



# THE NATURAL PLAY PRINCIPLES

## BUILDING YOUR APPROACH AND PEDAGOGY FOR PLAYING AND LEARNING OUTDOORS

by Jan White

As settings strive to do their best for children and families, and when work practices are developing, it is critical to bring into full awareness the reasons for what we are doing and the values that underpin how we work – and it is important that these values are shared by all involved.

Our values create a firm basis for all thinking about playing and learning outdoors, providing solid foundations from which all decisions about provision and practice for young children will be made.

Establishing a belief in the importance of being outside, trust that learning happens well in the outdoors, and commitment to increasing the amount of time and the quality of experiences children can access in the outdoor environment is a slow and long-term process that requires on-going energy, lots of small steps of success and, very importantly, a clear set of guidelines.

Whilst ‘*values*’ articulate internally held beliefs, turning them into ‘*principles*’ gives more specific external ‘*rules*’ for enacting our values in the real world. We need to work from this clear pedagogical base to determine what we actually do in practice – the very many decisions and actions we carry out through provision and adult support.

In a series of articles, we plan to explore the Natural Play Principles, designed to articulate a child-centred and nature-focused approach called Natural Play (*White et al. 2011 & 2018*), developed over many years as a working collaboration\*. Natural Play foregrounds both the child’s inner and emerging natural curriculum and the very significant role of the natural world in enabling this. Natural Play enables children’s natural ways of growing, learning and thriving with the help of the natural world.

\*Collaboration between Jan White (Early Childhood Natural Play), Suzanne Scott (Sandfield Natural Play Centre), Ann Thompson (Naturally Creative and Sandfield Natural Play Centre) and Menna Godfrey (Quackers Playgroup & Natural Play Centre).

## THE NATURAL PLAY PRINCIPLES

Twelve principles that can guide the development of your approach, provision, pedagogy and practice:

- **A natural curriculum** (*see overleaf*)
- The natural world
- Authentic experiences
- Embodied learning
- Imagination, creativity and science
- Child-paced learning
- Adventure and adventuring
- Risk is an intelligent behaviour
- Belonging and caring
- Building an ecological identity
- Parental engagement and involvement
- Enabling adults to enable children





# A NATURAL CURRICULUM

A Natural Curriculum is the first Natural Play Principle and is often described as child-led play.

*“At the heart of our thinking is a belief that children’s own need and drive to learn can be trusted. The young child’s body and mind has its own developmental agenda and processes, which they should be empowered to find and follow. We respect their natural urge to play and enable a truly inclusive and child-led curriculum.”*

## WHY IS CHILD-LED PLAY IMPORTANT?

Research in children’s education makes it clear that learning that is satisfying, rewarding and effective occurs when the child is deeply engaged and involved – and that this happens when the learner is strongly motivated by the experience, because it is relevant and matters to them at that moment.

Children’s enormous curiosity and drive to explore, discover and come to know their world is innate and natural – it has been coded into us biologically through evolution so that we can survive and thrive in a continually

changing world. This means that children are driven intuitively to do what is needed to develop well, and to interact and experiment with the things, stuff and people that are in their world. Children therefore have a strong need to interact with and come to make sense of what is in the world, how the world works and how they fit into it, and are especially hard-wired to be interested in natural processes and how nature works.

By trusting each child’s own agenda – what they want to do, feel or be in this particular moment – we support them to find out about what they are naturally drawn to, investigate what they are really interested in, and follow this line of enquiry to their satisfaction.

Evolution has also crafted children to learn through playing with their world. In playful interactions with no set outcome, things, people and forces can be messed about with, moved, modified, recombined and fully explored.

The questioning, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving that this child-driven approach to finding out develops so well, have been identified as vital dispositions and skill sets for the economy and employment in the 21st century. Trusting child-driven, play-filled activity enables every child to be the highly-motivated self-directed learner that they are designed to be.



## PLANNING FOR POSSIBILITIES AND THE PLACE OF 'ACTIVITIES'

Enabling child-initiated and child-led play requires a rich and open environment, filled with possibilities that are appropriate to the children’s level of development and range of likely interests, and this comes from both knowing about children in general and knowing each individual child well.



Within such an environment, adult-initiated activities are likely to be of interest when they match what a child is currently interested in and driven to learn more about. Successful introduction of activities therefore needs alert adults who are attuned to this child and tuned into what is currently motivating them, so that a relevant activity can be offered. In this context, specific activities can be used in two effective ways: firstly to respond to and provide further opportunity

for the child to investigate and play with their demonstrated interest(s); and secondly to ‘seed’ new ideas – to offer provocations that give the child wider experiences, spark new thoughts and present additional ways to follow their interest.

Children are usually drawn by what others show energy for, and such interest can be contagious, so that one child’s involvement draws and inspires others. Activities that are flexible and open to being used in several ways are more playful and interesting, and therefore have much more value for children’s learning. A combination of simplicity with versatility (which nature is so good at) allows the child to take the activity in multiple directions, playing with it beyond the obvious or expected. However, flexibility in the supporting adult is also required – enjoying surprise and finding pleasure in what children do with the ideas we offer!

Plenty of non-directed time is also critical to success. Time-limited activities can suffer from a focus on product over process – the glue may well be far more interesting than the item being made! So, factor in lots of uninterrupted time, be prepared for a child to take the activity in entirely new directions, and leave the possibility for children to return to it at a later time to carry on investigating and experimenting. If the opportunity fits with their interests, they will probably come back to it when the time is right for them.

*‘Valuing the outdoors’ and ‘Putting Values into Practice’ by Jan White and Liz Edwards*



## ABOUT PROFESSOR JAN WHITE

Working across the UK and internationally, Jan is a leading thinker and writer on outdoor play, advocate for high quality outdoor provision for services for children from birth to seven, and co-founder/director

of Early Childhood Outdoors (ECO), the national (UK and Ireland) organisation for play, learning and wellbeing outdoors. With almost forty years’ experience in education, including working with Learning Through Landscapes and Early Excellence to develop national support for early years’ outdoor provision and as an Associate Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam and Birmingham City Universities (CREC), she has developed a deep commitment to the consistently powerful effect of the outdoors on young children. She is currently an Associate with Early Education, co-director

of training company Outdoors Thinking, and convenes the Landscapes for Early Childhood national network. With a childhood love of rocks and soil, leading to a degree in Soil Science, a masters in Ecology and post-graduate teaching certificate in Science and Outdoor Education, she realises that she has always been, at heart, a committed mudologist!

Jan is award-winning author of *Playing and Learning Outdoors: making provision for high quality experiences in the outdoor environment with children 3-7* (Routledge 2014), *Making a Mud Kitchen* (Muddy Faces 2012) and *Every Child a Mover* (Early Education 2016), editor of *Outdoor Provision in the Early Years* (Sage 2011), and collaborated with Siren Films to make the award-winning training DVDs *Babies Outdoors*, *Toddlers Outdoors* and *Two Year-olds Outdoors* (Siren Films 2011).

