Chapter 7

We are playing outdoors!

Ten-year-old children’s games and outdoor places at school and in their spare time

The previous chapters have in the main presented kindergarten children and their games and places. Now I am going to introduce my doctoral thesis, which presents ten-year-old children at play. Remember: children’s golden age of motor development lasts till they are approximately twelve years old. At school many children are so physically developed that they quite comfortably cope with quite complicated tasks. They play more challenging outdoor games, too.

In this chapter I am going to discuss play more concretely. In my opinion these examples are relevant for kindergarten teachers, too, as similar kinds of games of play take place in kindergartens. I studied five girls and five boys, how they played and the character of their playgrounds. We spent time together in the school yard, I followed the class on excursions into the woods, and we rode our bicycles together on our way home after school.

If some readers want to read more about this research work: see Fasting, 2013, 2014a, 2015, 2016. But now to climbing!

CLIMBING

Six of the ten children were eager climbers. The physical proximity and the close dialogue between child and rock face or tree is essential to this kind of activity. When children climb, they of course touch the rock or climbing wall with their hands and feet, and they register whether it is warm or cold, smooth or rough. Finding friction is important. In order to advance you must be able to trust the wall when you lose your grip in order to move on. Having climbed a route several times, the children felt confident climbing this particular wall.
The importance of confidence became obvious when I observed climbers Siv and Maia. Siv was introducing Maia to a new climbing wall; I could see that Maia felt insecure, her body was not ready for this, she ‘closed’ herself and she seemed rigid and anxious. When she had climbed another more familiar wall earlier, there was nothing to it. The significance of this observation is in my opinion that our physical motion abilities need time to adjust and develop in dialogue with the new arena for physical activity.

Children’s physical dynamics or aura is in itself an invitation to play. The child-like motion dynamics is a necessary but not a sufficient requirement for play to occur. According to Gadamer (2004) a minimum of cooperation or opposition/resistance must be present in order to transform the childlike motion pattern to play. Climbing a rock wall or a climbing wall, children play; indeed, they dance:

The children perceive the wall and the climbing process almost as were they dancers, and their dance makes the world swing rhythmically. They unfold themselves for everything new in this world, they register with lightning speed shapes’ constant changes, and, above all, they are always prepared for transformation (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, p. 125, translated from Danish by AS).

Climbing exemplifies how play may be elucidated by utilizing Gadamer’s understanding of play. The game is not planned beforehand, it finds its form when the children are hanging there. The rock wall changes with weather and temperature, and therefore the way the children attack the wall and choose a route depends on the weather conditions. If the children take part in a competition, as Siv and Maia say they do, their individual views on the climbing process may be influenced by that. If they are climbing ahead, without being threatened by competitors, they will appear as calm and controlled, but if a competitor climbs closely behind their backs, trying to overtake them, this will certainly affect them, and they will try to climb faster. Nevertheless, when climbing Siv and Maia always radiate self-confidence.

Hangaard Rasmussen (1992) also writes about confusion. He writes about children seeking physical intoxication in play. This physical intoxication, however, may include panic and dizziness as well. Examples of this kind of play are Ole on the large swing in the woodland, the boys high up in a tree, children playing cops and robbers, and playing spy games. Siv’s and Maia’s climbing is definitely characterized by physical intoxication. This happens because their sense of equilibrium is in a way annulled, or as Hangaard Rasmussen puts it: “They create, briefly
speaking, chaos and disorder in their sense of equilibrium, they turn their usual
sense of space upside down, upside becomes downside, front end becomes rear
end” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992, p. 48).

While playing it is evident that children experiment with their bodies’ limita-
tions and possibilities, and this is why they develop their physical faculties, their
competences and their understanding of their surroundings. The relation between
children and their places is developed by means of trying and failing.

