

## Taking the First Steps Outside – Under Threes Learning and Developing in the Natural Environment

Helen Bilto, Gabriela Bento, Gisela Dias

This interesting, informative and highly accessible book – the result of a recent research project undertaken in Portugal – is beautifully illustrated with photographs of children exploring and engaging with the outdoor environment; complementing and illuminating for the reader, the detailed descriptions of the real events described in the book.

Written by three experts in the field of early childhood education; Helen Bilto, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Reading, UK; Gabriela Bento, an educational psychologist and PhD student at the University of Aveiro, Portugal; and Gisela Dias, an experienced early childhood teacher in Portugal – this book demonstrates how children under three can benefit from exploring the natural outdoor environment whilst providing teachers and facilitators working in educational settings for the under threes with a variety of pedagogical approaches to learning outside.

The authors argue that although there has been a long-standing tradition for children over three to play and learn using outdoor environments; e.g. the playground or garden in educational settings, this tradition, in Portugal, has not necessarily extended to younger children in the school nursery. The dominant reason for this, the authors assert, being a perception that children under three can be problematic in relation to their behaviour. For example, they cite the idea of the terrible-twos (which the authors argue is a myth), a time when two-year-olds can become extremely angry, frustrated and upset – often resulting in temper tantrums because they do not have the ability to perform many of their desired outcomes. This book claims that there are indeed many myths about one and two-year-olds which it sets out to dispel – the point made about young children needing to be constantly entertained is powerfully eliminated in the authors critical discussion of the negative consequences of over stimulation and the importance of young children being given time to enjoy Nature quietly and in contemplation – the authors assert that encouraging self-regulation during childhood encourages young children to be self-motivated without needing constant external reinforcement.

The authors are also concerned with a growing trend of children spending more time on electronic devices and less time outside and argue that the outside is an all-encompassing learning environment – affording young children the opportunity to learn and practise life skills such as perseverance, overcoming adversity and fear, whilst benefitting from collaborative learning. In terms of science education, this book focuses on how to use the outdoor environment to elicit and maintain curiosity; whilst giving young children opportunities to observe, explore and question as they develop a love for the natural world as well as their language and thinking skills.

Insights into the crucial role of the adult are given; adults observing and reflecting upon children's learning is high on the agenda – it is clear that the authors believe that adults should not feel the need to teach or over stimulate the children in their care with constant activities; this is not simply sage advice but a change in pedagogical approach for the teachers involved in the project. Necessary changes in educational practices are highlighted; reasons for these, how these were achieved and theoretical underpinnings are discussed. The book also provides clear advice on choosing the right resources to create an effective

enabling outdoor learning environment for young children and guidance on how to undertake a research project for children under three; a welcome chapter in the book which will hopefully inspire nursery practitioners, or indeed any reader of the book interested in education, to undertake action research or become involved in a research project.

However, for me, the power of this book lies with the focus on what the authors call 'risky play' to promote challenging and positive opportunities in the natural environment. In today's political climate, teachers and facilitators are held highly to account, and rightly so – all children deserving the absolute best education undertaken in a safe and stimulating environment; however, this can, as the authors rightly argue, create a strong risk avoidance approach to prioritise children's protection and security. I would agree with the authors premise that '*absolute safety is not possible or desirable – it is not possible to keep children in a bubble-wrapped environment*' (2017:63). Therefore, 'risky play' is an important trigger for children's social and cognitive development; responding to a child's need for stimulation of all the senses, encouraging a child's natural curiosity. Moreover, the authors strongly argue that without risks children are not given the opportunity to develop the attitude of persistence which is needed to not only develop problem solving skills but undertake challenge; when children seek challenge, the authors note that, they become creative in learning the best strategies to solve them.

It is important to note that this book is centred on a research project undertaken in Portugal where the authors state that early childhood education is still too centred on what happens inside the nursery; Portugal also clearly has a different curriculum to that in the UK. However, all of the activities and pedagogical approaches suggested would fit well into delivering the EYFS curriculum and what many teachers in the EYFS setting already do, the ideas presented are inspiring.

Furthermore, the premise that the nursery teacher is a facilitator of outdoor learning fits well with the idea of teacher-initiated activities leading into child-initiated exploration incorporating observation and problem-solving; a clear reflection of good practice in teaching science to young children. Therefore, all educators in the field of Early Years education would certainly benefit from reading this book, but I would also go as far to say that this book could inspire teachers and science co-ordinators of older children within the primary-age range to utilise the outdoor environment more when undertaking scientific enquiry.