

The Power of Imagination

~ Helle Heckmann

The following is an excerpt from the new WECAN edition of Nøkken: A Garden for Children, which describes and celebrates a remarkable indoor-outdoor program for children ages one through seven in Copenhagen, Denmark. The healing power of nature is a theme throughout the book, and here Helle Heckmann connects it with some important issues around imagination, play, and toys.

Little Johanne, one year old, is standing, looking at a tree for about ten minutes. She raises her hand slowly. Out comes the forefinger. She touches the tree carefully, then a bit more courageously, then with the whole hand. She is caressing the tree.

Karoline (also one year old) has been watching Johanne. She walks over and strokes the tree, still looking at Johanne. Together they laugh. They run away from the tree, and return to stroke it again and again and again.

Undisturbed, they spend an hour with this experience. This is what childhood is all about: an identification with the surroundings. Letting the surroundings become a part of oneself. The unchangeable, the safe, the ever-existing. This, only living nature can give.

“Are you hungry?” The question is asked by Sarah, age three. We (including twenty-four children from one to six years old) are out on our daily walk to the graveyard. Autumn is rapidly approaching. The wind blows refreshingly. We are all dressed well: lots of woolen clothes underneath the raingear. Sarah is poking in some soil and mud. Skillfully, she picks up a lump and shapes it in her hand. She finds a leaf that fits exactly as a serving dish for the mud ball, a hint of pebbles and a feather completing the dish. “There you go”, she says seriously. “Would you like a drink with it?” “Yes, please” is the answer. “Magnus, could you help me for a minute?” Magnus is busy putting leaves on a stick. “Does it have to be right now?”

“Does it have to be right now?” Sarah repeats, looking at me expectantly. “No, I can wait until I’ve finished eating,” I answer. The children carry on with their doings, undisturbed.



Photos from Nøkken by Helle Heckmann (WECAN, second edition 2015)

The wolf is coming—perhaps

“Helle, Helle, come and have a look.” Asbjorn, five-and-a-half, comes running short of breath. “We’ve seen some tracks—I think they are from a wolf.” Immediately we run to look at the tracks. Several of the older children are on their knees studying the large tracks of some paw. They are eagerly chatting. Knowledge is communicated between the children. In the end they are silent and turn to me. What do I have to say? I now produce a wolf-tale, which is no more than it claims to be, and which does not comment on the tracks on the ground at all. The children are listening, their eyes are totally clear, their ears are pricked up, their mouths half open. Around us the wind is blowing, other children are climbing the trees or romping about, other adults are cutting wood, but we are far gone. When the story ends we return to the present. I leave their circle, and the children continue their exploring of nature.

What makes it so important that Sarah and Magnus can sit in a puddle underneath a tree in which the wind is blowing, and in deep concentration cook



dinner?
What do they shape when they shape the mud balls?

To me it is definitely themselves—their inner organs. Mud, soil, sand, water do not have definite shapes, they have the ability to constantly change. This is exactly

what the three-to-four-year-olds need: an identification with the surrounding world. Getting dirty is a sign of health.

The four elements of earth, water, air and fire are the basic elements that children are nourished by and grow from. No shaped toys—be they wood or plastic—can compete with these materials. The seriousness with which the children play, the deep concentration, speaks for itself, and shows how important this “playing” is. Nobody needs to fight about anything; there is plenty of mud for everybody.

Asbjorn’s discovery shows the five-to-six-year-old’s curiosity towards the surroundings. They wish to explore, to conquer the world, but at their own level. They discover something, investigate it, use it, leave it, and transform it.

The process is the most important. Imagination changes reality—reality is changed by imagination. Had I said, “it’s a dog track, obviously not a wolf track,” I would have spoiled the atmosphere and ruined their experience. I do not deny that it is a dog track, because I never lie. I enrich them by telling them about something that exists in the same world as they do, in the realm of imagination, on the edge of reality. Of course, the children know that it is not a wolf track, but this is not what they asked about. They see whether I am able to grasp their world, and get carried along, that I as an adult can nourish their imagination, that I can

create a soul meeting with them by telling them a story, and not a long scientific explanation.

The simple and the true

To meet the children where they are, on the child’s own ground—that is the art of education. To understand that the child’s play is most serious, because through playing, the child grasps life. Through playing, the child imitates the adult world. If the children do not have the possibility of imitating the basic functions of life through play they will have no possibility of understanding life. If Sarah does not experience her mother cooking (one of the most important actions in life), she will have difficulties copying this situation later in life. She will have no inner images of how to approach it. If Sarah is not allowed to imitate this where she is—that is, in the puddle—she will not adapt a basic sense experience of her imitation. The important action of working the inner out in an imitation of mum and dad (the surroundings) is what playing is all about.

Whatever is available serves as a toy, the simple unprocessed materials that can do anything your imagination wishes them to. The stick that is a horse is transformed into a sword and so on. The only limits are those of the imagination. The best toys are the tools used in the household or in crafts. The simple, the true. They do not fool the senses, and they have the qualities they promise the senses.

Most toys are total abundance, a way parents and grandparents can buy the child’s affection when they do not have time to spend with the child, or are bought for their own sake or needs.

The abundance of the children’s room must be every parent’s or child’s worst nightmare. I’m bored. I’ve got nothing to play with even though the shelves are full to the brim. Dust-collectors, a useless mess. Where is the love for the teddy bear, the doll, the car? The present that was given in love and did not drown in abundance is hard to find. The child does not need the toys; the toy factories need the child! ♦

Helle Heckmann is the founder of the Danish child care center Nøkken and the author of *Nøkken: A Garden for Children and Childhood’s Garden* (both published by WECAN). She is active in teacher training and mentoring around the world, and recently started the website *slowparenting.dk* to meet the needs of parents as well as care givers.