Birk practiced an advanced game of his own: hanging by his arms he travelled
along a tree branch, and finally he jumped down on a steep, stony slope. Birk’s
game demanded courage, and it exposed his body to great efforts. His game
demonstrated the need for strength more than any other kinds of play, and it was
clearly a risky game. Birk’s game also demonstrated how well his body cooper-
ated, to put it that way, with the arena of play.

Birk was able, in his own words, to describe this: “Don’t bend your knees too
much, because then your knees will hit your jaw.” It is all in your body! Birk has
tried and failed a number of times. The outcome of the game is by no means cer-
tain, which make bodily experience and a great deal of courage necessary. Birk
also says that no one else dares try it, and that is why he does it alone.

IMAGE 13: Girls climbing and dancing on the rock wall. Photo: Merete Lund Fasting.
Such physical experiences and the close bonds between the children and their places of play make them emotionally attached. Birk told me about his favorite tree, where he once used to perform his jump from the tree trick. He became emotional when he talked about this now non-existing tree; a neighbor cut it down. Games and adventures familiarize children with places in unique ways. These places become significant. Relph (1976), Merleau-Ponty (1994), and American professor of philosophy Edward S. Casey (1997) make a point of the body understanding its surroundings, and this bodily understanding makes the place significant to the individual. To me, remembering is physical. Children’s physical attachment to the world is a feeling of physical continuity made of a combination of previous experiences and present situations. Being in motion may be marvelous at certain situations; it is like finding your own rhythm.

Children’s physical expressions depend on where they are. Motion is created in the relation between the child and its surroundings. Maia appears to be a bit rigid and silent, and sometimes she seems to be bored at school. In her spare time, however, she flies like a butterfly. She says she feels enormously happy moving around in her well-known environment with friends she enjoys spending time with. In her own environment she possesses another rhythm than the one at school. Other children, too, I have observed, move about with a rhythm of their own at their special places. Their own private rhythm.

At school, Kari and Siv do things together. Siv is usually the leader. Kari sometimes moves along somewhat impatiently when she is with Siv. Out of school, however, when Kari and Arne are playing together, Kari is usually the leader, and together they move along calmly and relaxed. Kari’s rhythm is quite different when she is with Arne, compared to how she appears when she is with Siv at school.

Playing children will perceive their playground in a special way determined by what they are playing. When a child moves along a branch high up in a tree, the branch will gradually change into something else as the child moves on. The child’s body will all the time have to communicate with the branch, adjusting to changes. The boy’s (or girl’s) body readjusts and reinstalls itself anew. Arne and the tree are cooperating as Arne moves towards the thin end of the branch to find materials for a den. His perception is intense; his body must spend every second adjusting to the movements of the oak tree.

I have described how boys run around in the woods playing the spy game. The boys’ perception of their surroundings is vital for being able to run around like they do.

Perception cannot be reduced to nervous processes only. Merleau-Ponty (1994) emphasizes that perception is an active, physical process in cooperation with the
actual context. An individual’s body is a synthesis where all components are related to each other. When children play at certain places, they install themselves there, making their bodies familiar with these places. They learn to know where things are in this world, like where that particular tree is and how difficult that slope is to climb. By running around in the woods their bodies learn to adjust to the environment.

Like Steinsholt and Øksnes (2003) I sometimes found children so bodily involved in cooperating with the physical surroundings that it appeared to be the place of play that played with the children, and not the other way around. This truly indicates the intensity that may unfold between playing children, their games and their places of play.

There are other examples of the place playing the children, like Siv and Kari in the climbing wall, Arne climbing the oak tree and the boys playing havoc in the woodland. The girls climb communicating with the wall, Arne with the tree and its branches, the running boys with the rugged woodland terrain, and often it may be difficult to separate the children from their places of play. Physical experiences may sometimes make the players, totally absorbed by their activity, feel they merge with the place.

Both at school and in their spare time these ten children seek real physical challenges; they really put themselves to the test. And they enjoy it, smiling and laughing and monkeying around, inventing new games and developing old ones to new heights.

