

Chapter 1

Children's right to play

Outdoor play as tradition, and space for children to play in the Framework Plan for Kindergartens

A new Framework Plan for Kindergartens was introduced in 2017. Chapter 1 of the plan is about the fundamental values and ethical principles of the kindergarten. Here it is stated (in a variety of ways) that the kindergarten must recognize and safeguard the intrinsic values of childhood. All kindergarten children have the right to a good childhood of well-being and development, friendship and play, and it is essential that the kindergarten contributes to this (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Outdoor play is and has been a strong part of Norwegian culture and everyday life. In Norway we have had, and still do have, a great belief in the healthiness of being outdoors. Ever since psychiatric institutions and hospitals for tuberculosis patients were built out in nature and in the mountains, and we would sing, "Where life is fresh and mild, up, up, up the mountains!" we have held on to the belief that outdoor activity makes us healthy and cheerful. In Norway we have kindergartens called outdoor kindergartens, nature kindergartens, and open-air kindergartens, but the more traditional kindergartens also allow their children to spend a considerable amount of time in the open. Legislation does not allow kindergartens to decide for themselves what they will focus on. Outdoor play is seen as a tradition to be protected. The new Framework Plan (2017) also values outdoor play, although I believe that it lacks an even greater focus on outdoor play. Chapter 8 of the Framework Plan declares that the kindergarten employees' pedagogical way of working should be based on creativity and play, and the employees should be able to improvise and accept the participation of the children (the responsibility still belongs to the kindergarten teachers, of course). It further states that all kindergartens are obliged to draw up an annual plan, and in this plan parents can read how the kindergarten works with play.

Chapter 3 of the Framework Plan states that in kindergarten, children should have the right to play and to develop the joy of creating, wonder and the urge to explore. Play is essential, and its intrinsic values are to be recognized. Kindergarten should inspire and make space for a variety of outdoor and indoor play. It may be noted that “outdoors” is mentioned first. Apart from this sentence, the Framework Plan says nothing specific about outdoor play except for when it deals with certain subject areas. Under the subject area “Body, movement, food and health” (*Kropp, bevegelse, mat og helse*) we can read that kindergarten should contribute towards helping children experience happiness, joy and the mastering of the practice of movement thanks to comprehensive activities, both inside and out, all year round. It is also written that kindergarten employees should provide access to varied and challenging environments for movement, sensory experiences and physical play both within the grounds of the kindergarten and outside it. The children are to be challenged, stimulated and developed intellectually and physically. The subject area “Art, culture and creativity” (*Kunst, kultur og kreativitet*) mentions outdoor activities, too; here, the employees are obliged to create and render the esthetic dimensions of the kindergarten visible—indoors as well as out.

Under the subject area “Nature, environment and technology” (*Natur, miljø og teknologi*) it is stated that kindergarten should contribute towards children learning to love nature and being in nature in the different seasons. Kindergarten should organize for children to learn to see what nature has to offer so that they can appreciate its abundance and potential as a year-round arena for learning and play.

Under the subject area “Local environment and society” (*Nærmiljø og samfunn*), kindergarten employees are to contribute towards the children exploring nature's different landscapes and getting to know their local environment.

In my opinion, the 2017 Framework Plan ought to have had a greater focus on outdoor play. In connection to kindergarten's values and its new central areas of sustainable development, health, and a mastery of life, a stronger emphasis on outdoor play would have been highly relevant. Perhaps we are taking outdoor play for granted, imagining that it is already a part of play? Well, it is, but as long as the Framework Plan does not make more of a point of outdoor play, some kindergartens may choose to spend less time on it.

The Framework Plan has a lot to say about kindergarten employees when it comes to play. In kindergarten, children are to experience a stimulating environment that supports their desire to play, explore, learn and master, and children's initiatives, wonder, curiosity and creativity are to be supported and enriched. Furthermore, staff should also support children's wondering and their ability to pose questions, seek experiences, take initiatives and master new tasks. The Frame-

work Plan does not mention unorganized play as a phenomenon, but it does state that employees should vary between spontaneous and planned activities.

Here I would have liked a specification and a discussion of the differences between adult-directed and child-directed play.

Under the subject area “Body, movement, food and health” (*Kropp, bevegelse, mat og helse*), it is stated that children have the right to take part in activities that imply movement, play and social life based on their own circumstances. The kindergarten ought to lay the groundwork for diverse experiences in nature, and use nature as an arena for play, wonder and exploration, to be approached with a sense of care and learning.

