



Children and nearby nature: A nationwide parental survey from Norway



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the availability of and use of nearby outdoor spaces along a nature continuum by Norwegian children. We carried out a nationwide survey of 3 160 parents with children aged 6–12 years, using a comprehensive web-based questionnaire. Results from the survey show forests are the most common outdoor space in residential areas in Norway. In all, 97% of parents state that their children have access to forests within walking or cycling distance from home. When it comes to suitability for play, 88% state that their child, in general, has good or very good opportunities for play in nearby nature. A key finding of the study is that nearby nature spaces have a much more sporadic daily use by children than outdoor developed spaces such as playgrounds and sports facilities. The paper discusses reasons for this observed pattern focusing on the play environment and opportunities for children to play in nature. A central question for future research is why children merely play in their own garden and not in the forest.

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1. Introduction

Nature and outdoor recreation are an important part of Norwegian culture. We are said to be “born with skis on”, and children playing in nature areas in all sorts of weather is seen as an important and natural part of childhood (Borge et al., 2003). The concept of a “robust nature child” as an important part of the upbringing of children is expressed by Norwegian researchers (Gullestad 1992, 1997; Nilsen 2008). Whether these constructions about Norwegian culture, landscape and childhood are a myth or not is discussed by several authors (e.g. Witoszek, 1998; Syse, 2013), but studies indicate that the use and importance of the natural environment for children are less common in their daily life today than it was only a few decades ago (e.g. Gaster 1991; Lidèn, 2003; Karsten, 2005; Skår and Krogh, 2009; Sandberg, 2012; Mjaavatt, 2013). A recent review of children and outdoor play in Norway (Tordsson and Vale, 2013) stated that there is a lack of knowledge about the availability of and access to play environments for children, frequency of use and the kind of activities children undertake outside in their neighborhood.

Children in Norway should have good opportunities to play in nature, and this study has relevance to the concept of Fennoscandia. The principle of common access rights to all uncultivated lands (Outdoor Recreation Act, 1957), secures access to most nature areas where children live. Nature areas such as mountains, forests, mires and lakes cover large tracts of the landscape, and in a European context cities and villages in Norway are surrounded by nature, and in particular forests (Gundersen et al., 2006). A similar situation occurs in Sweden and Finland (Hedblom and Söderström, 2008; Gundersen et al., 2005), regarding extensive availability and easy access to nature and therefore we talk about a Fennoscandia phenomenon. Bell et al. (2005) placed Fennoscandia in what they called the northern forest culture, compared with the situation further south in Europe where there are smaller tracts of nature areas, greater restrictions on use and more altered landscapes (Konijnendijk, 1999; Pauleit et al., 2005).

Loss of nature is an important part of the concern about children's opportunities to play outdoors in many western countries (Clements, 2004; Francis and Lorenzo, 2006; Sandberg, 2012; Kernan, 2010). In Norway concern about this situation has, among others, been expressed by the ‘Office of the Auditor General of Norway’, which has asked for better control and monitoring of urban development (Riksrevisjonen, 2007). However, excellent availability and free access to nature areas do not necessarily mean that people will make use of it. There is currently a lack of

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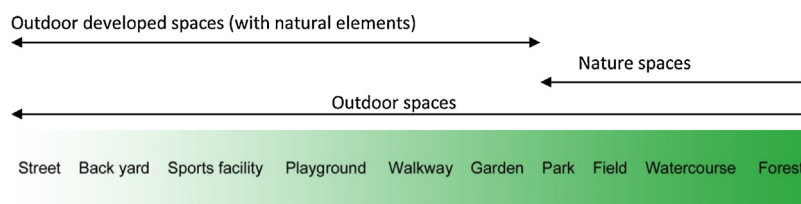


Fig. 1. Play environment along the nature continuum with examples of typical outdoor spaces nearby home.

knowledge of how inhabitants evaluate the availability of and their access to nature areas in their surroundings (e.g. Hörnsten and Fredman, 2000; Koppen et al., 2014), and this is especially true for children (Florgård and Forsberg, 2006). Internationally, there has been an increasing focus on children's mobility, their shrinking territory and their decreasing freedom of movement (Gaster, 1991; Hillman et al., 1990; Pooley et al., 2005; Karsten, 2005; Sandberg, 2012).

