

- **Green means GO!: Benefits of free-play outside in nature and green spaces**
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I want to begin by asking you a couple of questions: for a moment, think of a strong memory of play from your childhood.

How many of you, when asked to think of a strong memory of play recalled an outdoor experience?

A second question: In relation to the strong memory of play. Were you – or was your perception that you were – supervised or unsupervised? Typically most of us experienced that WE WERE NOT supervised.

The importance of extensive time in nature and green spaces, playing, walking and being to the health and development of the human being is a theme dear to my heart. I spend a lot of time these days speaking in various situations on human development and have been continually struck by how, when adults are asked to reflect back to significant experiences of play they had as children, 95 -100% of us recall outdoor experiences as our strongest memories and highlights. Particularly noteworthy is that this is true even for the younger generations – millennials - whom we know have spent substantially more time indoors than previous generations. I submit that this strong relationship to the outdoors in all stages of childhood is due to the inherent creativity, activity, freedom and exploratory opportunities including risk-taking that nature offers. We also experience a the depth of social connectedness when we interact and work together imaginatively. In short, outdoor play is fun! When we look back at our childhood memories of play and reflect on the time spent outdoors as holding the strongest memories for most adults across regions and countries, ethnicities and generations we have to acknowledge that it is tremendously important to human development and well-being that we have these opportunities as youngsters.

In modern times we tend to talk a lot, we have a hard time not over-engaging with children particularly as our work is often judged by what children “learn”. I suggest that children learn best from experiencing life, from exploring, from having time and space every day to play on their own or with their peers, and while there IS value in adult-led activities they should not be given priority over free-play, especially outdoors. Children need time, a lot of time. Hours. AND more than anything, they need to feel safe. This is done by being there, being available, not by hovering or over-engaging with the children. The best way to do this? It's simple really. Just like when I was growing up in the 60's and 70's: adults need to work in the environment where the children are.

- If adults are engaged in real work children are more likely to play well, with little need for adult intervention particularly if their needs for food, hydration and rest are taken care of. Ideally the adult work is accessible and the children are able to help if they wish to. Children need to see and experience adults working. When I say “working” I mean practical work both indoors and outside. Work with tangible outcomes that is not on a screen. This is how the generations flow, learning to DO things from others who are doing them, knowing how to take care of ourselves, each other and the environment around us. AND, as we work, the children will often help us and, as they become comfortable and feel safe, they move into play of their own often inspired by the work they have seen and participated in. Examples of work I do when we are outside: gardening (weeding, planting, watering, trimming, harvesting), putting the sand back into the sandbox, fixing toys, chopping and stacking firewood, chopping kindling, composting, mowing with a manual push mower, pruning, washing the windows, sweeping the walkway and the porch, raking leaves, shoveling snow.

This way of being with children has changed in the last couple of decades as out-of-home care has become the norm, and for children in daycare and early-learning programmes time is often scheduled to provide the “learning outcomes” that are dictated by regulations or by parents often mis-informed ideas of what is best for children's development. These learning outcomes are almost always intellectual and overlook the innate need to play, to move and....in terms of brain development, we know that when we move, the brain “grooves” - it forms pathways. The work of the stay-at-home mom of generations past provided these organic, necessary-to-survival-and-comfort-in-life activities and much more time for children of generations past to play. We grew up KNOWING, having a concrete relationship to human activity in the world. When we work, but maintain our awareness of the children and what they are doing, we become part of the environment like a fly on the wall, and the children, while knowing we are there, feel unsupervised. I always sing quietly while I work, so the children know where I am and what I'm up to. The gesture and activity of real work both what we do and how we do it supports children to play.

- The fundamental changes in how the gesture of the human being looks in the last decades is of paramount concern for me because children, especially the youngest - under 7 year-olds - learn primarily through imitation. When I look around in our culture -especially in terms of our addiction to screens, it begs the questions of what we can do to mediate the difficulties these gestures pose. I strive to provide an antidote by engaging actively in practical work activities within the school day as they were provided in our homes when I was young. I grew up knowing where our food came from, how to prepare it, basics in sewing, carpentry, and hundreds

of other skills that were part of daily life. We saw adults striving to fix things, not just throwing things out when they were broken. These weren't intellectual understandings, but things we learned by these jobs being done in our environment on a regular basis, often with us included in the process.

