

Children Playing in Nature

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Introduction

In this paper, I want to focus on *barnehager*, which when in the wild environment, are known as *Friluftsbarnhager*. Firstly, I will define the concept *Friluftsbarnhage*. Secondly I will discuss the observation of children's play out in wild environment and how nature influences children's play. Finally, I want to point out how nature influences the quality of children's play.

The Norwegian word *barnehage* describes different types of provision for children from one to six years of age, such as day nurseries, kindergartens and pre-schools. They all have an educational agenda.

The word *Friluftsliv* is more than simply outdoor activities or outdoor recreation. The main motivation is the experience of nature, and the philosophy is to take care of the environment.

Friluftsbarnhager Outside in the Wild Environment

The Norwegian Ministry of the Environment currently focuses on *friluftsliv* as a recommended educational way of working in *barnehager* and schools (Parliament Report nr. 39, 2000-2001). The arguments for this way of working are related to both ecology and health. A child who learns to love the countryside will wish to preserve it. He or she will understand the importance of biological diversity. It is also assumed that these children will keep on using the outdoor environment for physical activities in their adult life. The *Framework Plan for Day-Care Institutions* (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1996) formulates objectives such as "*developing positive attitudes and practical skills*" related to nature and outdoor activities. There is growing documentation stating that increased physical activity, and particularly outdoor physical activity, can prevent diseases related to modern lifestyles.

During the last ten years, a large number of *friluftsbarnhage* have been established in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway. In Norway, there is a loose National curriculum, a framework, stating objectives and aims for educational work in *barnehager*. *Friluftsbarnhager* must follow this national curriculum and the general principles of management of "barnehager". They do this through mainly outdoor activities all day, every day, year round. This motto from one *friluftsbarnhage* shows their philosophy: "*Everything you can do indoors, you can do outdoors, but not the other way around.*" According to their programs, two different areas seem to be common. The first is

developing knowledge about the environment and experience of nature. The second is to focus physical activity and motor development by using nature as an arena for play (Lysklett, 2003).

The researchers Borge *et al.* (2003) presented three ideas underpinning the *friluftsbarnhage*. Firstly, they see them as a part of the strong bonds between nature and Norwegians, and Norwegian's tradition of preferring outdoor leisure activities. They assume that parents want to give their children the opportunity to experience outdoor activities and to develop positive attitudes to outdoor and wild environment. The second idea is that of "a happy childhood." They say that the majority of parents believe that "happy children are children playing outdoor most of the day, irrespective of season and weather." (Borge *et al.*, 2003:606) The last point is the parents' option to choose this type of *barnhage* for their child because of the increased number of these *friluftsbarnhager*. Borge *et al.* (2003) estimate that about 5 per cent of all day-care children in Scandinavian countries experience such outdoor life in *friluftsbarnhager*.

Høyland (1999), supported by The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, evaluated the quality of *friluftsbarnhager*, and her results show that wild environments and outdoor life are positive arenas for learning. *Friluftsbarnhager* represent more flexibility. There are more possibilities for physical activities, mastery experiences, knowledge about the natural environment and environmental consciousness in these institutions.

Fjørtoft (2001) in her doctorate thesis documents that children develop better physical skills when they are given opportunity for outdoor activities from an early age.

How does the Environment Influence Children's Play?

According to a post-graduate thesis (Klepsvik 1995), staff in *Friluftsbarnhager* reported that children's play is more creative, and they play better in the wild environment compared to ordinary playgrounds. My main question is: How does the outdoor environment influence children's play?

Fjørtoft (2001:111) notes that "the central concept guiding children's examination of their environment is that of "affordance'." Gibson's (1979) concept of *affordance* was developed to describe how compositions and layout of surfaces constitute what they afford. The *affordances* of the environment are what the environment offers to the children. Heft (1988) elaborated the concept of *affordances* further and explained environmental features as functions for play. Children perceive the functions of the features in the environment, and they intuitively use them for physical challenges and play. They perceive what the environment affords them. Heft (1988) argued that the functional approach corresponds to the relationship of children to their environment. The

diversity of the outdoor environment gives the children a lot of possibilities. Different features like cliffs and rocks, slopes and heights, and a mixture of woodland with a high diversity in vegetation, all have a functional meaning for children. For example, a tree with branches suitable for climbing will be perceived as climbable. If some of the branches also are big enough to sit on, the tree can be perceived as both climbable and as a base for social play. The tree therefore affords opportunities both for climbing and playing. A key point made by Gibson (1979) is that *affordances* correspond with each individual; to the size of the body, strength, the skills, courage and fear.

