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Self-Reflection of Outdoor Play Activity

This assessment focused on therapeutic play within an outdoor environment, which I planned and facilitated with my two children in our local park. Prior to the activity, I carried out a risk assessment, and my children gave assent to participate, including the recording and photographs taken for submission. My mother also provided consent to be included in the assessment in her role as the person recording the activity.

The purpose of using a green space was to support the emotional well-being of young children by encouraging mindfulness and present-moment awareness through exploratory and symbolic play in nature. It became evident throughout our engagement with the natural environment that green spaces play an important role in holistic child development. The environment we selected was not merely a location, but a learning space that created opportunities to explore mathematics, science, language, art and social interaction, yet on the other hand, there were positive impacts on wellbeing – a sense of joy, calm and relaxation developed throughout the activity as the children were provided with rich opportunities to explore freely, use their imagination and interact with natural materials, suggesting positive influence over our mental health and wellbeing.

The environment offered a variety of open-ended resources such as leaves, twigs, stones, bark and moss. In addition, the surrounding sounds of the river and birds created a peaceful atmosphere. These elements provided Moses and Tilly with present moments and sensory experiences that supported their curiosity and engagement with the natural world. The space, within the safe boundaries I had set, allowed them freedom and autonomy that is often more limited in indoor environments. Without the need for plastic, battery-powered toys with a single predetermined function, or overly resourced settings which too much choice it is overstimulating; simple, authentic materials such as bark and twigs took on multiple meanings and uses. For example, these materials were used to create a rescue shelter for animals. An unexpected discovery of a minibeast by Moses brought his rescue center to life, while moss was used as a warm blanket to keep the creature comfortable. Tilly created a log-pile house for snakes, bringing Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo* story to life. These opportunities would likely be more limited in indoor environments. The natural environment therefore offered numerous affordances, a concept explored within Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances, which refers to the opportunities for action that environments provide. These affordances enabled the children to interact with the natural environment in multiple and creative ways.

The activity also relates to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), which proposes that learning occurs through experience, reflection and interaction with the environment. By exploring natural materials and creating symbolic representations, the children were able to actively learn through hands-on experiences rather than through passive instruction. However, on reflection, I feel that I spoke too frequently throughout the activity. As the facilitator, I could have allowed the environment and nature itself to guide the experience more organically. This is something I would approach differently in future practice. In review, I may have exercised too much control during the activity, and the experience could have benefited from a more child-led approach.

The mindfulness element of the activity appeared to support my children's emotional wellbeing. Encouraging them to notice sounds, textures and sights in the natural environment helped promote calmness and present-moment awareness. Research frequently highlights how time spent in nature can reduce stress and support positive mental wellbeing, particularly for young children. Moses can sometimes struggle with stress, worry and anxious thoughts. During the activity, I observed a noticeable change in his body language and tone of voice when comparing the beginning and end of the session, when we started and finished the activity by grounding ourselves as a "tree." By the end of the session, he appeared happier, more relaxed and fully immersed in the natural environment, with a calmer demeanour and overall presence. Together, we all felt positive, calm and engaged. It was refreshing to simply be present and aware, particularly in contrast to the fast-paced nature of everyday life. The experience allowed us to slow down and notice the natural world through sensory grounding. In comparison to many indoor environments, the reduced levels of stimulation within the natural space appeared to support emotional wellbeing. This observation led me to consider whether outdoor environments, particularly green spaces, may help reduce cognitive overload.

However, I believe I could have facilitated the activity more effectively by allowing our senses to guide the experience rather than relying so heavily on verbal instruction. At times, I may have spoken excessively, whereas the experience might have benefited from simply listening, observing and allowing the natural environment to support self-regulation and emotional balance. In addition, providing more opportunities for the children to share their thoughts, ideas and perspectives could have further enhanced the activity. Although the activity included some structure while allowing for elements of child-led exploration, I recognise that I could have stepped back further. Vygotsky's (1978) theory suggests that scaffolding is important in supporting children's learning; however, effective scaffolding requires a balance between guidance and autonomy. Reflecting on this, I believe I could

have adopted more of a facilitator role rather than acting as a constant instructor. My presence inevitably influenced their play, and greater autonomy may have allowed for even deeper exploration.

Despite these reflections, the overall aim of the activity was achieved. There was clear evidence of engagement, creativity and emotional regulation. The strengths of the session were found in nature's open-ended resources, the freedom to explore and the sensory experiences made possible by the outdoor environment. However, the time constraint limited the natural progression of the activity. The need to record the session for assessment purposes interrupted the flow of play and restricted deeper engagement with the environment. Interestingly, once the recording had ended, the children continued their play independently without instruction. They chose to extend their exploration using the materials they had collected while I simply observed. Their play developed further as they continued creating, problem solving, communicating and laughing together, which appeared to have a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing.

In conclusion, the activity was largely successful in achieving its intended aims. However, effective outdoor learning requires intentional facilitation while preserving children's autonomy in play. In future practice, I would allow more time for exploration, reduce the level of verbal direction and incorporate greater opportunities for child-led decision-making.

Reference List:

Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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Gibson, J.J. (1979) *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.