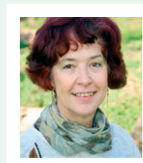


Daisy chains & scabby knees

As opportunities for children to connect with their environment diminish, our practitioners need to have the confidence to make the most of outdoor



time, says **Sara Knight...**

My mother said she knew I was artistic even as a baby, because I stuffed daisies up my nose, whereas my sister ate coal. At that stage we lived in a semi in a market town, and the local kids played together in the street. One winter we blocked the street with a snow barrier and had a two-day snowball fight. I learned to roller-skate in that street, and had permanently scabby knees from falling over. My great aunt lived in a council house in a village, and when my great uncle was digging his vegetable plot I collected the worms and fed them to next door's chickens. Why are these memories important?

We're concerned about improving children's connections with their environment so that they'll live healthier, more sustainable lives. However, their opportunities are very different to mine. The street I live in now has speed bumps, and I don't see children playing out, let alone on roller skates. The council houses have had their vegetable plots sold off, their gardens reduced to a concrete yard plus narrow flowerbed, and separated from each other by fences. Parents are cautious about perceived dangers, but their fears are reinforced by sensationalised news reports. Few babies have a garden to crawl around and explore the daisies, and when I look around at young children today I see very few scabby knees.

Underpinning the adventures I describe above were the communities in which they existed. In our street, houses were occupied by different aged families, and many included adults who were at home during the day. Without some sense of community we could not have played on the street, with known adults looking out for us. Tending the vegetable gardens gave informal opportunities for interactions.

In many young families today both parents work and children are rushed from home to daycare and school; chances to develop their environmental awareness are limited by opportunities both social and physical. As such, daycare and school settings have acquired an importance to raising children's awareness of their environment that once would not have been necessary. Unfortunately, many practitioners feel the fearfulness ascribed above to parents, which puts pressure on them to over-protect. It's difficult to give confidence to practitioners who have children's best interests at heart, but are fearful and may have limited outdoor experiences themselves.

I find that the best way is practical, to give hands-on experience of activities without the worry of caring for the children. This might include bushcraft skills such as fire-lighting and cooking, creative activities like mud faces, or gardening to grow vegetables. Students need to feel comfortable with

activities before they'll be able to share them with children effectively. This year, a group of experienced practitioners working with me for two hours a week for nine weeks came to me after 'playing' outside at activities they had designed for each other. "Now we know what you mean," they said. That week they'd lit a fire, made mud animals, and played pooh-sticks, all open-ended activities with opportunities for individual creativity and imagination.

I do direct the students to think about risk management. We practise different ways to risk assess, which gives them confidence, as do the statistics from RoSPA and the HSE websites. We talk about how important it is that children should have a wide range of outdoor experiences in order to learn about the world around them: how to keep themselves safe, to dress appropriately for different weather, about the rhythm of the seasons and where their food comes from. And that is just a start. All of the curriculum can be delivered outside.

Settings need to be looking for a range of outdoor opportunities for staff as a part of their CPD. Staff picnics and days out can offer the chance to share existing knowledge and skills. This is often an excellent starting point - I took my colleagues out one summer for a sharing picnic just after a scheme for voluntary redundancies had been announced. We made magic wands - need I say more? The next step is often one-day events. Local wildlife trusts, the RHS, the RSPB, and local forest school and bushcraft practitioners can provide sessions, not always at a huge cost. Then there are certificated professional courses for those who want to go further, for example, as forest school practitioners or as a part of post-graduate studies.

P.S. My sister is a nurse!

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Sara Knight is an author and senior lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University. To receive 20% off RRP of her new books, *Forest School and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years* and *International Perspectives on Forest School*, quote discount code UK13EM033 when ordering on sagepub.co.uk



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