Families in the forest: guilt trips, bonding moments and potential springboards

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Abstract

The article is based upon practitioner research supported by the BIG Lottery funded *Good from Woods* programme that aimed to develop research capacity in the third sector and explore social cohesion and well-being outcomes derived from woodland activities. The location of the research was the Family Places project run by the UK National Trust, which organized family friendly activities in woodland. Using interviews and fieldnotes, our research found that popular discourse around

children's disconnection from nature was experienced as a pressure by some parents who sought opportunities to reduce 'guilt'. An English cultural tendency to romanticize 'natural childhood' may underpin parental references to their own outdoor childhoods and explain some parents' expressed desires to offer nature opportunities for their children through shared experience. The intervention seemed to alleviate pressure to provide positive outdoor experiences, engendering both self-confidence as 'competent parents' in guided events and possibly stimulating independent family engagement with nature.

Keywords: family; leisure; woodland; well-being; nature; parenting

Introduction

In this paper, we examine and problematize the character of 'shared experience' in nature for supporting families' sense of well-being. We draw on theory about the importance of parent–child play and shared leisure time for family cohesion and well-being (Zabriskie and McCormick 2003; Shaw, Havitz, and Delemere 2008; Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon 2013), and the role of early experience and memories of nature in encouraging future engagement and well-being (Chawla 2006; Waite 2007; Humberstone and Stan 2009).

The article is based upon research conducted by an intern at the UK National Trust,[1] who focused on the Trust's 'Family Places Project' in their 'Good from Woods' practitioner research. The Family Places Project sought to inspire confidence in families using National Trust sites, including woodlands; while Good from Woods is a BIG Lottery funded project, where woodland activity providers explore well-being benefits of the activities they provide. Family Places worked through children's centres[2] to recruit participants, with National Trust and children's centre staff anticipating that parents would be drawn from lower socio-economic groups as the centres were set up to improve outcomes for those families in greatest need.

In the article, we consider theory about the value and purposes that family leisure in nature may bring and then discuss the findings of a case study in the light of relevant literature around emergent themes of guilt trips, bonding moments and springboards. In particular, we examine the phraseology used by parents' discussing their families' enjoyment of outdoor leisure to understand their investment in this activity on behalf of their children. The semantic content of what was being said

helped us discern the aims and significance of families' excursions to the forest, and their contribution to well-being and cohesion.

Family leisure, cohesion and resilience

Positive outcomes for family functioning and parent and child well-being are consistently identified in the literature exploring family leisure activity. Multiple studies highlight how shared leisure by parent and child can beneficially impact upon family closeness, interaction and collective resilience (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001; Swinton et al. 2008; Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon 2013). Furthermore, research demonstrates that satisfaction with family leisure time correlates highly with increased satisfaction with family life (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001; Swinton et al. 2008).

Family leisure patterns and their relation to family functioning can be divided into two categories. 'Core family leisure' has been used to describe the relatively unplanned, day to day, inexpensive, frequently home-centred recreational activities that bring families together, such as TV watching, cooking, gardening, and game playing (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001; Ward and Zabriskie 2011). Such leisure tends to be familiar, recurrent and well established and may impact primarily on families' feelings of cohesion and group identification. 'Balance family leisure' refers to recreation that is typically more structured, less frequent and located away from home, requiring greater investment of time, energy and expenditure and includes activities such as holidays, special occasions, and trips out (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001; Minnaert 2012). The more novel, challenging and less familiar character of balance type activities are argued to stimulate learning, growth and flexibility amongst family groups, contributing to their collective ability to function positively. Together core and balance leisure can meet families' needs for security and novelty and affect both kinship and resilience. Access to both appears to have the most positive impact on parental perceptions of family well-being (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001; Ward and Zabriskie 2011). However, while core leisure activity seems most significant in shaping perceptions of family cohesion and happiness for young people; parental views appear more influenced by participation in balance activities (Ward and Zabriskie 2011). The structured activity provided by the National Trust's Family Places Project involved parents' signing up for and travelling to specially designed activity days with their children and would be classified as a balance leisure activity.

Purposive employment of leisure for increased family cohesion and development

Some studies reveal parents' active use of balance type shared leisure as a tool for increasing positive family functioning and enhancing their children's development (Shaw et al. 2008). Such 'purposive' family leisure is deliberately employed by parents to support family integration and advancement. Engagement of the family in this may be driven by a sense of obligation and responsibility on the part of the parent and may be understood by them as an integral task of parenting (Trussell and Shaw 2007; Shaw et al. 2008).

It may also be regarded as a way of reinforcing collective identification as 'family'. For example, Shaw et al. (2008) present the family holiday as a context in which parents seek to generate positive, shared memories of family life. Memories are actively constructed and subsequently reinforced to nurture a sense of mutuality through shared experience. Parents organize memorable activities and supervise family dynamics as part of managing this process and perceive a lack of competing distractions (such as work and school) as helping to support it (Ibid). Parents' (positive and negative) recollections of their childhood holidays may drive this construction of family history; personal recall influencing their awareness that memories of successfully shared leisure can help nurture kinship (Shaw et al. 2008).

Purposive recreation is also utilized by parents to encourage children's adherence to family norms and values (Trussell and Shaw 2007; Shaw et al. 2008). When building holiday memories, for example, parents suggest they may help guide their offspring's future decision-making about the way they live their lives (Shaw et al. 2008). Likewise, parents may champion and support involvement in particular family leisure activities if they understand them to be fostering attitudes and behaviours which they regard as advantageous to their children's development (Harrington 2002; Coakley 2006). Parental coaching of children's sports, for example, provides an adult supervised context, where skills and attributes perceived as useful to future positive functioning, such as co-operation, or competitiveness, are nurtured (Coakley 2006, 161).

