

Children in the Forest: Thinking with Risk, Ethics, and Possibilities

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Taking children into natural spaces has come to be considered best practice. Forest kindergartens and nature daycares have proliferated here in BC and beyond, with seductive promises of appealing to children's natural sense of wonder, promoting curiosity, and building connections to the land to promote environmental stewardship. While we understand being outdoors is good for all of us, we are concerned by simplistic images of children frolicking in idealized nature. The reality of child-nature-educator encounters brings challenges, questions, and tensions that are often ignored in the push to get children outside.

In this article and in the accompanying pedagogical narrations, we share our experience of taking very young children into the forest daily, and explore some of these tensions. We grapple with the messy realities of forest excursions, and discuss how our pedagogies have shifted to consider our interdependence with nature, and to question to whom and to what we are ethically responsible. We share these stories not as a template of how to “do” children and nature, but as a hopeful invitation to *complexify* nature pedagogies.

We draw on our experiences of working together within the Investigating Quality (IQ) Project as educators (Shannon and Miranda) and as pedagogical facilitator



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(Kim) at a toddler centre on the traditional territories of the Coast and Straits Salish and Lekwungen peoples, on southern Vancouver Island. The goal of the IQ Project is to extend and broaden dialogue about quality in the early years field through critically reflecting on dominant discourses that shape our practices. Through group and individual discussions, introducing reading materials by local and international scholars, and engaging with pedagogical narrations, we think together about situated and experimental pedagogy.

Taking children into the forest is an important part of the child care program we work in, and both

educators and children anticipate visiting much loved landmarks such as the mossy hill and the jumping puddle. We watch as a young child sits alone in a gully and gently strokes the salal leaves that envelop him. We see how the moss is wearing away as small feet and hands repeatedly move through it to visit beloved spots. And we notice how hands and feet explore the ground, leaves, sticks, and mud and how bodies and earth connect and respond to one another. Attending to these small moments affects us, and makes us pause and consider what it means to be in this place and to live with the movements and life worlds of the rocks, moss, and salal. We are provoked to recognize that

our pedagogies are not as simple as taking children into forests to teach them about the species that live there. We are inspired to ask: What happens to us, to children, and to the forests in these excursions? Who are we responsible to? What stories do we tell about the forest and the non-humans that live there? And what stories do we not tell? What histories do these forests know? What histories do we talk about, and what histories do we silence? What does care look like for children? For moss? For insects?

While nature (plants, animals, trees) has always held importance in early years programs, it has been viewed as an object of study. Facts about how trees grow, the names of plants, and the biology of worms are subjects to teach. This view positions nature as separate from humans, where humans are exceptional and thus at the top of the hierarchy of living things with everything non-human below us. However, in these times of environmental crisis, scholars with the Common Worlds Childhood Research Collective are challenging this separation of human and non-human, and asking us to notice our interconnections and dependencies on non-humans (common-worlds.net). The human-induced changes to the earth require us to acknowledge that we are inextricably entangled with nature and that we are mutually vulnerable. Working within the Common Worlds framework means shifting away from notions of children in romanticized natural spaces toward expanding our ideas of community to include non-humans.

Further complicating these forest encounters are the historical and

political forces that have shaped early childhood education practices. In our work together, we consider how developmental psychology has dominated early years pedagogy, so that developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has become the “truth” of best practice. Within a DAP framework, children grow and learn in predictable, universal age-related stages, and learning outcomes are static and measurable. Children are offered particular materials and experiences that will foster what is deemed “normal development.” Underpinning DAP are Western assumptions of rational scientific truths that are applicable in all contexts to all children and educators. Everyday practices such as schedules, rules, circle time, snack time, ways of speaking, and lining up are all to be managed in very particular ways. Expectations for what children are capable of doing, what they are not capable of doing, and what we can or cannot talk about are based on how old they are. Taking toddlers into the forest is fraught with understandings of “best practices” according to DAP.

All these complexities bring complicated conversations to our time in the forest. We grapple with our uncertainties as children grab at moss, and wonder how to respond when a child gently squashes an insect. Children become frustrated as they slip down a muddy slope into a gully, or trip over roots. Educators bring differing perspectives on what care looks like, when to help, and when to simply encourage. Squashed bugs, poisonous plants, steep ravines, echoes of silenced histories, and uncertain environmental times haunt us.

What might happen when time is slowed, adult voices are quieted, rules are set aside, and questions are allowed to flourish?

In the narrations that accompany this article, Shannon and Miranda make visible these complicated conversations to take risks have influenced them in their practice. They illustrate how these conversations have led to lively experimentation and collaboration. The stories they tell create spaces to test ideas, play with understandings, stand back, notice, and wonder what other ways of being and doing are possible. They inspire us to push away our certainties to allow surprise. What might happen when time is slowed, adult voices are quieted, rules are set aside, and questions are allowed to flourish?

References

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