



A Froebelian approach

Re-engaging with nature

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Contents



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Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergartens and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood.

Froebel's ideas were considered revolutionary in the 1850s. The principles of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern mainstream early years educational practice.

Unity and connectedness

Everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk



Introduction

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) believed that everything in the universe is connected, and that “the more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature, and the wider world.” (Froebel Trust 2022)

One important way that children are helped to understand this complex web of connectivity is through their active engagement with the world that surrounds them, and especially with the natural world in which the connections and cycles of life are so evident.

Whilst we are always part of the Unity that Froebel envisaged, our awareness of our connection with nature is not always as rich as it could be.

This pamphlet explores why we should support children’s understanding of their connections with nature and ways we can do this. It considers the role of community, the adult-child relationship and suggests ideas for supporting children to be passionate about the natural world.

Now, more than ever, we need to help our children to be protectors of the natural world and pioneers of a renewed human relationship with our planet. Educators, parents and carers can encourage this from birth.



“In childhood there is a four-fold development of life - the child’s own inner life; his life in relation with parents and family; his life in relation, common to him and them, with a higher invisible Being; and, especially, his life in relation with nature, regarded as endowed with life like his own.”

Froebel 1912, p.50

The importance of feeling connected

“Regular access to nature through outdoor learning in schools enables children to develop their understanding and capacity to deal with the world around them.”

<https://www.treesforcities.org/stories/childrens-mental-health-week>

Many different fields of study have shown us how important it is for humans to respect and understand their connectedness in and to the natural world (Mayer and Frantz 2004). The benefits for humans are often discussed, including improvements to mental and physical health (Mental Health Foundation 2021).

A growing body of research argues for the positive impact of children engaging with nature.

Whilst playing outside, children experience the beneficial effects from sunlight and movement, which increase serotonin levels in the brain helping to regulate emotion and mood. Playing in the mud makes us happy as soil contains the bacteria mycobacterium vaccae and triggers a release of serotonin - ‘the happy hormone’.



Fig 1: Mud helps keep us healthy and happy

“Playing, learning and having fun outdoors helps to improve wellbeing and resilience, as well as physical and mental health and also provides children with the opportunity to develop a life-long appreciation of the natural world.”

(Macleod 2020)

Through regular experience in nature children learn about the cycle of life

Children who experience seasonal changes can see the cycle of life unfolding, especially when regularly visiting the same place.

For Froebel, Unity and Connectivity is a key principle and through following life cycles of plants and animals we can help children understand that everything is connected – our fruit waste becomes compost which we use to plant seeds, the seeds become plants and produce seeds which we save. Fungi grow on the rotten logs breaking them down into rich soil to nurture new trees, animals die and we bury them, later finding their bones in the earth.

Learning outside stimulates all the senses

There is so much for babies and children to observe, investigate and become involved with in the outdoors. They can hear bird song, feel textures in leaves and shells, notice raindrops on a pond, or how the light changes and how the wind moves things. All of which attune and enrich their senses, immersing them in the wonders of the natural world.

These **first-hand experiences** enable babies and children to gain knowledge for themselves and synthesise it into their own understanding of the world, which gives them the opportunity to share this knowledge with their care givers.

Children can learn the correct names of plants in their locality which helps them feel connected to place. The best way to do this is through sensory experiences – feeling, touching, smelling, tasting. These embody children's learning about the plants and make it meaningful.



Fig 2: Learning through our senses

Something as simple as sliding through mud can lead to a wealth of communication and descriptive language as children call upon their experiences in nature to ignite their imagination with fun words, rhymes, poetry, stories, or songs.

Being in nature provides a rich seam of opportunities for autonomous learning

There are so many open-ended resources in nature which absorb children in a world of imagination and activity. Playing in nature is intrinsically rewarding, with less need for external, adult-led motivation (Tovey 2017).

Being in nature provides all children with physical challenges appropriate for their age

Children can manoeuvre round obstacles, crawl over different surfaces, touch different textures, roll down slopes, negotiate tricky terrain, run, leap, climb, slide, drag heavy logs, push wheelbarrows, dig in the earth, use tools, or balance across fallen trees. They experience all sorts of weather, wind, rain, cold and heat. These opportunities and challenges help children become healthier, stronger and more agile.

