

A Sense of Place

Oxfordshire Parenting Forum

A community development project in partnership with

The Nature Effect

Personal, Professional & Community Development, Connecting People to their Earth

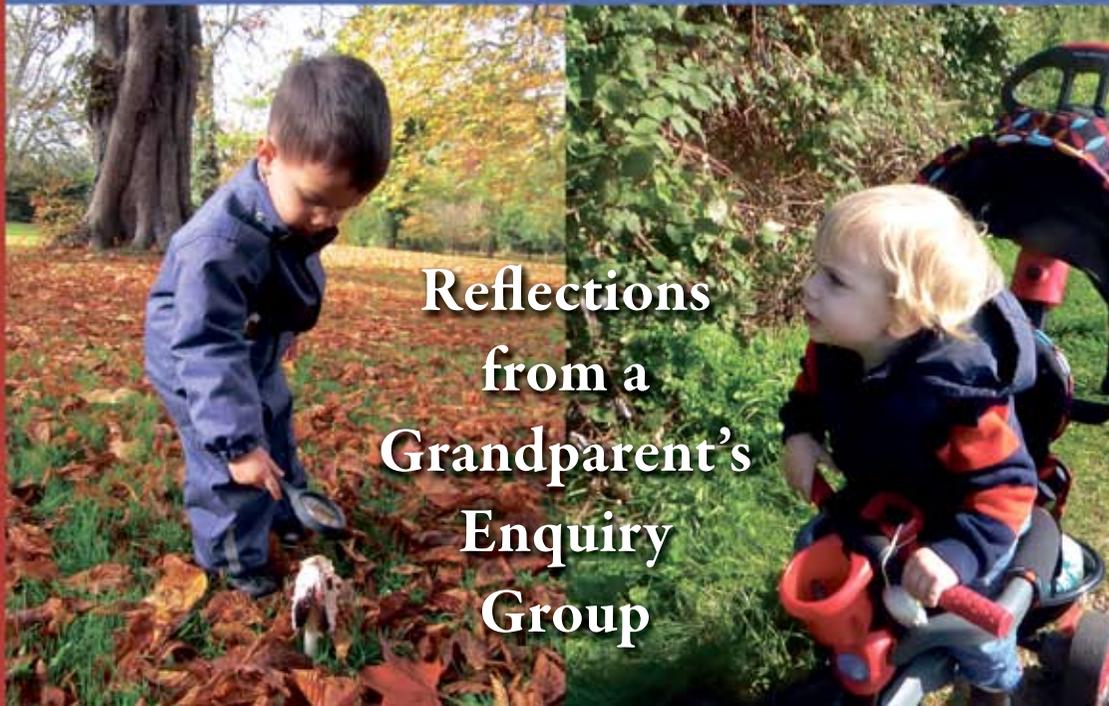


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Companionable Adventures Outdoors

In 2015 The Nature Effect worked with grandparents and children in Oxford to engage children and adults with playing, learning and communicating outdoors.



Reflections from a Grandparent's Enquiry Group



A Sense of Place: companionable adventures outdoors

Inspiration for the project

In autumn 2015 **The Nature Effect** initiated the 'grandparents' enquiry group', supported by the **Oxfordshire Parenting Forum**. In this booklet we share some of our experiences, in the hope that they will interest and inspire other grandparents and indeed anyone with an interest in the care of very young children.



My own absorbing interest these last few years has been our human relationship with the wider ecological world. What makes us feel connected to the rest of life – to plants, animals, the sun, sky, sea and soil? Without these things we cannot live and yet we take them for granted so much of the time. I want to continue this enquiry with Maia: to notice as she reaches out with each of her senses – seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, moving, balancing, thinking, voicing. Long before she could walk she was testing the world: she senses it and by doing so she is gradually developing a sense of herself and her belonging to this place.



Learning about what is edible & ripe in a garden

I fancy I can almost 'hear her thinking' as I watch her explore the movement of her body, of birds, branches and grasses, light on the floor. I see her fascination with objects – putting things under, in, on top of. I see her delighted response to other living creatures. What is she learning from them? What is she learning from the way I, or her parents, or other children, respond to her explorations? What calls her? What is her response? What repels her? Where do fear and risk and judgment and the desire to care for or destroy other living things come from? How does it develop? All this moved me to explore with other grandparents. What do they notice? How do they pay attention? How is the landscape and culture and behaviour different from when they were children, and from when they were parents? What are their hopes for their grandchildren and the world? What place do grandparents have in the lives of their grandchildren and how do the children develop their own 'sense of place' in their homes, their communities and the world?

This project wouldn't have been possible without the support of the Oxfordshire Parenting Forum, and all the wonderful group participants. Thank you very much.

