



A FROEBELIAN APPROACH

# outdoor play and exploration

by Helen Tovey



This pamphlet has been produced by the Froebel Trust as part of a series focussing on various themes closely associated with Froebelian practice today. The pamphlets are an accessible e-resource for those supporting children 0-8.

# Introduction

Play outdoors is a long-standing feature of early years provision. However, its quality can vary and for some children outdoor play means little more than time spent in a bland, plasticised, safety-surfaced play area with little contact with the natural world. Friedrich Froebel, a pioneering nineteenth century educator, had a very different concept, a garden for children which offered time and space for play and exploration in contact with nature. His vision is still vibrant and has increasing relevance for young children's play and learning today.

## Froebel and the nursery garden

### Froebel and the nursery garden

The garden was central to Froebel's idea of 'kindergarten'. It was a place where young children could grow and learn at their own pace with adults who cultivated their learning just as good gardeners nurture young plants.

Froebel saw children as active, curious, creative learners. He considered that children learn best through self-activity, rich first-hand experience, problem-solving, play and talk. They thrive when they are emotionally secure, joyful and in close relationships with others.

#### Froebel's key ideas

- Wholeness and connectedness – everything links
- The interconnectedness of all living things – what we would term ecology today.
- Living and learning in harmony with nature
- Freedom with guidance.
- Open-ended, creative play and exploration
- The key role of the adult in observing, supporting and extending play and learning.



Fig.1: Froebel's first garden for children in Blankenburg, Germany

The garden, Froebel believed, offered an ideal environment for young children. Through gardening, exploration and play outdoors children develop an understanding of the natural world, begin to appreciate its beauty and learn to take care of it.

Each child had their own small plot of land in Froebel's garden. Here they could sow seeds, tend the plants and harvest the produce. They could experience the rhythm of nature and see the effect of the changing seasons on the garden. Gardening helped children understand the cycles of life and death, growth and decay in direct and meaningful ways.



# The value of play and learning outdoors

Children were free to plant and look after their own gardens, seeing the visible effect of care or neglect. They were expected to share, alongside the adults, the care of the communal gardens which surrounded the children's plots. This garden layout (Fig.2) was highly significant. It represented in symbolic form Froebel's belief in connections in all areas of learning. The garden illustrated the connections between the individual and the community and between freedom and social responsibility.

Alongside areas for planting the kindergarten garden included natural spaces for investigation and discovery, creative and imaginative play, for stories, songs, music, dance and games. In short it was a rich environment where children could learn in harmony with nature and in close companionship with others.

The child should experience nature 'in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour'.

(Froebel in Lilley 1967:148).

## Play outdoors offers

- Rich, sensory first-hand experience which is essential for growing minds.
- Engagement with the wonder and mystery of the natural world
- Space and freedom to try things out, explore, experiment and investigate how the world works.
- Space for whole-bodied, expansive movement
- Engagement with key concepts such as gradient, gravity, speed and energy or such things as life and death.
- Opportunities for adventure, risk and challenge
- Opportunities for meaningful learning in all areas of the curriculum

All these aspects are interrelated and connected.

Each impacts on the other. This was Froebel's unique insight. Today, too often an aspect of children's learning is seen in isolation.

For example, concern about obesity can lead to exercise programmes and even 'treadmills for toddlers'. However, as Froebel emphasised, movement is part of children's very being and it is spontaneous play and exploration that motivates children to move not exercise or keeping fit.

The value of play outdoors cannot be realised in bland, safety-surfaced play areas. Outdoor play is about *potential* – the potential of spaces to engage children's imagination, curiosity and creativity and foster their health and well-being. As Froebel argued, the quality of the environment and the interactions within it are crucial.





# A Froebelian garden today

Opportunities for experiencing nature in direct and meaningful ways



Fig. 2: Discovering potatoes and investigating their roots



Fig. 3: Washing the potatoes before cooking and eating them

Through gardening and play outdoors children have real, direct experience of the natural world. They learn *in* nature not just *about* nature. Through activities such as planting potatoes, harvesting apples, making bird cake, they experience the changing seasons, the cycles of life and death, and growth and decay (Brown 2012).