Boys’ and girls’ games alike were very physical. The children communicated physically with their surroundings, playing absolutely unrestrained. Children’s urge to move about and their spontaneity are important parts of play’s dynamics (Buytendijk, 1933). The child’s relation to its surroundings is decisive for the same dynamics (Åm, 1989).

Åm focuses on play, on players and on places of play, and she makes a point of play’s dynamic interaction between players and places of play. Play’s center of gravity is the physical expression itself, created here and now, there and then.

“The urge to move without direction makes the child experience the world at hand by means of its faculties” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, p. 124). According to Hangaard Rasmussen a childlike pattern of movements may be described as “expressive, lively and dynamic” (p. 123). He pays attention to the child’s urge to move; the child simply must move around, because for the child it is impossible not to move.

According to American play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) children in our modern Western societies are often denied the wild, chaotic ways of playing; yet
prohibitions do not stop them. Children have discovered that neither parents, teachers nor other children tried to prevent them from playing their own kinds of play. The ten boys and girls I was studying, showed me games that really put their bodies to the test, making the world around them spin! They loved hanging upside down, running as fast as possible in rugged terrain in the woodland, riding their bicycles at full speed down bicycle jumps (!), climbing a rock wall as rapidly as they could manage and swinging in a swing till they were a tenth of an inch from hitting a neighboring tree.

MAGIC PLAY
Kari and Siv told me about their magic school yard play, which was theirs exclusively. They played it at every break, although with minor variations. Their magic play could be performed anywhere in the school yard.

When we play our magic play, we are the girls who save the world and such. We tell each other what we look like, and we find out what to do. Sometimes we are ordinary girls, but all of a sudden, we have superpowers and have to save the world and so on (Kari and Siv).

It is not easy to observe the two of them during breaks, because they move around at great speed. They told me they were magic. At one moment they were out in the woods next to school, a moment later they were by the jungle-gym, and another moment later they were by the flagpole. I asked how magic girls like themselves move around, and they answered: “We run, or if someone tries to catch us, we run, anyway. If we pretend to swim or something, then we walk, yes.” They were changing their ways of moving about in response to the challenges they had to face on their way.

This magic theme may explain why the girls moved around so fast. I observed them running from the jungle-gym to the woods, and when I asked them a little later, they told me they were about to save the world and that they were magic.

My idea is that magic girls must move around very rapidly in order to create an illusion of invisibility, which makes them more difficult to discover.

When I asked them what they did to save the world, they answered:

We must fight crooks and such. When we save the world, we are spies too, sometimes. And when we have been spies for a while, we come to a whispering pipeline, and then we come to a boss, and he gives us jobs to do because he had seen us being spies (Siv).
The magic girls ran around in the school yard, and they suddenly became spies, and they found a whispering pipeline. The game’s self-presentation (Gadamer, 2004) changed as the play changed character. The running girls moved their feet differently on asphalt compared to on woodland ground. In the rugged terrain of the woods their bodies needed a closer dialogue with the ground and a closer correspondence with the environment than what was necessary on asphalt.

Movements and body language change and the self-presentation of play changes, too. Children move about, which affects the self-presentation of play. We might see play as a ‘work of art’, the children constituting the audience, in the way Gadamer (2004) presents play as a phenomenon. If the children are to be genuine spectators, they must participate in the play, indulge in it, let themselves be swept along with it.

Imagination and movement are all important to this play, and Siv is the central individual when it comes to making the games develop. My observations, including interviews with other children, indicate that Siv, more than Kari, lets herself be swept along in the game.

“The intensity and profundity of the play seemed to depend on the children’s willingness and ability to be carried away by it” (Åm, 1989, p. 52). Kari did not always have the same kind of will to be carried away by the magic play. Especially when playing on asphalt in the open areas Kari appeared to be somewhat bothered. Siv let herself be swept along, but Kari did not. Siv to a considerable degree shut out the rest of the world when she played. Siv often suggested ways to develop the game, and, as Åm (1989) writes, a suggestion from one participant is dependent on the positive response of the other participant(s) if the game shall keep on being the common property of all the players. Kari always responded positively to Siv’s suggestions, and the game could go on.