Socio-economic background may be a determinant in parents' motivations for pursuing purposive family leisure (Harrington 2002). Harrington's research (2002) suggests that many parents value family leisure time for its role in pulling together family members and connecting them. However, the author suggests that middleclass parents are more likely to use purposive leisure as a tool for promoting their children's personal growth and skills gain. According to Harrington, middle-class

parents are more likely to value the anticipated long-term benefits of family activity to their children. In contrast, families on lower incomes were less likely to structure their children's activities towards long term or specific goals and their children were correspondingly more likely to engage in 'free play'. Lower income parents were more frequently focused on family leisure's more immediate impacts on interpersonal relationships and bonding. Harrington (2002, 2003) suggests that regardless of socio-economic background however, parents within her study were united by their deriving of 'considerable pleasure and satisfaction from their children's enjoyment of leisure and sport activities' (Harrington, 2002, 2).

Whilst purposive recreation may be aimed at nurturing very specific family cultures, its pursuit is set within and informed by wider cultural patterns and norms, as the evidence above suggests. The influence of cultural ideas and ideals concerning child development, and contemporary notions of how 'good' parenting can support it, are also explored within the literature (Coakley 2006; Shaw et al. 2008). Coakley (2006), for example, identifies a shift in western child-rearing cultures towards increased parental responsibility for children's happiness and success, as well as their failures. Within this cultural paradigm, 'good' parents are expected to devote considerable time, energy and money to supporting their children's development. Coakley (2006) suggests that achievement on the part of the child has become, by extension, achievement on the part of the parent; a return on their investment and visible proof of their 'good' parenting. Enabling and supporting particular types of leisure activity may be part of this asset building. Coakley (2006) refers to fathers' coaching and management of their children's sports interests in the USA and suggests that parents, who fail to support their children's engagement in such contexts, are judged to be less 'good' parents, less morally worthy (Coakley 2006). Such studies confirm that family leisure time can be understood as a space of both active and more passive management of family cohesion, development, and well-being.

Family leisure, memory and the outdoors

There are several strands of literature with relevance to exploring the importance of the outdoors and natural settings in relation to family leisure time. Within the UK there is a longstanding cultural and historical habit of understanding childhood as a period spent somehow closer to 'nature'. The historical character of this perception has altered in relation to contemporary norms and concerns, but is recognizable through its connection of youth with 'natural' attributes and environments. In terms of discipline, for example, society sometimes appears to fear children running 'wild' or 'feral'

and perhaps behaving in an untamed way without the civilizing influence of parental socialization (Sibley 1995a, 1995b; Gittins 1998). Closeness of childhood to nature is also interpreted more positively, however. Within western literature, a childhood spent in the countryside is often characterized as innocent, healthy and sheltered from sophisticated, often urban influences. In association of the natural world and youth, being instinctive tends to be considered a virtue and nature is often seen as an educator in its own right (Hendrick 1997; Gittins 1998). This romanticized interpretation of childhood's relationship with nature is a powerful idea which appears to often correspond with unease in adult society with aspects of modern life (Jones 1997; Matthews et al. 2000). The recalled or imagined country childhood can be seen as an influential representation of simplicity and continuity in times of rapid change.

Valentine's research (1997) offers a rare and significant exploration of how concepts of idealized nature may impact within a family context. The author's interviews with rural parents of 8–11–year-olds found that they actively contrasted idealized notions of their children's childhoods with ideas of urban, 'streetwise' upbringings to suggest that the countryside was a protective space (Valentine 1997, 140). The parents suggested that their rural children would be less exposed to stresses they associated with modern, urban life, such as awareness of fashion and sex or involvement in substance abuse or violence (Valentine 1997). However, work exploring young rural residents' perspectives suggests that country childhood is actually a diverse experience, responsive to many more factors than its location (Matthews et al. 2000).

The pursuit of outdoor family leisure is likely to be affected both by cultural constructions of 'natural' childhoods and their desirability and ideas of 'good' parenting. UK-based campaigns which seek to stimulate parents to take the family into outdoor natural environments, such as the National Trust's 'Natural Childhood' venture or 'Project Wild Thing', in which it collaborated, reflect such popular influences (National Trust 2014; Project Wild Thing 2014). These schemes are part of a growing movement across the western world that both look to evidence the impact of children spending less time outside in the natural world and to promote families and children increasing their engagement with the outdoors (Louv 2005). Discourse associated with this cause regularly emphasizes the process and importance of memory making in nature (Kellert and Kahn 2002; Chawla 2006; Waite 2007).

'There's nothing quite like fresh air, exercise and family time. You can't beat the fun you have in the Great Outdoors and creating memories that will last a lifetime'. (National Trust '50 things to do

before your 11¾' campaign, 2015) 'Time spent outdoors can give children a lifetime of memories … The vast majority of people point to similar memories when asked when they felt happiest and safest as children. I've asked hundreds of children the same question during the making of my documentary PROJECT WILD THING. Thankfully the majority of them still recall an outside memory. But by no means all of them do'. (David Bond, Memories of a natural childhood, 2013)

Memory access to a 'golden age' of outdoor childhoods may not be universal, but some commentators contend that a markedly steeper drop in engagement with natural environments since the 1980s does now influence our ability to recall 'natural' childhood experiences (Louv 2005; Chalquist 2009). Arguably, more parents today may not have personal early experience of the outdoors to provide an impetus for and knowledge about engaging with natural environments. If this pattern is repeated generationally, then previously established ways of knowing and understanding the natural world may be diminished, and enjoyment of the outdoors could be impacted.

