

### The Crow Forest:

In Norway, it is believed that it is important for public health to enable people to make positive and responsible life choices. It is understood that children and young people are developing their personal identities and that it is particularly important to encourage a positive self-image during this period.

Among other interdisciplinary themes like Democracy and Citizenship, and Sustainable Development, Public Health and Life-skills is a theme in schools that facilitates pupils to develop good mental and physical health. It also discusses value choices and the meaning of meaning in life, interpersonal relationships, being able to set boundaries and respect others, and being able to handle thoughts, feelings, and relationships (Udir, 2021).

The Crow Forest is situated near Tønsberg, close to a kindergarten. Some children from the kindergarten attend the forest kindergarten daily, all year-round. They are aged between 3 and 6 years old. Here, the children learn how to be independent and how to make friends. They learn how to use the environment in their play and learning, and practice life skills.

The group sometimes cook their lunch over the fire, such was the day that we visited. They still grill over the fire on Fridays, however, most of the time, the group prepare sandwiches for lunch and the children are facilitated in preparing these themselves.



### Kindergarten in Norway:

The Crow Forest has been built by the teachers that work there, along with the help of others, including the children. Teaching occurs through meaningful demonstration of tasks and skills and encourages pupils to solve local challenges. The teachers model their behaviour to encourage children to inquire into their surroundings, recognise affordances of play in nature, and take risks.

At the Crow Forest, children are evaluated according to experience-based goals and not numerical or literacy goals. They aim to promote social goals among children and develop their independence. They emphasise the importance of being able to dress oneself, eat, go to the toilet, play, be a friend, and make friends.

While being outdoor focused all-year round in the forest, the kindergarten still operates according to the national framework plan. This framework requires that healthy examples of life choices and skills are modelled and developed within the kindergarten. It expects the environment to be safe and challenging, and that alongside daily activity that develops children's motor and physical skills and encourages positive social interactions, a time for peace, rest, and relaxation is also promoted. It states that Kindergartens have "*an important task in promoting values, attitudes, and practices for more sustainable societies* (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2021). Kindergartens such as this demonstrate to children that it is possible to comfortably enjoy such a curriculum while outdoors and in direct contact with nature and the forces throughout the whole year. It children to develop a sense of place and a love for nature and this place.

Barane (2015), states that "*all thoughts and actions exist in a reciprocal relationship with where they happen. Access to places and the ability to engage in active dialogue with place develop us as people and equip us to take part in community life*". It is this dialogue with and about nature in the everyday context of their lives that helps children inquire into sustainable choices and care for nature.

### Recognising affordances of a living and changing environment:

Gibson (1979) defined the term *affordance* to describe that which an environment affords an individual. In other words, the affordance of a place, object, or thing, refers to the opportunity for activity that something offers as a result of its nature.

Kyttä (2004) extends the concept of affordances and defines them as *potential or actualised*.

Potential affordances refer to all of the affordances that an environment or thing can provide, including those not actually used by the individual. Actualised affordances refer to those that are utilised by the individual (Waller, 2017).



Encouraging children to be free in nature and to challenge themselves according to a changing environment helps children to recognise potential affordances of natural beings, landscapes, and surroundings. We observed some examples of this such as the stepping-stumps that had been placed during the wettest part of the winter to serve as a means to cross a muddy area, which now proved to be a great way for playing with balancing and jumping. An ant nest on the outskirts of the arena provides for great entertainment and laughs, when the children place a stick onto the nest and lick the end of them to taste a bitter taste. Occurrences such as these can also afford an opportunity to discuss sustainable and ecological perspectives and ideas in a meaningful context.

We observed that the teachers and children had built a bridge leading from the shelter to the outdoor toilet. When asked about this, the teacher replied “well, because we could...”. It could be assumed that similar to the stepping-stumps, this bridge could have proven very useful on wet, muddy days. Here, an activity that develops pupils cognitive and physical skills can be created as a solution to questions and problems relevant to the children. These are examples of actualised affordances of the changing environment and surroundings.