Siv was played by the world, she was in the power of play, as Gadamer would put it. The difference between Siv and Kari may be explained like this: Siv is broad-minded, with the ability to empathize with and be swept along by imaginary elements. As mentioned before, both Hangaard Rasmussen (1992) and Abram (1997, 2005) make a point of the imagination being a part of our bodies. Siv’s potential when it comes to interpreting her environment creatively, is huge. We, the professionals, may interpret Siv’s relation to the game as pathetic. When I observe her, I find her spontaneous. She radiates an unrestrained urge to move around in any unpredictable direction. This kind of dynamics will lead a child into the sphere of play (Buysendijk, in Åm, 1989).

This is exactly what happens to the playful Siv. In her magic play she is carried away, her play being one of profundity, which, according to Åm (1989), is
characterized by the child’s spontaneity and patic attitudes. Siv as a participant in a magic play is propelled forwards by her own insight into it, and as a player she is cooperating with Kari and the environment. Siv, much more than Kari, tends to forget herself in her devotion to the play.

In my opinion Kari’s relation to her school yard surroundings is rather more gnostic than Siv’s. Kari is more than Siv affected by her surroundings. They play in a school yard and in open areas close to school, they play there with a number of other children, and all this may affect Kari. Siv and Kari alike are distinctly physical; their bodies cooperate actively with their surroundings. During play they frequently vary the ways they utilize their bodies. They run fast, or not so fast, they walk, they hide and they make themselves small before entering the whispering pipeline. They adjust their bodies to suit the place they inhabit just now; there is a dialogue going on between the children and their secret place. Relations like this produce creativity, according to Abram (2005). Siv and Kari signal physically that they enjoy being active; at play they can use their bodies as they please.

Siv is fond of playing, and she may quick as a wink disappear into a world of play, being carried away by it. Her play is genuine. I was deeply moved by how she mediated her happiness at playing. She is an expert at making changes while at play, she exaggerates, decreases, making rough or soft movements characterizing the animals she is depicting according to specific contexts. Her body language tells a lot about her thoughts and emotions. Sometimes she is careful, not wanting the tigers to drop into the water, but then a kind tribe come to the rescue, and after that they can all relax – and Siv can relax, too.

I remember Siv as a very creative girl. Sometimes I wonder if Siv tried to hide from reality by seeking refuge in her world of play. She once said to me that she would have liked to know more playmates, and she missed her old places of play after her parents’ divorce, after which she had to move to a new home. Did she engage in play in order to escape reality?

This project (my thesis) is about play anyway, and there is no doubt that play was beneficial and of importance to Siv. How may games of play function as escape from reality, and how may this be expressed in the kindergarten? This is an important question.

DEN BUILDING

Why is building dens or shacks such a popular game? Norwegian author Frode Grytten and photographer Jens Hauge (2010) have published their book Det norske huset (“The Norwegian House”) about children’s den building. Hauge has
photographed children’s shacks and dens all over Norway. They prove that children’s den building is a strong Norwegian tradition (Grytten & Hauge, 2010).

I found that children build shacks and dens at school as well as in their spare time. Perhaps this kind of play is a way of building cultural competence? Norwegian architect Hanne Wilhjelm (1994) says that den building as a game has been looked upon as messy and unruly, consisting of unmanageable elements. She also says that so-called construction play or games have been regarded as something for the kindergarten sandboxes. When building dens children communicate mainly by means of their bodies. The human body knows things about the world before our mind has produced a clear idea and before we are able to utter the word (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). Children consider den building a valuable activity. Steinsholt (2001) agrees: “The production work is rather a result of the act of play (the dialogue) which transfers the work of art and the spectator into a meaningful and coherent relationship of trust” (Steinsholt, 2001, p. 36). We cannot expect to find the essence of the work of art in the consciousness of neither artist nor spectator, but just as soon somewhere in the middle, where there is space for imagination and creativity as well (Steinsholt, 2001).

