

Pedagogical Narration: Becoming More Comfortable with Taking Risks

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In 2014 I began working at a toddler centre where the educators were exploring different practices when they went for walks in the forest. Instead of everyone walking in a group, the educators were spreading out in the forest and allowing children to explore freely. I was conflicted; I thought this was an amazing idea but not realistic. I worried that children might run down trails where they could not be seen, or that I would not be able to keep track of everyone. But I also wanted to experience this and grow! I had confidence in my colleagues, and as I watched the children explore the forest, it was amazing to see how each child was able to do what interested them most. I still felt anxious and concerned about safety, but I tried to push past this and enjoy the moment. However, after about 20 minutes, I called out that I couldn't do this anymore; I was much too nervous. So with support from all the educators, we collected the children together. It was amazing to have so much support from the others; I never felt they were disappointed or that I had ruined the fun. Instead, they congratulated me for trying. I was able to tell them I liked this idea and wanted to continue but needed further support to grow more comfortable.

As time went on, I began to be more spontaneous in the forest. We climbed hills, built forts with



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the large sticks we found on the ground, and lay in the moss to stare at the sky and watch the trees sway in the wind. It's amazing to see how much you can do and how time goes by so fast when you can explore more than just the trails in the woods.

But questions come to me: What we are doing to nature when we veer off the trails? As we walk around the forest, are we destroying plants? Should we allow children to pull moss off the ground? What are we killing as we walk? Are child and adult feet destroying insect habitats? The children love going off the trails, but I often ask myself, who are we responsible to?

Recently, I read an article about the importance of children being barefoot. This made sense to me as I often see children trying to take off their socks and shoes. I wondered what it would be like to have children explore the mud pit in the forest in their bare feet.

One day in the forest, a child was in the mud pit squishing his boot into the mud, but I wasn't prepared for the bare feet experiment! I didn't have a towel or spare clothes, and I struggled with the thought that maybe this was the best time to try, even if I wasn't prepared. So I encouraged the child to feel mud with his hands. I too touched the mud with a finger and picked it up with my hand. The boy was interested in touching mud, so I offered to take off his boots. He had a look on his face that said, are you serious or are you joking? I helped him take off one of his boots and then took

off one of my own boots and sock. I put my foot in the mud, and held my breath from the cold feeling! It was definitely different on my feet compared to my hands. Is it because we always explore with our hands? The boy seemed to love it! I took off his second boot and sock so he could have both feet in mud. This attracted other children, and they began taking off their boots and socks. One child touched the mud with her foot but quickly made it clear she wanted her sock and boot back on. Another child began lifting one foot and then the other in the mud, and then sat down and looked carefully at the mud on his toes. He seemed more interested in the mud on his feet than the mud pit. He walked away barefoot and explored for a while, and then he came back to ask for help with his boots. We didn't have anything to clean our feet off with so I used moss and rocks to wipe off our feet and we put our socks back on. I wondered if anyone would complain about socks and boots over muddy feet, but no one seemed to even notice!

The educator I once was would have never have allowed bare feet in mud. I have become more willing to take risks and explore new practices and ideas. My colleagues and I continue to support one another to challenge what quality in early childhood care can look like.

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