Fig. 4: Taking the potato plants to the compost heap. Composting material from the garden helps children begin to understand the interconnectedness of all living things





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## Opportunities for curiosity and enquiry

The garden provides endless opportunities for children's curiosity, investigation and puzzling questions. These are a few examples of children's questions –

- How do worms breathe under there? Why don't they suffocate? [suffocate]
- Why is there glass on the pond? [looking at ice]
- How do snails eat lettuce when they haven't got any teeth?

Adults can offer further experiences to support children's enquiry for example creating a wormery to see worm tunnels or exploring how temperature changes water into ice. Snails can be investigated with magnifiers to see their rasping tongues.

'Question after question crowds out of his enquiring mind – how? why? when? what for?'

(Froebel in Lilley 1967:125)

## Opportunities for imagination and creative play

A Froebelian environment provides resources which can be transformed rather than bought equipment which is 'pre-formed'. It is the act of transformation which is important as it involves children in symbolic thinking, using one object to stand for another.



Fig. 5. Mixing soil, water and leaves to create 'food' for 'cooking' outside.



## Opportunities for creating and enacting stories

Fig. 6: Nature provides a plentiful supply of props for play. These boys are transforming flowers and pretend water to make 'purple poison' for the 'wicked wolf'. They use a piece of bark to 'stand for' the tap. A long narrative unfolds.

Opportunities for open-ended exploration, problem solving and making connections



Fig. 7, 8 and 9: These children are exploring the force and the flow of water. The adults make connections with similar resources indoors. Making connections is a key Froebelian principle and links the new with what is already known.



Opportunities for representing ideas through a range of open-ended resources

Froebel believed that simple, open-ended materials help children to represent their ideas, feelings and experiences. They allow children to explore different areas of meaning. Froebel called these 'forms of knowledge', 'forms of life' and 'forms of beauty'. So, any one representation may include aspects of knowledge such as scientific or mathematical understanding, aspects of the child's own life, and aesthetic aspects such as pattern, shape or symmetry.

'Simple playthings that allow children to feel and experience, to act and represent, and to think and recognise'  
(Froebel cited in Brosterman 1997:51).



'As the play material becomes less tangible so there is a greater advance in creative expression'  
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:18)

Fig. 10, 11 and 12: Using sticks, stones, leaves and petals to represent ideas.



## Opportunities for learning to care for living things



Fig. 13 and 14 Closely observing snails found in the garden and water snails in the pond. Children begin to notice similarities and differences and learn to respect living things.



Fig. 14



'The child who has cared for another living thing... is more easily led to care for his own life'.  
(Froebel in Lilley 1967:128).

Froebel noted that a young child, hardly six years old 'can tell you things about the wonderful organism and movement of a beetle which you have never noticed before' (Froebel in Lilley: 1967:127)



Fig. 15



### Opportunities for experiencing all areas of the curriculum in meaningful ways.



Fig. 16: Play with a tyre offers experience of mathematical and scientific concepts of weight, height, energy, and forces. The height of the tyre is dependent on the pull of the rope.



Fig.17: Froebel advocated the use of finger and hand play, action songs and movement games outdoors as an important part of developing music, rhythm, rhyme, narrative and close relationships.





# Creating a challenging garden for play and exploration

A Froebelian garden is flexible, easily changed, and responsive to children's interests and patterns of play. Each setting may look very different but is likely to include -

- **Direct experience of nature in all the seasons** with a wide range of trees, bushes, plants, logs, small ponds, sand and water offering rich scope for investigation and play.



Fig. 18: A Froebelian garden offers space, time and opportunities to experience the changing seasons

- **Child gardens** for growing flowers, fruit, vegetables and herbs and digging areas for exploring and investigating
- **Uneven ground** that children can navigate, such as grassy banks for clambering and rolling, slopes for sliding, tunnels for crawling, ditches for crossing.
- **Wild areas** such as fallen trees, boulders, long grass, tangled vines, thickets of bamboo which can offer exploration, imagination and adventure.
- **Diverse movement experiences** with opportunities for running, swinging, sliding, balancing, crawling and climbing, so that children can move their bodies in space. A carefully planned environment can provide spatial experiences such as over, under, through, in between, and experience of concepts such as height, gradient, gravity, speed and energy. For example, sliding headfirst down a slide offers experience of such things as direction, gradient, speed and concepts of headfirst or even head-first backwards.

Fig. 19, Fig 20 and Fig 21: A Froebelian environment offers a wide range of diverse, full bodied movement such as swinging, sliding, jumping, crawling, hanging, climbing and balancing.

