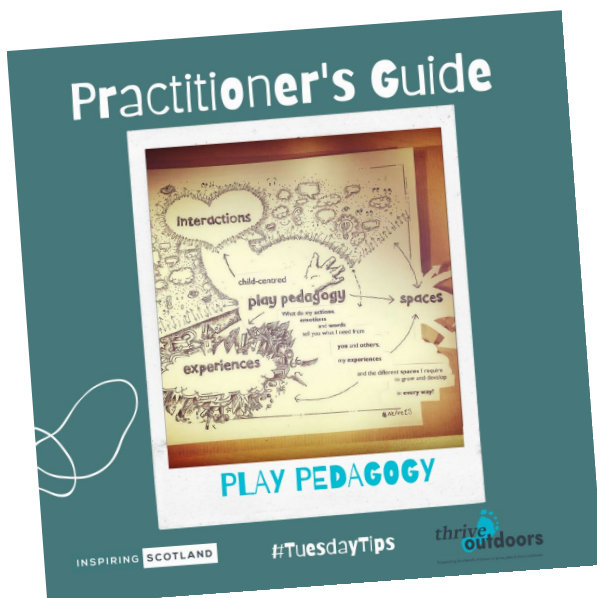


# Dr. Lynn McNair A Practitioner's Guide to OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING INTERACTIONS

**What are interactions? Interactions are where the powers of nature and human nature meet**

The purpose of this blog is to explore child and adult *interactions*, specifically in the outdoor environment.



'Play Pedagogy Sketch' Education Scotland

I was so pleased to be asked to write this blog as how adults *interact* with children is of critical importance, whether indoors or outdoors. Before going any further, it may be important to say I suspect for many of us, we may exchange the word *interactions* for *engagement*. I will most likely do that too, as I use the words interchangeably. I begin this blog with a very meaningful quote regarding adult interactions from Friedrich Froebel:

***'Education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting only; it should neither direct nor determine nor interfere' (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:51).***

**But what does it mean?** When I think about how adults interact with children, I often consider this quotation. What does it mean to be 'permissive' and 'following', 'guarding' and 'protecting'? What this means to me is that the **sensitive, attuned adult is intently tuned into what is happening, 'observing, supporting and extending'** children's interests and experiences (Bruce, Louis & McCall, 2014); that is why, when in the nature kindergarten with children, I am interested in what the child is gravitating towards and how the child engages with the space and the elements. I am often, very relaxed, but always tuned in, considering how to support the child in his/her encounters.



Figure 1: Children need space for solitary play, where they can reflect, dream or test a skill

## Do you know a Fish Face?

What Froebel also reminds us is that **the adult is 'not to direct' 'nor determine', 'nor interfere'**. Importantly, this does not mean a laissez-faire approach, which literally translated means leaving alone, which would mean the adult leaving the child alone. Of course, you do want to give children the space they crave for group / solitary play, where they can reflect, dream, or test a skill. However, it is important **to be aware of what they are doing with their time**. In our early childhood practice, it is very likely that we have all have come across the adult who reluctantly engages with the children outdoors, who often stands back... with their arms folded. Claire Warden calls those adults **'fish faces.'**



## I'm not keen on being outdoors, will it show in my practice?

At Cowgate Under 5s Centre in Edinburgh, I can honestly say we have no *fish faces* in our team. It goes without saying that **how the practitioner feels about being in the natural environment can have a profound impact on how they interact with the children** playing outdoors. **If we value the outdoors, it undoubtedly shows in our practice.** What we all desire in ELC settings is practitioners who offer *freedom with guidance* (Froebel, 1826), which means adults pay particular attention to children's interests / perspectives, and be on hand to recognise, respect and respond to what the child's interests are, and, importantly what they are telling you about them. Engagement can, of course, take many forms.

## Outdoors: where time stands still

One of the most wonderful things about being in the **natural environment** with children is that time almost stands still; **the concept of time seems so different to being indoors** with children. Children can gather up clay from the forest floor and mould it, in contemplative thought, no one is rushing the child to wash their hands for lunch or to join story-time. Quite simply, children do not have to fit into the adults fixed routines, they can **wallow in their play** with little interruption from busy adults.