Kellert and Kahn (2002) argue that there is a critical period in early childhood to develop a love of nature and that early experience creates a lasting positive attitude towards nature and a wish to participate in outdoor activity in later life. Such participation has also been demonstrated by research (Lovell and Roe 2009; Chalquist 2009) to have clear personal, social and health benefits. Recent findings in Natural England's longitudinal study 'Monitoring Engagement in the Natural Environment (MENE)' have included the motivational and facilitating role of children in encouraging parents to go to natural places (Hunt, Burt, and Stewart 2014), which suggests that outdoor family leisure may also influence intergenerational interaction and wellbeing. Indeed, there is a large literature that points to the value of nature for happiness and health. A thorough and wide ranging review by Bowler et al. (2010) concluded that outdoor contexts promoted physical exercise and physical health but also contributed to mental, social and psychological well-being through opportunities for social interactions.

Our study thus focused on an intervention into an area of family life, engagement with nature, frequently regarded as attenuated through general societal disconnection from nature (Louv 2005). National Trust and children's centre staff anticipated that participants within The Family Places Project would indeed demonstrate just such a lack of connection with the natural world, potentially exacerbated by parents' relative youth and low socio-economic status (Chalquist 2009). This expectation reflects children's centres' focus on families in challenging circumstances, and that

attending parents are frequently, although controversially, perceived as lacking certain parenting skills (Coakley 2006; Lavelle 2014). Our interest lay in whether the balance leisure activities provided as part of the Family Places project could impact on core leisure pastimes and upon families' ongoing perception of their cohesion and well-being (Ward and Zabriskie 2011). This article examines a case study evidencing the outcomes for families of spending time in woodland-based activities. Through determining the relationship of its findings with the various theoretical perspectives and cultural assumptions discussed above, it aims to contribute to our understanding of the value of forest-focused family leisure time.

Our methods

The case study was part of the Lottery funded *Good from Woods* project. Led in partnership between Plymouth University and The Silvanus Trust, this research explored the well-being benefits associated with spending time in woodland. Good from Woods supported 12 woodland-based activity providers to examine the outcomes of the activities they provided to identify the people, places and practices associated with tangible impacts for participants. These providers became practitioner–researchers. Practitioner–researchers employed a qualitative, action research methodology. This seemed to offer the most satisfactory approach both pragmatically (suiting a wide range of research contexts and types of respondent) and also as a means of gaining an understanding of research processes as well as outcomes (McNiff and Whitehead 2002; Kemmis 2009).

The focus of this particular case study was woodland-based activities delivered through The National Trust's 'Family Places Project', another Lottery funded partnership between the National Trust and Family Learning in the southwest of England, running between 2008 and 2011. 'Family Places' identified National Trust owned properties and landscapes that could inspire learning and grow confidence in family learners visiting them. The Good from Woods case study examined the outcomes achieved by family learners visiting National Trust woodlands and participating in Trust organized forest school and bushcraft styles of recreation that encouraged engagement with the outdoor, natural environment. For instance, such activities might emphasize examining nature in close up, such as hunting for bugs, or using the natural world as both inspiration and material for creativity, such as building stick men sculptures.

The research took place between 2010 and 2011 during these activities at various woods open for public use and focused on the adults, who were visiting with their children as part of the Family Places Project. Parents were recruited to the scheme through children's centres. Staff at the centres specifically steered some families towards attendance if they were felt to be a good match with the project's stated aims and those who chose to participate in its woodland-based activities then formed the sample for this research.

The term 'parent' is used in this article to indicate the adult accompanying the child on the activity. The majority took part with their mothers and fathers, but children were sometimes taken by grandparents or a childminder. Thirty-two adult respondents participated within the activities and the study. Just under a third of adult attendees were estimated by children's centre staff to have learning differences of some type and a sixth perceived to have social or emotional differences. Ten families were identified as coming from areas of known social deprivation and there were a range of rural and urban backgrounds amongst them. Twenty three adults were female, 9 male, attending with a total of 38 children under 4 (21 female, 17 male) and 6 children aged 5–11 (2 female, 4 male). All participants were white British. Demographic details of participants were given in anonymous format by children's centres, precluding any detailed analysis of how these interact with expressed perspectives. Although quotes from respondents have been anonymized, they include the gender of the parent and children attending.

Five minute, walking or activity-centred, snapshot interviews with adult respondents were the main research method. The use of mobile methods to hold conversations has been advocated for reducing tension associated with formal interviews and to support research about place and activity, where the prompts for thinking are present during the interview (Moles 2008). Interviews were semi-structured with questions informed by Good from Woods' overarching focus on well-being derived from woodland activity and feedback on earlier drafts from stakeholders in the research (see below for further discussion). Parents were asked why they had chosen to attend, whether they undertook any similar activities with their child on other occasions and what they had done during the event. The researcher was alert to who, what and where were identified by respondents as significant during their experience and asked respondents to expand on these themes. This brief, concentrated approach suited parents whose attention was centred on their children and the activities and who might need to shift their focus quickly. Their immediacy also helped prompt reflection about ongoing experiences. Interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone, which supported them being conducted flexibly. However, for some respondents, audio-recording introduced some

anxiety, with one respondent comparing audio recording to her experience of being filmed for local TV; 'I was like "oh my god, I don't want to get out of the car" [laughs] [Angela, Mum with partner, three sons and daughter]'.

