Transcript: Natural Play - The Berlin story

**Alastair Seaman, Grounds for Learning:** Well the background to the Berlin Story is that back in the 80s the schools were experiencing really significant volumes of playground violence and tried to get to the bottom of what was behind that and one of the things they came to believe was that the environment the children were in had a big impact there. So what they did was to kind of re-imagine what a playground could be like and go back to first principles.

The first thing you notice in the Berlin schools is a very different approach, nature is allowed to come up through the cracks. It is something that is not just tolerated but celebrated and so nettles grow in peaceful co-existence with children and I think there is a risk in Scotland that we kind of manage and tidy nature out of children’s lives, I mean there’s a sense in Berlin that they needed to do the opposite, they needed to give the children more opportunities to engage with nature and you notice a very different attitude to risk, there’s definitely a sense that risk and adventurous play is something that’s important.

And so you see that in a number of ways, you see fall heights commonly of six feet, boulders that children can scramble on to jump off. And what they said was that, yes it does lead to more accidents but it leads to more minor accidents, yes more scrapes and bumps and bruises, but serious injuries far fewer. And there’s a lot of research that says when children and presented with more obviously risky scenarios, they change their behaviour, they are not going to monkey about in the same way when they recognise that there’s a bigger fall height.

One of the things that we noticed was that a lot of the children were out of sight for the whole of playtime, something that generally doesn’t happen in Scotland, we feel that playground supervision means you need to be able to see children all the time. In Berlin there was an opposite philosophy that actually what children needed during break time was to escape the classroom and escape the adults and that was a very healthy thing.

**On Screen:** What is the impact of all this on behaviour?

**Alastair Seaman:** They were so involved in the play that they were undertaking that behaviour improved radically and that was the stimulus to the original re-design was behaviour and it did very significantly improve. When you say the word ‘playground’ you tend to think of play equipment and yet how many Scottish school playgrounds have any form of significant play equipment? In Berlin, again a common aspect of play provision there. The play equipment was always rustic, it was always quite adventurous but they were designed to be something that would present the children with challenge and with risk.

In Scotland, when it rains, we have what we call ‘wet play’ which is almost a contradiction in terms, it means the children don’t get wet and they don’t really play, they have to stay indoors. In Berlin, they were thinking a lot about to make rain a playful kind of thing and a common example of that was creating little kind of stream rivulets through school grounds so that when it rained you had little temporary streams forming or another school where they drained the rain water into splash pools that were designed for kids to jump up and down in and splash around in.

One of the challenges with Berlin of course was you couldn’t escape the city very easily to go to the countryside and so there was a lot of emphasis on brining the countryside to the city and so these playgrounds became, and still are today, a very important community asset. After the school bell rings, they become effectively a community park space so adults who came to collect their children would commonly stay there for quite a while after school, talk to each other, catch up on the local gossip, let their children play.

Another key community aspect of playgrounds in Berlin is community involvement in looking after these spaces and it’s common for the parents to organise work days in the school playgrounds but what we really loved was the way that turned out to be a fun social event so people would bring their picnics, someone would organise a barbecue and the whole things had a fantastic kind of community enriching feel to it.

I think the message is that there is definitely another way and that another way is possible, this isn’t just something that we can do in theory, the Berlin schools demonstrate it’s a practical possibility.

We’re not saying that we have to copy everything that they’ve done in Berlin, I think we can find Scottish ways of doing some of that so it’s not necessarily about copying everything but what’s clear is that we can do better, we can do more. But if we’re going to do better and do more, it’s going to need all of us to get involved in that.

At a national level, Grounds for Learning is campaigning and working on resourcing and supporting but actually we need the support of teachers, of parents, of practitioners, of the sorts of people that are watching this film if we’re going to make this happen, and we encourage everyone to think about what they could do.

We strongly encourage you to send a link to this film to people you think should see it, we’ve got a report that covers much of this ground on our website, we’d like you to pass that on to parents, to teachers, to your head teacher, to your management team, to your councillor, to everyone that you think might have an influence in Scottish school playgrounds. There’s a big prize here which is really the way our children grow up and the quality of experiences that they have and with your support, working together, we think we can get there, we can make it.

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