Being in nature has a positive impact on children with additional needs

Being outdoors can help many children of any age with special educational needs by reducing levels of stress and anxiety. Engaging with nature is highly inclusive, enabling educators to support children's development of independence, listening skills, patience, and resilience (Brewer 2016).



Fig 3: The root ball of a fallen tree can become a 'tree root mountain' - a resource to dig into, climb on, explore, and imagine worlds

“...we want to cultivate that sense of connectedness so that it can become the emotional foundation for the more abstract ecological concept that everything is connected to everything else.”

Sobel 2013, p. 16

Immersion in nature enables children to develop meaningful connections with the world

Children can observe, describe, compare, measure, wonder and marvel at the world we live in. They become scientists, mathematicians, engineers, poets, philosophers, artists, explorers, archaeologists, and architects of their world.

Using the outdoor environment to raise awareness of connectedness

Outdoors is not the only place where nature exists but where Froebel believed children could more easily recognise and realise their connectedness. Settings may have a garden, be close to the park, beach, local wildlife area, a small woodland or copse, a local recreation ground, or a community allotment, orchard, or garden.

Regular visits to the same place in all seasons create a kind of home from home environment. Naming special places with your own invented names such as crocodile log, king pine, froggy mud, gives a connection to each place as well as reference points for mapping and talking about the outdoor environment when back inside.



(Above)
Fig 4: Drawing and painting from direct observation



(Left)
Fig 5: Understanding of forces and properties of materials in real life situations

Ways to develop our re-engagement with nature



Fig 6: First hand discovery

The magic of discovery

Young children are so much better than most adults at observing closely (Watts 2020). They are fascinated by the patterns on a skeleton leaf or the trail left by a slug, or the routine journey of ants at work.

We truly support children to re-engage with nature when we follow their lead and they discover it for themselves, witnessing their excitement and sharing the joy they feel when we observe the magic of nature's effect on them.

“A little boy hardly six years old can tell you things about the wonderful organism and movement of a beetle which you have never noticed before.”

Froebel 1912, p.101



Fig 7: The magic of nature

Spirituality in nature

When we visit parks, natural spaces or work in the garden it is important that we share children's awe and wonder for the natural world, so that we embody a love of nature and respect for the spirit of life in all living things. The children in our care will then take our lead and feel enabled to experience this feeling of oneness with life.



Fig 8: Sharing discoveries

“Children feel themselves drawn towards the spiritual in nature, but unless these yearnings be welcomed and strengthened by their elders, either they die away or they lose their confidence in those whom they should respect.”

Froebel 1912, p.101



Fig 9: Sharing Circle

Developing awe and wonder by reflecting together

As educators, we can lead by example in sharing our own awe and wonder for all life. Drawing children's attention to the beauty and wonder in the world around them can foster children's connection with nature. After a session engaging with nature, we can come together and share things we are grateful for or amazed by. This kind of collaborative reflection can in turn develop an appreciation of the world around us and our part in the Unity of all things.

Visiting the same place in all seasons

By visiting the same place all year round, children can see a tree change through the seasons and experience the buds, flowers, leaves and seeds which connects them in a deeper way as they learn its name and all its different faces.

When children experience changes in the seasons and the weather, they gain knowledge and develop a sense of belonging which helps them to connect more deeply to their place in the world.

Fig 10: Playing with autumn leaves



Fig 11: Making nests from grasses and eggs from clay

Fig 12: Mandalas can be made from found leaves and flowers



“For a deeply meaningful learning experience we need to follow the seasons and understand the way they influence our own rhythms, feelings, thoughts, actions and, more importantly, relationships in the world.”

Cree cited in Casey, Richardson and d’Ascoli 2019, p. 6

Making connections

Educators can help children understand that we are part of the universe, not separate from it, how we are connected to everything. Like a spider's web, touch one part and everything moves. All beings are interdependent, and every form of life has value in its own right.

Froebel believed that "every phenomena in its essence is unique and yet part of the whole, all emanating from one source and returning to this source." (Liebschner 1992, p. 8.)

Educators can help children understand the web of life and the reciprocal relationships in the natural world, for example trees can feed each other nutrients and send signals about oncoming storms. A useful resource to share with children is *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?: Discovering the Hidden Life of the Forest* (Wohlleben 2020).



Fig 13: Web of connection

"We moved from being a part of nature to being apart from nature."

Attenborough 2020, p.125

Exploring the elements

Froebel said that children should experience nature “in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour.” (Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.148).

