

## Playing (and learning) in the natural world

By SUSAN KEORBER

We have a metal label from a piece of printing equipment that we found in an old factory on our sunroom wall. The plate carries a small, yet powerful message. It's a three-letter word - JOY. I have just finished cleaning away the last of the winter's accumulation of houseplants and stored materials and have washed the windows. As we transition from winter to full spring/summer I polish that plate and shine those letters. It is time to open the doors and GO OUT into the natural world. It is time to discover, or rediscover, the JOY of being outside with children. It is time to foster a true joy of being in the "great outdoors" and to nurture the learning that this environment can provide.

Jeanette Stone, a highly regarded expert in Early Childhood Education, once told me of observing children in Washington DC. She was asked to design playgrounds for inner city children and visited a playground that had recently been built. The space was virtually empty, she reported. Nearby an embankment to a bridge overpass was alive with activity. Children were safely rolling down the hill and creating hiding places in the bushes. This image had a profound effect on my thinking about outdoor spaces planned for children and about creating natural play areas. If we build it will they come? Do we really observe and note where children play and what they find truly engaging?

Young children need to move to learn. Children grow to GO and as soon as they are mobile they push harder and faster. Let young children loose outside and the open space, open air, wind or rain propels them forward - fast! They need the space to be open and relatively unobstructed. They seek to explore with all of the senses and will move from soft grass to sticky wet mud with pleasure. Sand and dirt are critical. Even grown ups gravitate to the sand pile to dig and shape and tunnel or simply to let the soft sand run through their fingers.

Young children are programmed to experience with their senses. Young children will transform and recreate their environment if we allow them, first, the freedom of exploration and, second, the undefined area in which to work. Play structures tell us to do only certain activities. We can learn to climb stairs and hang from the bars. Once we have mastered the slide and the climbing wall the variation of challenges is limited. A rock or a hill can be wet and cold one day, warm and soft the next. We are challenged to

learn to master the climb or the descent in many different ways. We can build a tunnel under or a structure over. The raw material of nature is endless in possibilities for exploration and transformation.

We often find it difficult to release children to the natural world. Sunscreen, sunglasses, hats and bug spray must be applied. The safety of an open area or even trees and woods is hard if not impossible to monitor completely. First, children must be supervised carefully. Supervision can be in the form of focused observation or grown up engagement. Seeing the possibilities and the pure joy of exploration is only possible when we really watch. Understanding the imaginings and the problem solving comes when we are part of the play. Let the child lead and you will be taken back to the purest of play moments that happen only "right now". When you are handed a worm that has been freshly unearthed, you will be challenged to experience the slime and the stretch of the creature as a child again.

Toddlers and preschoolers should always be in sight. Kindergarteners can be within sound. It is a delicate dance to allow children to truly experience the freedom of exploration without direction and monitoring. We need to think of our goals for the growing independence of children. Allowing them to take the time and the space they need to become self-directed learners means that we must let them go to grow. Consciously giving young children that freedom is vital. Unconsciously letting them go is neglect.

Finally, remember your own best outside memories. Was it a splash in the first muddy puddle of a spring melt? Was it finding a snake under a log or a toad's eggs in the pond? Was it a secret hiding place under the trees or a fort in the bushes? What caught your interest and attention so completely that you forgot everything else? Finding these memories and passing them on to your children in this outdoor season will bring back the pure JOY of childhood.

*Information in this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensuring that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry, building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. Learn more at [www.earlylearningnh.org](http://www.earlylearningnh.org).*