Children’s games, for example den or shack building, support Steinsholt’s opinions, the way I see it. Children’s dialogues are physical, they actually talk very little during play. Their play is self-motored. Lindqvist (2001) looks upon play as a phenomenon with its own characteristics, at the same time drawing impulses from the prevailing culture.

The children know what shack building is all about; they understand profoundly the dimensions and structures of the game, as Lindqvist (2001) describes it.

The pupils who were building a den in the woods told me they often were so absorbed by their game that it became like a party with its own atmosphere and rhythm (Steinsholt, 2010). Their woodland den was situated as far away from the teacher’s quarters as possible, and it housed both girls and boys. Half the class, more or less, regularly spent time in this area. Some sat, some lay in the grass, and they all had a good time. Only a few actually worked at the den, two boys and two girls in particular. Three of the children did a bit of construction work each and every day we spent in the woods with the class.

The woods with its wilderness and rugged terrain undoubtedly contributed considerably to the children’s imagination while den-building. These areas of nature were ‘poetic’ and ‘magic’, and in a much more evident way than the immeasurable characters at the ready-made outdoor play equipment in the playgrounds. In nature the relationship between children and places became another than in the organized
playgrounds. This we may explain by pointing to the banal fact that a woodland is something else than a playground filled with ready-made outdoor toy equipment. In nature children easily find innumerable spaces of play.

Children in motion meet their places, they are susceptible to them, and they become creative towards their surroundings. Children become more creative in nature than in an outdoor play equipment-filled playground. This is why kindergartens, if it is possible, should offer their children frequent excursions to rugged terrain and varied wilderness.

SPY GAMES

The boys played spy games in the forest, completely absorbed. For a moment or two a boy might stand absolutely still behind a tree, in the next he raced at top speed to a new place of shelter. “When we are captured by the game and we let it lead us astray, Gadamer’s opinion is we have attained a state of mind he calls self-oblivion; we are beyond ourselves” (Steinsholt, 2010, p. 113). The dialogue between children and their place of play becomes evident in a spy game, and the game takes control over the children, mesmerizing them. They are body and soul engaged in their activities; the game absorbs them completely. They know the game well; they have played it often before, and in exactly the same surroundings. They have ‘place memory’ as well as ‘body memory’ (Casey, 1997). Both kinds of memories are ‘inside’ them. They can just let themselves drift away. The children let themselves engage with insight and profundity in the play, as Steinsholt (2010) writes:

Their play is comprehensive, in the literal sense of the word, because the playing children are ‘captured’ by it, they let themselves be moved about as seriously fully engaged physical participants. Being in the game demands our total surrender, together with others who also are spellbound and in the power of it. This is exciting, and thrilling for those involved (Steinsholt, 2010, p. 113, translated from Norwegian by AS).

Maria Øksnes (2010), associate professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), says Am, Hangaard Rasmussen and Steinsholt have written about play from quite different perspectives than what other play theorists have done. Their approaches make the ambiguity of play more obvious, says Øksnes (2010).

expresses that play is a form of energy, and I agree, seeing how children mediate their playing experiences.

When playing spy games, the children demonstrate that their games to a large degree consist of pleasurable motions and gestures, of which the forms and intensity develop and fluctuate, as Buytendijk (1933) writes, describing the spheres of play.