Knowledge about children's use of nature areas should be of special interest in the context of "Green Norway" (and Fennoscandia) where there are better availability and access to nature than in central and southern parts of Europe. In this study we present results from a nation-wide parental survey on the availability of and access to play environments for children, the frequency of use, the type of activities undertaken and the situations (e.g. institutions, organized activities, leisure time) in which activities take place. Children's outdoor play has many facets, and in this paper we focus on play in nature settings, such as forests, and play environments along a nature continuum.

1.1. Play in nature

Fennoscandian studies report positive impacts from children playing in nature including physical activity and development of motor skills as well as improved mental well-being (Bang et al., 1989; Grahn, 1991; Grahn et al., 1997; Fjørtoft, 2001, 2004; Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000; Stokke, 2011). Research from western countries has identified positive associations between availability and access to nature areas and children's physical activity levels (Timperio et al., 2004; Roemmich et al., 2006), and the amount of time young children spend in play in outdoor spaces near their home is correlated with their level of physical activity in general (e.g. Sallis et al., 1997). Several studies claim that children prefer natural environments (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Grahn et al., 1997; Evans, 2006). The effects of play and use of natural environments have been studied and show a complex interaction of (positive) environmental and societal factors including motor skills, attention, self-regulation, creativity, mental health, physical health, air quality and parental influence (Kirkby, 1989; Grahn et al., 1997; Fjørtoft, 2004; Tordsson and Vale, 2013; Chawla et al., 2014). Children's nature experiences have great potential for reducing stress and promoting better mental well-being (Korpela et al., 2002; Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2006; Chawla et al., 2014) according to the Kaplan's research on restoration (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

Play is an important part of growing up and an evaluation of children's physical availability to nature areas or their perceived access is needed to understand and look at the natural environment in terms of opportunities for play. Natural settings offer qualities of openness, diversity, alteration, exploration, creativity, anonymity and wildness (Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000; Zamani, 2016). According to Tordsson (2003), the character of nature is exceptional because it provides so many opportunities for play and because it is often less designed and managed for human purposes. It does not hold instructions for actions, but offers a diversity of opportunities for play and activity, where every child has their own

opportunity to explore, shape and change based on the child's individual background, experiences and personality (Chawla, 1991; Fasting, 2013). Children's idea of beauty is wild rather than ordered; they are stimulated by a diversity of topography and texture (Fjørtoft, 2004). A discovery play garden that is designed for wildness, and provides openness, diversity, and opportunities for manipulation, exploration and experimentation, allows children to become immersed in play and stimulates embodied nature contact. There are indications today that children, to a much greater extent than before, experience nature while under adult's control and supervision, both in day-care centers, at school, in after school care, and in organized activities during leisure time (Skår and Krogh, 2009). Recent research shows that when adults take a more hands-off approach instead of organizing and planning specific activities, then more spontaneous, unstructured and self-directed children's play can generate a more emotional, sensuous and embodied engagement with nature (Stordal et al., 2015; Skar et al., 2016).

Wild areas providing opportunities for discovery and play for children are different to landscapes designed for adults, who often prefer more manicured lawns and tidy, neat, orderly, managed, and uncluttered landscapes (Nassauer, 1997, 2011). Children value unmanicured places and the adventure and mystery of hiding places, opportunities to escape supervision and wild, spacious, uneven areas broken by clusters of plants, with opportunities for digging, climbing and using loose materials for building dens (e.g. Mjaavatn, 2013).

Studies of urban nature spaces have largely focused on parks, grasslands and residential areas, somewhat on urban forests, and to a limited degree on the comparisons between children's use of different types of areas along a nature continuum from developed spaces to more untouched nature spaces (Tordsson and Vale, 2013). A more complete picture of children's use of different outdoor spaces as presented in this paper, will contribute to broader discussions about contemporary childhood. Children's engagement with nature spaces along a nature continuum is not isolated from their everyday life in general, but influenced by a range of cultural, economic, societal and demographic factors. In this paper, we will limit the topic to discussion of the availability of and access to use of outdoor spaces, outlining principal patterns concerning children's current nature play. We define free, unstructured play as child-driven, spontaneous, and without direction from adults (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005).

1.2. Play environment along the nature continuum

A drastic reduction in outdoor play over the generations was identified in a study from England based on both quantitative and qualitative material (Valentine and McHendrick, 1997). This study suggests that parental anxieties about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood explain observed patterns of play more significantly than the public provision of play facilities and opportunities for play. Access to outdoor spaces is not only about physical availability, but also perceived access where a diversity of socio-cultural barriers and constraints, are generating parental

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