

CHILDREN PLAY AND THE ELEMENTS

Reeling from the effects of the fiscal /banking crisis and the hangover effect of waking up after years of what some see as over consumption, many amongst us are re-evaluating our lives. Over the last few weeks I've heard a number of folk talk about getting back to the basics of life as a way of re-adjusting their values. It seems to me that this is especially important with regard to the way in which we see children in our society. We only have to read about the nature of what Sue Palmer calls in her book of the same name , "toxic childhood", to jolt us into reconsidering the values that we are currently imparting to our offspring.

At the same time, the idea to offer children clean, tidy, sterile play spaces, in the name of child protection and health and safety, and to give up our landscape to a plague of synthetic material for the same misguided concerns is being seriously challenged.

Here in these islands we are, somewhat belatedly, seeing the development of more individually designed, green and natural, boundariless play spaces, not solely reliant on fixed play equipment and offering more risk and hence more fun. This is much more in keeping with what is considered the best in continental Europe, where I have been working for the last ten years. Here the benefits of children engaging with the elements from a very young age is seen as a natural part of their development and yet some in Ireland and in Britain still consider this dirty and dangerous. A good example is in the area of water play – clearly of the most fun for children yet most often denied to them by adults on the grounds of safety/health or climate. This latter is especially amusing when you compare it with the fact that I have worked in a Polish city where they want to install a water play area which will be shut for more than half the year (average temperature minus 10) and yet they are still convinced of the benefits to their children of water play.

If we do not offer opportunities in our town and city parks and streets for our children to play with the elements: earth, water, air and even fire, the basic building blocks of life, how can we ever expect them to develop a connection with their world, our world? How can we ever put them on the path to understanding issues such as climate change?

Let's briefly look at each of the elements and remind ourselves about their benefits:

Earth – freely available, comes in a wet or dry form – with water it becomes immediately more attractive to children, especially with bare feet. In the form of sand it also has high play value and much more easily manipulated. With turf covering it becomes a very suitable play surface for which children have an innate understanding .

Water: limitless qualities incorporating sound light and flow. The truest of element in the way it finds levels – recognised by architects and builders since their trades began. When you imagine a toddler discovering hydraulics and hydro-power without knowing what it was you start to appreciate the benefits of water play.

Air: Swinging in the air gives the first feeling of speed and movement; wind power understanding from a little windmill and sound formation and transmission can all be experienced on a natural play area.

Fire: undoubtedly the most difficult as the most prohibited. However, international fire brigade's conferences inform us that as the day-to-day contact with fire decreases, more and more people are perishing in fires because they have no understanding of what is happening - leading to panic and poor decision making. Vandalism in the form of burning very often starts as an experiment that gets out of hand. Would it not be better to expose our children in a controlled way to the benefits and dangers of fire?

At the lecture on 27th January, I hope that we can explore these concepts further and maybe, in a small way make life a little better for our children and thus for all humanity.

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