Enabling children to explore and fully experience the elements – earth, water, air, fire – helps them in a myriad of ways. Playing with mud can lead to questions of where clay comes from and important tactile experiences of how it feels and ways to change its consistency. Making dams in streams helps children understand how water flows and how its power can be harnessed. Children love the excitement of running in the wind, and we can make the link to wind energy. Sitting round a fire cooking or singing camp fire songs creates a strong feeling of belonging and mesmerises children and also provides opportunities to learn how heat changes properties of materials.

Barriers to participation

Where children live, poverty, and life experiences can create barriers to participation. If adults had limited experience of the outdoors themselves as a child, they may fear taking children out. Parks may seem unsafe and unfriendly. Families living with disability may experience multiple barriers. For some children from households with fewer opportunities to visit green spaces, engaging in nature may be challenging. Children might not want to get dirty, wet, or too hot or cold in the outdoors. Parents and carers may worry their children’s clothes might get ruined. Some families and carers may find accessing nature too costly, or difficult.

Breaking down barriers

Identifying barriers and making adjustments as well as being supportive can go a long way to overcoming obstacles. Creating links between children’s home experiences and the setting provides opportunities for families and carers to take part in home study projects involving nature exploration or growing plants. Inviting families, carers, and communities on walks and outings in nature, builds confidence, sharing enjoyment in being in nature together. If possible, provide warm and waterproof clothing for all children.

Educators can seek out inclusive literature connected to nature, with characters from diverse backgrounds in different natural environments such as *The Extraordinary Gardener* (Broughton 2020), *Green Green: A Community Gardening Story*, (Lamba and Lamba 2017) and *Are Your Stars Like My Stars?* (Helakoski 2020).

Children can begin by observing games and activities in the outdoors if they are reluctant to join in, building



Fig 14: Walking along a stream bed

up their confidence. We can help children bridge the transition from indoors to outdoors by providing natural and messy materials such as clay, to play with indoors, to encourage getting messy in a ‘safe’ environment.

Ideas for inspiration

Create opportunities for plenty of 'free play' time outside valuing children's ideas and exploration of the natural world around them.

Hiding games help children pay close attention to what is happening around them.

Let babies crawl around and touch different plants, to explore their environment intimately. Educators need to check for hazards first, thinking about poisonous plants or plants which are unpleasant to touch e.g. nettles or brambles.

Children like to pretend to be different animals, imitating their movement.

Tell stories to engage children's imagination and inspire them to create responses to nature through their own stories, songs, music, art and craft.

Children can make up songs about the things we notice around us. Educators can help them by suggesting songs we know but changing the words.

Educators can encourage sensory awareness by creating a culture of sharing what children have noticed.

Blindfolds are a great resource for focussing on listening to sounds or feeling natural objects and for trust activities, where one child wears a blindfold and another leads them (Casey, Richardson and d'Ascoli 2019).



Fig 15: Making bees from natural materials



Fig 18: Exploring the possibilities of clay



Fig 16: Using our senses while wearing a blindfold



Fig 17: Paint colour samples can be used in a colour matching game



Fig 19: Making a journey stick - tying natural items found on a walk to a stick as an aid to memory or to make a story about on return to the setting

Children can wallow in first-hand experiences - how it feels to run in the wind or be out in the pouring rain.

Being buried in leaves helps children feel connected with nature.

Build giant nests with children, becoming chicks and hatching out into fledglings and flying around the woods, garden or park.

Children can play with the wind by making flags, windmills and wands with ribbons.

Towns and cities can be rich in places to forage, not just the countryside. Educators can forage plants with children, helping them to become aware that some plants, mushrooms and berries can be eaten and others definitely cannot.

Children can make wild garlic pesto, pine needle tea, roasted sweet chestnuts, nettle soup as well as herbal treatments such as yarrow and plantain ointment, elderberry syrup and elderflower cordial. With help from educators, children can create a wild garden at the setting and plant some of these medicinal and edible plants to harvest. (See [resources](#) on p.31).

Educators can encourage children to sit and listen to the sounds around them, noticing movement or smells, which helps children develop listening skills and sensitivity to the natural world.



Fig 20: Gathering blackberries to use in cooking

Encouraging wildlife

Encourage children to observe and nurture the wildlife they share the garden with. Night watch cameras can be an amazing resource for children to see what emerges when they are not there.