The researcher used semi-participatory observation. She engaged in conversation during activities and helped as needed, but did not fully engage in the activities as she made contemporaneous fieldnotes as a secondary research method. Notes made during data collection sessions reflected both on the observed experiences of families and the experience of capturing this evidence. The observations provided a means of interrogating the interview evidence; to consider the observed experiences that respondents' did not appear to verbalize, or perhaps deem relevant to the researcher, compared with those they mentioned often and felt were significant to the enquiry.

Longer semi-structured interviews (around 30 minutes long) were conducted with 7 stakeholders regarding anticipated outcomes of the woodland-based activity before the events. These took place with National Trust staff leading the project and its activities and children's centre staff referring families to the project. They aimed to establish the ideas underlying the design and implementation of the Family Places project and motivations for promoting it to families. Exploration of this data was undertaken in relation to the parents' views to highlight where expectations were being met or where outcomes were unexpected.

Data was examined using a guiding analytical framework, an understanding of types of subjective well-being and indicators developed for Good from Woods in collaboration with practitioner–researchers. This shared conception of well-being (emotional, social, psychological, physical and biophilic) and feelings and behaviours likely to be indicative of its achievement was formulated in the early stages of the wider Good from Woods project. The model built on the literature, empirical evidence gathered in pilot projects (Good from Woods 2015), and measures and approaches employed within UK governmental and non-governmental organizations' (DCLG 2007; Abdallah et al. 2008; Nevill 2009; DEFRA 2010; Mguni and Bacon 2010; ONS 2011; Bragg, Wood, and Barton 2013). Space precludes full inclusion of this aspect of the research, but it should be noted that the suggested components of subjective well-being provided a frame of reference (helping to shape research questions, methods, thematic analysis and cross study comparison) rather than a definitive model. Each practitioner–researcher was encouraged to engage with it critically, exploring how well it worked for their context and dataset and where it could be modified or expanded (Goodenough and Waite 2011).

Findings and discussion

Guilt trips

In this section we consider some cultural expectations for what constitutes 'good' parenting and how these can underpin stated motivations for taking part in balance type leisure activities in the woods. We explore the possible association of this guilt with idyllic concepts of nature and the location of these within some parents' memories of their own 'natural' childhoods.

'Good' parenting and feeling good

In line with Ward and Zabriskie's findings (2011), most parents who took their children to the woods to participate in the National Trust's activities appeared to feel good about the experience. The majority of respondents described the activities, the people leading the activities and their location in positive terms. In particular, parents appeared to feel good about themselves as parents. Attending and participating in the woodland activities allowed adult attendees to experience themselves as competent, confident, in control and progressing; feelings that can be associated with psychological well-being (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Deci and Ryan 2004; Abdallah et al. 2008; Bauer, Mcadams, and Pals 2008; Ryan 2009). These feelings appeared to be associated with how attendance and involvement in the events allowed them to meet parenting goals that they perceived as important, but may not always manage to achieve. These parenting goals were multiple, but appeared to overlap and be linked in character. As Coakley (2006) observes parents in western cultures appear to feel themselves responsible for children's success or otherwise, therefore in order to be a 'good parent', they must provide opportunities for increasing their child's happiness and success.

Making a 'good' choice on behalf of a child

A number of parents participating in the activities with their children appeared influenced in their decision to attend by a sense that they would be meeting their children's needs through doing so.

So why did you come? Only because I thought he would really enjoy it. [Kathy, Mum with son]

Some parents in particular anticipated that activities children took part in would increase their access to and engagement with the outdoors and the natural world. Further, they understood that this enhanced contact with nature would help meet their child's developmental needs.

I think it's great for the children; it's wonderful for them to be in nature in the outdoors, I think it feeds their soul; it feeds their imagination. [Robin, Mum with daughter] For the exercise, so they can do something tangible … I think a lot of life these days is not something you can touch is it … so the more they, they can affect change in their environment then the happier they'll be, I fancy. Good preparation for life really. [Mark, Dad with two daughters]

Evidence of purposive parenting and perceptions that, in the western world, 'good' parents make choices about family leisure that will help meet the developmental and future needs of their child (Coakley 2006; Shaw et al. 2008), can be detected within these responses. Some adult attendees appeared grateful to the National Trust for helping them to be a 'good' parent, supporting them to provide a valued stimulus for their children's growth.

When I'm on my own with him or something … I'm always thinking 'right, got to do more things with him' all the time, but when you're with a group, it's somehow a bit more relaxing, as long you can just go with the pace and they're telling you where to go next and what to do next, which I think is better. [Dave, Dad with son]

More outdoor orientated and more nature [than routine activity] – you know to do with nature and things which is good for him – something new. [Ruth, Mum with son] I mean to be honest with you I'd have never thought of coming here with a picnic so that's something, that's nice so I'll do again. Yeah and the mudslinging – I'd never do that – too messy, lazy mummy. [Lucy, Mum with son]

Some of this feedback hints at parents experiencing guilt associated with the moral parameters associated with 'good' parenting (Coakley 2006). A mother who finds it hard to accommodate her child playing with mud, even whilst perceiving it to be a worthwhile activity, fears she will be perceived to be lazy, for example. Some parents engaging their children in woodland-based activity appeared to experience time in the woods as a relief from pressures to provide 'good' parenting without support.

