

# Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

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## Children as Designers of Their Own Space

by Claire Warden

As adults, our heads are full of possibilities for design. We have had anything from 0 to 99 years of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic-based experiences to fill the area of the brain, that I nominally refer to as 'the filing cabinet.' This huge database affects all our decisions, many of them completely intuitive and many not even in the realm of consciousness. So, as guardians of the outdoor spaces in which children learn, we define and design a space that we feel is wonderful, that we feel is all the things it can be. But let us consider for a moment who has made the decision, who has created the definition of an effective outdoor space for children. We have. Yet we are not the end users, the children are:

- They have a voice that should be heard across every aspect of their lives.
- It is their empowerment and the value we give their ideas that will intrinsically sit within their brains to ultimately affect their sense of well-being.
- They have a greater feeling of worth if adults hear what they are saying.
- The connection between children and learning is stronger when the adults around them support and collaborate with them to achieve joint goals or to define projects and areas where children's ideas can take the lead.

In my work I create documented group journeys that are held together in a **Talking and Thinking Floorbook**,™ a large A3 book that records children's ideas both verbally and nonverbally through drawing, gesture, and movement so as to make the strategy more inclusive. The books are designed to work in

nature time. The key learning — in this case the use of a landscape — may well be months from initial discussions. These Floorbooks™ last at least a year and are often referred back to after two years by younger friends and siblings. Alongside this book, we use Talking Tubs™ to provoke thinking in the children we work with (18 months to 12 years). One of the tubs we use is focused on outdoor landscape design.

When I am working in centres exploring consultative planning, the main questions I am asked are:

- 1) "What do we do if they ask for something we cannot provide?"
- 2) The other is "They just say the same as the provision that they already have . . . bikes and tarmac."

The answer to these two questions lies within the Talking Tubs.™ The tubs are created by the adult to offer provocation for discussion. The photographs and 3D-objects give an overview of the possibilities of the space. To see pictures of 10 versions of a seat is to widen your

horizons immediately. To support that by physically feeling different types of rock, wood, metal is to deepen the connection for the child. In this way they can make informed decisions.

Enclosure of space is another wonderful aspect of the work in creating landscapes with children. The physical size of young children changes their perspective all the time (Warden, 2006). The first thing we need to do is to put ourselves in the spaces that children show us that they love. Then we can begin to understand what their views are.

Planning in a tangible way to enclose space can be done with rope, sand lines, pebbles, and other materials so children can move in and out of areas to show the ergonomics of a space. The way children use space will be very different from how adults use it. We need to consider if we are willing to have children change the design of a space. If not, then we should not ask the questions in the first place!

Our new Centre for Excellence in Perthshire, Scotland, has created 15 landscape features with children as the designers. The documentation of the whole space celebrates children's thinking. The children asked for a "mountain 2 metres tall with a tree on top." It had to have long, wavy grass to hide in and a path going up that had to stop at the top. When questioned about the idea of a pathway just stopping, the little girl of four years replied, "Well, that is so you have to scramble and trip and find your own way down. It is more exciting that way." How

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PHOTOGRAPH BY NINI BUCHAN



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many times do we make our outdoor landscapes too easy or too simple so that all the play affordances of loose materials are removed and the thrill of adventure suppressed?

In Scotland we have two centres that are innovative in that they are Nature Kindergartens. The children spend 80% of their time outside, and the gardens and the wild wood are as natural as possible. This ethical and environmental route to reduce plastic and closed, over-designed products has led to creative spaces both inside and out. When the children were looking at the Talking Tubs,<sup>TM</sup> they described, "Playing in the mud, hiding where no-one can see us, running down a hill, and just lying in the hammock sleeping and snoring." Are all of these achievable? Yes, they are. It leads us easily then to consider — How will children:

- Run down a hill if the ground is always flat?
- Tie a hammock up without trees or a post?
- Hide if there are no willow spaces?
- Create mud pies if there is no mud pit?

The climate, flora, and fauna may alter around the world, but the links between childhood experiences around the globe are remarkably similar. Children tell us what they need and want, we have to train ourselves to listen and take note.

## References

Warden, C. (2006). *Nurture through nature*. Perthshire, Scotland: Mindstretchers.

Warden, C. (2000). *Talking and thinking floorbooks*. Perthshire, Scotland: Mindstretchers.

This article has sections taken from Claire Warden's two new books: *Nature Kindergartens* and *Journeys into Nature*, both published by Mindstretchers (Perthshire, Scotland, UK) and are available at [www.mindstretchers.co.uk](http://www.mindstretchers.co.uk).