

A photograph of three children in a forest. They are wearing colorful knitted hats and red jackets. One child is holding a large piece of wood. They are looking down at the forest floor, which is covered in fallen leaves. The background shows trees and green foliage.

ERBINAT

ASSOCIATION FOR EXPERIENCE
AND EDUCATION IN NATURE

Guide

Nature and
the Early
Years

Working outdoors with
children up to the age
of six.

Preface

At last, Luca managed to balance alone on the tree trunk. Elisa and Samuel had collected dry branches and lit their first fire together whilst Lara told them excitedly about the mouse, which had just scurried under a pile of leaves. Is there anything more rewarding than accompanying children on their adventures in the natural world, sharing their discoveries, listening to their stories and celebrating their successes with them?

ERBINAT – the Swiss Association for Experience and Education in Nature – is committed to professional educational work with people of all ages outdoors in the natural world.

This brochure presents our view of what it entails to accompany our youngest citizens through forests, fields, and woods so that they feel at ease and are able to profit from this valuable time outside.

With this in mind, we invite you to reflect on your own role and responsibilities as a nature educator as well as to further develop your practice.

We hope you continue to enjoy your adventures with children in the natural world.

Your
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Guide “Nature and the Early Years”



This guide is based on the Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care (Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der Schweiz) and the related Focus Publication on Environmental Education (Fokuspublikation Umweltbildung). It defines general guidelines and principles for the education and care of children up to six years of age in natural surroundings. This guide was developed by ERBINAT Early

Years Interest Group. The perspectives of both the educator and the child have been taken into account.

This guide is for everyone who works outdoors with children up to the age of six: nature pedagogues, playgroup leaders, kindergarten teachers, nursery staff, trainers of the aforementioned groups and policymakers within these institutions as well as parents.

The Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care (Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der Schweiz) and the Focus Publication on Environmental Education (Fokuspublikation Umweltbildung) are available for download in German, French and Italian at www.netzwerk-kinderbetreuung.ch

In this brochure, we use the designation "nature educator" for all of the above-mentioned target groups.

The Foundations

This guide is built on the following foundations which form the basis of our work and which incorporate our six guiding principles.

Enable contact

The natural world is a place of learning for children that cannot be replaced. It is our responsibility as adults to enable children to have access to the outdoors and to allow them to have lasting experiences under open skies.

Create trust

Children trust the adults with whom they feel safe and they learn best when they feel comfortable and secure – learning processes are interpersonal processes. Children need additional protection – both physical and psychological – in the natural world. A nature educator can relate to children's experiences and how they feel outdoors and are able to engage with the children's emotions. Nature educators know how to cultivate relationships with children outdoors.

Allow self-directed learning

Children intuitively choose learning content appropriate to their developmental stage without guidance; they are inherently active and eager learners. Children learn from each other and with each other. Free play in the natural world offers a boundless diversity of possibilities for these processes.

Provide support situationally

Nature educators observe the children in their care and support them as much as is necessary. When children are able to move through the natural world playfully and independently, their curiosity is awakened and learning is set in motion. The natural world invites creativity and offers plenty of space for children to indulge their need for movement. Children get to know that there are things in nature that remain constant – like the location of a tree or landscape features – and other things that change, such as the seasons, the weather and the light.

The following pages explain our six guiding principles which are fundamental for high-quality educational work with early years children outdoors. The perspectives of both the educator and the child have been taken into account. The checklists – “For me, as an adult, this means:” – are meant to encourage and support your own reflection.

The 6 guiding principles

Wellbeing

Connectedness to nature

Social learning

Involving all the senses

Nature as a space in
which to move freely

Risky play competency

*As a point of honour as
nature educators:
we maintain good relationships
with forestry personnel, game-
keepers, landowners, and local
authorities.*



Wellbeing

Children need a different kind of protection when outdoors as opposed to indoors. They can only learn when they feel safe and secure. On the one hand, they need the correct clothing in order to feel physically comfortable; on the other hand, they may need contact with a trusted adult and/or to be in a familiar place in order to feel psychologically secure. "Learning processes are interpersonal processes." This general guiding principle is even more relevant outdoors.

Nature educators are able to observe and accompany children attentively. They know about children's developmental stages and can take the perspective of a child to deduce

For me, as an adult, this means:

- I take responsibility for the wellbeing of the children in my care and work on building trust
- I develop a relationship with each individual child and am aware that it is only on the basis of this emotional security that learning in the natural world is possible
- I am able to assess weather developments and can take steps at any time in order to guarantee the children's safety

its needs. The nature educator is trained to engage with children emotionally. Their educational knowledge and experience help them to offer a group of children a secure and relaxed environment outdoors.

Nature educators can set up a learning base in the woods in an orderly and environmentally friendly manner. They are careful that the natural world isn't negatively impacted during building and crafting activities and that they leave no trace.

«Learning processes in the early years are relationship-based. Children develop relationships with their social and physical surroundings.»

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 30)



Connectedness to nature

Outdoors, children experience the continuity of natural cycles. The diversity found in nature affects children emotionally and they develop a relationship with the natural world. They can take the perspective of other organisms and empathise with them.

Outdoors skills such as lighting a fire, preparing plant materials or sawing wood allows children to develop new competencies. Rituals strengthen the relationship to, and understanding of, the yearly cycles of nature.