The disconnection of children from nature (Louv 2005) is a powerful popular discourse and may account for some parents' apologetic tone in relation to mud and the outdoors. The guilt it may engender is a troubling aspect of parents' motivations for joining in this balance leisure (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001). Their comments suggest a deficit view of the core leisure they share day-to-

day with their children as insufficient for 'good' parenting. Evidence from the MENE study in the UK (Hunt et al. 2014) shows lower socio-economic families are less likely to access natural places and as Harrington (2002) notes, research also suggests that lower socio-economic groups are less likely to purposively pursue balance leisure. An emergent identity of the 'good parent' as one who provides novelty and nature to stimulate learning and growth may therefore be class-based and, as Lavelle (2014) argues, a widely held deficit view of parents attending children's centres may compound this. Yet, whilst the whole family unit can potentially benefit from improvements to interpersonal relationships achieved via shared balance leisure activity, some parents' comments suggest that their primary focus in visiting the woods are benefits to their children's development (Minnaert 2012). This conforms to further findings in the MENE study which suggest that children are a powerful influence on whether adults access natural places themselves (Hunt, et al. 2014).

Bonding moments

Not all parents seemed to experience the chosen purposive leisure activities as purely altruistic. Some parents saw the woodland experience as a learning opportunity not only for their children, but also for themselves. A shared learning context appeared to offer opportunities to bond; however, close semantic analysis suggests that this sharing may be complex and conflicted.

Providing a learning experience

Parents repeatedly perceived time spent in woods as providing learning opportunities through the diverse, novel and distinctive, nature-focused experiences they were understood to support, possibly leading them to feel that attendance was a positive decision made on behalf of their children (Hunt et al. 2014).

I think it's very important as well, you know you're talking about bringing children into woodlands … well being outdoors in general but, yeah they just learn so much – and they're not scared of you know a twig or … it's good for them. [Erin, Mum with son]

[Elaborating on why they would visit the woods again] *It's the most natural learning environment.* [Judith, Mum with son]

For some parents, attendance was felt to have enhanced their own learning about the environment or ways of engaging with it. This was sometimes equated with personal growth for the adult, but

was also understood by some as providing skills that would both help them meet their children's needs in the future, and potentially repeat the experience.

We haven't really gone a lot of places like this and it's something … little games that we can play with him and 'there's the trees' or 'there's the sticks or stones' and he can pick each thing up and play little games with them … seeing him what he's been like today; he loves it. [Lisa, Mum with son]

For some, however, feeling like a competent, confident parent was derived more from their learning to care for their child in a novel environment.

It gives me a chance to kind of get out, and practice like looking after her on my own and things like that you know. Dealing with feeding and all those situations. [Will, Dad with daughter]

Several stakeholders had also anticipated that learning to be outside together would help families to bond and adults to increase their parenting skills.

What I've seen is that they get to enjoy outdoor play as a family, so parents and children interacting and all the positive outcomes within that, bonding, attachment, parents and children increasing their confidence with skills … collecting firewood for a fire together is not usually what families get a chance to do, so doing something a little bit different but as a family … being outside will be very beneficial to their [parents] wellbeing and therefore the knock on effect for the family if the parents are feeling happier in themselves … Some parents don't know how to or feel anxious about playing with them, with their children, so doing something like this activity where it is presented in a way where there is an informal structure – it is less threatening. [Sarah, children's centre staff member]

In this way, nature appears not only valued for its own qualities by stakeholders, but also because it perhaps offers a looser cultural context (Waite 2013), in which to model enjoyment and playing within families than children's centres' parenting courses. Stakeholders appeared to support the contention that parents may feel less likely to be perceived by others as deficient in parenting skills through shared activity in a novel environment that is associated with fewer preconceived expectations. (Swinton et al. 2008; Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon 2013).

Potential springboards

Perhaps forest-focused family activities form a foundation for repeating similar experiences by addressing areas which parents may not feel competent to provide for their child alone and by offering a shared learning environment. This might be through reaffirmation of an existing relationship with nature, but also through providing a new arena for families to be together purposively. The research suggests however that there may be a flaw in expectations that balance family leisure time will translate into core pursuits. Shaw et al. (2008) suggest that for parents some of the value of family balance leisure is because it is recollected more than regular shared activities; its novelty and the lack of competing distractions contributing to its memorability (Waite 2007; Shaw et al. 2008). Whilst children more frequently appreciate repeated, familiar activities compared to one-off experiences in shaping family well-being and cohesiveness (Ward and Zabriskie 2011), conversely, parents accord greater significance to specially arranged events, away from the everyday. However, there were some indications in our data that, aside from their intrinsic value, such experiences might act as a springboard for future core family leisure activity.

You get different ideas – something like the natural painting … we haven't done that so that's an idea we would take away and go and do. [Robin, Mum with daughter]

Feeling supported in meeting children's needs

For some families who reported already engaging in outdoor-based recreation, attending the National Trust organized woodland activities was part of an ongoing purposive pursuit of this type of leisure.

I just like any opportunity to get outside with [child's name] [Karen, Mum with two daughters].

We actually love being outdoors. [Robin, Mum with daughter]

Despite feeling their children benefit from deliberate attempts to spend time in natural settings, a few adults appeared to find aspects of outdoor recreation daunting. These families seem to have felt particularly supported by The National Trust's offer of a clearly led, knowledgeable engagement with nature.

It was tough with a little two year old, I wouldn't have thought they could have done it, but with the groups doing it, they've done it … They [children] take the discipline better from the leader especially

when they've started to go to school and it's good for them. [Joan, Grandma with grandson, granddaughter and child-minding one girl]

Within parents' responses there is a recurring sense that whether or not families are already spending time in outdoor recreation, attending led activities may provide children with a more expansive, deeper or memorable engagement with the woods. As discussed, the latter of these opportunities, the chance to establish familial reference points which can be recalled by children, can motivate adults' promotion of balance family leisure activity (Shaw et al. 2008).

