

Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



RISK TAKING



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

I once knew a person who used to run training and encounter groups. One of the truths that he taught us was you learn only and always by the willingness to take a risk. He stressed that when you take a risk and it doesn't work out well, it is not failure...it's learning! Just because you are not successful when you take a risk, you should never judge yourself as being a failure, but rather embrace all that you have learned in the process and hold your head up high, knowing that you did your best. You increased your own knowledge by direct experience.

When children are very young, many are curious and want to explore their surroundings. This can be risky. With proper guidance from their parents, kids can often discover things for themselves. The parent's role is to make sure their child is not doing something that could cause harm to themselves.

Now let's enter the realm of what we call "wild nature play." At Thorne Nature Experience, we define wild nature play as "self-directed, intrinsic behavior that is actively engaged in by children during unstructured time in nature that builds upon their sense of wonder."



Photo courtesy of Thorne Nature Experience

Wild Nature Play

I point out here that Rachel Carson, the famous author, wrote a whole book entitled *A Sense of Wonder* in which she stressed the importance of having an adult mentor to lead a child into nature, allowing them to develop their own sense of wonder under the mentor's guidance. Thorne feels that wild nature play is supported by teacher/mentors who are effective in cultivating "cool" experiences through their own enthusiasm and interest in the natural world. By strengthening their connection to nature through living and non-living things in their environment, children will enhance their sense of comfort in nature. Their emotional responses will reinforce that connection.

I fondly remember Frank Trevor, my biology teacher at Millbrook School in Millbrook, NY. He would take us outdoors on field trips and his enthusiasm was con-

tagious when he discovered various animals or plants. His excitement certainly transferred to his students. It certainly did to me!

Wild nature play certainly has its risks, but the role of the mentor is to make sure that natural hazards are removed or minimized. For example, if children are being allowed to play in a stream, the mentor must be sure that the water level is shallow enough that there is no danger of a child being swept away by the power of the current.

When engaging in wild play, children can unleash their own creativity and imagination. They will be led by their own curiosity and will take risks that will help them overcome physical, mental, and emotional barriers through their own intrinsic problem solving during their play experience. I remember as a little boy, I loved to go outside on a

rainy day and play in the mud and make dams to divert the trickle of water. I intrinsically was learning about the physics of water flow. Dr. David Hawkins, the great University of Colorado philosopher who was also interested in early childhood development, called this kind of activity "messing about with science." I love that concept!

After almost 90 years, I think of the many risks that I have taken in my life. Some worked out well, others didn't. I certainly learned a lot in the process. I'm still learning!

Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute) in Boulder. For over 64 years they have helped "connect youth to nature." For information about their classes for kids and other programs, check www.thornenature.org or email info@thornenature.org or call (303) 449-3647, ext. 100.

