



I Ur och Skur Mulleborg and Skogsknattarna Forest Kindergartens



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This report has been produced to give Early Years professionals an insight into the Swedish forest kindergartens which are called “I Ur och Skur” or “Rain or Shine” schools. A separate report covers the organisation, history, research and benefits associated with forest kindergartens. This report is about the morning I spent in each nursery observing and interacting with both the staff and children. Both establishments are situated on Lidingö, an island, not far from Stockholm.

In December 2008, the Scottish Government published The Early Years Framework which sets out their strategy for ensuring children have the best start in life. The benefits of outdoor play are mentioned:

Children are entitled to take part in physical activities and to play, including outdoors, and have an opportunity to experience and judge and manage risk. (Article 31) The Early Years Framework p11.

Outdoor play in particular can also be a major contributor to outcomes around physical activity and healthy weight. The Early Years Framework p18.



Figure 1: Group tree climbing!

When it comes to priorities for action, outdoor play is included:

HMIe will continue to focus on the quality of energetic and outdoor play on all inspection activities. Evidence and reports will continue to include evaluations of outdoor learning and developments in such areas as Forest School Initiative. Section 5: Priorities for Action – Short term action, The Early Years Framework p26.

Nurseries and schools supporting outdoor learning and outdoor play. Trying out innovative approaches such as nature kindergartens is a medium term priority. Section 5: Priorities for Action – medium term priority, The Early Years Framework p26.

The Early Years Framework 2 features the first Scottish nature kindergarten, The Secret Garden as an example of innovative good practice.

Thus I hope that this report will be relevant and interesting given the changes which are set out for the Early Years sector in the next few years.

I Ur och Skur Mulleborg nursery school

This was the original forest school established by Siw Linde and Susanne Drougge in 1985. It moved in 1990 to its current site, which is a rented property. This site exemplifies how a nursery can grow from strength to strength when the staff and parents share the same vision, values and expectations for their children over many years.



Figure 2: The high staff child ratio allows for greater interaction



Figure 3: The dry stream

When the children are dropped off at the nursery they join other children playing outside in the spacious, leafy grounds rather than enter through the house. There are many wooden play structures. These have been made or donated by parents and staff. The play house in Figure 3 belonged to Magnus Linde when he was a child. Other features such as a dry stream for water play have also been built into the grounds.

Fireplaces are a feature in all I Ur och Skur schools. This structure is also used as a shelter and place to sleep, on insulation mats. There are strict rules about approaching a fireplace and appropriate behaviour in this area.



Figure 4: The fireplace and shelter



Figure 5: Playing with dough outdoors

Many activities which traditional nurseries leave indoors take place outside. Plastic cloth over the wooden table provides a suitable surface for many activities and clips keep this in place on windy days. Woodwork takes place on an old table in the playground beside a shed where the tools are stored.

At least twice per week the children spend the day away from the nursery. They take their lunches and snack with them, each carrying their own gear in backpacks. This helps the children get to know the surrounding area and return to favourite places. It also gives the children greater opportunities to learn more about nature and the changes which take place through the seasons, year on year.



Figure 6: Getting ready to leave

This walk was into clearly familiar territory. The children discussed the natural features coming, begging to run to the five-fingered birch and wondering whether they would see any more signs of a beaver near a pond.

The walk was broken up with several stops. At the meadow, a few simple games were played and songs sung. At the pond, the children simply stood still and reflected about what they saw. Just before entering the forest, the children gathered in a circle for a snack and drink. Whilst this was happening the leader told a story using a felt worm and various natural objects which discussed recycling and decomposition of leaf litter. She continued with a couple of memory games, again using natural materials laid out on a large white cotton square.



Figure 7: Spotting each other!

Next we went up the woody hillside following a tiny path. The children knew where they were going and headed for the fallen down tree. Immediately three girls picked up some bark and started playing houses. The bark was used for the crockery. Some boys gathered together in a little hollow with rocks on two sides. The conversation sounded serious. A mixed group of children went off to climb trees together and run around the woods with sticks.

This was where I witnessed the only accident during my whole week. A child tripped and fell over a stone. There was no blood and a few tears but within minutes was up and running about quite happily again. I left the children around midday. They remained in the woods until 1.30pm before heading back to school.

