

Conference Report: Children and Nature: Measuring Success London, October 2010

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The organizers of this conference—Frances Harris (Kingston University), Valerie Gladwell (University of Essex), Liz O'Brien (Forest Research), and Judith Hanna (Natural England)—wished to bring a range of experts to the table to explore the topic of children and nature. The aim of the conference was to discuss the many ways in which the natural environment can contribute to children's health, education, and well-being. The seminar focused particularly on how success in engaging with children is measured: what evidence is seen as useful, what methods are used to measure success. A key aim was to establish how empirical evidence can be obtained to determine the benefits that can then be used to allow implementation on a wider scale and for policy development.

The attendees were from a diverse range of backgrounds: practitioners, educators, geographers, psychologists and physiologists. There were 12 formal presentations, as well as posters, three working groups and round table discussions. There was also a chance for networking throughout the day. Presentations were made by a mixture of academics, teachers, and practitioners. They ranged in focus from primary school children to teenagers and concerned education, conservation, social exclusion, and health.

The day started with Frances Harris giving an overview of the scope and challenges of the task, focusing on the need to engage with a range of academic disciplines to measure the many benefits of nature, as well as the importance of academics working with practitioners to ensure that years of evidence and experience are monitored and evaluated to capture robust evidence of impact. A Skype call was then made to New York to discuss the U.S. perspective with John Fraser.

Presentations followed on "Gardening in Schools: A Vital Tool for Children's Learning" (Jacky Chave, Royal Horticultural Society); "How Can We Know? Methods

for Assessing Some ‘Soft’ Benefits of Woodland Activities for Children in Participative Research with the Third Sector” (Sue Waite, University of Plymouth and Alice Goodenough, The Silvanus Trust); “Free Range Teenagers: The Role of Wild Adventure Space in Young People’s Lives” (Catharine Ward Thompson, OPENspace Research Centre, Edinburgh College of Art); “The Turnaround Project: Using Nature as a Catalyst for Change” (Jo Barton, University of Essex); “Exploring the Natural Environment with Learning Disabled Children: Opportunities; Barriers and Experiences” (Nadia von Benzon, University of Manchester); “Using Base-Line Data at School Starting Ages as a Measure of the Effectiveness of Forest School in Early Years Settings” (Sara Knight, Anglia Ruskin University); “Life on Our Shore: A Case Study” (Graham Scott, University of Hull); “Connecting Children and Nature through Art and Technology” (Denise Taylor, Education 4 Conservation Limited (E4C)); “The Role of Fieldwork in Geography Education: More than Just a Coach Trip and Soggy Sandwiches?” (Eleanor Coulber, Royal Geographical Society); “Teenagers, Mountain Biking Lifestyles and the Nature Experience: Methodologies for Understanding Youth Engagements with Nature” (Katherine King, Brunel University and Andrew Church, University of Brighton). The last speaker was Valerie Gladwell, who presented some summary work written by the University of Essex about the growing evidence to show that children’s contact with nature and consequent levels of physical activity affects not only their well-being but also their health in later life. A quick summary was given about how life pathways can be altered by the effects of nature and ten key priorities to improve children’s health and well-being.

The day was also used to explore how to obtain an empirical core of evidence whilst keeping in mind the ethical issues of the use of children in studies. Attendees split into three working groups to explore three areas, and the main outcomes of the discussion are outlined below.

Future Research Issues

Individual case studies show that experiences in nature can lead to transformative experiences in children’s lives, but the challenge is to capture these experiences in a way that generates robust empirical data. While there is a growing body of experiential learning, based largely on feedback from practitioners, we need to identify measurable, objectively quantifiable outcomes that can be measured easily and reliably within the context of working with children. What are the appropriate outcomes that are to be measured? Are there existing, validated methodologies that can be employed that will result in data of interest to policy makers? Much research analyzes the impact of children and nature activities in the short term, but there is a need for more longitudinal studies measuring the impacts over the longer term, and over the life course. Are there existing data sets (e.g., school records, public health data) that can be used, and if so, how? What can we learn from historical research on nature studies, and what can be gained from a comparative, international perspective? Research needs to be underpinned by theory.

Methodologies

Discussion concerned appropriate measures for working with young children, those with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. How can researchers work with

practitioners to capture data that results in a rigorous data set applicable to an analytical framework? The balance between quantitative and qualitative data was discussed, as well as the overriding need to move beyond anecdotal stories of individual transformation towards a more robust analysis of cohorts. The need to use widely accepted indicators such as the Rosenberg self-esteem measurement or the connectedness to nature scales was emphasized, as well as the potential of using pre/post event questionnaires, measuring physiological attributes, etc. The difficulty of identifying control groups was raised.

Ethical and Practical Issues of Working with Young Children

Research on children and nature often requires working with children from vulnerable groups (i.e., those with special needs, mental disabilities, or involved in foster care/ custodial care). At what age are children able to give permission themselves, rather than parents? Even if parental permission is required, how much should children be aware of the research, and be entitled to join in, or opt out? Is it permissible to insist that participation in research is a condition of participating in an activity? Where is the dividing line between routine (and sometimes obligatory) monitoring and evaluation of a program, and a research project? At what point does observational data (e.g., photos, observational notes) overstep the mark and become more personal or invasive data collection (e.g., personal fitness/ physiological measurements, diaries, and the like)?

Further details are available at www.kingston.ac.uk/ceesr/childrenandnature or by contacting Frances Harris at f.harris@kingston.ac.uk.