipment (Waters & Maynard, 2010). In terms of cognitive development, the "benefits of contact with nature have been identified by various studies and indicate that nature improves awareness, reasoning, observation skills, creativity, concentration and imagination" (Dowdell et al., 2011, p. 24). Nedovic and Morrissey (2013) add that cognitive development occurs when children are immersed in environments that are full of provoking, open-ended objects to explore, which in turn encourages spontaneous learning opportunities. Rose and Rosenow (2007) discuss how a naturalised environment can help to counteract the effects of the fast-paced lives children are experiencing, referred to as 'sensory overload', by encouraging them to take notice of patterns, details and textures, taking in all of the beauty that nature has to offer. In addition, "since sensory and motor development are aspects of neural processing and of the development of thinking and reasoning skills, young children should be given as many opportunities to move in as many ways as possible" (Rose & Rosenow, 2007, p. 42).

The social-emotional benefits for children are endless. Thompson and Thompson (2007) discuss how, due to the nature of outdoor play, children's exploration is very much self-directed. Social interaction outdoors tends to lend itself to sustained periods of play, thus encouraging children to get to know each other and what they and others like and dislike; learn 'rules' of play; learn how to problem solve and manage conflict resolution. Casey (2007) adds that "outdoor play fosters children's developing friendships and provides opportunities for children to negotiate relationships" (cited in Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013, p. 282). Burdette and Whitaker (2005) believe that the outdoor environment is a place to 'cultivate social skills' and 'emotional intelligence'.

### ***The 'ideal' naturalised environment***

Waters and Maynard (2010) see the ideal outdoor environment consisting of elements such as varied terrain, grassy areas with plenty of plants and flowers. Light and shade and many 'loose parts' are necessary, which refers to things that can be moved and manipulated, that do not really have a fixed way to interact with them, allowing for children to use their imaginations. These could be logs, shells and leaves just to name a few. Titman's (1994) study identifies 'signifiers' of 'ideal' being an environment where you find "a natural landscape, living things, colour diversity and change, features that can be used for seating/shelter, private spaces and materials that can be changed or used in imaginative way" (cited in Waters & Maynard, 2010, p. 478). Varied terrain, as highlighted above, refers to uneven topography, or ground. This can be achieved by having areas of pebbles, bark or mulch, sand and so on. This is



important for developing skills that are not supported by walking or running on an even/smooth surface such as concrete (Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013).

In conclusion, it is clear that there is need for ECE outdoor environments to be natural or naturalised. This is due to the situation that many children are experiencing from a lack of connection to nature. The benefits that the natural outdoors have are vital for children's learning and development, and the significance of this cannot be underestimated. In a setting where the lack of natural elements is an area for improvement, there are many straightforward examples of how to change and create the 'ideal' naturalised environment found in up-to-date and well researched literature.

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