

# How do children experience nature? Meaning-making and socialization to outdoor life

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The outdoor life of children has changed substantially during recent decades both in form and content. In Norway, it is suggested that children spend less time outside in nature areas than before, but there is a lack of scientific evidence support this assumption. Existing studies also show divergent results on how much time Norwegian children spend outdoors. This poster presents a research project financed by the Norwegian Research Council in the period of 2012 to 2015.

Until some decades ago, the outdoor life of children could be characterized as a natural part of the everyday life of childhood, as a part of transport, work, duties, play and social life. Today, the outdoor life of Norwegian children seems to be much more about outdoor *activities*, planned and organized by adults and with adults present (Skår and Krogh, 2009). Spontaneous play outside competes strongly with organized activities in leisure time, and even stronger with indoor digital services. The fact that children spend increasing time in institutions (school, pre- and post school programs and ECEC's), also contribute to less 'free time' without adults present. In total, today's outdoor life of children deals increasingly about what parents and other adults define it to be.

The changes and characteristic of children's outdoor life briefly described above, does not imply that no children spend time outside in spontaneous play without adults present. A qualitative study (Fasting, 2012) describe how children have their own places outside; mostly places in nature, and that they know these places from regular activity and play. However, there is generally very little knowledge about who, when, where and in what contexts Norwegian children spend time outdoors in nature areas, and this study aims to fill this knowledge gap by a literature review and by performing a national, quantitative survey among parents.

Materiel and social framework in different ways stimulate the creative activity of children, and relevant to this study is research focusing on how children's own culture could be understood (James et al., 1999). Hart (1997) focuses on how play outside as part of the culture of childhood is gone, and that the everyday life of children has shifted to be carried out indoors. An important quality and characteristic of nature is the way it facilitates the opportunity for children to explore and create their own play spaces as a sense of places that belongs to them (Chawla, 1992; Jones, 2000). Derr (2006) shows that outward exploration, freedom and room for trial and error are vital for the development of creativity, social development and the development of independence and identity. Some authors have explored the consequences of children's increasing participation in organized and plan-

ned activities, but limited research has been undertaken on the significance and impact of a planned and organized everyday life in relation to children's nature experiences (Skår and Krogh 2009). The main focus in the study will be on meaning-making in different outdoor activities, by focusing on how children experience nature in different settings along a gradient from more self-controlled and unorganized outdoor activities to more adult-controlled and organized outdoor activities. This main part of the study will base on three in-depth qualitative case-studies and two more superficial examples which in total represent this gradient.

## Primary and secondary objectives

1. Provide a comprehensive and multidisciplinary description of how children experience nature.
2. Increase the understanding of the social and cultural conditions that affect children's outdoor activities, and how this may affect meaning-making and socialization to outdoor recreation.
3. Provide knowledge about the contexts in which children spend time in nature today: what characterizes the different arenas in which children participate in outdoor activities, and how do the adults and children who participate in these activities experience the different settings?
4. Acquire applicable knowledge for society about the content and meaning-making of children's experiences in nature, which may facilitate suitable opportunities for future outdoor recreation.

## The four main parts of the study

### 1. Literature review

The literature review will describe existing knowledge about how children use nature today, emphasizing the Norwegian situation.

### 2. National survey

A national survey among adults with children between 0 and 12 years of age will be accomplished. The study will map when, who, where and in what contexts children spend time in nature.

### 3. Qualitative case study

Three to five qualitative case-studies will focus on how the presence of adults, the nature environment and other framework conditions are mirrored in children's nature experiences. Methods are participating observation, focus groups and interviews with children and adults.

#### 4. *International co-operation*

Forestry Commission, UK will contribute in the study by arrangement of a study tour and comparison of findings from this study with experiences from UK.

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