Children develop creativity when they search for and discover natural materials for their games. They develop an emotional attachment to the natural world through play. This is essential for the later development of ecological understanding and sustainable behaviour.

For me, as an adult, this means:

- I take time to reflect on my own connection to nature
- I am mindful and respectful of the natural world
- I regularly train my nature awareness

"Children need free time and space in order to realise their needs for play and learning."

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 29)

Nature educators are important role models of how to connect with and be in the natural world. They are able to use this know-how in an educational setting, understand the natural phenomena around them and react calmly even in unexpected situations. Their professional knowledge and practical abilities help them to pass on their enthusiasm for nature to children which allows them to engage emotionally with the natural world in turn.



Social Learning

Children learn from each other. They observe how their peers achieve something and emulate them.

Being in a group outdoors means that children need to find solutions to problems together and this strengthens their social competencies. When discussing how to use natural materials for play or crafts, children practice expressing their opinions and needs. Challenges such as the occasionally demanding weather conditions call for mutual support. Overcoming these challenges strengthens group bonds.

For me, as an adult, this means:

- I am confident that I can support children through difficult situations
- I let children find solutions independently
- My own suggestions for activities and tips remain in the background

"The main task of an adult is to guarantee a good balance between their suggestions and the children's own initiative, between help and hanging back in their educational actions."

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 52)

Nature educators have appropriate leadership skills and can understand the social context and world of the children in their care. They can deal with various emotional challenges such as separation anxiety, quarrels or social exclusion. They can assess group dynamics as well as individual children correctly in order to intervene or make adjustments where necessary. They recognise opportunities for facilitating social learning in the natural world, for example, natural materials for play or crafts.



Involving all the senses

In the natural world, children experience the seasons and weather with all their senses. Warm spring sunshine on their faces or cold fingers on a November day directly convey information through the skin. When, for example, a beetle runs across their hand, the children receive a new tactile experience. Hearing natural sounds, they learn how their ears can convey important information that their eyes can't see. However, their eyes can show them how the light and the colours change throughout the seasons. Their sense of smell tells them about the damp earth, about the smoke from the fire or about the elderflowers in bloom.

For me, as an adult, this means:

- The individual child and his/her interests are at the heart of my work
- I am curious about the children's discoveries and their questions
- I have an appropriate repertoire of songs, stories and biology basics in order to react spontaneously to the children's ideas and to natural phenomena

"Small children learn with all their senses, led by their interests and previous experience."

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 48)

Nature educators observe the children playing in order to support them with their projects, to follow through on their ideas, to strengthen learning and to encourage new learning processes. They know how valuable free play is, how during this time children learn about their surroundings and their own capabilities. Nature educators are experienced in finding appropriate places and material to support exploration and experimentation, building and demolishing, depending on the season, the weather and the interests of the children. They take anxieties seriously and gently allow each child to approach the natural world in his or her own way.



Nature as a space in which to move freely

The natural world offers children an extremely diverse set of opportunities for movement, which they intuitively make use of: balancing over tree trunks or jumping down from them, climbing up slopes and then rolling back down, slipping and sliding, jumping and competing with each other. The basic exercise needs of children are met and satisfied naturally outdoors. New challenges are sought and found, dependent on the developmental stage of each child. Children develop dexterity and coordination, become stronger and healthier and can exert themselves to experience healthy physical fatigue.

For me, as an adult, this means:

- I observe the children and guide them when necessary or desired
- I am prepared to intervene supportively but let the children gain their own experience
- I am aware of the importance of exercise and movement for children and encourage as much of it as possible

"A child learns by doing, by observing and by exchanging with others. Doing this it expands its emotional, social, motor and cognitive competencies as well as its verbal skills."

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 49)

Nature educators know how important it is that children can realise their basic exercise needs. They understand which physical activities the children need for the development of their motor skills and therefore what they want to and should be able to undertake independently. Accordingly, they are able to use the generous space afforded by the natural world. Likewise, the educator knows how to integrate movement situationally if and when the children show an interest in it.



Risky play competency

Children experience the natural world as a space in which opportunities appear endless. Failures and near-misses also have their place here, as these experiences are indispensable for the maturation of a self-reliant personality. Children want to go on adventures and to take risks. When a child rolls down a slope, it is honing its body awareness. Children learn to recognise and trust their own abilities through play and the experience of testing their physical limits, step by step. In this way, children teach themselves to cope with danger. From an evolutionary perspective, this is a key competency for later life.

For me, as an adult, this means:

- I can assess risk and act responsibly
- Within a risk management framework, and where appropriate, I allow children the opportunity to deal with risks themselves and learn from this experience
- I maintain close contact with the parents and share day-to-day events from the natural world with them. I take their fears and worries seriously

"You put the strengths and the potential of the child in the centre and expand outwards from these to new, less certain experiential horizons."

(Swiss Orientation Framework for Early Years Education and Care, p. 55)

The ability to successfully engage with parents helps the nature educator to build a foundation of trust. Nature educators run parental events outdoors and inform the parents comprehensively about their day-to-day activities with the children. They can skilfully explain the educational value of the natural world. They understand the worries that parents might have and can introduce them to the importance of risky play for child development – as well as advocating the view that an occasional scraped knee is an acceptable risk. Recording observations helps them to discuss a child's development with their parents.

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