It is also good to leave or create wild spaces where nettles and dandelions can grow freely. Butterflies lay their eggs on nettles and dandelions are a huge benefit to pollinators, especially bees. Introduce children to plants which encourage wildlife and pollinators such as native wildflowers, buddleia for the butterflies, and lavender for bees. Let sunflowers, teasel, and artichokes go to seed for the birds to eat. Providing natural food sources is an alternative to putting out bird food as feeding stations can spread diseases if not regularly cleaned.

Practise 'no mow May' or other re-wilding initiatives which create conditions for nature to thrive, such as leaving piles of sticks and wild areas which increase biodiversity in your setting.



Fig 21: Butterfly in wild area

Ideas for Inspiration

Educators in early years settings can work with children to plant child-friendly edible flowers and foliage that children can eat, such as chives, coriander, fennel, oregano, calendula, dandelions and clover.

Making bird feeders and hides can help children to focus on birds and inspire them to take time to watch them and listen to them. Using birdsong recordings, CDs or books helps children to learn their different songs. With just a little encouragement children will become experts!



Fig 22: Fennel is decorative and edible



Fig 23: Making animal homes such as bug hotels and hedgehog boxes

Leave rotting wood and piles of leaves and weeds for wildlife to find a home.

Finding minibeasts under stones and logs sparks interest in wildlife habitats and identification.



Fig 24: Using strong gardening tools of appropriate size



Fig 25: Plant seeds, nurture plants, harvest and collect the seeds to plant again next spring

Ideas for Inspiration

For gardening children need robust child-sized spades and forks, trowels, watering cans and wheelbarrows.

Gardening can be done in the garden, allotments, or in containers such as bags, boxes, baskets, wellies and recycled plastic planters. Raised beds offer good accessibility for groups. If you buy compost check that it is 'Peat Free'.

Ask children to set up story gardens choosing plants to represent the story, e.g. 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. Settings with no outside gardening space can create miniature story gardens in trays or boxes.

Provide "take home" projects such as growing plants in pots – especially activities that don't require a garden at home.

Local seed swaps can give access to a wide range of seeds for very little cost.

Eat the produce grown in the garden from seeds children have sown and plants they have nurtured, documenting all the processes.

Try growing herbs for the children to make herb tea, introducing new flavours. Children can use the herbs in their play to make potions and concoctions.

Educators can help children understand we need bees and insects to pollinate our plants and give the children time to watch them at work and investigate them.

Educators can involve children in consuming our produce in diverse ways – use a dehydrator to make kale into crisps, make juice from apples using a fruit press which can be a community resource.

Children can help to take care of the garden at the setting – using small wheelbarrows to clear up leaves or transport bark for maintaining bark chip paths. They can help with watering using child-sized watering cans.



Fig 26: Harvesting potatoes



Fig 27: Making apple juice

Gardening

Gardening is not about the size of the plot but more about using what you have, to develop children's understanding of plants and their properties. To explore their smell, how they feel to the touch, how they taste. It provides opportunities to investigate how our waste becomes compost and bigger issues such as soil health. The care of creatures and plants can give children a sense of responsibility as well as a sense of wonder.

“The care of plants will... also satisfy the child's desire to watch living creatures, for they will see birds and butterflies and beetles coming nearby.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.129

Children can notice the work that worms do in the garden, feeding on decayed matter in the compost and improving soil structure in the vegetable beds. They can also learn how worms are food for the birds, especially when birds come to watch us garden. This can be even more visible if a transparent wormery is used and a compost area or wormery is a wonderful opportunity to recycle food waste from the setting. Positioning is important to think about to deter unwanted wildlife like rats. Rotating composters are good to keep waste off the ground.



Fig 28: Gardening gives children an immersive experience of soil – they can see what lives in it and what it feels like

“The child who has cared for another living thing... is more easily led to care for his own life.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.129

Involving parents, carers and the wider community



Fig 29: Families working together at NECA Community Garden, South Shields

Froebel believed in the importance of the family in educating children and realised that some parents and carers need to be supported by their setting. Involving parents, carers, extended family and the local community, continues Froebel's tradition of nurturing a child's connection to their community.

Helping to care for community gardens or plots in local allotments can encourage parents and carers to enjoy the outdoors and enables children to share their knowledge, learn alongside knowledgeable adults and everyone can share in the produce.

