



# Exploring the Importance of Outdoor Environment in Developing Self-Experience of a Child

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## Abstract

A child needs best for the formation of themselves. A more continuous experience needs for the stabilisation of the characteristics of children in the process of building confidence and maturity in life. This research focuses on the investigation of the favourite place for children age 6 years old. This will strengthen the engagement of children experience with its environment. The outdoor environment contains a variety of natural science that can be learned directly by children. The aim of the study is to seek for a positive impact of the outdoor environment in the process of formation of the child and the objectives of the study are to understand the means of the outdoor environment with children, to develop the criteria of outdoor space for children and its implications for children. It is importance to know apparently the appropriateness of children's outdoor environment and where it should be created for improving the development of self-experience of a child.

Keywords: children; environment; experience

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## 1.0 Introduction

Children are the stakeholder in this study because they are the driving force for the foreseeable future. They need to be educated to appreciate the nature and natural landscape so that it will always be protected and preserved. According to the theory by Havighurst (1953), stages of child development is divided into three stages. The first stage is the stage of infancy (0-2years) and early childhood (3-6 years) where they begin to talk, interacts with others and learns to distinguish between right and wrong. The second level is the middle level (7-12 years old) where they begin to make friends with others; understand the concept of life and morals. The third stage of the initial stage of early adolescence (13-15 years old), and late adolescence or youth (16-19 years) where they are almost matured and can recognise the concept of good and bad in life, as well as able to control the psychomotor, cognitive and emotional development. According to Islamic scholars, this division is generated based on the observation of the elaboration of the physical, mental and emotional.

This study is focused on children in the first stage, aged 6 years old. Ames et al. (2012) stated that children at the age of 6 years old are more enthusiastic. They could be considered as growing more matured, love adventures, attracted to new games, trying to be more independent, more daring, yet very sensitive and emotional. They are not willing to listen to any comments or criticism on them, especially when they considered themselves being very good. Meanwhile, from the observations at kindergarten, most of these aged 6 children are very cautious when speaking. Most of them will listen to instructions before making any action, in contrast to other below age.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Outdoor Environment

The outdoor environment is a space that gives more opportunities to children in created imagination, creativity, learned behaviour and social connections. It gives and promotes children experience with nature (Moore, R.C & Cooper-Marcus, and C. 2008). "Natural and outdoor environments define as a dynamic and rough plays capes. The topography, like slopes and rocks, affords natural obstacles that children have to cope with. The vegetation provides shelters and trees for climbing. The meadows are for running and tumbling" (Fjortoft, 2000).

The outdoor environment offers a sense of freedom for children. They can play freely with peers, expand their imagination beyond the restraints of indoor activities, release energy, and explore their sense of touch, smell, taste and their sense of motion (Kellert, 2005). Besides, the outdoor environment is the ideal environment for experiential learning and offers unique opportunities to be creative. Greenfield (2004) stated that outdoor environment is nature or physical space which can enrich and enhance a child's learning environment. A well as outdoors provides open-ended opportunities for play, learning, problem-solving and developing social competence that are at times unpredictable and risky (Greenfield, 2004). Ashley P. (2011) stated that outdoor environment is outdoor space is suitable for a wide variety of activities, active and quiet.

### **2.1.1 The Criteria of Outdoor Environment towards Children**

The outdoor environment should have different natural features such as grass, soil, sand, rock and also a variety of plants. Ashley P. (2011) mentioned all researchers agreed that outdoor environment is pivotal to the childhood experience. The criteria of the outdoor environment are divided into two categories which are natural (nature) and constructed (man-made). The greening area is integrated between the natural and constructed elements. These includes forest, swamp, mud, field, trees, edible garden, sand, rock, water and others natural elements (DEEWR, 2009, p.16). In the outdoors, children can experience about climate, openness, messiness, wildlife, and different landscapes such as hills, holes, streams, and mud puddles (Greenfield, 2004). According to Munoz, S.A (2009), and Elliot, S (2008), the natural outdoor environments include the elements of i) Sandpits area for sensory, symbolic and physical activities at outdoor environment, ii) A range of planting to encourage a variety of modes of outdoor activities, such in gardens where children can grow their plants, picking and smelling, encourage butterflies, birds and other insects, iii) Water plays areas for sensory play.