Interview with Chris Sewell

Grandfather of 7 grandchildren & part-time carer for his granddaughter Neve

What gifts has becoming a grandparent brought you?

An irresistible and joyful distraction from normal pre-occupations – a sense of awe and wonder at the development of a young child. This was something that, first time round as a parent, sometimes got smothered by day-to-day chores and trials. There is unconditional love and affection, both giving and receiving. It is a privilege to be part of their lives, not as observer but as involved companion. Becoming a grandparent has also enabled deeper relationship with our own children and their partners as we share in their family life both practically through childcare and also consciously and emotionally.

What things can grandparents do with their grandchildren to develop their love of Nature?

We can give names to senses, sensations, natural processes and objects: hot, warm, cold, freezing, colours, shades, smells, flowers, petals, nectar, plants, trees, fruits, seeds, animals and creatures, textures, words like ‘growing, bursting, blossom, dying...’ Not cramming them with information but gently feeding in at the appropriate time and pace. We can grow things with them from bulbs, seeds and cuttings, watering, smelling, digging, picking, eating, and, of course, composting.



We can extend their outdoor experiences beyond playgrounds e.g. visiting woods, parks, gardens, canals, riverbanks, sea shores, farms, zoos of all kinds. We can nurture an ‘all-weather’ approach to outdoor play.

What has changed about the environment since you were a child, or since your children were small?

The proximity of some risks e.g. traffic. There are more play facilities, both not-for-profit and commercial, including family-friendly visitor centres and ‘learning zones’ at cultural, historical and leisure centres, e.g. National Trust venues, Wildlife and Wetlands Trust.

Play is confined to safe, controlled spaces all conforming with Health and Safety regulations with the expectation of a parent being present, i.e. the removal of risk from children’s lives.

I hope for them to feel it’s their world and that they can make a difference to it

We have more environmental concerns: the impact of global warming, extremes of weather and the physical impact of the built environment on communities, declining wildlife due to pesticides and destruction of hedgerows.

What are your hopes for your grandchild’s future?

I hope for them to be deeply happy and confident, much loved and secure both physically and emotionally, to have a zest for life, making the most of opportunities and finding fulfilment. I wish that it will be a peaceful and hopeful future, with the major issues of environment, international conflict, poverty and community tension resolved or being resolved cooperatively. Most of all I hope for them to feel it’s their world and that they can make a difference to it.

“Attending ‘A Sense of Place for Grandparents’ opened up valuable time to enable me to focus on outside experiences that I could share with my granddaughter. This led to a deeper understanding of what Emily is interested in when she is outside. She loved to talk about the wind when it blew her hair and the small animals that we could find together under logs and stones. Giving Emily more time to explore was key: not to rush her became a focus.”

~ Irene Yarwood

Changing landscapes, changing lives

Global mobility means that many children grow up away from extended families and know their grandparents through photos, phone and Skype. How is the role of grandparents changing? What is it to be a grandparent today? What does technology bring to the relationship?

Here group member **Clare Dodwell** reflects on being a grandparent to her granddaughter being brought up in Rwanda.

Long-distance granny

As I open the front door after a busy day at work I can hear the rings of an incoming Skype call. I run upstairs and click the Skype icon on my computer and instantly the face of Arcadia, my 18-month-old granddaughter is on the screen. Dressed in her pyjamas, looking a little sleepy, she takes a moment to recognise me and then points and says 'Ganny'. Our virtual interaction has begun.

My daughter is currently posted in Rwanda, Central Africa and Skype has become invaluable for keeping family relationships going. So, how best to be a grandparent at a distance? We are learning as we go along and there is no magic formula but here are some of the things I have learnt so far. Calling regularly and at different times of day if possible allows me to see and talk to Arcadia about her daily routines and latest interests – currently feeding, dressing and changing her rag doll's nappy.

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Sadly you can't have a cuddle on Skype though and I have to contend myself with kisses blown in my direction.

Making the most of visits to the UK and the two weeks that I spent in Rwanda in October has been essential. These times together are precious so we make the most of them. During her last trip back, Arcadia came for the day and we had a wonderful time, discovering the delights of playing with sticks in puddles, joining in with Christmas songs at the children's centre and sharing favourite books, like *The Rainbow Fish*.



Learning about connecting with people far away

Spending time together in Rwanda was a milestone in the development of our relationship. At last I had the opportunity to be with Arcadia for a sustained period of time, and to share in her daily routines. These included trips to toddler group, walks in the garden, looking out for local hazards like snakes and mosquitos, observing exotic African birds and naming her favourite fruits growing in the trees: avocados and bananas. The photos and video clips that my daughter took on her phone help to keep those times alive and she tells me that one of her favourite pastimes is to watch the short films and remember time with 'Ganny'.