I Ur och Skur Skogsknattarna Nursery School

This nursery is perhaps the one which typifies the image of a forest school. Unlike many other schools, the indoor building is one of the teacher's houses, near the wood. It is only used when the weather is too bad to be outside for six hours. The standard nursery day is from 8am to 2pm. The ten children, aged 2-6 years old meet in a car park with the two leaders and together walk up to the forest school site which is tucked away about 100m off a path in the woods.



Figure 8: Over a number of years parents and staff have built play structures. This is a balance trail which leads to a den.

The main area is set up for children's play. There are various wooden dens and toys and a large shelter beside a fire pit. The day I went, the fire wasn't lit because twice a week the children go for a walk and play away from the main area so they need a packed lunch. Nevertheless small children continued to abide by the rule which only allows those children aged four and older to be near the fire pit. Seating logs act as a barrier and help enforce this rule.



Figure 9: The fire pit and log shelter

In terms of boundaries, the simple rule at all times is that every child must remain in sight of an adult. It does occasionally happen that this rule is flouted, but there is a consequence for this. For example, when two children ran too far ahead during a walk, they then had to remain beside an adult for the rest of the journey.



Figure 10: Moving seating logs



Figure 11: One of several dens

After an hour of free play, the children gather for a snack and shared session. Activities such as the day, weather and season are discussed and various number rhymes and songs are sung. The children listened very attentively to a story where the laminated characters are pegged up on a line hung between two trees and were active contributors at appropriate places.

Themes are followed loosely. The nursery was currently looking at oak trees. During the course of the shared time, a laminated squirrel was displayed and discussed. When a bag of toy animals was produced by one teacher, the children were keen to share their stories about these different creatures and further songs were sung which the children requested. This included “Miss Polly had a dolly” and “Five little monkeys” as two children wanted these songs. Both teachers had spent time looking at Reggio Emilia nurseries and incorporated much of this approach into their own outdoor work.



Figure 12: Snack time in the woods



Figure 13: Displays are left in the shelter overnight

Next it was time to move to another part of the woods and an open meadow, named the “Horse Field” as horses graze there in the summer. The children set off with their backpacks. Occasionally they stop at points of interest such as a big tree. The teachers take an old pram which is useful if any of the younger children need a sleep. It is also used for carrying equipment.



*Figure 14: Everyone has their own backpack.
Also most children wear reflective vests which are highly visible in the forest.*

At the meadow the children meet a childminder who has seven children of a similar age. She runs her child minding service on outdoor principles. The children meet up approximately twice per week so they know each other well.



Figure 15: Many tasks in the forest naturally lend themselves to cooperative work.

Today the children were digging a new fire pit near the meadow. The community forester had given permission for the nursery to do this. About half the children were keen and spent more than twenty minutes working away. Several children particularly enjoyed undertaking practical jobs with real meaning and purpose.

Impact of Visiting the Swedish Forest Kindergartens

The opportunity to witness first hand established forest kindergartens is very profound. It is one of the few times as an educator that I have observed noticeable differences in children's health and behaviour.

Firstly, in all the forest schools there were no obese children (or adults). Their physical coordination was amazing. The children hopped and skipped over uneven surfaces, climbed trees proficiently and balanced confidently on fallen down logs.

The high level of creative play with only natural materials to hand was interesting to watch. The children played typical child games, but the interactions were positive. There was little adult intervention required for inappropriate behaviour.



Figure 16: Cloakroom at Mulleborg

The children were appropriately dressed for being outdoors in all weathers. The children wore warm jackets and trousers, gloves, hats, thick socks and lined boots. This is distinctly different to any other country that I visited during my fellowship. All children had spare clothes which were stored above their pegs at the entrance to the outdoor area.

Inside the nurseries, the rooms felt considerably less used. There were lots of natural materials and displays using berries, plants and even the occasional stuffed bird.

Thinking Points

- 1) What are the benefits of parents dropping children off in the outdoor area rather than bringing them indoors to register?
- 2) How frequently are children in your setting getting opportunities to explore natural environments within walking distance of the setting?
- 3) Undertake a quick audit of your indoor area. Look at the materials which are offered to children and consider how many are made of natural materials. Do children have regular opportunities to play with stones, soil or peat free compost, leaves, nuts and cones, indoors as well as out?
- 4) How can you ensure children are dressed appropriately for being outside in all weathers and season?

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Figure 17: The big den at Skogsknattarna