

Claiming the Dark Forest as Urban Children's Play Space

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Photo: Nina Prešlenkova

Hallo,

my name is Nina Prešlenkova and I am very passionate about telling parents and early education practitioners that **our children need less toys and more (dirty) free play activities in the nature**. After becoming a mother I've got interested in children's play and that motivated me to complete Master in Arts in Childhood and Youth (Open University) and found a small non-profit and non-professional community based NGO in Slovenia called ZOOPI. Together with my colleagues we organise **toys exchanges and activities for urban children to free play in the nature**, also when it gets dark.

This is our hobby – we do that in our free time so I will present here a point of view of a parent who decided to become a part time play work practitioner. So I want to talk about free play in the nature in the darkness.

My contention is that **playing in challenging conditions such as darkness should not be assessed only through lenses of risk but rather through lenses of short and long term benefits for children.**

I was puzzled myself first by the question: **are we mad to let the children play in the dark forest**, full of possible dangers. It is more than legitimate to ask yourself the same question. But there is also **another way of thinking about it: do the children deserve to feel happy and free and have great play memories?**

So this is **what we do**: we gather once a week in the afternoon in a group of 15 or so urban children between 3 and 9 years old and 3 to 4 adults and we go together in the nearby forest to play in the nature. We do that in spring, autumn and winter time with more or less the same group of children. We have a certain protocol each time but children are let to free play at least one hour during our gatherings. We do it also in the darkness of the winter.

But **why do we do it?** Because if you have long and dark winters as we do in Slovenia, it's hard to tell your children to wait and stay inside, be miserable and in nature-deficit for the next 4 months. The **benefits** of the activities in the dark nature are undeniably important. Even during winter times when we otherwise tend to stay inside, we let the children be physically active outside, and explore different types of play and the (dark) side of the nature that is often off-limits.

In such free play children **use senses other than the predominantly visual senses which are normally used while playing in the daylight.** Playing in the dark allows children to encounter with unknown conditions that evoke **uncertainty and sometimes even fear.** With the help of unstructured play in such challenging conditions children gain confidence in themselves and their potentials. They are growing socially and emotionally and their creativity is enhanced by different stimuli in the environment, supporting their cognitive development.

For us at ZOOPI, the free play activities in darkness were not an intentional activity, at least we did not plan them in advance. It happened spontaneously. During spring and autumn since 2013 we had provided activities for children called “Forest Hours”. In 2015 parents asked us about prolongation of our program which coincided with much shorter and colder winter days with prospects of snow. They were clear that they were not bothered if that meant we might start and end our weekly gatherings with their children in the nearby forest after the daylight was completely gone. The argument was strong that their children might miss the weekly company of their friends and adventures in the nature with us. We decided to give it a try. Just as simple as that.

I’ll tell you **a story to give you an idea why it’s worth giving it a try.**

Liam was 3 years old at the time, one of the youngest children in our group. Even after some time he still seemed a little reserved among other kids and was more confident around adult practitioners. I observed him enjoying the time in the dark forest but he was never in the centre of the group’s attention.

Once it was dark, starry winter night and we sat under the huge oak tree, observing the big moon and one of the girls started spontaneously telling the story – full of talking and walking animals that act like people. And Liam was very fast to continue the story with such enthusiasm and imagination that kept other children in awe for quite some time. He was completely in a flow and when he finished others greeted the end of the story with excitement.

That was the moment Liam became fully accepted as a full member of the group. For him it was a real breakthrough and step forward to his integrity and connection with others.

What does **the story tell us?**

Darkness as an extreme condition can act as a strong incentive for different types of play as compared to the day time play activities. During our daylight sessions in the same forest with the same children were always fast to run around and explore the nature. Sitting and telling stories as the main play activity was never an option for our kids.

Obviously Liam grabbed the chance to play his preferred activity and that supported his acceptance into the group and that's how he became more confident in relations with other children. He never again was seen as this small and timid boy but rather fearless and full of imagination.

We play workers also noticed that the children's **visual impairment**, limited almost completely by the light of their headlamp, was **the dominant factor to change the type and patterns of their free play activities.** They are more cautious and conscious of their physical environment as compared to play in the same natural environment during the day.



Photo: Nina Prešlenkova

Let us assume you are assessing the possibilities of implementing such a free-play-in-the-darkness project. Check first if following **preconditions could be met:**

1. You are living in such a **geographical position** that it gets dark in the afternoon and there is still time span of 2- 3 hours to when children normally get to beds.
2. Social norms in your society tell you **it is OK for children to be seen let's say on the streets in the dark afternoon.**
3. In your chosen natural environment there are **no life threatening dangers** in the night – there are no tigers searching for dinner ;-).

If you have those three OKs, then only you can do the next step. I highly **recommend starting with day time free play activities in the nature first** before you even think about the night time activities. Then only you are able to **get to know really well:**

1. **get to know the play space** – are there any potential risks – are there any unprotected holes, poisonous bushes, fast streams, potentially harmful animals?

2. **get to know your children**

In our case all of the children had been previously involved in our daylight outdoor activities, and all of them had appeared to understand and actively use our one and only rule: 'I will not wander into the forest further than I might see one of the adults'. Even the youngest children (3 years old), had demonstrated they are able to make smart decisions in challenging situations.

3. **get to know your co-workers**

Find unanimous agreement to doing it. Do you feel confident with each other? Do you know their strong points and limitations?

4. **get to know yourself**, your limitations and abilities, and be fair about your motivations. Are you afraid of the dark yourself?

I strongly believe that mutual trust between and among children, your co-workers and parents is THE most important condition BEFORE you even think of organising play activities in the dark nature.

To conclude – **our children need and deserve challenging play opportunities such as playing in the dark nature**, therefore I have following **proposals**:

1. First of all I would like to **welcome researchers to work with our organisation**. If you are a researcher and you are interested in researching this specific (extreme) condition of play – like how the adaptation of play happens in case of impaired visual sense – you are invited among us – we are more than willing to support you.
2. If you are a **play practitioner and have experiences in organising free play activities in the darkness** either in the nature or in the urban environment, please let me know – maybe we can start **playing in the dark movement! Yes, let's do that!**
3. If you are a **play practitioner and feel inspired** and encouraged to give it a try – contact me with your specific questions I will be happy to share our know-how and give you support.

To really conclude, **I believe it's time to change the outdated perception of the dark forest from Hansel and Gretel fairy tale**, full of witches that like to eat children and howling wolfs and rather **embrace the idea that darkness, too, inspires children to free play in the nature, with many immediate and long lasting benefits**.

Our mission in ZOOPI is to help children build significant memories from their adventurous experiences in the challenging natural conditions that might help them well into their adult future. We hope that in times of distress they will be able to look back in their childhood past and see who they were – small boys and girls that had fun together, were courageous enough to play in the dark and were part of the group that took care of them.

Thank you.

Video can be seen on You Tube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99dw_NkzFHA

or search on You Tube: ZOOPI Dark Forest Hours