**PLAYING IN NATURE**

The atmosphere of a children’s place may influence the rhythm and mood of the game. This dialogue between play and place of play is obvious in children’s world of play. They are inspired by their places of play, and they let their play be affected by all existing possibilities. I am perfectly convinced that children see a manifold of playgrounds in the wilderness of nature, with possibilities of high-spirited play. Then they let themselves be carried away. The character of the place and the relationship between the place and the children are of significance if this is going to happen. Åm (1989) says that cooperation, self-oblivion and devotion are the forces that urge the play forwards. I agree.

When children, in their singular ways, encounter the world, their bodies are essential. Children think, feel and act by means of their bodies.

“A child’s body is totally concrete and expressive in its appearance, a body which is continually in dialogue with other children’s bodies” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, p. 12, translated from Danish by AS). What Hangaard Rasmussen (1996) says is that the human body, from its center to its fingertips, is present in any situation. The philosopher Merleau-Ponty takes interest in physical experiences and how they tie people together and to the world (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996). “The body seems in a mysterious way to be fused with the world” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, p. 24). This may explain Gadamer’s assertion, claiming play is the subject. Place of play and player to a considerable extent fuse during play, but not completely. Body and world meet and cross, and there is always a distance between them, if ever so little, according to Hangaard Rasmussen (1996).

Buytendijk (1933) may be able to explain this more thoroughly. In his opinion play’s spontaneous character is revealed by the way children move and by the way the game expresses itself. The context is what decides. Buytendijk’s opinion is that we all are in an emotional position to our environment.

He takes interest in play’s dynamics, and he sees play as children and environment cooperating. The way I see it, sometimes children’s motions and gestures constitute the most central part of the relationship between children and environment;
at other times their imagination is the more important. What turns out to be the most central element during a game is decided by the player/players *and* the place of play encountering; it is not decided by the player/players alone *or* the place of play alone. In this middle-space play develops. There is a dialogue between the players, their surroundings and their toys when children play, and this dialogue is what Åm (1989) calls the dynamics of play. The context of both children and a game of play is important, too.

Children’s play is naturally free, cheerful, relaxed and joyous; they let themselves be swept along, forgetting about time and place. “The particular ease and relaxation children achieve by playing, obviously is the result of succeeding at the specific task the game represents” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 107).

Steinsholt (2010) sees human existence as hermeneutical (interpreting). Children at play are inside a hermeneutical spiral. The possibilities they see are based on their own prior understanding. Their play is nothing beyond play itself. Their play is enough in itself. Children make new experiences and thereby gain new understanding. This may be explained as children forgetting themselves, and this may also explain, however, why they find themselves (Steinsholt, 1999).

Children often play the same games over and over again, although with changes from time to time. In repetition there is a dynamic and changing element. The children recognize themselves in their games and create patterns. When they imitate, they interpret and create. Children’s self-initiated play therefore is much more than any incidental activity.

“Theyir play describes how their understanding is based on the condition that changes happen continually within play itself” (Steinsholt, 2001, p. 40). Steinsholt (2011) emphasizes that a hermeneutic experience is unpredictable and without definite stops. Children’s play is like that, too, and a game which is terminated for the day is likely to be resumed another day.

Children’s self-initiated and self-organized neighborhood play very often takes place in natural areas. Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1946–2008) (1989) used to claim that nature is one of the foremost cultural categories of Norwegian society, and that nature gives human beings the possibility to be themselves and to find their own way of being. Children have demonstrated for me their many possibilities to develop and unfold in natural areas, both at school and in their spare time.

They had swings in the woods, paths, dens and shacks, resting places and picnic areas, and a number of places where shacks and dens were being planned or were under construction. These were ‘children’s places’ (Rasmussen, 2004), places discovered by the children themselves and often developed by them.
Children are usually very keen on inhabiting a place, making it their own. They see the opportunities. Children’s play places are places children think of as exciting, and where they feel at home. Children’s games and their places of play are very important to them. In my doctoral thesis I write that children often feel profoundly tied to places in nature. The children know their places well after having spent a lot of playing time there; they are attached to them (Fasting, 2012, 2013).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) also focuses on the vague boundaries between ourselves and the world, claiming there is a sort of communicative coexistence. Children appear to be ‘closer to home’ in their natural areas of play than in their well-groomed kindergarten playgrounds. There may be a more profound relationship between human beings and nature than between humans and urbanized areas, says Merleau-Ponty. Children comprehend that their children’s places in nature understand them; they communicate.