… he really loved the fire and when we were late because of the car he was just desperate that he was going to not get the jacket potato – and the whole idea – he's been thinking about it for days – cooking them on the fire – and I think it's things like this because you don't tend to do this yourselves – well I don't. [Kathy, Mum with son]

We would just walk through them [woods], you know, have a circular walk rather than stop and take it all in, whereas if you do something like this and spend some actual time here you get much more out of it … we wouldn't have done stuff like this. [Kirstin, Mum, with daughter]

Sometimes I suppose you might be a little bit reticent yourself about what you can manage to do – like light a fire or bake something, or cook – so I just wanted the chance to come and see how other people do it really and … because I suppose when we use outdoor spaces we wouldn't normally stop to just savour it the way we, I suppose we are doing here and do things in it – we just keep moving really, so it's a bit different isn't it? [Elle, Mother with daughter]

A number of stakeholders also described how parents introduced to the woods would be supported through the activities with the encouragement of staff to manage their family successfully in an unfamiliar and challenging setting. In addition, some stakeholders hoped that adults feeling good about their increased competency and confidence in this situation might consequently feel more positive about becoming involved in other adult learning opportunities.

The lady, the wellies lady as we call her, she actually went on to do the 'early start' … an accredited course for doing literacy and they work alongside their children as well and she's going on to do a 'first steps' skills for life course … my perception is that she would not have done that had we not gone out on the sessions outside. [Kate, Children's Centre staff member]

Whilst some of these predicted outcomes appeared to match the impacts that participants reported during the research, what could not be judged from this study was the extent to which this experience acted as a catalyst for future, similar experiences or sustained changes in parenting practices.

'Natural' childhoods and purposive parenting

It is possible that for some parents a sense of having made a 'good' parenting decision on behalf of a child through choosing woodland activity as family recreation, was reinforced by cultural associations between 'good' childhoods and natural, outdoor environments (Louv 2005). The influence of such ideas can be detected by a tendency by some parents to contrast that day's experience with less esteemed leisure pastimes.

I mean when I was a child I roamed the woods for hours, I feel the children don't get that opportunity as much now, really don't and that really bothers me. To get out as much as possible in non-shopping environments as well, we do so much shopping with our children, we don't do enough nature with them, outdoor stuff, you know. [Lucy, Mum with son]

Several statements, concerning motivation for attending the activity as a family, were characterized by similar temporal references. In one instance a parent suggested that what she particularly liked about the woods was that it was 'Like going back to childhood' [Karen, Mum with two daughters]. Other examples contrast memories of a parent's more 'natural' childhood with contemporary childhoods characterized by more interior or urban pursuits. There are references to a recent change in the nature and texture of childhood.

When I grew up in the summer holidays we used to spend all our time outside, now kids seem to spend all their time indoors playing, playing computers or TV's or stuff, so I just want them to spend as much time as they can outdoors, being happy really. [Richard, Dad with two daughters]

[The children] have an outdoor play area [at home] where they have slides and swings but I think they need to come to places like this because it's sort of healing and they can learn such a lot about flowers … there's no television, there's no video games and all that stuff that's … . you are away from all that stuff, all that technology that seems to be so prevalent, I just hate it – hate all the technology. [Liz, Grandma with granddaughter]

The theme of recalled childhood appears multi-layered in its significance. There is no doubt that the experience of childhood has altered in parents' lifetimes due to effects associated with modern lifestyles (Matthews et al. 2000). Parents, comparing their childhood with that of their children's, may well find memories provide an impetus to using leisure time for re/creating experiences they remember as beneficial to their own development, as the literature suggests (Shaw et al. 2008). The obverse was noted in one instance, a parent felt their lack of memorized or heritable experience of the natural world was a stimulus to creating a different legacy for his children.

It is a bit different to normal cos my, I'm totally suburban; my knowledge is so limited I can barely tell one tree from another. I think I'm better than I used to be and I'm trying to get better, I'm trying to bring the kids up so they got the complete opposite to that because I just don't have it. [Alan, Dad with two daughters]

As discussed earlier, the recollected home of 'childhood' within the western world is most frequently a natural setting, and this idealization of a youth spent in natural places may express a counterpoint to adults' anxieties about modern life (Holland 1992; Valentine 1997; Matthews et al. 2000). Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans (2011, 381) discuss the effects of white middle-class constructions of risk on parenting and how 'social and cultural dimensions of everyday rural life, such as parenting, are embedded within imaginary and metaphorical spaces of community and the gendered rural idyll, as well as grounded in material worlds'.

Within this study it sometimes seems that modern childhood is seen by parents as a less 'real' foundation for creating lasting memories, with associated implications for the task of creating wholesome narratives of childhood and family cohesion that can act as a resource for resilience in the future (Valentine 1997). One parent described modern childhood as being somehow less 'tangible' than in the past, less material in some way (Mark, Dad with two daughters). It is perhaps the case that parents experience the lack of embodiment implied by increasingly virtual lenses on the world as negatively affecting their ability to create experiences that can build family cohesion and resilience. However, it could also be the case that recalled childhood is reconstructed as more real and more substantial, when it is acting as an antidote to fears and anxieties about the present (Valentine 1997; Waite 2007).

Possibly, adults taking part in woodland-based activities with their children experienced themselves as 'good' parents both for providing experiences they recalled as significant in their own growth and development and for meeting a more ambiguous, cultural requirement that childhood take place in natural environments (Jones 1997; Shaw et al. 2008). Several adults, acknowledging that they infrequently spent family leisure time outside, spoke of 'nature' itself as a desirable destination and contrasted it with where they and their children spend more everyday leisure time.