Parents and carers can be invited on walks to the local park and parents' forest school days, so children can share the places and activities that give them so much joy, strengthening parents' and carers' understanding.

Some settings create a tradition of Festivals throughout the year, such as the coming of Spring or the collection of the Harvest that the community can participate in and look forward to. This helps to deepen the connection with nature and the rhythm of the seasons.

"Festivals can unify people to become aware of the beauty and harmony in the countryside and how we are connected to the whole."

Liebschner 1992, p.56



Fig 30: Harvest Festival celebrations

Ideas for inspiration

Plant trees, hedges, or orchards with organisations such as Trees for Cities, Children's Forest, and Woodland Trust.

Invite parents and carers to help with gardening workshops, working parties in the school grounds, maintaining window boxes and pots or using their skills to help children make bird feeders or nesting boxes.

Sing seasonal and nature inspired songs that everyone in the setting learns and repeats in each season. Children can share them with their families and carers, promoting cohesion and togetherness.



Fig 31: Children's Forest planting event



Fig 32: Making bird feeders out of pine cones

Role of the adult



Fig 33: The educator's role can be seen as encouraging a love of nature and sharing the joy of discovery

Froebel regarded nature as a chief force in a child's life and advocated that we should make the connection to nature as full and rich as possible.

Children love to share what they have discovered in the moment, observed on the way to the setting, or seen at home. Nurturing this excitement or sadness for creatures they have come across will foster stewardship and care for the environment and empathy with nature.

“Children and adults should go out together, and together strive to feel in their hearts the spirit and life of nature.”

Froebel 1912, p.101

Learning from children

Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct.

We can learn so much from following the lead from children, enabling them to be in nature and to get to know things on their own terms, to support them by being present with them when they make their discoveries and holding those discoveries in high esteem.



Fig 34: Following children's interests

“My life and work with my pupils was at first very limited, for it consisted merely in living, going out and walking in the open air. As yet I did not bring the simple life of Nature within the sphere of education – it was my pupils who taught me that.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.37

Knowledgeable, well-trained and keen observers

Educators can encourage careful observation, and ask questions such as, “What does it feel and smell like?”, “What does this remind you of?” and help children make connections to plant families, such as “this has five petals just like the apple blossom”, or “this one smells a bit like mint”. Educators can learn alongside children sharing their curiosity, observations and love of nature.

Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education. Educators need to give children the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and give them space for sharing their observations and feelings. We can recount the story of the day together to reflect and integrate their learning back to the whole. Creating a shared diary of activities and experience in the outdoors can be a lovely record to reflect upon.

“Dispositions towards the natural world are formed early in life and Froebel argued that if adults show indifference or disdain for nature, the child’s seed of knowledge and interest which is just beginning to germinate can be crushed. It is therefore important that those who work with young children should be knowledgeable and keen observers of both children and nature.”

Tovey 2022, p.5



Fig 35: If educators connect to the awe and wonder of nature, nurturing a love of the natural world in the children they work with, one inspiring educator could light the spark of a lifelong passion for nature

“Teachers should regularly take their classes out of doors – not driving them out like a flock of sheep or leading them as if they were a company of soldiers, but walking with them...and making them more familiar with whatever Nature or the season offers.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.146

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”

Carson 1998, p.55

Ideas for Inspiration

Encourage sensory play with soil, sand, stones, water, fallen leaves, long grass, ice or snow.

Provide opportunities for children to lie down under a tree in the park in the sunshine, watch the leaves fall, listen to the birdsong. Babies enjoy watching sunshine dancing in the leaves while they are put down for a nap.

Add depth and breadth to the children's experience by introducing a poem to inspire them or a song to help focus on a tree or season.

Share stories about animals and nature to consolidate experience or excite them to make a home for an animal or look and listen out for birds.

Encourage children to make up plays connected to the season.



