The Centre

Cowgate Under 5’s Centre is situated in Edinburgh, Scotland (see Figure 19.1). Attending children are aged between 3 months and 5 years. The Centre is open 52 weeks a year and from 8:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. The intake comes from all across the city and beyond and includes children from a rich range of cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds. There are three playrooms in the centre. Our community of children, parents and staff are free to move fluidly between all spaces and interrelate with whom they choose. In this way our children are nomadic, free to explore.

As well as a rich, stimulating environment the centre has two other outdoor spaces, a local Forest School site (McNair, 2012) and a Nature Kindergarten, 26 acres of wild space (see photo 2). The Nature Kindergarten (which was named by the children as Stickland, and provides the context for this case study) is considered by all to be an intellectual aerie. It is a wild site that is qualitatively different than indoors (Tovey, 2007). Stickland is offered to the children three days per week. A group of 10 children leave the centre first thing in the morning and return in the late afternoon.

Stickland features grassland, woodlands, fields and a river. There is a base camp with tepees, and a heated yurt, which provides sheltered spaces to eat, sleep and drink. Additionally, there are many places to cook food (e.g. at the barbecue) and there is a large fire pit.

At Stickland children are often invited to gather for nourishing snacks. This provides opportunities for rest and dialogue about what to do next. There are many opportunities for children to learn about the natural environment and to make connections (Froebel in Lilley, 1967; Tovey, 2007; Bruce, 2012a). ‘Knowledgeable adults’ (Lilley, 1967: 118) who are sensitively attuned to the children are on hand to observe and extend children’s knowledge and skills. Adults view children as adventurous, competent, curious, imaginative and trustworthy. There is no attempt here by adults to lead the children through abstract learning and instruction thereby stultifying the children’s emotional, physical and spiritual needs (see Hardy, 1912). As Froebel asserted, it is precisely the effect of the interminable nature of debates between the children and adults that is of value here:

(Practitioners) should regularly take their classes out of doors – not driving them like a flock of sheep or leading them as if they were a company of soldiers, but walking them
as a father with his sons or a brother with his brothers making them more familiar with whatever Nature or the season offer.

(Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 146)

Aims and methods

The aim of this case study is to illustrate the adventure, challenge and potential for mastery outdoors. Opportunities than can be restricted indoors (see Tovey, 2007).

A boy, Milo (4 years old) is followed on his journey as he persistently climbs a steep terrain to eventually mastering climbing a tree.

To record Milo’s experience practitioners will use participant observation. Observation of individual children was of critical importance to Froebel. He requested:

(i)n the interests of children I have still another request to make – that you would record in writing the most important facts about each separate child.

(Extract from Froebel’s letter in Poesche, 1981: Letter vii.)

Froebel’s conception of the potential of the outdoor environment was . . . imbued with his philosophical beliefs and his visionary aspirations for children . . . adventure, challenge, curiosity, problem-solving, persistence, respect for the natural world – these were the lessons Froebel set out to convey.

(Read, 2012: 70–4)
Milo conquers the terrain

Milo attempts to scale the steep side of the hill parallel to a guiding rope (photo 4). Making a propitious decision he crawls up the gentler gradient. ‘Froebel recognized that adults may be anxious about the risks in such play; they may fear the child will be reckless but he suggests that if a child is allowed to gradually develop their capacities then they will only attempt a small step beyond what they have already achieved – it is only those who have been restrained who may try too much and “run into suspected danger” ’ (Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 126–7). Milo carefully moves, holding on steadily to the ground until he reaches the top. As Tovey reminds us, ‘[o]utdoor play offers challenges for children to try things out, to have a go and to take risks’ (Tovey, 2007: 20).

To travel back down the hill Milo chooses to sit, shuffling down on his bottom, legs outstretched in front. Overcoming the challenge of getting down he rocks his body creating a forwards motion (Ouvry, 2000). He turns to the observing adult “I do it like this”. Milo uses his whole body to map Stickland’s uneven terrain. He climbs the hill on several occasions adapting his movements. He expresses delight: “This is how I move”. Froebel believed that through persistence at such tasks children learned to be safe, but also to develop a meaningful understanding and respect for the natural world.

Milo illustrates that he is now a confident, skilful climber (Figure 19.4). ‘I’m climbing. C goes first, then R, then me’ he says. Froebel stressed the importance of this type of experience; ‘He climbs up into caves and crevices, clambers up trees and hills, searches heights and depths, and roams through fields and forests’ (Froebel, in Lilley, 1967: 126).
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Milo can now seek out undiscovered heights as he climbs alongside his peers.

‘Let us alone’, he will cry as his father goes to take a log out of his way, I’ll get over it’. When he gets over it by himself, however difficult it may be, he is encouraged by the success and goes back to climb it again; soon he is jumping over it as if there were nothing in his way. *(Froebel in Lilley, 1967: 124)*

**Figure 19.3** Milo problem-solving and persisting

**Figure 19.4** Milo illustrates his technique for getting down

Discussion

It is unlikely that Milo would have mastered his climbing skills in the nursery environment. The nature kindergarten is a ‘space that is full of potential’ *(Tovey, 2007: 72)*, much less restrictive
than the nursery environment. Milo had the opportunity for adventure up and down an uneven terrain, and opportunity to climb a tree. Adults could have stepped in to ‘encourage’ Milo to use the rope to climb up or down the hill but they did not. As Dweck suggests:

> It doesn’t help a child to tackle a difficult task if they succeed constantly on an easy one. It doesn’t teach them to persist in the face of obstacles if obstacles are always eliminated. (Dweck, 2000: 7)

Furthermore, the elements produce a constantly changing environment while the landscape remains assuredly familiar. The children may arrive at Stickland to find the rain has muddied the field or the wind has blown branches onto the trail. A windy day offers different opportunities to a sunny day, which is different again to a snowy day. While providing opportunities for space responsive pedagogy, we always advocate that there is no such thing as bad weather, only different types of good weather. Children, like Milo, are able to contemplate the elements: ‘What is wind?’ This type of reflection could not occur in a meaningful way without uninterrupted periods in the outdoors facilitated by attuned practitioners who do not allow the weather to dictate the programme.

**Conclusion**

As we leave this outdoor experience, what have we learned? Certainly, the aim of this case study was to illustrate the adventure, challenge and potential for mastery outdoors. Has this been
achieved? We have learned that children’s play is inherently embodied, as Milo uses his body to feel and experience the risky terrain. We have learned when children have freedom, space and time to progress outdoors, at their own pace, they master challenges. And, as a consequence go on to become successful learners and spirited adventurers. Froebel knew that children treasured their autonomy from this he encouraged adults to trust children, not to conclude outcomes, but to enable opportunities and possibilities that this case study has shown.