Chapter 8
What’s next?

Kindergarten children and school pupils alike have shown me that they enjoy playing outdoors. They know numerous children’s places where they feel at home. They are energetic, impulsive and self-confident when playing, and they take care of their places.

Still, children do not always indulge in play, and they do not always experience play as something pleasant. Play may be tough on some children, and some suffer exclusion from play. Yet I choose, in this text, to concentrate on the possibilities and on the strength and energy of play. My studies taught me that children’s main message is a positive one: they very much love to play.

Nowadays, kindergartens and schools focus on public health, lifestyle and coping. Numerous children and adolescents grow up under pressure, facing ideals of often dubious value. What can be done? I want them to grow up playing, learning to cope, to face reality and to experience happiness in childhood. We all want safe and sound children and young ones; that is why we must, as often as possible, let them experience the joy of play. All kindergarten children must be granted the right of outdoor daily play. School pupils may not have the opportunity for outdoor activities on a daily basis, but they should have it as often as possible – the responsibility for that belongs to school authorities and administrations.

How can schools create good conditions for outdoor play at breaks? Some schools have tried to engage special therapists in charge of the pupils’ welfare, cooperating with the pupils in organizing activities. Kindergartens and schools must nevertheless always be able to offer children and pupils exciting outdoor playgrounds. Nature, open spaces and multifunctional play equipment may offer a variety of possibilities for play and motion.

Buytendijk (1933) claims that play is a prototypical phenomenon. We may observe ‘primitive’ or original play among humans and superior species. Play is one of life’s spontaneous ways of expressing itself. Gadamer’s opinion (2004) is that play is among the essentials of being human.

Play may be significant actions, physical movements and bodily expressions. Childlike motions have no distinctive starting points or purposes. Children always begin anew, moving about in their own childlike patterns. The dynamics of play
consist of spontaneity and to a large degree of an unrestrained urge to move. Play is its own project, and essential to children’s lives.

Children’s right to self-organized play in their own time is under great pressure in Norway today. Children’s self-organized play is, however, something professionals and parents should protect. The self-organized child is something different from the adult-organized child. Adults may think back to the time play made their bodies vibrate; their excitement was intense, so was their joy, so were the challenges they faced, and so were their feelings when coping.

I fear that this powerful play originating in the children themselves, is endangered. Children’s own play strengthens them, and it strengthens their resilience. Children’s play makes them robust and sturdy, capable of resisting hardships later in life.

If we are lucky enough in childhood to grow up as happy playing children, this may, I think, help us recover our playfulness in other situations later in life. We may be able to demonstrate presence and devotion, or we may be able to take ourselves a little less seriously, or even to show some self-irony. Participation in play has taught us the importance of social attachment. We have all been delighted by the falling snow, the rain, the slope behind the house, the cones, the insects, and by outdoor meals – everything which have to do with our quality of life. We, professionals and parents, must do our best to help our children live a satisfying quality of life. One way of helping is by offering them the opportunities of outdoor play at kindergarten and school, and in their neighborhoods. Several studies prove that we humans thrive in parks, gardens, woods, forests, lakes, the sea and mountains. When we use our bodies and put ourselves to the task, we produce adrenalin which makes us feel happy and content.

Recently we received a parliamentary report about public health (2015), and another about outdoor life (2016). Both reports focus on children and youth, and the public health report concentrates to a large degree upon activities in young people’s vicinities.

In 2017 the Norwegian Directorate of Health established a ten-year program for public health work in the municipalities, a program concentrating on children and youth, coping, welfare and happiness. Good meeting places are also recommended. Children and youth should be involved in the processes of developing good outdoor meeting places in their vicinities. Public health work gives priority to curative and healthful kindergartens and schools, including their natural environments and outdoor activities opportunities. This whole field, however, needs more research work. I hope I will be able to contribute in the future, too.
Thanks to Jan, Ella and Magnus for lots of play and a lot of activities in the garden, in the woods, by the seashore and in the mountains!

REFERENCES

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