(Above)
Fig 36: Use all available natural materials and experiences in every season



(Left)
Fig 37: Forest School diary of shared activities



Fig 38: Using magnifying glasses to observe closely

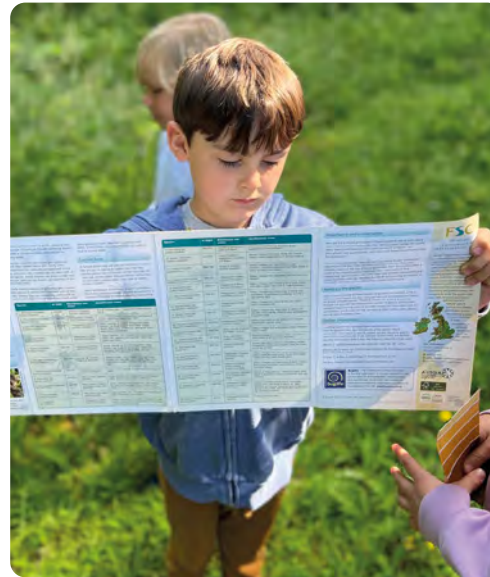


Fig 39: Share ID charts and look up unknown plants, trees, and insects



Fig 40: Jewellers' loupes (eye pieces used by jewellers) are helpful tools

Ask children to photograph plants and look them up back at the setting. ID charts and books such as the Clue series or Google lens are useful identification tools.

Help children learn the correct names of plants, parts of plants and categorise them into families by careful observation. This also encourages language skills and getting to know the plants in your locality. Jewellers' loupes (eye pieces used by jewellers) and magnifying glasses are helpful tools here.

Provide natural resources such as sheep's wool, pine cones and clay as a springboard to creating characters for storytelling.

Risk and challenge

“Froebel recognised the value of challenging and adventurous play, seeing the importance of the benefits rather than focusing on the risk. He highlighted that children who experienced challenges were actually safer than those over-protected from risk.”

Adapted from Tovey 2017, p.10



Fig 41:
Children who are given opportunities for taking risks safely become more adept at managing risky situations in later life

In nature there are possibilities for extreme weather – high winds, heavy rain, snowstorms, hot sun – that impact on the environment and educators need to be aware of their effect on children and assess if there is any risk.

Some activities can be challenging – they might involve physically demanding or risky tasks, be cold, messy and even scary but this can develop resilience, physically, cognitively and emotionally.

“To climb a new tree is...
to discover a new world;
...we should not be so
insensitive to call out,
'Come down you will fall'.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.126

Children often want to take risks which challenge adults, like climbing high in a tree. Appropriate risk assessments should be in place, without adults being risk averse. Thinking through risks with the children in advance is a first step to assessing their own risks independently.

Taking challenges outdoors and feeling proud of their achievements can bolster a child's willingness to 'have a go' in other areas of learning and develop problem-solving skills. Research has shown that a child who has not taken risks may be more prone to problems such as obesity, mental health concerns, lack of independence, and a decrease in learning, perception and judgment skills (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet 2012).

“A child who plays well of their own accord, quietly persisting until they are tired out, will develop as an efficient and determined person, ever ready to make sacrifices for the good of themselves and others.”

Froebel (1826) in Lilley 1967, p.83-84

Freedom with guidance

Children in a Froebelian setting use real tools which are much stronger and effective in getting jobs done and give more opportunity for success. They need to be shown how to use tools for cutting, peeling, whittling and fire lighting, so educators should model their correct use and draw attention to hazards.

Educators need to learn the skills themselves in order to model them. Educators should also ensure First Aid kits and measures for fire control are in place. When children understand why the health and safety measures are in place, they are more likely to follow them and can be given freedom to use tools safely and trusted to look after them. Freedom with guidance in action.



Fig 42: Using a fire striker

Climate action – caretaking our land and practising sustainability

Children are increasingly becoming aware of the impact of human life on the planet and are surrounded by references to climate change.

“Learners need to know the truth about climate change... They must also be given the hope that they can be agents of change, through hands-on activity.” (Department for Education 2022).

Educators can give children hope that they can make a positive contribution to the natural world by helping them to make a difference in small ways, such as looking after a wild patch in the garden for birds and bees, by involving them in positive solutions to climate change such as tree planting.

Educators can make links to the United Nations sustainable development goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).



Fig 43: “If children are given the opportunity to get to know their own small garden in deep ways, they are much more likely to want to help shape a sustainable future” Tovey 2017, p.65

“If we want children to flourish, to be truly empowered, we must first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.”

Sobel 2013, p.47



Fig 44: Exploring natural materials in a limited space

Developing a love of the natural world

The first step to encouraging children to be compassionate and nurturing of their environment is immersion in green spaces. Whether that is visiting the local park or woodland or gardening in tiny city gardens, children will develop an affinity with what they know and care about.

