



Tree Climbing in School Age Care

When we embarked on a year long journey of action research, our heads were filled with so many questions that we wanted to explore in our school age context. We were excited and highly motivated by this concept of professional development that facilitated ongoing collaborative reflection around work practices, all leading to better outcomes for our children and families. We followed our passions and eventually settled on two areas to examine.

I was curious as to how we could ensure regular play experiences in natural environments: How could we reconnect school age communities with nature?; whilst Olivia was driven by conflicting images of the child, intrigued at how the quality measures dictated by our compliance regulatory systems seemed to limit and disempower them. Are children not capable, even from infancy, to be active participants in their education? Should children not be able to develop their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential? Are we risk managing away vital learning opportunities that past generations took for granted? How could we support children and build capacity through risk taking?

Guided by these questions and the fundamental belief that children are indeed capable, and have the right to develop to their full potential, we immersed ourselves in as much literature as possible.

To examine this issue in the context of our centre we collected various forms of data from all our stakeholders, but most importantly from the children, families and educators. This included surveys, photos, video, drawings, observations, voice recordings of interviews, discussions and narratives.

As expected the children craved outdoor experiences that mirrored our own childhoods, climbing trees, playing outdoors, running wild and free. What was unexpected was that so many of them were so dismissive about their capabilities. They felt the dangers were far greater than reality, and that they were unworthy of the challenge.

We were excited however to discover that our families held similar beliefs as we educators did about the capabilities of their children, and the types of experiences they idealised for their childhoods. Tree climbing as an activity kept coming up again, and again, and led us to ponder... "Why can't kids climb trees at outside school hours care?"

Using the Hand – Head – Heart technique to critically reflect on our actions – thoughts – emotions, we could delve deeper into this type of question. What would I, as an educator, do if I saw a child climbing a tree at OSHC?

The pre action research me would have booted that child out of the tree faster than they could fall to the ground because as everyone knows, climbing trees at OSHC is just too risky. Then I would have given them a tirade of worst case scenarios as to why I did not want them playing in the tree, including risk of serious injury, non-compliance with governing regulations, litigation, to name a few. I would have eliminated the risk today and tomorrow by clearly establishing what my expectations in this area were and why, ensuring that all the children and other educators understood them and respected them. This would, of course, be supervised over time.

I had always assumed that this approach to working with children was child centred, focusing on the safety of the child as being paramount, but it is clear to me now that this is not the case. Whilst children have always been involved in most aspects of the service and have a large amount of autonomy, there were decisions around risk that were always made by senior staff or management; even other educators didn't get a say. Whilst 'softer' risks were allowed in carefully supported situations, we had mostly dealt with all 'real' risk from an elimination point. Anticipate the risk, remove it and make things safe. Risk Management 101. We had equated quality care with safe care.

More often than not these risks were 'compliance' issues. Things we were told by management or the licensing government departments that we had to do to provide quality care e.g., - The Australian Playground Standard. But what if they have got it wrong? Nothing makes you question the relevance of a standard like trying to rationalise it to a 6 year old. "I'm sorry Claire, you can't use that tree in your game, you have to play somewhere else" "Why?" "Because it doesn't have soft fall under it." "It's a tree. Why would it need soft fall?" "Because the Australian Playground Standards, which we are required to follow and apply to natural play spaces, suggest that anything over 50cm, needs to have 30cm of soft fall under it, and it doesn't, so you can't climb on it." "But it's a tiny little tree..." This is not an argument you can win. It is ridiculous, even to a six year old.

What if we were trying to apply regulations designed for children aged 0 to 5, to children 5 to 13? Is that taking into account the competencies of the children? Is that really in the best interests of the child? Claire doesn't think so...

This is not child centred practice; this is compliance centred practice – putting the regulations first, even above the best interests of the children. What does this really say about how our governing bodies view children? When we follow the regulations unquestioningly, what does this say about how we view children?

The culture of fear has slowly seeped into our practice over the last decade, stealing any hope that 21st century children can experience the childhood of my past. But what if we are brave? What if we actually live our beliefs? What if we trust in our children's capabilities? What if we allow them to climb trees and scale to new heights?

The new me would watch quietly... observe the capabilities of the climbers; ask questions if I needed to confirm they were considering the risks carefully. As I become more aware of the climber's knowledge and skill, my focus of inquiry would switch to more abstract ponderings. I would listen to what they are sharing with me. I would celebrate their achievements as they grew in confidence and reached greater heights. I would ensure that I captured this learning for the families and children to revisit. I would ensure that they always had access to this unique learning environment...

Old cultures of fear are hard to overcome and my resolve has been tested. My background in psychology adds another subtext to this; viewing children as a work in progress, developing across the life span. But all of that is the old me before Malaguzzi and Foucault. Regimes of truth are not universal truths as Mac Naughton has showed us. When I follow these 'regulated truths,' I am silencing the voice of the child, as well as my own inner voice. I am retraining myself to live what I believe – children are capable and their potential is mind blowing.

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