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## If You Go down to the Woods Today ...: developing a whole-school culture where it is safe to take risks

ALISON PEACOCK

**ABSTRACT** Children have much to learn from the natural environment and from working in partnership with each other. This article explores the real-life challenges of encouraging creative adventurous play within the perceived confines of the primary curriculum. The author shares the story of a whole-school learning adventure and aims to remind us of the importance of values such as trust, co-agency and freedom.

### *If You Go down to the Woods Today ...*

Imagine a scene. The sun is beating down, there isn't a cloud in the sky and there is only limited shade. A gentle breeze moves the leaves in the woodland that borders the school playground. The woods – the only place where shade and some coolness can be found. What do I do? Dare I allow my primary school children to play in the woodland or should I restrict them to the sun-baked playground?

To allow the children into the woods will require additional supervision. They will need to avoid the ditch and the stinging nettles. There is one area of fencing to a neighbour's garden that is broken. There may be rubbish amongst the undergrowth. Where is the greatest danger, in the cool, exciting woodland or on the burning hot playground?

I take the decision to talk to the children in assembly.

'Can I trust you? If we open the woods will you avoid the ditch, resist the urge to run away and avoid debris and nettles?'

'You can trust us, Mrs Peacock!' amidst the cheers.

This scene took place in June 2006. As a staff we had discussed the importance of outdoor learning and we had worked hard to incorporate the outdoor environment in lessons throughout the curriculum. We had built a quiet garden,

created an allotment, installed solar panels and yet the idea of allowing the freedom of play involving sticks, insects, rocks, low hanging trees, scraped knees and territorial dens was daunting.

Children learn through play. As adults we know this is true but it is tempting to sanitise every experience in the name of health and safety. In the name of safety we provide role-play areas with plastic woodwork tools, blunt scissors, fake plants, pretend coins, hazy plastic mirrors. Nurseries have even been known to select play resources by their suitability for regular soaking in disinfectant. Vast glossy catalogues entice budget holders to purchase plastic replicas of the real world in the name of play.

Play is risky. Play takes you to places you have never been. Play allows you to experience new sensations, new scenarios, magical happenings; the impossible is at your finger tips. Are we really prepared to let this happen within our schools?

Let's pretend schools can be places where this magic can become real. Let's pretend that we can accept that to experience danger is to know how to remain safe. That to jump over ditches and climb trees is the best way to find out what your body can do. That to get dirty is the best way of learning how to get clean. To taste dirty rainwater and berries helps you to appreciate what is nutritious. Let's pretend.

So what happened when the children were allowed in the woods? The reality was that we had a whole new range of decisions to make. We have a whole-school democracy system where we gather every week in mixed-age circle meetings to discuss issues that are important to us. For weeks we tried to resolve the issues that arose because of the new play environment that we had created. The children wanted to build dens but found the issues around territory very difficult to deal with. It is in the nature of den building that your den has to be better than anyone else's. In fact your den is always going to be the one that has the greatest permanence, the potential to be a luxurious dwelling regardless of the weather and will be the envy of all who survey it. Children requested a wide range of resources. We put up large pieces of paper in the corridor and children wrote down what they needed. Requests varied from sheets, camouflage netting and string, to pegs and washing lines.

I wanted the children to learn to share; to revel in the luxury of access to such a rich play environment. We eventually achieved this but not in the way I had envisaged. During one of our circle group meetings we asked the children to talk about what made them happy at home and at school. The results were stark. It emerged very powerfully that happiness at home was very often solitary and technology based. Happiness in school, however, centred on successful friendships and relationships with adults. We realised that the den building in school had created conflict and that what children needed most from school was the safety to manage friendships and relationships effectively.

Children suggested that we restrict the group sizes and that each class could have a den-building time. Consequently, this summer every class in the school had a den-building week where the entire curriculum was based

outdoors and centred on creating and living in dens. We used the school field as well as the woodland and children took photos of their constructions as they developed. Some classes cooked food over an open fire, some were filmed, some invited visitors. Governors visited dens and perched on makeshift seats. At the end of each week following an outdoor feast, the dens were dismantled and the equipment was stored neatly for the next class.

Schools are being encouraged to take risks. There is recognition that our children are given few opportunities to experience the real world. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Education (25 July 2007), commented in a speech to the National Children's Bureau:

Childhood is a time for learning and exploring. Through playing and doing positive activities, children and young people can learn to better understand the opportunities and challenges in the world around them, and how to be safe.

