

An introduction to

Froebel, children and nature

By Helen Tovey



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Introduction

We have a crisis in our relationship with nature. Children are increasingly disconnected from the natural world and their access to green and wild spaces is rapidly declining. We are discovering the devastating impact of human activity on our world.

In seeking to renew our relationship with nature, the ideas of Friedrich Froebel, a 19th century German educator and creator of the kindergarten, are timely. He saw the kindergarten as a garden for children, a place where children can develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults.

Engagement with nature

Froebel believed that from the earliest years children should be immersed in nature, engaging with it first-hand in the kindergarten garden and in the wider landscapes of hills, valleys, woods, and streams.

Experience of all aspects of the laws of nature were important including such things as forces, energy, air, fire and water.

Nature he argued offers a rich sensory, ever-changing environment, full of exciting features to explore and investigate and to learn through active enquiry, play and talk. He encouraged children to play adventurously, to dig water channels, climb trees, build dens and create stories. Nature offered a rich potential for imaginative, creative and symbolic play and a stimulating context for music, song and dance.





Gardening

Gardening was central to Froebel's kindergarten. Each child had their own plot of ground to dig, plant seeds, tend their plants and harvest the produce. Mistakes were important learning experiences so if a child forgot to water their plants the effect was clearly visible.

Gardening was not about didactic teaching of horticulture but about children developing an intimate relationship with the soil, the creatures which inhabit it and the plants which grow in it. He wanted children to develop a sense of wonder at the natural world, to see themselves as part of nature and begin to understand the ecological interrelationship between all living things.



Individual and community, freedom and responsibility

Children were free to plant what they liked in their own gardens but were also expected to share in the care of the communal gardens. Here they worked alongside adults, talking, discussing, reflecting as they engaged in shared activity.

Froebel's designs showed the individual child gardens encircled by the communal gardens illustrating in symbolic form how the individual is nurtured by the kindergarten, family and community. This design represented Froebel's deeply held ideas on the connectedness between individuality and community, freedom and responsibility.

Froebel's garden was no retreat, cut off from the real world. He sought every meaningful opportunity to help children make links and connections with the wider physical, human and social landscapes.



Froebel's first kindergarten in Blankenburg

Relationships matter



Dispositions towards the natural world are formed early in life and Froebel argued that if adults show indifference or disdain for nature the child's seed of knowledge and interest which is just beginning to germinate can be crushed. It was therefore paramount that those who work with the youngest children should be knowledgeable, well-trained and keen observers of both children and nature.

Froebel believed that merely spending time in nature is not enough – aspects of nature can just pass us by. What better way to engage with the wonder of nature than in close relationship with someone else, who shares an enthusiasm and curiosity about nature and who can inspire and support children's enquiries.

Connecting with 'big ideas'

Making connections between what is known and what is new was key to Froebel's approach.

For example, young children can begin to see the connection between a bee, blossom and an apple or between earthworms, leaves and soil. They will not understand the complexities of pollination or soil nutrition, but he argued that all learning starts somewhere and the small seed of understanding if nourished will grow over time.

Froebel's ideas today

Today, Froebel's ideas have renewed importance and urgency. Our task is not to give lessons in conservation or overwhelm children with anxiety about the planet.

Instead, we need to cultivate a love for nature, wonder at its beauty, respect for its laws, and an emerging understanding of its complex web of interconnections. Educators can empower children to play their part in protecting and nurturing nature, creating rich habitats for wildlife. They can connect with the 'big ideas' of sustainability, climate change and biodiversity in direct and meaningful ways. Crucially we can use Froebel's ideas to rethink our relationship with nature, create ecologically rich learning environments and help a generation of children to grow in harmony with the natural world.



About Helen Tovey

Helen Tovey was Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Roehampton University. She is a Froebel trained teacher with twenty years experience of working in nursery and primary schools. For eight years she was Head of a nursery school in an inner city area of London, and was involved in setting up and developing a challenging outdoor environment.

Helen is author of numerous books and articles including Playing Outdoors, Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge published by Open University Press and Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice published by Routledge. Her Froebel Trust pamphlet Outdoor play and exploration is available to download for free at froebel.org.uk.

The Froebel Trust funds research into children's learning from birth to eight years and champions early childhood education.

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