The second The criteria of outdoor environment according to DEEWR (2009) and Louy (2005) which are i) The outdoor environment or is providing rich opportunities for children to develop their interest and explore new ideas, ii) The activities should be engaging and related with the nature elements to gain their sense of freedom and learn the skills to manage self-risk in outdoor, iii) The design of outdoor environment need to include natural features and safety of materials for play. The examples of outdoor environment are i) Dividing areas by using woods, planting- potted plants or fences, ii) Providing shade by using suitable plants/trees for children –sheltered space, iii) Easy to access between indoor and outdoor space, iv) Safety materials that not hazardous to children – used recycle materials such as tyre, bottles and others.

Louy (2005) stated the outdoor space characteristic requires to using all senses such sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. All these senses will give nature inspires and creativity for children. The diversity of natural elements can give different sensory experience for children in enjoying the outdoor environment. Furthermore, the criteria of the outdoor environment also influenced by design. Some design needs to consider in creating a dynamic space with safety, conducive space of outdoor environment in the learning experience for children. Besides, it will give children to build up their self-confidence, multi-tasking learning activities, open-ended interaction and connection with nature environment, as well as develop their appreciation and awareness towards the natural environment.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This study was conducted in three (3) phases. The details of the phases are discussed below: Phase 1 involves the study of literature and picture selection around Taiping, Perak. The images are based on the attraction places in Taiping. Each image obtained will be put at the level of naturalness from modified to pristine. Regarding Miskell (2011) the 7-point scale was used, ranging from spectrum colour of red, very low (VL) totally modified to the colour green,

very high (V-H) which is indigenous or pristine. This scaling attempts to include as best as possible a rating that suits different types of environments.



Figure 1: Scale-like spectrum of naturalness  
(Source: Miskell, 2011)

Only four images were selected and evaluated by the natural level. Location of image VL/1 was at Bukit Merah Waterpark where it consist of water, plants and playground; image L/2 was at Kuala Sepetang, which consist of water, plants, decking and gazebo; image MH/3 at Taman Tasik Taiping, consist of tree, water and roadways, and lastly image label H/4 is at Burmese Pool, Bukit Larut. This image shows a natural waterfall consist of rock, water, and plants. This amount of picture was selected very optimum in respond to the child's age and their ability. All of these children selected at the age of 6 years by the teacher in preschool around Seri Iskandar according to their capabilities in understanding, knowing the elements of outdoor and indoor, and children who can write alphabets and read letters independently.



Figure 2: (a) Bukit Merah Waterpark; (b) Kuala Sepetang; (c) Taman Tasik Taiping; (d) Burmese Pool  
(Source: Author, 2016)

Phase 2 involves ground study between researcher, kindergarten teachers and children aged 6 years old. This study is to carry out an experiment with children aged 6 years old, to

see the order of places where they most prefer to have around them. Korpela et al. (2002) studied that children used their favourite places for cognitive restoration and one-third for emotional regulation. The study phase involved three kindergartens in Seri Iskandar with the total of 20 children aged 6 years old. These are the children who attended kindergarten directly.

Table 1: Respondents of the study according to gender age 6 years old

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Boys	10	50.0
Girls	10	50.0
TOTAL	20	100.0

(Source: Author, 2016)

First, children will be tested on their ability to identify the elements of the natural environment around them like water, plants, soil, rain and nature. Experience sharing sessions will run alongside the children and their teachers about the importance of nature to human beings. It is for additional input, especially from the perspective of the needs of children with their outdoor environment. Activities will be conducted by the image organised by children. Each image will be asked and explained to the children according to their age. Children will observe each image individually and produce a hierarchy of images of the places they most prefer to have activities and exist closed to them. The composition of the chosen picture vertically will be attached as proof. They were also asked to write their name on the back of the images where they love most. All the images will be recorded for analysis.

Phase 3 involves the results of data that has been recorded in the kindergartens. Each set of image analysis process will be carried out according to gender and age. This analysis process is conducted by using IBM SPSS statistic 24 software.

#### 4.0 Results and Discussion

Nowadays, children and families often have limited opportunities to connect with the natural environment. Outdoor environments promote many benefits to children in physically, socially and mentally. It can stimulate the multiplicity of children’s play experience and contribute to their healthy development. Lots of the benefits of connecting to nature have been well predictable in numerous scientific research studies and publications. Collectively, many of research revealed that children’s physical health, social, psychological and academic was positively impacted when they have daily contact with nature and outdoor environment activities. Research shows us that several of the basic tasks that children achieved though outdoor environment such as, exploring, risk-taking, fine and gross motor development and the absorption of vast amounts of basic knowledge (Johnson. J. 2010).