Creating a whole-school culture where it is safe to take risks is something that we have developed over time. Our governing body understands the ethos of the school and assists us in managing the health and safety agenda in a way that benefits learning. Of course, once the decision had been taken to open up the woodland we set about clearing rubbish straight away. Children wearing gloves and boots helped to create a path and we repaired the broken fencing. Funding from our Friends' Association paid for tree work so that there were no overhanging branches that might fall. Our site manager checks the area daily to ensure that no new hazards are present and crucially the children let us know if they spot anything that they consider may be dangerous. We created a fire pit area where food could be cooked outside and established risk assessments around supervision following the advice of a member of our local fire service. Once these procedures had been instigated it was easy to replicate them for different occasions.

As school leaders, if we want colleagues to pursue new possibilities for teaching and learning we have a responsibility to make innovation possible and to ensure that risk taking is collectively supported. Risk assessments are intended to do what it says on the tin – assess risk. If something is too dangerous it should not take place but there is always a balance of judgement. On the day when we opened the woods my judgement was that the woods were actually safer on that occasion than the playground. We need the professional courage to make decisions based on our experience and common sense. Worryingly, the safe option of exploring the world virtually rather than through first-hand experience has become the norm. School leaders need to support new ideas within our schools by making friends with the risk assessment process so that it enhances opportunities, reduces the likelihood of accidents and thereby enables the opportunity for rich learning experiences for our children.

Children at Wroxham School have built a Celtic Camp, explored scientific concepts on a field full of snow, dressed as Robin Hood's Merry Men and made

bows and arrows, carried out archaeological digs, frolicked in long meadow grass and played in the rain: simple activities made possible by a culture that celebrates our environment and the immense potential it holds for learning. We even have a sailing boat (bought on eBay) that has been sited on the playground for round the world voyages. We have just built a raised pond and future plans include a music garden and sensory area. Our approach to learning tries to centre on possibilities instead of limits.

Children who were interviewed at the end of Year 6 were certain what they had learned:

By letting children investigate the environment, like we do here, we don't just sit them down and make them work and do whatever we want them to do, they can have fun, they can investigate the environment, they can make their own choices. (Y6 girl)

Year 6 children were very clear that they had been able to learn so much from the den-building week because teamwork and collaboration were skills that they had developed over years of working together. They knew that there was so much to be gained when teachers and children can trust each other:

Another thing that makes people happy, if teachers trust their children more, like you trust us to do things and we have sort of our own free space, we can use the woods, we can make dens and we can do cooking and lots of things like that. (Y6 boy)

They talked about learning in terms of level of challenge:

I think like it's up to you how you go, if you want to make it easier for yourself then it's your learning you're like disrupting and if you want to challenge yourself then it's you that you're doing it for, it's not for anyone else. So it's up to you how you do it but it's best to sort of challenge yourself and do as best as you can in everything because you get only one shot. (Y6 girl)

The children were asked to reflect on the situation in many schools where behaviour deteriorates after Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) in Year 6:

Child 1: I think it starts from when they start their class, the child needs freedom in their school, they need to make their own choices, if they're not allowed to do that, they want to make that and if they're not allowed to, I don't know, do that um ...

AP: They rebel?

Child 1: Yeah because if they're not getting their way, they make their own way.

AP: Yeah, I think you're so right, I think that is so insightful.

Anybody else got any other kind of ...

Child 2: Um, if they're not happy then they probably don't want to like work.

Child 3: It might be because if they have something that they want to say or if they like, if they're not given the freedom they need or something like that and they want to be listened to, but they're not being listened to and try and get attention by like doing things that they shouldn't be doing to try and get themselves heard, I think.

The children knew what could be achieved when there was mutual trust and respect. We have played in the woods since June 2006. To date no one has been hurt and parents have supported us, despite the mud, because, as always, the children are our greatest advocates. They know how much they are learning in school and they know what it is to experience success.

The world is not germ free. There are sharp edges, cracks, unpredictable events. Freedom is precious and we need to plan for it.

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise ... The surprise will be joy, wonderment and inspired learning. What are you waiting for?

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**ALISON PEACOCK** is the head teacher of a one-form primary school on the outskirts of London. She is currently working with colleagues from the University of Cambridge to research a whole-school approach to teaching without ability labelling. She aims to contribute to the current debate about primary education through providing examples of ways in which children can participate meaningfully in their learning through genuinely inclusive first-hand experience. *Correspondence:* Alison Peacock, The Wroxham School, Wroxham Gardens, Potters Bar EN6 3DJ, United Kingdom ([head@wroxham.herts.sch.uk](mailto:head@wroxham.herts.sch.uk)).



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