

Friluftsliv with Preschool Children

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***Friluftsliv* with preschool children**

Friluftsliv, a word with many definitions. In an international perspective it mainly includes hikes, canoeing, rock climbing and other adventurous activities. Swedish *friluftsliv* is this as well, but it is also more and more frequently associated with experiences which bring people closer to Nature.¹ Seen from a child's perspective, *friluftsliv* can be to venture into the school's immediate surroundings, just outside the school doors. It is here that the feel for, and knowledge of, what is outside the room, begins. For small children the act of climbing a boulder can be as pleasure-filled and exciting as for an adult climbing a mountain.

A few generations ago many still lived outside the cities and encountered nature on a daily basis. In those days, children often spent time with adults who then could share their knowledge and experience things together with the children.² Nowadays we live in cities and many young people follow a movement pattern: home – school – mall. As well, today people from different parts of the world, with different traditions and different experiences from the outdoors, meet one another in many life arenas. There are, then, many reasons why we should teach children to play together, discovering the many possibilities in nature, and to feel safe with one another in the outdoors.

Healthier children

Preschools have not always been places where conscious work towards equipping children with a natural attitude to that which is outside the school walls has been prioritized. Many preschools have focused on indoor activities. Now, research has shown the importance of outdoor activities.³ Children who spend much time outdoors are healthier than those who are indoors a great deal. Playing in a natural environment also benefits their motor skills more than if they are in a planned environment. Children today spend more time in front of the TV and the computer, a physically almost inactive life without sensuous experiences. Also, children are heavier than they used to be. Many schools and preschools have brought attention to this and work to shape active children who spend more time outdoors.⁴

Changing your focus to “what we can do outdoors that we usually do indoors” is not easy. You need to adapt your teaching methods to the outdoors. Swedish teachers can find support for outdoor education in their Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö 98):

¹ Brügge, Glantz, Sandell, 2004

² *ibid*

³ Grahn, Mårtensson, Lindblad, Ekman, 1997

⁴ Lenninger, Olsson, 2005

*Children should be able to switch activities during the course of the day. Their activities should provide scope for the child's own plans, imagination in play, and learning both indoors and outdoors. Time spent outdoors should provide opportunities for play and other activities, both in a planned and natural environment.*⁵

The significance of location

Research shows that the immediate surroundings of the preschool is of great importance to the child's development.⁶ To give both big and small children the opportunity to experience new things and get emotional and motor training, more and more schools are designing an attractive outdoor environment. This includes, instead of asphalt; grass, plants, natural opportunities for climbing and finding different smells, labyrinths, sandpits, water, and places for "just being". Many of Sweden's preschools can use green open spaces that surround the schools. Moreover, Swedish law allows everybody access to private land. Children can explore nature for themselves and find their own favourite spots.

As a rule, small children's *friluftsliv* only includes the school's immediate surroundings, but when they grow to be 4-5 years old their world expands. It may be the forest or the park that attracts them with its paths, fallen trees, big rocks. Here, the child uses imagination and gains new experiences.⁷ Most children can develop and flower here. A child who is timid, shy and cautious gets to encounter the unexpected in a familiar environment. For a child who needs a lot of space and physical challenge there is opportunity for that as well. Everybody also needs peace and quiet and being alone sometimes.⁸ With *friluftsliv* there are many opportunities for that; beneath the branches of a tree or shielded by a big rock.

If the outdoor environment is confined to the school yard it is important to accommodate the 5-6 year olds' need for movement, their work in groups, and places to be by themselves. By adapting the school yard you can meet many such needs.⁹ School yards often have a spot suited for making a fire, whether it is on asphalt or on sand. The fire is a natural meeting-point and both children and adults can use it for reflection and the sharing of thoughts.