My Research Project Observing Children Playing Outdoors

My research project is based on a Qualitative approach (Sparkes 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992). During Autumn 2003, I visited two groups in two different *friluftsbarnhager* that spent most of the day outdoor in the forest. I stayed with them for twelve days from late August to December. I watched children play, wrote some notes and finished my log later on. I videotaped children's play when they were happy for me to do so. The tape was transcribed and analysed together with the log. First, I tried to observe the whole group because I wanted to get a general idea of how children behaved. Then I kept on observing different groups of children in their play and play at popular features.

Both *friluftsbarnhager* alternated different places, camps, out in wild environment. The only facility at the camp was the fire. Some camps were near the main *barnehage* building, while some were nearly an hour's walk or a short bus journey away. My observations have been discussed with and confirmed by the staff and my colleagues.

How did the Children Play?

Each camp had different natural features, such as different woodland, a grassy field, a lot of cliffs and really big rocks. On coming to the camp, some children started to play immediately and some stayed with the staff at the camp. The latter group could find a knife and start whittling or help in building the bonfire. One of the staff always had to stay by the fire. One of the *Barnehager* also prepared a hot meal for the children by the fire every day at noon. The children who immediately started to play, were either focused on where to play and had made arrangements for play before they arrived at the camp, or they went around looking for facilities and playmates before starting real play.

Physical Activity Play

Physical activity play was prominent most of the time. I saw a lot of activities which were repeated in the context of exercise play (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). The activities could be:

- Climbing up very steep hillsides and sliding down again;
- Climbing up and jumping down from big rocks or small cliffs;

- Climbing in trees;
- Throwing javelins or cones;
- Shooting with bows and arrows;
- Rolling on the ground;
- Balancing on stones, fallen trees etc.;
- Whittling a stick.

I will argue that all these activities were based on what the environment afforded and the functional significance of the surroundings (Heft 1988). Children are aware of how steep a slope must be to be able to slide down, and they explore different ways of sliding down according to their fear and ability. When climbing, they find their own ways up, fitting their strength, height and skills to the task. They intuitively examine what nature affords them, and they stop climbing when it becomes too dangerous for them. All the elements listed above were also seen as a part of role-play.

Role-play

The environment with its natural features constituted a scene for role-playing. They were a mother and children, a mouse or a cat family moving around looking for something to eat, running away from a threat or whatever the dramatic adviser (always one of the children) told them to do. On their trips, they sought the natural features that could give different challenges. They moved around through shrubs, crossing rock-strewn slopes, up and down hillsides while speeding up and down, often fleeing. The one in front perceived what the environment would *afford* her. Sometimes her movements were too complicated for some of those who followed, but they never mentioned or commented on the behaviour. The play had the elements of running effectively around and dealing with obstacles. I observed this kind of play in both institutions. In one, this play belonged to a group of girls, but sometimes boys were involved. In the other, both boys and girls participated almost all the time.

Some boys' play had a different content. They were pirates, workers on a spacecraft, car drivers, Robin Hood or Harry Potter. Their play was more vigorous and their movements more dynamic. Often they also carried sticks with them, and sometimes there was an element of fight, either verbal or physical. I never saw them participate in the mother and child play, and they seldom allowed girls to participate in their play. The advanced climbers found their spacecraft or their castle at the top of a tree suitable for climbing. Big branches afforded opportunities for sitting, balancing, swinging and rocking and all these elements were found in the play. Another element was the fight, and even a fight can take place in a tree, if the tree is suitable. I watched different kinds of fights in the trees. The fights were very much verbal and as soon as the intruder was a real danger, they surrendered, climbed down, or negotiated a solution.