- Within our outside play area we have places to run, play, climb, create, roll as well as spaces to retreat to. In addition to this we take walks daily of varied lengths. There are some toys in the sand heap to inspire play and things that can be used for games such as balls, balance boards AND there are many movable parts – planks and logs, water (we have a shallow stream in our outdoor play space), pipes and lots of things from nature: sticks, shells we bring back from the beach, rocks, cones from various trees, flowers and other plants the children can pick and use in their play (they do have to ask first unless they are harvesting dandelions, or the small daisies that turn our lawn white at a certain time in the spring).
- Play helps to preserve flexibility and curiosity while developing competencies, be they SOCIAL - abilities to communicate one's ideas and be flexible with understanding others, self control, regulating emotions, empathy, the ability to find/make/keep friends, PHYSICALLY play stimulates fine and gross motor skills running, climbing, skipping, jumping, gathering, lifting, balancing – Neuroscience has shown that varied movement in childhood enhances the pathways that will later be used for intellectual learning. It is my experience that given the opportunity to move and play freely, children are drawn to what they need to fully develop their own physiology. In our time children are more constrained from the time they are born than ever before, in car seats, high chairs, snugglies and slings and we have children wearing backpacks from an ever-earlier age. THROUGH PLAY children become more flexible in their thinking, feeling and movement, while also exploring what it is to be human, we become more human when we play more with others.
- Play is a preparation for the future. If a child plays firefighter, it doesn't mean that he/she will become a firefighter, if they play doctor, they won't necessarily become a doctor. Play, especially in early childhood, is experiential and informs the brain's development as a whole.
- When play is in process, there is a dynamic, tangible energy of engagement in the flow of what is happening similar to an artistic hum or buzz when we are working creatively as older children and adults.

Many of our greatest thinkers Albert Einstein, Rudolf Steiner (founder of Waldorf education, biodynamic farming and many other initiatives), Alexander Fleming (discoverer penicillin who as a scientist was known to say of his work in the lab that he was “playing with microbes”) Max Delbruck, (a founder of modern molecular biology and Nobel laureate, formulated a “principle of moderate slovenliness” which he defined as leaving a little wiggle room for the unexpected to happen, but not so much room that you don't know what happened), attribute their capacity to think creatively to their imaginative play in childhood.

Play is often defined as an activity that is unrelated to survival, that happens spontaneously and is pleasurable. One can play by himself or with others. We don't play if we are in traumatic or stressful situations. For example if a child is hungry, he doesn't play, children who are in war-torn environments, or those in the aftermath of natural disaster don't play. Having said that, when the para-sympathetic nervous system pattern is back in place after the trauma is over and things feel safe again, children will “play out” their experiences as a way of integrating and creating an understanding of what has happened. But first, the environment must feel safe to them.

Listen to this from: **Dr. Janice Hadlock:**

“In humans the “safe feeling” can best be described as the physical sensation of expansion that occurs in the chest when sensory cues for danger have ceased.

Perception of the safe feeling leads directly to the release of substantia (mid-brain) dopamine.

Release of substantia dopamine initiates seeking behaviours: curiosity, interest in food, playfulness, uninhibited self-expression.”

The first time I read this I thought, “Right, I am a dopamine dealer. I am a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, and Dr. Hadlock's description of what substantia dopamine does for the human being makes a fairly accurate description of my goals with my work with children.”

