NATURE AS A PLAYGROUND

Jorunn Nyhus, Vestvold College, Norway.

Norwegian children have traditionally played in the fields and woods, there being more than enough room in our country for such activity. However, the world of the young is changing. There is more traffic, making it dangerous for many children to move about freely. T.V., video and computers also mean that children lead more sedentary lives.

Recent research in several Nordic countries shows that this modern lifestyle can have a negative influence on child development and health. Traditional child culture is also threatened.

College lecturers Jorunn Nyhus Braute and Christofer Bang have conducted a three year project, the aim of which has been to stimulate preschool teachers to spend more time with their children in the local natural environment. Nature provides children with rich learning experiences, both cognitive and moral. The challenges they meet will stimulate their development. One of the kindergartens involved was Labakken Kindergarten, whose children are used to spending much time out of doors. The landscape and the play areas around the kindergarten provide valuable educational experiences. The stimulating local environment of woods, fields, sea and shore encourages curiosity and a love of nature. The kindergarten has a little boat and fishing nets. In the kindergarten's statement of aims, we can read: *"the woods, with their variety of natural challenges, serve as a magnificent play area for children of all ages and stages of development. Trips outside the kindergarten are made three days a week. To be able to go on the excursions with food, drink and magnifying glasses is exciting. Each section of the kindergarten has its own special area in the*

woods. It is here that children find their 'natural playground'" The kindergarten staff and children also make simple apparatus, suitable for children's play and movement. In these familiar surroundings the children feel the security and sense of belonging that arises as a result of their acquaintance with their area's challenges, possibilities and limitations. The staff in the kindergarten believe that their children benefit tremendously from being out of doors so much, in natural surroundings. They feel that children;

- *develop creativity and imagination,*
- *become more secure,*
- *master motor co-ordination skills, as a result of the many different physical challenges,*
- *develop a curiosity about the aspects of nature they see and experience,*
- *experience less conflict with other children,*
- *develop positive values, e.g. become better at helping each other,*
- *discover the enjoyment of being out of doors in all types of weather,*
- *are more likely to initiate play activities themselves,*
- *develop stamina and physical strength.*

Because children in Labakken Kindergarten have a 'natural playground', they experience a variety of physical challenges. They develop the ability to tackle these challenges effectively. The kindergarten staff believe that this has a positive on children's concentration and their later learning. The work done here demonstrates that it is still possible to use nature as a playground and that this practice has positive results. I strongly believe that kindergartens in other countries have the same possibility of making nature a central arena for children's play.