A deep respect for the new born soul

Sometime over the last year, after the birth of my granddaughters, I watched the Inuit made film Atanarjuat “The Fast Runner”. The film is set in a time where magic and mystery are part of the reality of life. Humans are a part of all that exists, they are not ‘onlookers’, not separate from animals, plants, ice, weather or spirit.

Last year I became grandmother to Elle and Lily. I was blessed to be present at their births. To witness two spirits entering life was awesome in itself, but these two spirits are my daughters’ daughters. I found their arrivals immeasurable experiences.

In the moment of their arrival I experienced the wholeness of their spirits. I could ‘see’ that there was nothing that they needed to ‘do’ in the future in order to be truly themselves. I hadn’t quite ‘seen’ this in this way when my own three children were born. Of course Elle and Lily are utterly different in every possible way and they are already wholly themselves.

How does the film ‘Atanarjuat’ relate to my granddaughters? Something of my experience of their entry into life was mirrored by the film. Generations of family inhabited small ice ‘igloos’ in the Winter months, new babies arrived in amongst these generations.

I saw the families celebrate these arrivals and open up slowly to ‘see’ who had arrived in their midst. ‘Who is this?’ ‘Who are you?’ Babies of these times were seen as reincarnated souls of elders who had died. The families took their time to ‘see’ who had returned to be amongst them again and then their names were returned to them. This in turn brought a real respect to the reincarnated being. The baby might be perceived as the returned mother of the grandmother and thereafter be known as ‘Little Mother’.

I loved the sense of respect that arose from the portrayal in the film of this ‘new’ ‘old’ soul. As my granddaughters begin the slow unfolding into their lives, I wish to bring this sense of respect to my own grandmothering.

A respect for their place, a respect for all that has gone before to bring them here, a respect for the generation upon generation of lives that have been lived as far as maturity, to be present and able to conceive a new generation.

I have a wish to walk beside my granddaughters for as long as I am alive



I have a wish to walk beside my granddaughters for as long as I am alive, to love them, to listen to them, to hear them, to see them, to play with them amongst the magic of life, to encourage them, to offer them what I cannot fully see and do not yet fully know. As their grandmother I sense that it is my duty to give them this and to trust that it will be so.

Grandparent Glimpses

Through my grandchild my own world has become a bigger place

I have always been a city girl. I grew up in a house in Jakarta, Indonesia on a corner where two very busy roads intersect. Urban streets were my comfort zone. Furthermore, the culture was highly superstitious, where all things natural – insects, reptiles, ‘dirt’, things that go bump in the night – were imbued with real threats and invisible things to be feared. In traditional epics, forests and seas were places of retreat, not because they provided escape and tranquility, but because there lurked demons that the human spirit needed to overcome to transcend to a higher level. The circumstances of my three-year-old grandson Jay’s growing up are very different. With a sporty father and an ecologist mother, Jay’s life has been one of outdoor activity and enquiry from day 1.

As Jay’s grandmother it is such a privilege to be in regular intimate contact with a child when he is constantly learning and articulating curiosity about everything in the world around him. Being with and consciously observing Jay on his adventures outdoors gives me an opportunity to appreciate the world through his senses and find it afresh as a place of endless discovery but also to notice where he feels at home. Through my companionable adventures with him, my own world has become a bigger place.

Diyan Leake



Many ways to listen

Gopnik (1999) summarises how science has challenged the image of the helpless newborn with ‘... what we see in the crib is the greatest mind that has ever existed, the most powerful learning machine in the universe.’ Emilia, our first grandchild, is certainly that to me!

Knowing that ‘listening’ starts in the womb, I was fascinated to see how Emilia would start to communicate and listen herself. This is of particular interest as Rachel was born deaf and both her parents are deaf, although her mother was born hearing but later became deaf due to a childhood illness. Rachel’s brother, however, is hearing. Our son Huw too, has had issues with hearing reduction and has learnt to use British Sign Language.

Watching Rachel and Huw talking, signing, making different faces and responding with much love to their new daughter was both moving and fascinating. They, as listening adults, were tuning in to Emilia with all their senses, in the best possible way for her as a unique baby. I was fascinated to see the benefits of Rachel giving Emilia so much more direct face-to-face communication, with expression as well as touch, sign or gestures. This encouraged us all to do the same, which is to Emilia’s benefit and one reason why I believe she smiled so early.

Kathryn Solly



What will grandchildren remember of us?

The first of a new generation prompts the grandparents to think more of their own mortality and to wonder what the future might hold for their grandchildren. What will Emilia remember of us in the years to come, I wonder? Will she think of me as some old fogey with a vague foreign connection? Will she learn German, visit the country or link up with her German relatives? Will she be interested in my discoveries and documentation of the generations that went before? Becoming a grandparent has made me feel that the past, present and future are inextricably bound up together in our Emilia.

