



Children in Scotland
every child - every childhood



Key points: Children in Europe conference with Children in Scotland and Fife Council

16 September 2010, Markinch, Fife

Playing Outside: Play, nature and services for young children

*The conference explored and debated some of the issues raised by Children in Europe's current issue, **Playing outside: why does it matter?** A key focus was whether national government should take a stronger lead in ensuring access to and more effective use of outdoor space: also the implications of more outdoor play for the early years workforce; and the need to consider not just the provision of outdoor space but how it is used.*

Speakers included Frederika Martenssen, Professor of Environmental Psychology at Sweden Agricultural University; Anna Pelloni, Pedagogical Coordinator, Emilia Romagna, Italy; Claus Jensen, Secretary General, BUPL, Denmark; Ken McIntosh, Shadow Minister for Schools; Susan Deacon, Early Years Champion, Scottish Government; Ronnie Hill, Director of Children's Services Regulation at The Care Commission; and Kenneth Greer, Executive Director of Education for Fife Council.

Practitioners from Italy, Denmark, Norway and Wales joined Scottish practitioners such as Cathy Bache, of the Secret Garden Outdoor Nursery in Fife, and Liz Mahindru, of Marylee Primary School in Glasgow, to look at how outdoor space can be used more effectively to boost children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Among the key points raised

- **Outdoor space standards:** Outdoor space standards in services for young children in European countries are listed on p.13 of the latest Children in Europe magazine – UK is the lowest or among the lowest amount of space required per child, in countries where regulations exist.
- **Not just provision of space, but how it is used:** *Fredrika Martensson*, Professor of Environmental Psychology at Sweden Agricultural University in Alnarp, spoke of the idea of 'play nodes', where a single outdoor play space can become the location for many different kinds of games and activities. *Claus Jensen*, of the Danish Association of Pedagogues, gave the illustration of a school in Norway where an international-size football pitch was redesigned to become a multi-centre outdoor space with slopes, trees, tunnels, shelters and a garden area – so the same amount of space provided a multi-activity play base for a range of children and ages, rather than a single- or limited-activity space for a relatively smaller number of participants.
- **Clever use of the outdoors offers meeting points for services with families and community:** *Anna Pelloni*, a Pedagogical Coordinator in Emilia Romagna in Italy, described toddler and family walks.

- **Statutory duty on play:** The question of whether there should be a statutory duty on play was raised by Assistant Director of Play Wales *Marianne Mannello*, who drew attention to the duty on this which exists in Wales. Some felt a statutory duty would be helpful in protecting outdoor and play initiatives in a time of budget considerations but others felt higher priority should be given to statutory entitlements for early years services.
- **Statutory entitlements and targets for expanding services for early years services:** It was felt these could support the implementation of the Early Years Framework but that more discussion is needed on what entitlements and targets should be and what should be included.
- **Workforce:** Highlighted the need for a flexible, qualified workforce to make the most of the opportunities: the conference heard about the particular role played by pedagogues in Norway and Denmark and the relevance of this model in ensuring all services have staff who are better able to make more use of outdoor environments. There was widespread agreement that greater workforce flexibility would help take forward an outdoor learning and play agenda.
- **Not either/or:** Being outdoors can be play AND learning simultaneously. It doesn't have to be viewed as either/or. Making more effective use of the outdoors can make learning more relevant to real life, as well as providing children and young people with important physical and social skills. Ordinary lessons can be held outside, not only those with a special focus: *Vegard Dybvik*, of educational training body RKK in Norway, showed a scientific laboratory in a tent.
- **Curriculum for Excellence:** The focus on making connections and building relevance into learning fits very readily into the development of the outdoors as a place for both learning and play. Fife Council's Natural Connections programme highlighted how team-building and problem-solving tasks can be included in organising outdoor activities, placing learning in context and making it relevant to real life.
- **Making more effective use of available resources, whatever they may be:** When resources are in short supply the outdoors environment is universally available and almost universally free of charge. A shift in thinking and practice to support outdoor learning would lead to a range of benefits in terms of relevance, cost-effective educational development and – importantly – children's confidence and wellbeing.
- **Encouragement to take the first step:** Speakers highlighted the need to get over the feeling "we can't do this because..." *Liz Mahindru* of Marylee Primary School in Glasgow spoke of their work in a built-up area of Glasgow, building "an urban jungle" with the participation of children and parents to make outdoor play more possible and enriching; and Fife Council's Area Education Officer *Carrie Lindsay* encouraged people to think positively about outdoor play and do what they could in their own settings: "Different things can be done according to the environment you have. In Fife we focus on what we can do rather than what we can't, so you are able to make a start."