## “Outdoors just affords so many opportunities that being indoors could never provide”

**Lian Higgins from Cowgate shared how interactions with children can be more egalitarian and fulfilling outdoors:** “I remember being at Johnston Terrace (our little wild site beside the castle) with a group of children on a particularly windy day. The trolley was searched to find a roll of twine and makeshift kites were created, using the pages of a newspaper litter picked at the site. As one child attempted to send her kite soaring, she turned to Jane (our teacher) and said, **“What is wind?”** Jane, very wisely I thought, replied, “What a great question. What do you think it is?” The child pondered, watching her paper kite twitch and dance, before finally answering. **“I think it is strong air”**. “Yes, it's strong air.” I could not imagine that interaction occurring in a playroom. Certainly not with the same meaning and resonance. On another occasion, I observed a child, Lily, turning over a large rock. Lily discovered four snails underneath, to her absolute delight. Lily called me over to see. “Look, it's four snails,” she pointed and counted, “One, two, three, four. There's a mummy and daddy snail and two children snails.” Here, numeracy was being explored, counting, sorting and classification. Not through a prescribed game that aimed to promote numeracy, but through a child's intrinsically motivated exploration. Lily watched them in fascination as they began to move across the rock, no doubt trying to get back to the dark protection they'd been enjoying. Lily pointed to the shining trail being left and queried why they were “slimy”? **It enabled us to talk about what we already knew**

and what we could see, while making plans to check back in our library for more information.

## When we are outdoors, we can enjoy the magic of discovery

### Indoors, resources and experiences are often more predictable. But outdoors?

The environment is forever changing, weather, seasons, migrations and life cycles. The same space can offer different opportunities each time. Our children, perhaps just by being closer to nature, observe these changes, make comparisons to earlier visits, predict what might be found in future visits. In terms of making sense of the world, Mother Nature provides so many meaningful lessons for us all. Our children are challenged by the different topographies they encounter. Whether travelling up or down a hill, they are exploring movement and developing their physical capabilities in the local landscape. In our interactions with children in the outdoors, we must appreciate how important movement is to brain development and take great pains to support our children's freedom to challenge themselves. To enable the spinning, hanging, jumping, wading and swinging that slopes, trees and rivers provide". Here Lian has shown how the adult actively nurtures the child's relationship with nature. Lian shared the joyful engagement and deep focus of the children, as knowledge became aligned, and extended, as both children and adults were immersed in the immediate landscape and surroundings.

I have also found that adults also slow-down in the natural world. Therefore, the interactions between children and adults appear **more peaceful and less intense**, perhaps due to the lack of structure. The adult has time to 'observe, support and extend' children's learning in a way that removes other pressures from the daily routines typically embedded within early years settings, lunch time for example, can take place when children become hungry and not because it is 'lunch time' and practitioners have to get their lunch break.



**Finally, it is important to end this blog with trust.** Trusting the children in their resourcefulness, capabilities, and abilities. As adults interact with a child climbing a tree for example, it is important to accept that the child will climb as high as he/she feels able. Often barefooted, as one child said, '**The trees tell me where to put my feet**'. Adults must trust the child to manage their own risk. The adult can be on hand to discuss the experience, but not to direct, nor determine, not interfere!

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### Useful Links

**Bruce, T. Louis, S. and McCall, G. (2014), *Observing Young Children*. London: Sage.**

**Froebel, F. (1826), *The Education of Man*, translated by W.N. Hailman, New York, NY: Appleton.**

**Lilley, I. (1967), *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from his Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

**Realising the Ambition** <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/realising-the-ambition/>

**Education Scotland Early Level Play Pedagogy Toolkit**  
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/early-level-play-pedagogy-toolkit/>

**Cambridge Pedagogy Definition of**  
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pedagogy>

**Satchel: 'What is pedagogy?'** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcpwEoW1uY8>

**TES** <https://www.tes.com/news/what-is-pedagogy-definition#:~:text=What%20are%20the%20pedagogical%20approaches,%2C%20social%20constructivism%2C%20and%20liberationist.>