It's just nice to come along and see other things you might do in nature. [Elle, Mum with daughter]

I think it is nice for the children to be on the whole nature side of things, we do lots indoors – especially this time of year, so it's nice to get out. [Helen, Mum with daughter]

Whilst speaking of 'nature' in this way may be common, a shorthand for various aspects of the natural world; it may also suggest referral to nature as an abstract idea. In this case, 'nature' may offer a refreshing ideal in comparison with other, more familiar modern contexts and possibly offer relief from them; a literal and perhaps more emblematic, breath of fresh air. Yet, its abstraction seems somewhat at odds with the embodied experience of being in nature and the lukewarm adjective 'nice' might suggest that an 'abstract ideal' may not always fully engage the adult.

A number of stakeholders also referred to situations where they perceived the whole family to be disconnected from nature.

[The parent] wrote it down, saying that living, you know they live on an estate – just getting outside into a different environment was refreshing and gave them a feeling of peace and a sense of there's a bigger world out there. [Carl, National Trust staff member]

It's taking them [the participating families] out of their comfort zone … And especially living in an area like this, I think, it's getting them to actually open their eyes to what's around them. We get families who haven't really experienced the countryside … I think a lot of parents have had experiences of living in a very, even in this area, living in a very urban controlled environment, so to actually be in a natural environment and especially in woodland, it can be completely new to them. [Kate, children's centre staff member]

Perhaps for parents with limited personal experience of the natural environment who may find taking their children out a big step, structured balance leisure provision may help provide a bridge. However, the practitioner–researcher found that many of the actual participants did have previous exposure to outdoor activities. Whether this reflected an increased likelihood of parents signing up to the woodland-based activities because of this or whether the demographic of the participants was not that anticipated by the activity providers is not known. Lavelle (2014) suggests that staff in children's centres may tend to envisage parental deficits, and expectation here also appeared to anticipate participants more significantly disconnected from the possible value and content of natural experiences than many of those participating in the Family Places project appeared to be.

Engaging with or witnessing moments in nature: critiquing shared experience

An abstraction or sense of being at a remove from direct benefit from the woodland experience is further illustrated in an interesting sub-theme within the data concerning the way that 'witnessing' reinforced feeling good about achieving children's access to and engagement with nature. Parents felt particularly positive about the experience of woodland-based activity when watching their child's evident pleasure in and enjoyment of the natural world. For example:

We've had great fun making a stick person and a stick baby, and he's enjoyed the fire haven't you? – the popcorn exploding everywhere. That was fun. [Judith, Mum with son]

This sense of deriving well-being from witnessing and being absorbed in the moments when their child makes a new discovery or a biophilic connection was perceived by the researcher during observation and clarified by reviewing the manner in which parents' answered questions.

What have you done today?
He's made a medallion – and he's spent most of his time looking for bugs underneath deadwood, pulling deadwood off and looking for bugs. [Kathy, Mum with son]

What did you enjoy about your trip to? [National Trust site]
She was really interested in all the nature and picking up all like the fir cones and leaves – different coloured leaves, she's quite outdoorsy – there's woods at the back of our house isn't there – so we're down there a lot. [Em, Mum with daughter]

Parents could answer the researcher's questions either in the first person, 'I'; in the third person as 'he/she/they' on behalf of their young child; or from a shared perspective in the first person plural 'we'. However, only occasionally did parents talk about their own experience of the day in the first person singular, such as the parenting involved or a new thing that they have learnt or done 'And what have you done today? Not a lot really just feeding her and making sure she's happy [Sam, Dad with daughter]'. Witnessing (third person 'he/she/they') and being part of their child's novel encounters (first person plural 'we') with the outdoors and natural world are how most parents explained what has happened to them.

What have we been doing today? We had a mirror and we held the mirror so we could see the tops of the trees which was really fun, I'd never thought of doing that before [laughs] … went on a bug hunt and we found the jumping spider and a ladybird and a little black bug, and we did a listening game and we heard birds … the children made smelly cocktails – getting a whole lot of leaves and bits and pieces that they picked and then they mixed it with water and mashed it all up and smelled it, so that was a lot of fun. [Liz, Grandma with granddaughter]

We've eaten, we've had some wild foraging … slightly confused the child by getting her to eat things in the wood. We've helped with the kettle – get the fire going. We've investigated the moss; we've investigated the big, huge rock of quartz we've just found … She's been very interested in the trees and the moss, and she's just really enjoyed. [Alan, Dad with two daughters]

'We' phraseology can be attributed in part to the parent's continued engagement with their child whilst they chat to the researcher. But this way of talking is also particularly associated with carers witnessing what are, in their eyes, significant moments for the child. These key events are most frequently novel or engaging experiences of the outdoors and natural world, as the quotes above suggest. Notably too, the moments referenced are frequently described as both sensory and sensual: employing taste, touch, hearing, smell and sight and providing gratifyingly tasty, tactile, aural, olfactory and visual experiences. As described above (Feeling supported in meeting children's needs), parents were conscious of a difference between extended encounters with nature that could be 'savoured' by both parent and child and more fleeting experiences they had during self-led activity outdoors.

The deconstruction of parents' purposive engagement of their children in woodland leisure may suggest a calculated experience of the woods and interpersonal bonding in that setting. Identifying the parental intent and objectives in enabling moments of family closeness perhaps suggests a less emotional, spontaneous involvement on their part. However, recordings and fieldnotes captured the mood and interactions generated through parents investing in their child's engagement with nature as warm, pleasurable and immersive. Evidence of this affective environment, combined with analysis of parents' attribution of such experiences to the first person plural or third person suggests that this balance leisure activity is contributing to creating bonded moments, where the family is the unit of perception.

