



Wonder

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Experiencing Nature: An Opportunity for Pedagogic Quality

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A natural do-and-discover garden at a child daycare centre, an after-school forest group, raincoats always at hand ... more and more child care centres in the Netherlands are beginning to see the value of nature in child care. Experiencing nature appears to contribute positively to the development of the young child. The organisations Veldwerk Nederland, ROC Koning Willem 1 College, ROC Landstede, Buitenkans Participatieve Groenprojecten, and Cailin Partners carried out research about the present stage of developments in the Netherlands and abroad: what the possibilities are for child care centres in the Netherlands and what obstacles exist for a further development of nature experience in child care.

For the introduction of successfully experiencing nature programmes in the child care centres, four elements appear to be crucial:

- Competence of the pedagogic staff members;
- Inclusion of the principles of experiencing nature in the policies of the child care centre;
- Involvement and agreement of the parents; and
- Presence of a suitable outdoor facility, because experiencing nature can, of course, only be experienced outdoors.

Only if these four conditions can be realised do we have a reasonable chance that experiencing nature can really occupy a place in the child care centre.

In this article we will tell you more about the experiences of the project partners

and about the design of nature experiencing for children's day care centres and the role you can play in these developments.

The Importance of Experiencing Nature

Experiencing nature challenges children to become more independent by discovering and communicating. Nature also provides relaxation and rest. Research shows that children (and especially very young children) who spend a great deal of time in nature, concentrate better, are less stressed, and are ill less frequently.

Experiencing nature also contributes to the following specific areas of development:

- Locomotor system
- Use of the senses
- Good emotional development (perseverance, self-confidence, etc.)
- Moral development: respect for the environment, plants, and animals.

In short, experiencing nature is indispensable for children's balanced development, and therefore also essential in child care. It is, of course, not by accident that nature and the physical environment occupy an important place in the pedagogic framework of child care centres designed for toddlers 0-4 years. But how does one give form to experiencing nature? Are there no risks associated with the process? As far as the children are concerned, there are no obstacles. Children have a natural need to play and be outside.

Opportunities or Risks?

The ideal starting point for experiencing nature outside in the fresh air might

include the following elements:

- A discovery garden
- A piece of grass for the babies
- A bamboo thicket where the toddlers can go on an adventure journey
- A piece of ground where the after-school group can climb trees and, together with the pedagogic members of staff, build huts.

But is it sensible to let toddlers climb tree trunks with the risk that they might fall off? Should we let ten-year-olds independently put out an adventure track in a wood? Yes, because what we fear is actually the opposite of what turns out to be true. Experiencing nature, provided it is well-guided, prevents accidents. Children learn at a young age to handle risks and practice motor skills. Of course the area has to be suitable to practice in relative safety.

And what about parents' concerns: Are parents willing to see their children come home in grubby clothes? Or that they prick their fingers on the bramble bushes? No, of course not every time. It is therefore recommended to discuss the dilemmas of experience with nature thoroughly with parents. A daycare centre can obtain special playsuits for outdoor activities and parents can give their children a set of 'outdoor clothing.' Once parents are convinced of the importance of experiencing nature, then the problems listed above do not hamper play. By including experiencing nature in the centre's pedagogic policies, parents know what to expect and will be briefed thoroughly about them.

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The Role of Training

In vocational education, there is generally minimal attention — or none at all — paid to children experiencing nature. And graduated pedagogic staff members are not 'automatically' competent in guiding children in experiencing nature. Their attitude towards experiencing nature is more important than, for example, the presence of suitable materials. A positive attitude of the pedagogic staff member stimulates the children to go and explore instead of finding the creepy-crawlies 'scary.' In addition, the pedagogic staff member follows the children's interests in nature as much as possible and offers them new supplementary challenges. A good practice of experiencing nature demands extra attention during the education or refresher courses or extra training. The vocational schools (ROCs) involved in the project have introduced a module of "Child and Nature." But other ROCs are now including the subject in their curriculum. Special nature training and coaching courses for the practical application of nature training have been developed.

What Is a Suitable Outside Location?

Not all centres have a large outside area at their disposal, but it has been found that even in smaller gardens much can be achieved. The ideal outside facility is especially a nature-rich do-and-discover garden where they are allowed to play and experience. In these spaces:

- There exist variation in measurements, space/mass, relief, plants, and ambiance.
- The senses of the children are being stimulated in a variety of ways.
- Nature and natural processes are given

space; for example, children encounter falling leaves, mushrooms, and rotting wood.

- There is a clearly recognizable space for babies (0-5 years).
- There is a covered area where children can play, eat, drink, and be active throughout all seasons. The pedagogic workers are thereby enabled to spend longer periods outside. For them, there are places to sit to feed the babies and change their nappies.
- Because of the games of the children, the garden will change continuously. That seems to be a pity, but in a children's garden children should be playing and discovering. A good design is worth its weight in gold, so go and search for a garden architect with an eye for this target group.

Support from the 'Green' Professionals

Child care centres have a lot of support from "green" professionals when shaping their nature experience venture. Firstly, the outside area of the garden has to be established. That requires the knowledge of a landscape architect, such as knowledge of plants and other materials and a good arrangement of the space. Next, it is important that pedagogic staff members are not afraid to undertake and get a grip on the potential of the physical environment. Support of child care centres by organisations for nature and environmental education with training and advice, materials, knowledge, and practical examples helps to lower the threshold.

Not every child care centre has the funds for design and construction of the garden. It has been shown that councils will sometimes be prepared to assist. Staff members of local nature organisations can help in finding the right funding sources.

Practice Experiences

It is possible to set up such centres, as has been shown in practice. There are examples of this in the Netherlands and abroad. But these efforts demand contributions from both trainers, designers, child care centres, nature educators, and policymakers. The knowledge and

expertise is there, but where does one find the right people?

The initiators of the project "Groen is Gras" are willing to help you bring these worlds together. They have already done this in practice by establishing nature experiencing in two model locations: training and coaching fellow workers, parent evenings, natural outdoor locations, inclusion of nature experiencing in policies and teaching schedules, and by producing a DVD with information about the projects. But now the time has arrived for a country-wide effort.

Conference "Kind van nature 2009"

On September 11, 2009 the first conference "Kind van nature" (Child of Nature) was held in the town of Zwolle in the Netherlands. The day was designed for all professionals who are devoting themselves to the young and nature: landscape architects, pedagogues, and nature educators. All participants received the new DVD "Experiencing Nature in Children's Daycare Centres" free of charge. The DVD is a summary of the project results and can be used to inspire pedagogues, parents, staff, designers, and policymakers. The DVD is subtitled in English and can be ordered for €30,-ex delivery charges.

For more information about nature in child daycare, contact:

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