Let’s return to play as a tradition and a cultural phenomenon. Arne Næss (2005) never stopped playing, and climbing was his favorite pastime. His entire body language expressed a joy in movement and in physicality. Throughout his life he was a playful man. Through his playfulness, he showed us how to take ourselves less seriously. How can we explain why play is essential to so many of us, even in old age? The concept of *homo ludens* – *playful man* – is an old one, but the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, one of the founders of modern cultural history, made it widely known when he published his book of the same title in 1938. It is considered a classic of research on play. It has been translated into a number of languages. Huizinga discusses the essence of play and its significance as a cultural phenomenon. He describes play as the engine setting culture in motion. He also says that we probably never stop playing, but of course we adults play in other ways than when we were young. The act of play produces hormones and provides an experience of joy and mastering.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR FREE PLAY EXIST FOR CHILDREN TODAY?

Do children today have access to exciting places that inspire them to play, move, and imagine, and do they have the opportunity to visit these places? The Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) conducted a survey of parents with children six to twelve years of age. In it, 3,160 adults answered questions about how their children played in their local areas. 60 to 70 per cent of the parents reported that their children play in the gardens on a daily basis, while around 40% answered that the children play at least once a week in a nearby woods during the warmer months of the year. Ninety-seven per cent of the children have access to a wood on foot or by bicycle. The survey indicates that the youngest children spend more time in the local area than older children do, and often do so with their parents. It also shows that children spend

a great deal of time outdoors, and that children taking part in organized activities also spend more time playing in their local areas (Skår et al., 2014).

When it comes to exciting places to play, Norwegian children are relatively privileged. Most children have access to exciting and stimulating places to play at kindergarten, at school, and close to home. Yet still, there is a great potential to improve the opportunities for play at many kindergartens, in schoolyards, and in the local area. Opportunities for indoor play, such as computers, cell phones and television present a great challenge to outdoor play. In his book *Digital Dementia*, the German professor, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer raises the dangers of digitalization. In the introduction to the book, he writes that he is passionate about children being entitled to a childhood and experiencing a world of values such as fellowship, the future, freedom and consideration for others. He explicitly condemns the digital industries for denying the gloomy and alarming truth, as Spitzer sees it, that digitalization is not helping us; on the contrary, it is hurting us. Digital media are habit-forming, inflicting long-term physical and mental wounds upon those who indulge in them too much, writes the author. In addition, he emphasizes that the frequent use of digital media may cause the death of various brain cells, because cells left underemployed will eventually perish (Spitzer, 2014).

Digitalization and the fact that children live in bigger houses and have many toys are not the only factors threatening outdoor play. Another factor is that parents are anxious about their children playing outdoors. This kind of parental anxiety is more widespread in countries other than Norway, but recent research shows that the phenomenon is advancing in Norway as well (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). One important reason for this may be that many parents do not live where they themselves grew up. They are not familiar with the play areas that their own children have access to. Someone who has worked as a kindergarten teacher in the Grünerløkka neighborhood of Oslo for 18 years told me that she has only met one other mother who was herself born and raised in the same area. She let her children come and go in the neighborhood as they pleased, and was not afraid of the local area because she knew it well. She knew where to find nice places to play because she had played there when she was younger. What can we do about this? This former kindergarten teacher told me that she had taken other parents from the kindergarten to the urban parks and shown them how they could handle discarded syringes and other city-specific problems. One might also arrange a parents' gathering or a meeting for coffee at places outdoors so that parents get to see possible walking routes that kindergartens or schools use. They can then go there with their children in their own free time. Learning about the risks and getting to know the local environment makes one feel safer.

WHY OUTDOOR PLAY?

Chapter 1 of the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017), “Mastering life and health” (*Livsmestring og helse*), mentions well-being, joy for life, mastering and the joy of movement. Play is essential for children’s emotional, physical, and social development. It is through outdoors play, which implies movement, physical expression, and being outdoors both with children of a similar age and with adults, that children develop and lay the groundwork for mastering life and good health. The Framework Plan can help us put children’s self-organized play, which we often call “free play”, back on the agenda again. To a large degree, this book is about play in nature. Play is how children learn to solve problems and control their own lives, get to know their own bodies, see the possibilities in their surroundings, and feel joy, freedom, and happiness. Play is how children learn to get along well with their peers and superiors, show consideration of others, negotiate, be creative, receive good advice, learn about movement, experience mastery and, not least, have good social interactions. One of those who has been most important in approaching an understanding of children’s play is Anne Greve (Greve & Kristensen, 2015). She has written extensively on the importance of play on friendship.

In the introduction to Gert Biesta’s book on “the beautiful risk of education” (2014), the author writes about the many pedagogical moments of presence and sensitivity that occur at kindergarten and school. As educators, we have a responsibility to see individual children and their circumstances, not least to arrange to give children access to exciting play areas. The Framework Plan contains a chapter (Department of Education and Research, 2017) about the working methods of the kindergarten, stating that these working methods should contribute towards participation, interest and motivation, and provide the possibility to add new experiences at the kindergarten. The plan also states that the kindergarten’s neighborhood and local environment should be included when planning and carrying out activities.

