

Children's use of nearby nature in Norway: no longer an integrated part of everyday life

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International studies show that children nowadays use neighboring nature areas for play to a lesser extent than before (Valentine 2004, Gill 2008). Despite good access to nature areas and despite nature and outdoor life being deeply interwoven in the national identity, this is also perceived to be true in Norway (Skar & Krogh 2009). In Norway we observe a growing concern about children's decreasing contact with nature, but little quantitative knowledge exists about the extent, and eventually change, of children's relationship with nature. An on-going study about meaning-making in children's nature contact today therefore includes a national survey among 3160 parents about where, who and when children between 6 and 12 years stay in nature areas (Skar et al. 2014). The survey is to be supplied with qualitative case-studies, which among others issues focus on play in nature in different contexts presenting higher or lesser degree of adult presence. The study is led by NINA (Norwegian institute for nature research), but is a collaboration between Queen Maude University College, Telemark University College and Centre for Rural Research. This presentation will show main findings from the national survey, conducted in January 2013.

Findings from the survey show that, even though access to nature areas is rated as good, children play in neighboring nature areas much more sporadically than in other, more arranged areas such as parks, gardens, street yards, quiet streets and playgrounds (Skar et. al 2014). The garden is the most commonly used area, and trampoline jumping the most common activity. 53 % of Norwegian children never or seldom play in forest areas, and this is the least frequent activity among nine being asked about in the survey.

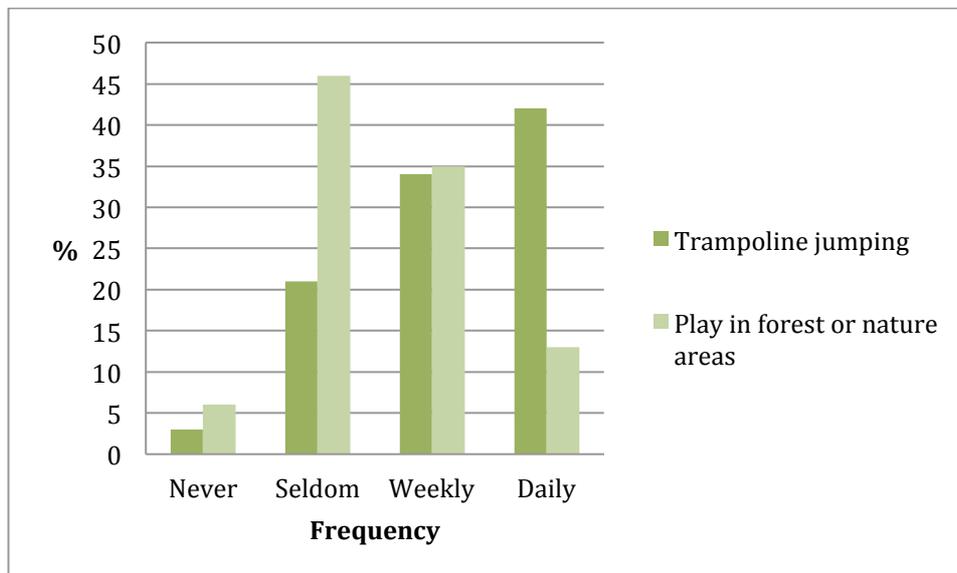


Figure 1. Children's participation in the two activities *Trampoline jumping* and *play in forest or nature areas* compared (seldom=maximum 2 times per month.)

According to parents, important hindrances for children's use of nature areas are primarily related to time pressure. The reason being the amount of (organized) leisure activities and homework, or simply that one tends to prioritize other activities. However, the survey also reveals that traffic situation comprise an important hindrance. Children with parents considering the traffic situation as

good or *very good*, use both nature areas and the neighboring areas in general, more often. Children in this group also participate more often in the other activities enquired, than those of parents considering the traffic situation as poor. The exception is use of parks and playgrounds, and this demonstrates that arranged play areas are even more important when the traffic situation is poor.

A common concern nowadays is that children to a lesser extent than before are to be seen outdoors without adults being present. The survey shows that in summer, 70 % of children are on a daily or weekly basis, outdoors alone without “parents really knowing what they are doing”. As such 30 % of children are rarely outside without adult presence during summer. Thus, children’s own initiated activity/play is still important, even though the extent is seen to be sporadic for many. When it comes to play in nature areas specifically, more children seem to use such areas *with* adults present, than without.

Further, it is interesting that the 6-9 year olds play and dwell in nature areas more than the 10-12 year olds do. This youngest group also attend walks/hikes in “forest and field” most frequently. The fact that the youngest age group spend more time in nature than the older and more independent children, emphasize that the extent of children’s nature contact nowadays is highly dependent upon parents’ effort.

Children’s use of neighbouring nature areas should be seen as an integrated part of their everyday life. Knowledge about participation in other activities, socio-demographic status and other factors is therefore included in the survey. An important present day factor is the organization of children’s leisure time. The survey shows that children regularly attending organized activities outdoors also use their neighbouring areas more. In addition, this group is the one that walks by foot or uses bike to school and other leisure time activities most frequently. A pattern seen in the material is that the ones not participating in organized leisure time activities (19 %) also are the ones using neighbouring areas, and especially neighbouring nature areas, least. These correlations indicate that children’s definite and bodily experiences from being active in organized settings constitute a basis and increase the motivation for also being active in the neighbouring areas. At the same time the survey shows that participation in organized activities is related to social factors, and especially to parents’ level of education.

While nature area near children’s home earlier was an important informal meeting place for children across age, gender and social status, this survey shows that nature contact today has become something the adults in much greater degree eventually *choose* for their children, but in strong competition with attractive indoor activities, other organized activities and in a pressed time schedule. Children are naturally the next generation of outdoor recreation participants. Understanding how, when, who and why children do not experience nature, is important knowledge to provide opportunities for future outdoor recreation. Such knowledge can be used to provide better social and physical framework conditions for outdoor life among children, in line with health- and outdoor life political objectives. In a context where children’s nature contact has had a transition into being less informal, spontaneous and self-initiated, parents, educators and teachers have gotten a more important role as motivators and managers - in addition to practitioners in area management.

References

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