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Lessons learned from a 5 ½ year old: getting to know nature

"But Aunty Tracy, I still need to see a real rabbit." Words spoken to me by my five and a half year old nephew – and yes, the half matters with numbers, as he explained to the lady selling us tickets to cruise across Lake Windermere. We had spent the morning visiting the World of Beatrix Potter where we reread the story of Peter Rabbit, enjoyed a picnic lunch then the afternoon's adventure was a boat trip around the Lake, waving to people on the other boats when we passed them. "Why don't some people wave back Aunty Tracy?" "Perhaps they don't see us". He had carried his new rucksack with him (a present from me to help him enjoy walking), which he had crammed full of cuddly, toy rabbits (nothing sensible, that can wait until he's six). The first a present from me when he was born, three others acquired over the next five and a half years, culminating in the tiny, pocket sized one bought that morning to accompany us on our adventure, and as a memento of our day. He had read some of Beatrix Potter's books and listened to the audio versions on the long drive north to visit me. We had planned to go on to Hilltop, to see where the real Beatrix Potter had lived, with the hope of seeing real rabbits in the kitchen garden, but unfortunately it doesn't open on Fridays. He took this disappointment quietly, and we agreed he'd have to come and visit again.

At this point you may be thinking this is a pleasant story, but what's the point of it for readers of *Horizons*? What's this got to do with CPD? I hope to encourage you to think about your own early experiences in nature, remember who was with you (human, toy, real and imaginary) and to consider how this may have affected the way you work now. I share my story as a way of engaging you in the wider debate of how we can support others to connect with nature: to develop an awareness and appreciation of the world around them; to feel a sense of belonging in outdoor places.

Since my nephew's return home, I've been thinking a lot about the magical days we spent together. I recognise how much I learned from him during that time, and this has caused me to reflect on my practice as an environmental youth worker, and on my newer role as a researcher. In 1956 Rachel Carson urged parents to take their children outside as "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful... full of wonder and excitement"ⁱ. She emphasized that, "Daily, intimate, sensory experience is essential to keep that wonder bright for a lifetime...the early companionship of a responsive adult is the best way to make it happen"ⁱⁱ.

These wise words were spoken nearly sixty years ago, and have been echoed and added to over the years by many others including Richard Louvⁱⁱⁱ ^{iv}, and most recently by the National Trust^v. And I agree with them, it is important we encourage children to explore and discover a sense of wonder outside. However, children can also inspire us: they enable us to take a different perspective, to rediscover the world through their eyes. We just have to be able to get down to their level, to put down our mantle of sophistication and maturity, to be responsive and remember how to play. The world looks, smells, feels, sounds and tastes different when we do this: it's more fun!

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However, there is a serious side to this, when we experience nature, culture and family as *an interwoven entity*, the connections and attachments we make can be very strong and meaningful^{vi}: these are connections we make with each other and those we make with nature. Starting with soft toys, fairy tales and nursery rhymes, we can begin to explore the world of nature with children, introducing them to some of the creatures with whom we live, and helping them to feel a sense of familiarity and desire to learn more. As they grow and develop, we have progressively more opportunities to make this real, to take them outside and let them play – and it can be so much more fun if teddy (or rabbit) comes too! Perhaps children who know how to play in nature, and who value these experiences, will be more likely to grow up keen and able to play with their own children in a similar way. But what happens to those less fortunate than my nephew? Those who find themselves surrounded by adults who are 'grown-ups', who are not responsive, who don't wave back to children who pass by on boats; people who have forgotten (or perhaps never knew) how to play? Possibly they feel too self-conscious when *mucking around with little ones*, as suggested by a recent consumer survey reported in a national newspaper^{vii}. What about the children and young people, who live separately from their families, or whose families are overwhelmed by dealing with more pressing concerns? What happens to the young people who enter adulthood never having experienced nature in this way? Who helps them to discover the wonder and then keep it bright? These questions have been playing in my mind, toying with my thoughts, philosophically making their way onto this paper.

I think I may have an answer to the last question: practitioners, facilitators, teachers, grandparents, carers, peers, you and me; we do our best to help them by providing outdoor experiences, in diverse guises. However, do we do enough? Do we remember to be childlike (perhaps even childish?) in amongst dealing with the requirements for professionalism and responsibility to ensure we all stay safe, meet desired outcomes and can evidence learning? How do we provide opportunities like this for young people for whom such activities may appear to have little relevance, and who may cynically perceive them as too childish, after all, they're nearly adults? I believe we need to find a way. One way I have found effective in the past, has been through intergenerational work: helping to set up a teddy-bear hunt for younger siblings can be great fun for teenagers, result in more creatively hidden bears and thus a more interesting experience for the younger ones. Then afterwards, it is an experience that can be relived through sharing stories, each with their own perspective as hider or discoverer of the bears.

By making use of stories, we can help to develop a sense of belonging, of familiarity, comfort; we can engage, captivate, and encourage participation^{viii}. Stories enable us to make use of our imagination and reflections, and they can linger in our memory long after the experience. Stories can help make the link from the outer world to our inner world, and can be adapted to the specific context and culture. We can do this with people of all ages – from little children to adults; however there is less time to do this with toys! A favourite toy from early childhood makes a good companion for those initial adventures: someone to share the stories with, to hang on to when we're feeling scared, and to cuddle when tired and sleepy. Unfortunately, for most (I exclude myself from this) a cuddly rabbit is usually outgrown well before adolescence, consigned to a dusty shelf or tucked away in a cardboard box at the back of a

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cupboard. However, a chance discovery whilst looking for something else (a pair of walking boots perhaps?) can unlock the memories, allowing the discoverer to relive the experience and remember the wonder of nature – to renew the connections.

My questions for you:

- Within your programmes, do you make time and space for play?
- Do you encourage your participants to make use of their imaginations?
- Are you a good role model? By allowing others to see you play, you may inspire them to do the same.
- Do you share your stories, and listen when others tell you theirs?
- Finally, are you responsive – when you see a child wave at you, do you wave back?

I've seen many real rabbits since that magical day with my nephew, and each one reminds me of him. The sight of the rabbit takes me back and I relive the story of our time together. It serves as a connection, linking us through the time and space that separate us. Let us never underestimate the power of stories (and cuddly toy animals) to help us to understand and to enjoy time spent in nature. However, we should also remember that for the impact to be most powerful, the experience needs to be real: as my little nephew said at the beginning, we still need the real thing, and one day soon, we will take his toy rabbits to meet a real one! But that's another story...

ⁱ Carson, R. (1956) *The Sense of Wonder*, New York: Harper & Row

ⁱⁱ Dunlap, J and Kellert, S.R. Eds. (2012) *Companions in Wonder: Children and Adults Exploring Nature Together*, London: The MIT Press

ⁱⁱⁱ Louv, Richard (2005) *Last Child in the Woods: saving our children form nature-deficit disorder*. North Carolina, USA: Algonquin Books of Chaple Hill

^{iv} Louv, Richard (2011) *The Nature Principle: Human restoration and the end of nature-deficit disorder*. North Carolina, USA: Algonquin Books of Chaple Hill

^v <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/what-we-do/big-issues/nature-and-outdoors/natural-childhood/>

^{vi} Derr, V. 2002 in Dunlap, J and Kellert, S.R. Eds. (2012) *Companions in Wonder: Children and Adults Exploring Nature Together*, London: The MIT Press

^{vii} Duggan, O. (2013, June 13). Parents spend under an hour on child's play. *i newspaper*, p. 26.

^{viii} MacLellan, G. (2007) *Celebrating Nature* Somerset: Capall Bann Publishing