The positive effects of *friluftsliv*

The *friluftsliv*-activities are mostly concerning children developing their own activities and games. That is when the outdoor environment becomes fantastic. Here everything a child could want can be found. The only obstacle is the imagination. The children do, however, not always have the ability to do this. It is then the teacher's role to encourage initiative, action, and daring. To feel that it is allowed to climb and run is important. Through physical activity on natural surfaces, many muscles and coordinations are practised.¹⁰ Also, you can stretch your limits. Children can decide on their own how they want to climb. To balance on a stump, great concentration is needed. Next time the stump might be a bit higher... *Friluftsliv* is a method to achieve better condition, increase muscle-strength and to stimulate motor progress. *Friluftsliv* does, indeed, create opportunities for learning, sensuous experiences, joy and better health.¹¹

⁵ Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, s. 11

⁶ Lenninger, Olsson, 2005

⁷ Grahn, Mårtensson, Lindblad, Ekman, 1997

⁸ Brügge, Glantz, Sandell, 2004

⁹ Olsson, 2002

¹⁰ Brügge, Glantz, Sandell, 2004

¹¹ Dahlgren, Szczepanski, 1997

Play, learning and responsibility

Friluftsliv in preschool is mainly about playing. Playing is learning for children. Through games they can process events, increase their social skills, gather new knowledge and discover life! With nature as their play-ground they will also notice that which they cannot change. The whistling wind, birds singing, the warmth of the sun, raindrops falling, frosty branches, slippery roads, and all the things that are there if you allow yourself to feel and look.¹² *Friluftsliv* in preschool is full of surprises. As a teacher you always have a goal with your activities, but you have to be prepared for the possibility that anything can happen. You have to be able to change your plans. Obviously, you can not concentrate on leaves when a cat is nearby and willing to be petted. Instead you answer the children's questions and ask them to tell each other what they know about cats. Working with the environment and *friluftsliv* creates opportunities to tie theoretical knowledge to what is encountered every day. It is about finding possibilities and connecting experience to knowledge.¹³ Reflection in connection to outdoor activities is important. The children are often so engaged in what they are experiencing that they do not realize that they are learning as well. At the moment of reflection, you help each other to look back on what you have done and what you have learned. You often discover that you have learned many different things. Children want to be affirmed, and are proud of their knowledge.

Through the habit of spending time outdoors, the step towards working consciously with learning is not long. Many preschool teachers think that teaching is easier outdoors. Many things done inside can easily be shifted outdoors.¹⁴ Colour and shape is something you can work with all year round. During seasons without snow, there is the possibility of bringing colouring outside to paint exciting pictures. When doing nature pictures, you can use nature itself in addition to the paints. When there is snow, the water colours are brought back out again, and the works of art are created on the white surface of the paper. To search for exciting shapes or look for geometrical figures, trains the observation of eye and mind. There are plenty of circles, triangles, and squares if you only put on the "glasses of the geometrical figures". In the wintertime, geometrical figures are created by shaping snow into three-dimensional shapes: cube, sphere, pyramid. Indoors, the experience gained outside is used.

In the school yard many group-games are played to gain social training and good spirits. You also practise co-operation, motor function, awareness of body, ability to co-ordinate, daring to stand in front of the group; but you must show consideration and wait for your turn as well. Many of the games have old traditions and playing them is a way to carry the culture of play on to the next generation.

The preschool yard is the place where "freedom with responsibility" is practised. When being outdoors and conflicts occur, it is easier for children to solve them by themselves.¹⁵

A rainy day with the smallest children

¹² Kaplan & Kaplan, 1994

¹³ Brügge, Glantz, Sandell, 2004

¹⁴ Annika Claesdotter i Utomhuspedagogik i förskola och förskoleklass

¹⁵ ibid

It is raining. In front of me is a group of little 2-4 year olds dressed in red, green, yellow and blue rainwear. A couple of them are squatting, shoveling water and sand into a small bucket which they then turn upside down, being rewarded with a "Splash!". The bucket is filled, over and over again, and it is turned upside down again just as often. Three other children have discovered that they can catch the rain drops from the roof in their mouths. Cheerful noises can be heard from the group far away. It is exciting to jump in the small pools and experience how far the water splashes. They are all so occupied with what they are experiencing that nothing else exists. The sensuous discovery of rain and water, what can it help with in the future? Is it a first step towards enjoying spending time outdoors?

Circus adventure with 4-5 year olds

"Tra-la-la-la-la... Stop!" The children place themselves in pairs behind each other. "The person in front – crawl backwards between your friend's legs!" A difficult task to perform with a pack on your back. When everybody has done the walk the singing continues until the teacher once again calls out "stop!" and gives the children another task. Tra-la-la-la... The children are on their way to the "big forest" 300 metres from the preschool. To make the walk exciting it includes songs and activities that practice the concept of behind, in front of, under and over as well as other motor skills.