Table 2: Percentage of place preferred photo selection

Preferred Selection	Very Low (VL/1)	Low (L/2)	Medium High (MH/3)	High (H/4)
1	85	0	0	15

2	0	45	30	25
3	5	30	45	20
4	10	25	25	40
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Source: Author, 2016)

Most of the respondents choose the VL/1 photo, which amounts to 85%, but none selected the MH/3 and L/2 photo. The result revealed that the entire respondent mainly prefers first to choose or select very low (VL) pictures, amount 85%. Then secondly, followed by low (L/2) about 45%, third, medium high (MH/3) amount 45%, and lastly, high (H/4) amount is 40%. The result revealed that children at Seri Iskandar children age 6 years old prefer to select very low (VL) pictures with the water element. They love to interact with water compared to the other elements in outdoor environments. From the interviews, respondents are afraid of wildlife creatures in natural setting, and discomfort with the natural facilities. They mentioned that parents do not allow communicating with nature and less being in the outdoor. A 'culture of fear' has parents afraid for their children's safety. A 2004 study found that 82% of mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 12 identified crime and safety concerns as one of the primary reasons they don't allow their children to play outdoors (Clements, 2004). Moreover, parents are busy working, and less spends time leisure in the outdoor. Most of the class and activities were held in the indoor rather outdoor environments.

According to Crain (2001), children will be better able to get along with others, smarter, happier and healthier when they have been exposed to outdoor activities. The outdoor environment is beneficial to children for spending time outdoors, exposed to fresh air, sunlight, health benefit and exposed to natural elements such as grass, trees and sand. Besides offers a sense of touch, smells, sight, hearing and taste. The outdoor environment is important to children's development in each way which is intellectual, emotionally, socially, spiritually and physically (Kellert, 2005).

Mentally, outdoor environment builds up the children imaginative and creative play as well as fosters language and collaborative skills (Moore & Wong 1997, Taylor, et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2001). It also positively creates a child with a sense of wonder and as a motivator for life learning (Wilson 1997). Studies in the US show that schools that use forms of nature-based experiential education support significant student gains in social studies, science, language arts, and math. Besides, according to Malone & Tranter (2003), play and exposed in a diverse natural environment reduces or eliminates bullying between children. Moore (1986) and Bixler et al. (2002) stated that outdoor or natural environments could stimulate social interaction between children and as well as improves their social relationship. It's supported by Pyle (2002) that mentioned with disclosure to natural environments also improves children's cognitive development by improving their consciousness, the way of thinking and observational skills. As well as reduce the impact of life's stresses on children and helps they deal with adversity (Wells & Evans, 2003). It helps children to be more self-discipline and have more positive feelings about each other (Moore 1996).

Physically, outdoor environment helps improves their physical activities, expand their powers or skills of observation and creativity and instills a sense of peace, place and being at

one with the world (Crain 2001). According to Moore & Wong (1997), play and exposed in outdoor environments will help stimulates all aspects of children development more readily than indoor environments. Mackett and Paskins (2004) point out, there is a double benefit from participating in play outside the home – the physical activity itself and the opportunity to walk/ cycle to get to the place of the activity. Furthermore, it is important in children's development for their independence and autonomy (Bartlett, 1996) besides an appreciation for natural environments and exploring relationships with other living and non-living things.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Overall, this study showed that the majority of children at Seri Iskandar's kindergarten are slightly less interested in nature, but there are some who preferred. Those who fall under this group category are children who had an experience in overseas pre-school. However, they have chosen the element of water as the most desired element of outdoor environments for the process of gaining self- experience in their life. We suggest that parents should spend more time outdoors with their children for this purpose. In general, teachers also play an important role to educate and nurture children to appreciate nature by guiding them individually or en masse, via outdoor play activities that involve them majorly learn in outdoor class and get close to natural elements such as water, soils, and vegetation. This will create better engagement and closeness to their outdoor environments while enhancing creativity during their learning experience. In future, research continues in exploring the outdoor space design criteria in school in expanding children experience towards the natural world.

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