



PRESS RELEASE  
Embargoed Monday, April 25, 2005

## **Space to play, room to grow**

Ensuring that children have access to enough outdoor space so they can explore nature will help ensure optimum brain development, according to a leading professor of neurophysiology. Yet a European study has revealed a general trend away from legal prescriptions that define how much outdoor space and access to nature early childcare services should provide.

In the latest edition of *Children in Europe*, Matti Bergstrom, emeritus professor of neurophysiology at the University of Helsinki, says that until the age of six or seven, the area of the brain that processes logic and order has not fully developed and the child depends more on their inner feelings and what is important for them. Children must have access to space and freedom in order to play out their fantasies, which are vital in helping them to develop ideas, values and understand the world around them. They are the food for brain development and the raw material for creativity.

Professor Bergstrom said: “Spaces that have four walls like the classrooms in many of our schools are not what is required. Why do children seek out the untidy or incomplete, ruined buildings or building sites? Buildings that offer young children the chance to re-order, complete or knock down like sandcastles on a beach, provide their brains with room to grow and mature.

“The freedom and space that nature offers can provide inspiration for designing indoor spaces too. When we observe children’s behaviour in this natural environment we can see them observing every small detail and absorbing everything around them. In nature they find a reflection of their own world.”

A study of the regulations relating to outdoor space in children’s services, carried out by Children in Europe, revealed that many countries have no requirement or recommendation that would ensure every child attending an early years service, would have access to the outdoor space they need.

In Scotland, requirements for nurseries based in schools state that every child should have access to at least 9.3 square metres of outdoor space, but pre-school services outwith schools, including private nurseries, are not covered by such regulation.

In England, nine square metres used to be a requirement for outdoor space for local authority nursery education, but this is no longer specified.

Bronwen Cohen, guest editor of Children in Europe, which produced the study, and chief executive of Children in Scotland, said: “The expansion in services for young children means that they are spending more time in organised child care of some kind. We are also witnessing a decline in access to safe public space, such as town squares or open countryside. With less freedom to roam and more time spent in organised space it is vitally important that we ensure children have access to the outdoors and the opportunity for freedom to explore. Nature can provide the best environment for a child’s play.

“It is a worrying trend that there are now fewer requirements for outdoor space in the UK than previously. There is an opportunity for Scotland to improve provision for young children nationwide by extending regulations that already exist for those attending nurseries based in schools.”

## Notes for editors:

- A table detailing space standards for young children in selected European regions and countries is available in PDF format. The comparison of European standards is not comprehensive, but is designed to provide a snapshot of legal requirements and trends.
- Dr Bronwen Cohen, guest editor of issue 8 and Peter Moss, editor, are available for comment.
- Children in Europe is a magazine for everyone working with and for children from 0-10 and those interested in children's issues. It is published simultaneously in eight languages by a network of national magazines. It aims to provide a forum for ideas, practice and information and contribute to the development of policy and practice at European and national levels. It is published in the UK by Children in Scotland, the national agency for voluntary, statutory, and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Children in Europe Issue 8 - *Making space: architecture and design for young children* can be ordered from Moira Cameron on 0131 2222410 or visit [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/cie](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/cie)
- For all press enquiries contact Nicola Pay, communications officer, Children in Scotland on 0131 2222419.