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Benefits afforded to children of playing and working in the early years outdoor environment

Helen Bilton

University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire, United Kingdom

Background

With both the Every Child Matters Agenda (DfES 2004) and the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DCSF 2008) the government is suggesting that educating about healthy living and educating in a healthy environment are important for the future direction of the nation. In Early Years education there has been a long tradition of providing an outdoor area for children to play and learn in alongside the indoor classroom; thereby enabling teachers to educate children in a healthy environment and to help children become healthy. With the publication in England of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DCSF 2008) there is a statutory obligation to ensure children do constructively utilise the outdoor space. Although

this seems straightforward, several challenges distract practitioners from reaching this goal. By looking to the research which indicate the benefits afforded to children when outside it is hoped that teachers will be encouraged to use this information to utilize outside more often and more effectively.

Research Questions

Children of all ages are spending less time outside now than in the past. The research attributes this trend to factors relating to concerns about child safety. The lack of engaging outdoor activity has had some universal consequences which suggest an increase in the percentage of young children becoming obese and failing to achieve fitness levels required for healthy adulthood. Recent research by Palmer (2006) also shows a link between inactive children and reduced skills of communication. It is important to visit the gains afforded to children when outside, including the need for such things as fresh air, sun and daylight. School can play an important role in achieving this goal.

Methods

This paper draws on the recent research from a range of disciplines, (for example Frith and Blakemore 2005, Clements-Croome et al 2008) to help inform practice in the Early Years. The evidence has been collected as to the benefits of fresh air, cool atmospheres, sunlight, and daylight. It draws on evidence which indicates that children need to be active daily. Outside can be a quieter environment than inside and the paper draws on evidence which indicates the impact noise can have on children.

Frame

Barriers to working outside can inhibit its use. First, working outside in an engaging manner is harder than teaching inside; teachers need to be physically more active in all weather conditions and consequently need to remain alert and watchful for potential dangers. The second challenge is the perception from some colleagues that play is less important and therefore of less value when compared to more traditional structured classroom activities. Finally, there are the practical considerations such as storage and variable weather conditions. Consequently the outdoor space can be underutilized as an opportunity for teaching and learning. By presenting evidence from a range of disciplines it is hoped teachers will feel more secure in utilising the outdoor area.

Research findings

This paper will look at the evidence which argues that children are spending less time outside, to the evidence as to the benefits of being outside and therefore why it is important to young children to be both educated inside and outside. It will conclude by sharing some examples of good practice. By gathering the research evidence from a range of disciplines it is hoped teachers will be clearer as to why children need to be engaged purposefully outside and finally how the outdoor area offers sometimes different benefits to working outside.

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