- **Open-ended materials** which have no fixed purpose and which can be used in a multitude of different ways. For example, boxes, crates, blankets, wheels, planks, pipes, guttering, wheels, pulleys and ropes. Such flexible, transformable resources provide rich opportunities for solving problems, and creative, imaginative thinking.
- **Provision for meaningful learning in all areas of the curriculum.** Outdoors offers potential for all areas of learning. However, these are not provided through a range of 'activities' but through rich experiences and adults who can make links with areas of knowledge.
- **Spaces to hide, make dens and to create their own secret worlds.** Froebel argued that all children need a space they can make their own small world or 'kingdom' and that this is best chosen and created by themselves.
- **Quiet spaces** such as comfortable grassy spaces, swing seats or hammocks, cosy nooks where children can be still, dream, watch others and find solitude or quiet companionship.

- Uninterrupted time which allow for engagement and involvement. A Froebelian garden is available throughout the day, so that wherever possible children can move freely between the indoor and outdoor space. Weather conditions such as snow, ice, rain and wind are seen as exciting learning experiences, not as reasons to stay indoors.



Fig. 19





# What about risk?



Fig. 21



Fig. 22: Open-ended resources allow children to take risks and try things out.

Froebel recognised the value of adventurous play outdoors. He believed we should look at the benefits of such challenging activities rather than focus on the risks. Tree climbing for example offers children experience of height, perspective and distance and can create feelings of joy and a sense of achievement – ‘I did it’.

He argued that children who experience increasing challenges in their play are safer than those who have been protected from them. It is the child who ‘does not know his strength and the demands made on it who is likely to venture beyond his experience and run into unsuspected danger’ (Froebel in Lilley 1967:126).

In a contemporary climate often regarded as ‘risk averse’ the value of children learning the skills to do things safely and of developing a ‘can do’ attitude is increasingly important. The early years garden may be one of the few places where children can safely test their limits and develop a sense of adventure.



Fig. 23: ‘To climb a new tree is... to discover a new world; ... we should not be so insensitive to call out, “Come down you will fall!”’ (Froebel, in Lilley 1967:126)





Fig. 24: Risk taking helps develop persistence in the face of challenge

### What is the value of risk?

The willingness to take risks is an important characteristic of an effective learner. It can help develop a disposition to 'have a go', persist at something and see challenges as problems to enjoy rather than things to fear. Small mistakes and minor accidents can offer some protection against the negative effects of future failure. Such play can develop children's resilience and help them to cope physically and emotionally with unexpected events (Tovey 2012).

When adults look anxious or repeatedly say to children 'mind out'; 'be careful'; 'don't do that', 'come down you'll fall', there is a danger that they undermine this important disposition to learn by communicating their own anxiety.

Children should be 'brought up to bear minor affliction so as to endure more serious hardships' later in life. (Froebel in Lilley 1967:60)



Fig. 25: Testing and pushing limits

### The key role of the educator

Adults who enjoy being outside, who interact sensitively, and take a positive approach to adventurous play are crucial. They can help children to assess risk for themselves and teach safe ways of doing things. For example, testing the stability and strength of a tree branch before putting weight on it is a useful strategy.

'No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool'.

(Health and Safety Executive UK 2012)





# Extending play and learning outdoors - adult interaction

## Positive approach to risk in play

We support early years providers 'taking a positive approach to risk... moving away from a traditional deficit model that takes a risk-averse approach, which can unnecessarily restrict children's experiences... to a more holistic risk-benefit model'

(Scottish Care Inspectorate 2016)

Outdoors can be a source of surprise, curiosity and adventure for young children. Sadly, research suggests that too often adults tend to focus on rather mundane domestic matters such as organising turns on bikes, sorting out disputes or telling children to stop doing something' (Bilton 2012 in Tovey 2015). However, when adults respond and interact in ways that are in tune with children's interests this can lead to rich and meaningful conversations (Waters and Maynard 2010 in Tovey 2015).

Froebel recognised the powerful impact that adults can have on either nurturing or crushing children's curiosity and engagement outdoors.



Fig. 26: Observing, listening and talking about the pulley

'Children who spend all their time in the open air may still observe nothing of the beauties of Nature and their influence on the human heart. The boy sees the significance ...but if he does not find the same awareness in adults the seed of knowledge just beginning to germinate is crushed'

(Froebel in Lilley 1967:146)



'If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in'.