Settings with limited access to the outdoors can bring in natural materials – stones, twigs, tree stumps, shells, acorns, seeds to use as loose parts.

Sustainable thinking can be encouraged by talking about our ancestors and the future generations of our world which include plants and animals as well as humans. We want to help children to make choices for the whole planet, not just for themselves.

We can encourage children to be mindful of not taking too much when we are harvesting from nature, to leave enough for the birds and animals and the regeneration of the plant species.

Caretaking our land

Children can be encouraged to look after the places we visit by taking only what they need and leaving no trace.

If we use a forest school site, we should be mindful of rotating the fire site, extinguishing fires and making sure not to leave litter.



“Every single person on this earth has the power to change the world”

Stevens & Rewse 2021, p.59

Fig 45: Cooking dampers in the woods

Making a difference

Froebelian educators encourage children to become problem-solvers, enabling them to think critically and creatively and to develop innovative ideas, becoming ambassadors for the planet and ultimately to make a difference. Ten-year-old Shalvi Shakshi from Fiji argues that:

Ideas for inspiration

Source nature related and climate change books which have positive role models for all children, such as *Climate Action* by Stevens and Rewse (2021) and *The Girl Who Planted Trees* by Hart and Suvorova (2022).

Grow for a purpose and make use of everything. Have a no waste policy in the garden, recycle the waste you produce through composting, upcycling and recycling.

Join in with plastic reduction initiatives and make your own plant pots from newspaper and recycled materials.

Introduce drought resistant gardening, mulching, choosing plants to suit the environment and using water butts to collect rainwater (<https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-design/drought-resistant-gardening>).

Hold eco fairs at the setting, where you invite local growers from inner city farms, sustainable businesses, and parents with expertise to introduce other parents, carers and the wider community to sustainability initiatives.

Educators can involve the setting with local citizen science surveys, such as the Big Garden Birdwatch or surveys run by the Wildlife Trusts or local universities.



Fig 46: Children can make compost to show how food waste becomes soil to grow more food

Final thoughts

Regularly providing time and space for children to re-engage with nature opens up a world of creativity, imagination, adventure, exploration, investigation, and physical challenge improving children's mental health and vitality.

The natural world is full of opportunities for children to understand that they are connected to everything and provides boundless possibilities for nurturing creative thinking, problem solving and for developing resilience.

If we enable the children in our care to foster a healthy vibrant relationship with the natural world, we give them the keys to become the future guardians of the Earth.



Fig 47: Fostering a healthy relationship with the natural world

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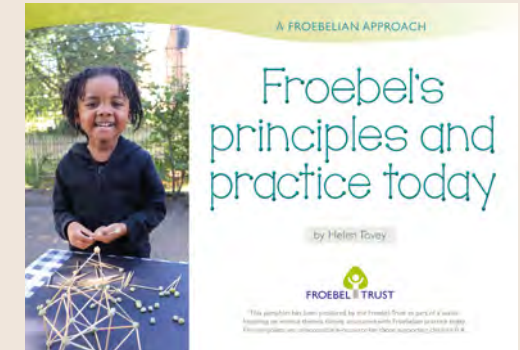
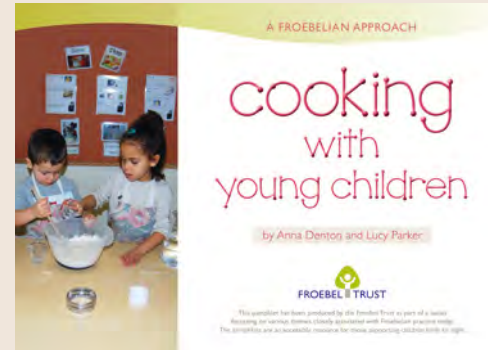
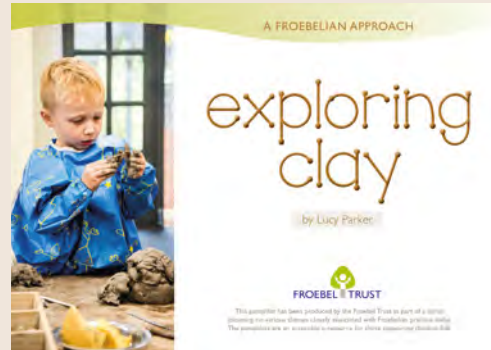
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