In the role-play the elements of nature were used in different ways. The shrubs and trees were transformed into houses, cars, garages, spacecraft, castles and whatever. Implements such as switches for lights, door openings, rocket launchers, steering wheels etc. were always found and used by the children in their play. Stepping-stones, for example, function as an entrance for a house, stepping from stone to stone became an important element of a mother and child play. A windfall where the wind had blown down trees could be a scene for a role-play. Like staying in trees, staying at windfalls demanded balance and strength. The windfall gave opportunities for those who did not want to be quiet during a part of the role-play. If the tree or the windfall afforded it, some children were balancing, hanging, swinging or turning somersaults when the dramatic adviser told them to be in a car, in a plane or at school. They played their individual exercise play parallel, but within the role-play.

Go Exploring

Another distinctive type of play was the number of expeditions that set out to discover something. In the autumn, spiders' webs were easy to find and they were attractive to some of the boys who challenged themselves to kiss the spiders' webs. Other exciting features were small caves, and stories were made up about who might have lived there. A dead mouse, a cocoon, a snail roused from its winter sleep in a warm hand, are all examples which were found and brought back to the camp to be shown to the staff and discussed.

Traditional Play

The last type of plays was chase and catch play, hide and seek and different singing games. Most of this play was started by children themselves, but once during the day, adults could start a game and very often the whole group participated. Different variants of chase and catch and hide and seek were popular, and sometimes the children started those games on their own. The ground, with its elements of vegetation and rocks made those games more challenging than if played on a flat ground, and emphasised the impact that the outdoors can have on children's play.

Conclusion

I found that physical activity play was the prominent activity in these *friluftsbarnhager*. The children were more or less physically active all the time. The key elements of the exercise play (Pelligrini and Smith, 1998) were functions of different features in the environment, and the play had different characteristics according to the different surroundings. Where elements such as good climbing trees, windfalls, steep hillsides and dense bushes were available, these elements were included in nearly all the role play. Physical skills and body control seemed to determine the child's participation more than age (Kaarby, 2004).

Quality according to the Norwegian *Barnehage*

A program for Quality improvement in “barnehager” has just come to an end. The preliminary conclusions are of great interest from the point of view of *friluftsbarnhager*. The conclusions state that quality in the Norwegian *barnehager* first and foremost is characterized by:

- “A positive environment with a high level of well-being for the involved groups;
- Emphasizing play and variety of activities;
- Emphasizing outdoor activities and experience.” (Søbstad, 2004: 68)

These characteristics correspond with the main focus of the general framework plan for *barnehagen* which is on social interaction and play. Because quality is both relative and normative it is meaningful to talk about a special Norwegian Quality in *barnehager* (Søbstad, 2004).

How the Wild Environment Influences the Quality of Children’s Play

Quality can be understood as the meaning or value a phenomenon has to those who are involved (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Søbstad, 2004). I have tried to describe how the wild environment influences children’s play and, from my point of view, gives value to play. I have tried to describe how nature was a dominant element in all kinds of play, and how children perceive functions of the environment and use them (Heft, 1988). Because of the seasons, the landscape has different characteristics and affords different functions during the year. These different features give various options and great diversity. The creativity children showed when transforming objects was conspicuous. While some will say that the environment simply serves the play, another way of looking at it is to ask how the environment created the play, how a feature invited just that particular kind of play.

Nearly a hundred children in six *barnehager* were asked what they preferred doing, and ninety-eight per cent answered running, jumping and climbing (Søbstad, 2004). All these activities are what children in *friluftsbarnhager* do all the time, as described earlier in this paper. The possibilities that nature gives for vigorous gross motor moments are of great value for children involved.

According to Pelligrini and Smith (1998), physical activity play has developmental functions in proportion to endurance and strength. From a health perspective, there is now a focus on children becoming more and more sedentary. The fact that children, when given the opportunity to play in outdoor surroundings, are physically active nearly all the time, shows that children enjoy being physically active. It seems like they are more engaged, involved and socially included in play outdoors (Klepsvik, 1995).

As I see it, another benefit for children is the many and various impressions which the wild environment gives. The four seasons and all sorts of weather make the same surroundings different each time. Being outdoors all through the year, children are much more aware of those shifts, and the different sense impressions they provide. The experience of nature is one of the basic qualities of *friluftsliv*. Practical experiences from different situations give children fundamental knowledge, and in the *barnehage* they have the opportunity to share the experience linguistically and to interact based on these shared experiences.

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