

Pedagogy for child and tree relationships in early childhood education

Authors: Jan White, Abigail Hackett, Peter Kraftl and Steve Pool

A pedagogical approach of nurturing children's relationships with trees might support better relationships between people and planet through growing children's foundational worldview, attitudes, capacities needed for living sustainably into their futures.



Photo: Carol Duffy

Headlines

During a three-year research project, trees themselves influenced the children and their play in significant ways. Our research revealed:

- A potential for a different kind of relationship between children and trees, which was more about kinship and deep knowing, and less about how trees can be useful for humans. This involves listening to trees.
- The breadth of bodily ways of knowing young children already had about trees, and what we could learn from this. This means listening to children.

Background

Could children's playing in the presence of trees, whether bushy shrubs or great big oaks, nurture feelings of being part of nature rather than growing up feeling apart from it? Through a child-centred methodology, we conducted ethnographic research with families with young children, asking 'what can happen between children and trees?' Through this methodology, we learnt by slowing down, paying close attention, and spending time with young children, their families, and trees. How can we support this more broadly?

Findings - Five guiding principles

One: Hold the Space

A pedagogical stance of holding open possibility for children to take the lead and for the unexpected to happen, creates the slow conditions needed for connecting with place. Being alongside, present and available can be the most useful role for adults to take.



Two: Deepen kinship relations with trees

What happens between children and trees is most exciting, expansive and transformative when deep relationships can develop between them, grounded in curiosity and respect. This 'kinship' often involves bodies (human and tree) opening towards each other, playfully, experimentally and without judgement.



Photo: Steve Pool



Photo: Steve Pool

Findings

Three: Know through the body

Our research identified the importance of children being able to 'get the measure' of a place using their moving bodies. This develops a certain kind of 'know how' in relation to trees and outdoor places: a deeply held 'knowing' rather than more superficial 'knowledge'.

Four: Learn from children, learn from trees

This involves shifting focus from the role of humans to consider what else might be involved; what other kinds of wisdom are present. Children tend to be good at this, so adults can often learn from them.

Five: Language comes from bodies and place

Listening to children's voices means paying attention to their moving bodies. Trees and treed places offer powerful potential for moving, sense-making and communication.



Implications & Recommendations

Hold the space: Slow down and tune into the detail of all the varied sensory information the child is gathering, including through movement, and allow it to play out.

Deepen kinship relationships with trees: Notice the role the trees might be taking. How are they creating conditions that invite playful responses, even if these are sometimes momentary?

Know through the body: Consider how children might be able to move and use all parts of their body - fingers, hands, upper arms; feet and legs; torso and bottom - so 'getting the measure' of a place.

Learn from children, learn from trees: Instead of taking ideas, activities and objectives into a space, give plenty of time to really pay attention to what is already there. Young children are very good at paying this kind of attention, so do allow them to help you with this.

Language comes from bodies and place: Try thinking of movement as children's first and most fluent language: young children are so much more liberated with movement and gesture than they are in any verbal language. It's fascinating to start noticing children having 'conversations' with trees/tree parts and other non-human entities.



Authors' contact details: <https://treescapes-voices.mmu.ac.uk/>

This note is based on: Hackett, A. et al (2025). 'Fractured stories and voices of the future; coproduced research with young children and trees', [Global Studies of Childhood](#).

Future of UK Treescapes Programme Impact & Insights Note Series

Editor: Deborah Talbot