### Working with Tools and Risks:

Children learn that knives, saws, and hammers can be dangerous if used incorrectly and children are taught to recognise how to protect themselves when dealing with these fundamental life-tools.

While at the kindergarten, we observed children as young as three years old using knives to chip wood, and five-year-olds carving their own butter knives.

The leaders teach children to recognise the potential dangers that sharp tools and fire can present and aim to help pupils to develop a healthy respect for these things. They provide pupils with choices and opportunities to make responsible decisions.

One young child was observed using their handmade knife to cut sausages for their sandwich. Here, the child could reflect on the usefulness of their working process and creation and strengthen beliefs that they have achieved something. They can begin to appreciate the usefulness of a skill, and develop positive self-efficacy and esteem if they are provided with an environment that affords them to practise and improve a skill. It is these kind of safe and challenging affordances that develop children's sense of life mastery.



*“Spikkestedet”- “The Nail Site”, where children carve wood with knives*



*“Sitt ikke stille, vaer en krokodille”- “Don’t sit still, be a crocodile.”*





### The Children and Environment:

The children were playing when we arrived. They were spread out across the area between various play places like the pirate ship, the tee-pee, the bridge, the mud-pit, the swings, the ants' nest, the crow's nest, the climbing ring, and the stepping-stumps, to name a few.

Some of the children were curious when we arrived and came closer to explore the situation or attempt to understand the language. Some children said hello or waved.

Some children played atop the pirate ship and peeked below to the group. They laughed at us or pretended to hide and play peak-a-boo. One child began to cry for a moment during a disagreement, before they appeared to sort it out among themselves.

One of the leaders explained to us that it is very rare that a child is sick or absent, and attributed an increase in health and immune systems to an exposure to the outdoors and physical activity. Here, children are encouraged to get dirty and parents are reminded not to wash children's' clothes daily. It is understood that dirt is good and that children develop a healthy relationship with earth.

This belief is echoed elsewhere in campaigns such as *Persil, Dirt is Good*, who seek to promote the positive effect that exposure to nature has on children, and how attempts to shield children from nature can be perceived by children as a lack of engagement with it and decrease children's likelihood to become involved in the protection of nature and climate action (Global Action Plan, 2021).

Our guide described to us a story of a young boy who ran across the forest floor, flying a paper aeroplane. We learned that the children learn to focus on many challenges simultaneously in this environment, as they become accustomed to natural and fluid obstacles such as tree roots, rocks, bumps, branches, etc. In fact, he told us about a Norwegian-Canadian study that illustrates how time spent outdoor increases children's' working memory and attention skills; benefits cognitive and behavioural development; and decreases inattention- hyperactivity symptoms in school children (Vidar Ulset, 2017).



### Conclusion:

The outdoor kindergarten model demonstrates how nature can be used to improve cognitive and physical skills and represents an opportunity for education for sustainable development. It is clear to me that if managed sustainably, it can provide children with opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about their relationship with nature and their place within nature. There is opportunity for outdoor kindergartens to model sustainable and ethical choices with an emphasis on the impact on immediate surroundings.

It would appear to me that important topics such as fuel consumption, care of nature, pollution and waste disposal, responsible use of resources, infrastructure and equipment evaluation, and self-control and group relations, are all relevant and meaningful to the outdoor kindergarten context.

The Norwegian Kindergarten framework has recently made revisions to its duty of care required of workers in relation to harassment and abuse (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). Here it directly outlines specific guidelines for staff. Since the framework requires supervisors to model authentic tasks to *promote values, attitudes, and practices for more sustainable societies*, it would seem that a revision of the kindergarten curriculum could be developed to equip educators with the necessary tools to raise environmental awareness and model and encourage sustainable and ethical choices.

## References

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More Photos:



*The Mud Pit*



*The Pirate Ship*





*“Tissestedet”- “The Urinal”*



*Stepping-stumps*





*Scaffolding*