George Solly



Companionship Adventures – and noticing what is

I take a picnic for Jacob and me. I put down a ground sheet / blanket (all weathers) in the middle of the field and we sit and enjoy food and just be.

It is lovely. We soak up the atmosphere, just being quiet and together. We listen and discuss, when we feel like it, the sounds – sirens, train whistles, geese, ducks, crows, seagulls, dogs barking, dim sound of traffic etc. We talk about the wind and the day the blanket acted like a kite because it was so windy and would not lie flat. We experience and talk about the sun, the dark clouds, the white clouds scudding across, aeroplane tracks in the sky. We are also just quiet, unhurried and peaceful – each enjoying our own thoughts and quiet time.

When food is finished Jacob likes to run off to be free. I know he is safe and he feels safe because we can see each other. He feels the land beneath his feet dip and rise and he adjusts his balance, mostly, to the challenges that that brings. The first time we were out we found blackberries. Jacob loved them. He got very quick at spotting where they grew. Each time we went out he would ask if we could look for blackberries for him to eat.



It was a very long season this year but eventually there were no more blackberries to be had! This is the beginning of understanding seasonal changes. One early trip he walked along a grassy path and stopped to explore a hole – he walked into and out of it time and again. Sometimes he wobbled over as he lost his balance on the uneven surface. He was absorbing the feeling and the physical adjustments needed to keep his balance.



We experience the differences the weather brings to our trips. One day there had been a sharp overnight frost and we observed the pond in my garden had iced over; we dropped some gravel on it, which did not sink as it usually did. Out and about we found the puddles had iced over. Sometimes the ice held and Jacob slipped on it and other times it cracked and he found puddle water.



The next time we went out Jacob expected puddles and ice but the weather was not cold enough that day. On another trip there was a wood pile and I rolled a trunk away and we observed the woodlice, worms, centipedes all responding to suddenly being in the light. We rolled it back and repeated this action with another log. The next time we went this way Jacob asked for the logs to be rolled again so he could see the insects. I marvel at the anticipation of experiences he is learning.

I enjoy our trips so much. We both get such a great deal from the experience for our spirit and our connection to each other and to Nature.

Sue Hale

A little theory: Sense Doorways, Windows and Skylights – a framework for mindful learning together outdoors



The 5 Sense Doorways of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell enable young children to explore, understand and manipulate the materials of the world. Grandparents and others can support sensory-based learning by offering a rich variety of materials, tastes, sounds, smells,

textures. We can allow children to simply explore without a definite task in mind. We can give children experience of all elements – water, earth, air, wood, stone, metal, plants and animals. Simply being in Nature – outside and under the sky, helps the Sense Doorways to open.



The Sense Windows are more subtle to detect: they are less about exploring the external world, and more about children's innate, internally-felt calls and responses to it. For example, through the senses of **balance** and **movement**, young children learn to stand tall and free their hands, becoming independently mobile.

Through sensations of **temperature**, **hunger** and **pain**, they learn what they need to survive – food and shelter – and also how to manage danger and risks. The Sense Windows teach us what each child needs to be comfortable and safe. We can observe children's responses to the environment and know when to encourage a child to take his or her next developmentally-appropriate steps.



The Sense Skylights are essentially our values – senses of **appreciation**, **kindness**, **purpose**, **connection**, and **awe and wonder**. The **Skylight of Appreciation** shows us that resources are

precious and need to be taken care of. Kindness helps us learn to take care of other living things, understand fairness and justice and be able to give and receive from others. Purpose motivates us to take action in the world. Given appropriate opportunities, we learn to share in tasks and help solve problems. Connection is the felt experience that everything is connected to everything else. We are part of Nature and subject to its laws and cycles, including seasons and time, life and death. Through the Sense Skylight of Awe and Wonder we learn humility. Seeing we are part of something bigger helps us to develop respect, tolerance and gratitude.

Companionship Learning & noticing what is

In early years theory we talk about adult-initiated and child-initiated learning and both of these concepts are useful. Companionship learning goes beyond these ideas to include attunement and flow between the adult and child. As companions in learning, we can sensitively respond to our grandchildren's cues to explore, engage and interact. Being outdoors and in Nature offers children and adults limitless invitations; as grandparents we can hold a container of awareness, presence and attention in which children's learning and development can flourish in its own unique way.

A Pedagogy for Ecology

Learning in and about Nature can be the breeding ground for teaching children important values about people, place and planet. How do we model such values and walk our talk? As grandparents – and parents and educators – we might ask ourselves: 'What legacy do we wish to pass on to the children in our care? How do we best support young children to have a rich sense of their place, a desire and commitment to take care of their own tiny part of this big beautiful planet, and feel it as home?'

Annie Davy