Rachel Carson (1965:55)



Fig. 27: Observing supporting and extending. The adult poses a question 'I wonder what will happen if I let it go?' They discuss ways of making the structure stable.

Froebelian educators emphasise the importance of -

- **Observing** – not ticking off stages of development or isolated achievements but to take note of what children are interested in, thinking and feeling. Observation is much more than watching. It involves listening carefully, being open and wanting to know more.
- **Supporting and extending** children's learning by sensitive intervention through planning additional resources, new experiences, or adult support
- **Tuning-in to children's own play ideas**, recognising that such play can be rumbustious and messy at times but when supported and allowed to flourish can be sustained, collaborative and complex.
- **Having realistically high expectations of what children are able to do.** This means knowing children well enough to decide when to be quietly watchful, when to be sensitively supportive and when to actively intervene by joining or extending the play.

- **Making links with the curriculum** – this is not about imposing curriculum targets or taking over children's play for curriculum objectives. Rather it is about building on children's interests, making appropriate links with areas of knowledge and extending children's learning in worthwhile ways.



Fig. 28: Sharing the joy and delight in discovery





*Fig. 30: Outdoors offers many opportunities for symbolic thinking. Here the children are using bushes to stand for a house, and leaves and stones for food at a pretend dinner. This is a highly significant aspect of young children's learning as it involves both abstract and symbolic thinking.*

# Supporting Children's thinking outdoors

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'The first and weightiest point of education is to lead children early to reflect'  
(Froebel cited in Herford 1916:45)

Outdoors is not just a place for doing, it is also a place for thinking and feeling. All three are interconnected. Froebel argued that self-activity on its own was not enough. Children should become aware of their own thinking and feeling so that they 'know' something in a deeper, more reflective way.

Today we know that self-regulation, reflection, being aware of one's own thinking and feeling is highly significant in children's learning (Robson & Rowe 2012). A key part of a Froebelian approach is to start where the child is, tune in to what they are interested in and support and extend it in meaningful and worthwhile ways. Careful observation and knowing children well help guide the adult as to when to stand back and when to intervene more actively.



*Fig. 29: Supporting children to solve their own problems. What might happen if...?*





'To have found one quarter of the answers [to his own questions] by his own effort is of more value and importance to the child than to half hear and half understand it in the words of others'  
(Froebel 1826: 86).

This might involve-

- **Engaging in meaningful talk and conversation.**  
This means listening carefully, responding to what children say in a way which is meaningful and which invites a further response.
- **Helping children reflect on their own learning and think about their own thinking.**  
Open-ended questions help children to reflect and invite speculation and consideration. Using 'thinking' words such as wonder, remember, guess, consider, re-consider in everyday conversation helps draw attention to the processes of thinking.
- **Encouraging children's adventurous play, thinking and learning** for example by nurturing their confidence to pursue new experiences and ideas, to 'venture' in the mind, to wonder, play with ideas, imagine, represent, speculate and make unusual combinations and connections.
- **Nurturing children's symbolic thinking** for example by providing open-ended resources which can be transformed.
- **Supporting children in finding and solving problems** and seeking answers to their own questions.



*Fig. 31: A rich environment supports children's creative problem-solving. Here the children are asking 'how can we get the water from the fountain into the bucket?'*





# Final thoughts...

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Today as many children spend longer amounts of time indoors and are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, Froebel's ideas have renewed importance and urgency. If children can develop a sense of wonder about nature, can see the effect of their actions on things around them and can get to know their own small garden in deep ways, they are much more likely to want to conserve nature and help shape a sustainable future.

Revisiting Froebel's approach helps us reflect on current provision and practice.

- Is the outdoor space a place of wonder and enquiry with adults who support children's curiosity and investigation?
- Does it provide direct engagement with the natural world?
- Is it a place for adventurous and challenging play?
- Is it a place where creativity and imagination flourish?
- Can children adapt and transform it as part of their play?
- What are the freedoms we want for children and what constraints best allow those freedoms to thrive?

The gardens we create with children are powerful testament to how we view children's lives and learning and how we view the natural world. Together, we need to re-create Froebel's vision of a garden for children, see the potential for learning outdoors and develop rich, challenging spaces which help children discover the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.



Fig. 32



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London

Vanessa Nursery School, London

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