How is this to be explained? Children expressed that their places talked to them, non-verbally. Merleau-Ponty (1994) writes about places communicating with susceptible individuals, saying children generally are more susceptible than adults. Children are very open-minded and attentive at their places of play.
Nature, in a sense being without purpose, intention or effort, is an ever-self-restoring game, possibly a straightforward ideal for art, claims Gadamer (2004, p. 105). What does this mean? Nature as an ideal for art? Or for play? These questions are interesting, as children’s play appears as so natural and so elementary in children’s everyday life.

Human games (play) are parts of a natural process. Human beings are nature, and the meaning of human games (play) is pure self-representation, says Gadamer (2004, p. 104). He compares play to the motions of nature. Children often play in nature, and perhaps this does something with the motion rhythm of play? May it be correct to say that play’s motion patterns to a large degree are similar to nature’s? Perhaps the bearings of play are very similar to those of nature, as Gadamer seems to think. Children’s play nevertheless appears as natural, genuine and fundamental.

Children have their places not only in nature; just as often children’s places are just around the corner (Hart, 1979; Rasmussen, 2004). This is what I found out, too. Only three places of play shown to me by children were situated more than 200 meters from their homes. Children do a lot of playing in their vicinities; these vicinities often, however, consist of natural areas with rocks, slopes, trees and groves (Fasting, 2012, 2013). Like American professor Roger A. Hart (1979) and American architects Michael F. Crowe and Robert W. Bowen (1997), I discovered that woods and groves are popular natural playgrounds. In this kind of wilderness, or sometimes semi-wilderness, children build their dens and shacks, or they pretend that trees are shacks or cottages, they climb the trees, or they just sit on the ground close to the trunk.

Why are natural places such attractive playgrounds for children? Because they find them flexible, first and foremost, offering innumerable possibilities for games. Tordsson (2003) indicates that nature is something incomplete, not designed for any specific purpose, a state which offers many possibilities for understanding and utilization. Children see natural areas as open spaces just waiting for them.

A research worker taking interest in the phenomenology of a place may learn a lot from children. Children have a very special relationship to their places of play. They have the ability to listen to and to investigate their surroundings (Lauvland, 2007). Therefore, they achieve what may be called intimacy with these surroundings, too. They are devoted to their places. It clearly hurts them when favorite spots are lost for some reason. The places themselves are important, but there is more to it than that; the whole context is important: the physical place, their playmates, the specific atmosphere, and the specific games which are played there – everything put together is what makes such places important. As Norberg-Schultz
(1996) points out: our experiences from a place are parts of the character of the place.

Our emotional relationship to a certain place may change with the passing years (Buytendijk, 1933). According to Broch (2004), children’s relationship to nature is a playful one. Does it matter how children experience nature? Yes. Children do not see nature as nature; they see nature as something to investigate and to make their own. They do this by exploring, experiencing and living their neighborhood areas.

The children in my study said that they played in the school yard, in the woodland with their class, and with friends and playmates in their spare time. They frequently returned to what they looked upon as their places, nature-made as well as man-made, and they felt attached to them. They clearly were fond of them. Why?

Some like to move around, some like to put themselves to the test, some are very social and wish to be with friends, others have a lot of imagination, and all these things help decide what each individual child is attracted towards. But most important of all: children are social beings, and who they wish to be together with, and have the possibility to be together with, are factors very decisive for where they will choose to play.

Children’s previous experiences also help them decide where to go and where to feel comfortable. Children, like adults, have their individual experiences and personal memories connected to specific places.

REFERENCES