One thing that we can look at to get a sense of what a human being looks like when his/her body doesn't have the capacity to release dopamine from the mid-brain due to the over-use of the sympathetic (fight or flight) mode is Parkinson's Disease, in fact that's what Dr. Hadlock was describing: she was describing what people with Parkinson's Disease DON'T have. The body becomes more rigid, less flexible, the limbs and head may tremor, the gait changes and becomes limited, compromised, a shuffle gait, the balance mechanism stops working effectively.....the list goes on....It's striking to me that many of the symptoms of PD are similar to what teachers and parents have been

increasingly seeing in children. Stiffness, lack of capacities physically, poor coordination, vestibular and proprioceptive issues such as challenges with sitting still, stress, anxiety. As we navigate this time in evolution, we need to look at what we want for our children, our culture; for humanity. Many of the children of today are lacking in opportunities to feel safe in the world. Screens, movies, tv, computer games often promote the stress response also known as fight or flight – both in terms of content and in terms of the speed at which programming unfolds. We are kept in a place that is never fully relaxed. Then, as adults, we start including things like vow of silence meditation retreats, spa visits.....we pay to relax, and when we relax, we do it in the extreme, just as we live life.

Because the human being, especially in the early years needs lots and lots of movement. I walk with my class daily. These are not marches but nice leisurely experiences. We have several different loops we do depending on the day, the time available, the health of the group....I pack a snack and often a lunch too. The children don't carry anything as I want them to move freely and not be bound by weight or lopsidedness that comes from carrying things. We sometimes take special walks like the times I've arranged for a parent from my class with a boat to drop us off on nearby Wallace Island – a provincial park - for the day....we walk 7 km there. The children love every moment of it. Exploring, finding old relics from the mid-20th century when the Conover family lived there. Some of our adventures are one-way and have the parents pick up the children at a beach, or a farm. There is something special that happens when we take these longer walks, we stop in little areas to have our snack or our lunch. The children find things in nature to play with, we don't rush. There is a cooperative experience, a working together. It's lovely in the moment, and I notice that what happens on the walk will inspire play for days, sometimes longer.

As society becomes more hooked on competitiveness and “preparing” children for their future education, we have been on a general trend over the last decades of bringing children into the curriculum at ever younger ages, before they are developmentally ready to sit still and take in the learning. We don't end up with more learned children or adults, but the opposite occurs, we lag behind former generations. The modern child is displaying symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression as never before. I beseech us to recognize the idea that life itself can be a more at ease experience, so that stress levels are kept in check both for adults and children.

We must implement more of what is healthy, what is right and good. We have to do what will best prepare competent and capable adults for the future. The time is nigh to ensure that we are giving humanity the tools it needs to move forth with love and empathy. We need leaders who can make good decisions with the best interests of the future of our planet at the forefront of their hearts and minds.

In our time we must also take a clear look at the use of technology to ensure that fundamentally, we are using technology and that it is not “using” us. An abundance of time to play and move freely could make a difference to the future of both the individual people, to the future human society and earth evolution as a whole!

For the early years, I submit that the best learning comes from exploring in the broadest sense of the word, exploring our environment, exploring the people we meet and their activities and work in the world, seeing others working together, exploring ourselves mastering our physiology, our social skills, having time to figure things out on our own or with friends. The early years should be spent in a state of reverence and wonder. As adults we need to lay off and observe. NOT fill the children with facts, but just be there, bring stories that will inspire the play, bring the children into a healthy relationship to the earth, so they see the earth as a beautiful, safe place for us to be and to play. Above all, they need to trust humanity. This will inspire the children and they will be happy, healthy, curious and engaged which in turn will lead to exploration and openness to learning later in childhood and as adults. Outdoor play, I submit, is the most significant contribution we can make to the betterment of humanity and the world for it lays the foundation for creative thought, which we will need if we are to save our species, our planet and all her creatures. I believe that it all starts with outdoor play in nature and green spaces, plain and simple. For the best in the future, we need to start with the proper and solid foundation, best of all, it's fun, and it's free. Green means go!

Thank you.

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Waldorf Early Childhood Teacher, recipient of The Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Education, film-maker – *Time to Play* a film about best practices, available in e-version at: <https://timetoplay.vhx.tv/products>, or by “contacting us” through the link at: <http://www.timetoplayfilm.com/> where you may also view the trailer or invite Kim to present in your community.

