

Why children need to play outside? What is free play?

An evolutionary and neuroscientific perspective on outdoor play

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Some scientists argue that the brain of the modern person with the highly-performing prefrontal cortex developed that way because children were free to play for 100.000 years in the unstructured (outdoor) environment¹. Human child is born with a huge neuronal over-capacity, which is being activated through play or die if not used. ‘Not only are children developing the neurological foundations that will enable problem solving, language and creativity, they are also learning while they are playing. Through their play children learn how to learn.’²

Human beings play most while the busiest period of brain development, in early childhood, thus, free play reflects the course of evolution³ and is a migration through primitive stages in order to prepare for the endeavours of modern life.⁴ From an evolutionary perspective credence is given to the power of the environment, which is not only impacting children’s development and emotional functioning, but also bringing about a connection with their evolutionary roots through contact with natural elements such as fire, earth, air, and water, and other species and systems⁵. How much do we actually value and employ free play?

¹ Peter Grey ‘Free to Learn’

² Sutton-Smith Brian ‘The Ambiguity of Play’ Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997

³ Stuart Brown ‘Play. How it affects our imagination, brain and health’

⁴ John Santer and Carol Griffiths ‘Free Play in Early Childhood’, 2007

⁵ Brown F ‘Playwork. Theory and practice, 2003 &

Hughes B ‘Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytical Practice, 2001