In our society, we tend to worry about our children losing contact with nature. One survey conducted by NINA has studied the ways in which children play in nature. The researchers followed kindergarten children, children at school camp, and children attending *Barnas turlag*, the Norwegian Trekking Association’s club for children as they were out walking, and asked adults about the ways in which the children play. The sub-studies show that self-directed play and development in nature have distinctive qualities for children. One principal outcome is that children acquire a closer, more sensual, emotional and physical contact with nature through spontaneous and self-directed play without the presence of adults than

they do when they follow instructions from adults in activities characterized by play (Skår et al., 2016). In my doctoral thesis, I call this “occupying the place.” The children found or created their own places; it was here that they found peace, were present, played, and allowed themselves to be spellbound (Fasting, 2013, 2014a, 2015). In activities creating joy, mastery and passion, children lose track of time and place. It is through play and many experiences of this kind that children build up a core full of experiences, emotions, movement and mastery, as well as social and local connections. About play Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002) wrote: “I wish today’s children would play more than they do. Those who play as young children acquire a wealth that they can draw on their entire lives.” A great many adults remain attached to the outdoor play areas of their childhoods. These places recall particular games and activities and are connected to those children with whom they played.

DO PARENTS AND KINDERGARTENS VALUE PLAYING OUTDOORS?

We in Norway are concerned that children possess the ability to deal with conflicts during play, and value physical and creative play such as climbing trees and building dens (Gullestad, 1989, 1992). I write about such activities, calling them “the playful life outdoors” (Fasting, 2016). But is this ideology still valid today? Many parents believe that children who play outdoors are happy children, no matter the season or weather (Nilsen, 2008). Recent studies indicate, however, that outdoor play is disappearing, although parents still consider it to be important (Skår et al., 2014). Many adults recall their own playful childhoods with glee and see the value in their own children sharing similar experiences. Yet many children are spending very little time outdoors, and parents are finding it very difficult to get them outside. The children are very often captivated by screens, and spend the afternoons taking part in activities organized by adults. It is a fact, too, that an increasing population is causing a reduction in green areas near residential areas. Green areas between houses thus are invaluable when it comes to opportunities for outdoor life and play in the local environment.

The Framework Plan puts emphasis on experiences of nature and the local environment. Children are to develop an affection for nature and are given experiences that promote the ability to orient themselves and to be in nature in all seasons.

Most kindergartens stress outdoors play, and many staff are skilled organizers who believe in the children’s right to self-directed outdoors play and in the children’s right to have a voice in what activities to engage in. Some staff members have told me: *There is a focus on how children develop their language at*

kindergarten, but seeing the development of language in relation to children's motor functions has been forgotten. Studies conducted by Elisabeth Bjørnstad and Ellen Os show that staff succeed best in stimulating children's development—linguistic or otherwise—through play. The researchers argue that formal language teaching, testing, and language stimulation ought not to take the focus away from language development through play for the youngest of children at kindergarten. In the opinion of Bjørnstad and Os, adults talking with children about play, during play and after play is the best way of stimulating language development (Storvik, 2015; Bjørnstad & Os, 2018).

Today, play is an endangered activity. Many people think that children should learn more, and they do not see that play has its own intrinsic value and utility. Most kindergartens attempt to give priority to play, and staff value it highly. What does research have to say on the matter? Studies confirm that the earlier children are subjected to target-oriented teaching, the worse they perform at school later on. What benefits children most, is what professor Dion Sommer calls “supervised play”. The overall approach to care, play, and teaching that is a well-known part of the Norwegian kindergarten tradition provides children with an excellent starting point (Sommer, 2015).

Many schools have made a push for outdoor activities but find such activities difficult to carry out under the pressure of national examinations and PISA tests. Break times are shortened or eliminated, classes are expanded and extended and teachers feel they have to give priority to teaching in the classroom in order to meet the demands of the national testing regime. Many teachers think that the situation has gone too far. Space and time for play, and physical and outdoor activities at school, have been reduced considerably in recent years.

Children's right to live a life of play is under threat. What used to be children's own time is increasingly being organized by adults. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes children's right to play, and the right to places to play. The article “In defense of children's spontaneous play” warns that children's free and spontaneous play is threatened by increasing academic pressure and a focus on teaching (Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2016, p. 2).

In this book, children's physicality and movement will be central to the discussion of children's play. As adults we have a responsibility to look upon children as physical persons. Children need educators who understand that children are capable of understanding and experiencing the world through their bodies.

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