Gathering by the "Secret Rock". The small backpacks are put down by the rock and everyone knows that it is "Explorer time". They also know that they must stay within eyeshot of the rock or the teacher. Three of the boys climb onto the elephants back (a boulder) and immediately more children are involved in the game. Two girls are balancing on a branch that is lying on the ground (not a very simple thing to do as it keeps rocking from one side to the other). Some others are playing "circus dogs" and walk on their hind legs, put out their paws and bark the number of times the dog trainer tells them to. A true circus performance is growing into existence. Suddenly a character appears with moss as a hat on his head and decides "It's time for a break!" Everybody is eager bring out sandwiches, fruit and lemonade from their backpacks.

After lunch they start to explore the surroundings. The moss on the stone where the sun shines attracts everybody's attention. "Wow, it's so soft" "This one is much greener than that one!" "Oh – a spider." "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 legs – it's a real spider!" The teacher instantly picks up on the idea. "Let's make our own spiders!" The children do not have to be coaxed and the result of the improvised workshop is a great deal of fantasy spiders, all with eight legs.

The children radiate with joy. With this activity they have, amongst other things, practiced motor skills, co-operation, and mathematics. They are used to being in this area as their preschool teachers bring them here often. The teachers feel that the school's immediate surroundings, which is a good environment for the smaller children, does not offer enough challenges for the 4-5 year olds.

Before they go back to the school they form a circle. Now it is time to reflect on what they have done during the day and more importantly, what they have learned. The answers vary: a spider has eight legs, moss smells good in the sun, we have to help each other to be able to climb onto the "elephant"... To wind up the day they sing songs about spiders. This moment of reflection is good for allowing the children to take in what they have experienced, to confirm that they have learned something and to inform them that it is time to go back to the school.

Fire and food – five year old’s favourites

It is the day of the week when they cook outside. The five year olds eagerly each stuff a half litre of water and a vegetable (potato, carrot, Swedish turnip, or leek) into their backpacks. Plastic bags, with dough for bread, is, with some effort, tucked in under the children’s shirts and onto their stomachs. The body heat will make the dough rise. Two girls are responsible for a big pot while the others each carry a log of wood for the fire. Everyone has an active part in preparing food. Two of the children are in charge of the fire and of adding more firewood to it. Experiencing newly baked bread and vegetable soup, together with the scents of the forest – it is a memory for life.

The above description is of an ordinary day in a preschool. Outdoor education has become a natural part. By being outdoors every day (the entire day or shorter periods) the children create their own feeling of security and safety that many of those who have not been able to experience this lack. It is also important for the preschool staff to learn about the benefits of *friluftsliv*. The basics of good *friluftsliv* is to keep warm, dry and having enough to eat. Knowledge you only can obtain through experiences which contribute to the security that is important for feeling the pleasure and joy of being out of the safe indoors.¹⁶

Advice for those interested in working with *friluftsliv* and outdoor education:

- Explore your immediate surroundings to find suitable locations.
- What changes can we make in the school yard?
- Make it a habit to go outside. It is better to do it a short while every day than an entire day every semester.
- Let children experience things themselves, using their imagination. Encourage challenging activities!
- Once you are comfortable in the outdoors – use it when you teach.
- Use theory as well as experiences when you teach.
- Reflect: what can we do outdoors that we usually do indoors? Go outside and try!
- Use all senses.
- Be prepared for that not everybody is going to be positive towards outdoor activities from the very beginning. The children, and parents as well as teachers, must learn that preschool activities might well take place outdoors.
- Dare to try! Both children and adults will gain from new experiences.

Today there are courses in *friluftsliv* and outdoor education to improve the quality of outdoor activities. Internationally, the importance of outdoor education has been discovered and the EU (through the Comenius project Outdoor Environmental Education) adds to this by giving European teachers the possibility to learn about, and participate in, some of the outdoor activities that can be used to increase their understanding of the method. In the last few years teachers from European countries have participated in week-long courses in Sweden, Czech Republic and Scotland.

¹⁶ Brügge, Glantz, Sandell, 2004

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