

Childcare philosophy: 'Let kids be kids' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Inner-city Brisbane children will soon be exposed to a new type of early learning experience - one spent mainly outdoors, in a wilderness devoid of synthetic materials and man-made structures, where they rely only on nature and their imaginations.

Early childhood centre operator C&K has fleshed out plans for its new Ashgrove headquarters and kindergarten facility on the old Ithaca TAFE site.

Following the model of early childhood centres in Scandinavia and Germany, the "Centre for Excellence" will feature more than an acre of outdoor space complete with a rainforest, a creek and an outdoor pizza oven.

C&K director Barrie Elvish said the idea of a predominantly outdoors learning experience in early childhood was gaining popularity in the United Kingdom and North America, but owing to legislated safety requirements had been slower to catch on in Australia.

"The plans we have for the early childhood centre at the C&K Centre for Excellence will incorporate the indigenous flora and fauna in a large space that encourages children to explore and climb, make their own special places, cook their own produce and possibly even have sleep-outs with their parents overnight," he said.

"There's lots of evidence that being outdoors benefits children both in terms of physical health and their general well being."

Traditionally, Mr Elvish said, Australian authorities had wanted to have a safe outdoor environment.

"Safe being risk-free, and I guess the easiest way to do it is to just have a synthetic outdoor environment," he said.

Risk and "children's rights to childhood" was the theme of a two-day conference held last month at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Keynote speaker at the C&K-sponsored event, Tim Gill - author of *No Fear: Growing up in a risk adverse society* - said that childhood in the UK and Australia was becoming "colonised" by risk aversion.

"Activities and experiences that previous generations of children enjoyed without a second thought have been relabelled as troubling or dangerous, while the adults who still permit them are branded as irresponsible," he said.

Mr Gill cited the examples of schools banning certain games because of "concerns that play times were becoming too rough", and children in Birmingham, England, who were "not just arrested but DNA tested for the 'crime' of building a tree house in a park".

The result of a "zero risk approach to childhood" had the effect of drastically restricting the opportunities for children to learn from their self-directed experiences and mistakes, Mr Gill told the audience.

Mr Elvish, for his part, said: "To build resilience children need to take risk to learn to deal with failure. Surely a broken arm is better than a broken spirit?"

"The importance of play and risk in every child's learning development cannot be understated," he added.

"Understanding that risk can be part of play are natural learning strategies where children can experience different sensations, create their own ideas, solutions and develop their imagination."

Mr Elvish said the 60 children attending the Ashgrove centre - which will also serve as the group's new headquarters - would build their own play structures from materials they found onsite.

"They'll build their own cubbies out of fallen branches and things like that, and basically use their own creativity," he said.

Mr Elvish said it was an idea that would hopefully catch on at other centres around the state, even if they didn't have the space offered by the Ithaca site.

"In the UK, I've visited some [natural outdoor settings] that are established in a space as large as a tennis court. So it doesn't necessarily need to be a huge outdoor space, although the one we're building at Ithaca [over an acre] is," he said.

"And if there's no outdoor space immediately available, what they do overseas is go to the same spot in a park on a regular basis. So if not onsite it can be offsite."

Weather certainly should not present any obstacles in Queensland, Mr Elvish said.

"There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad choice of clothing. That's their standard response," he said of his experiences in northern Europe.

"I visited [a childcare centre] in Scotland last year where the children would go out in minus-10 degrees. They just had their little Michelin Man type suits and go outside and do their thing."

Mr Elvish said around half of the places at the Ashgrove centre had already been reserved, before the plans had been formally announced.

He said workers had been on the Ithaca site since in May, removing asbestos and diseased vegetation before beginning the substantial "5-star sustainability type" refurbishment of the existing buildings, ahead of a planned March 2013 opening.

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