In some ways these descriptions of 'witnessing' children's enjoyment suggest that the mutuality of this leisure experience may be different to the expectations of stakeholders. The aims for the activities were to create shared experiences but many parental comments suggest a more enabling and reflective role for the parents, who watch and reminisce but, for whom the principal pleasure seems frequently vicarious. This type of involvement may be indicative of parents using the National Trust organized activity as an opportunity to provide the balance leisure they feel is necessary for their children (Trussell and Shaw 2007; Shaw et al. 2008). They enjoy observing activities that they understand to be developmentally beneficial and a stimulus to family cohesion (Harrington 2002). Often in these instances, there seems to be a marrying of cultural imperatives (to be a 'good' parent) and delight in witnessing their children's pleasure in biophilic engagement (Harrington 2002; Coakley 2006). One parent observed 'he is in his element', and seeing children in this immersive connected state appeared to make parents feel good. As Harrington's (2002) research suggests parents can find satisfaction in being party to their child's successful engagement in balance leisure activity. It is possible this gratification is derived from the opportunity (through choosing to bring their children into the woods and negotiating the activity successfully) to experience themselves as competent, confident and in control caregivers; shapers of family life and history (Shaw et al. 2008). Parents associated bonding moments with children's deep absorption in natural things and these experiences may also be valued as a resource for forming positive memories that might help guide children's future attitudes and behaviours (Harrington 2002; Coakley 2006; Shaw et al. 2008).

I suppose what we're trying to do is get her used to being outdoors and in different environments, so when she's a bit older she can, she'll understand and appreciate it. [Sam, dad with daughter]

Respondents also frequently express intentions to return with their children independently and it may be that the activity leaders' expertise is deferred to in balance leisure situations, contributing to a more passive role for parents. Certainly some literature (e.g. Waite 2007) suggests that adult memories are often of more unstructured free time outdoors rather than organized activities. Thus, as touched on above, it may be worth considering whether externally organized balance leisure is able to promote sustainable and sustained core leisure activity.

I think it's been nice to have seen children doing their activities, getting involved in their activities and the parents maybe thinking 'I didn't really notice or know beforehand that my child would maybe want to go bug hunting and was really keen to find them bugs and getting their hands grubby' … so it's a great thing for parents to see for themselves the development of their kids maybe in areas where they wouldn't really notice it before … they are learning new things about their children and their development. [Marie, National Trust staff member]

Stakeholders represent the novelty of being in the outdoors and the natural world as a stimulus towards family cohesion and learning, but what they sometimes perhaps understate is parents' deliberate, purposive pursuit of this opportunity because they value these outcomes and the affirmation of their 'good' parenting through achieving them.

Conclusions

Stakeholders from the National Trust and children's centres appeared to anticipate parents' engagement in activities increasing their well-being in a range of areas. It was expected that adult participants would strengthen their feelings of competence, self-confidence and social assurance. Stakeholders also predicted that parents would feel good about their own development, through noticing the development of their children and by connecting with the natural world. Our findings generally bore out these expectations of those providing activities and those recommending families' involvement in them.

Parents' access to positive feelings of well-being often seemed to occur through being able to meet a culturally desirable aim of making 'nature' available to their children. This agenda appeared to be validated through drawing on childhood memories of good times in nature, but also through more generalized cultural references to 'nature' and idyllic settings for childhood experiences. Witnessing children's enjoyment and learning was widespread, but some uncertainty remains about the extent

to which parents' sense of well-being derived directly from shared participation in activities or indirectly and vicariously through witnessing. On the whole, well-being seemed to be founded in the satisfaction of feeling like a good and competent parent via family bonding moments and the alleviation of some feelings of guilt or inadequacy through supported participation in shared outdoor activity.

There was some evidence that the woodland activities might act as a springboard to future core leisure engagement with nature or to other positive aspects of families' lives. Parents appeared to have felt competent, confident and happy as part of a group. They also described enjoying the novel and learning opportunities they encountered in the natural world, particularly in terms of their child's development and pleasure. However, the extent to which such activity led to further family-based engagement with nature and longer term impacts remains uncertain and complex. A limitation of the research was that it was not possible to arrange follow up interviews after a period of time had passed to explore the extent to which these experiences, and the confidence perhaps engendered by them, were continued and transferred into other aspects of parents' and family lives.

Notably, children's centre and National Trust staff's motivations for enrolment of families into the activity seemed to be founded on professionals' perceived benefits of engagement with nature discussed earlier and established within research such as Dillon and Dickie (2012) and evidence that lower socio-economic groups are less likely to access these benefits independently (Hunt et al. 2014). Longitudinal research would enable us to see whether externally organized balance leisure is able to promote sustainable and sustained core leisure activity of this type; where parents taking children into the natural world to engage them with nature is an everyday occurrence. On the other hand, as Ward and Zabriskie (2011) suggest, parents might attribute less value to such core leisure engagement with the outdoors and derive less family wellbeing from them, because adult family members perceive balance leisure activity as a stronger contributor to family cohesion and resilience. Nevertheless, this research has clearly demonstrated that family leisure in natural woodland settings can make a positive difference to parents and their children, firstly in terms of psychological and emotional well-being through meeting perceived shortfalls in their 'good' parenting and secondly, by supporting cohesion within the family through shared bonding moments.

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Notes:

[1] The National Trust is a UK charity which looks after historic property and land for public access. On its website (2014), it states: 'Every child should have the right to connect with nature. To go exploring, sploshing, climbing, and rolling in the outdoors, creating memories that'll last a lifetime.'

[2] Children's centres in England were set up to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on those in greatest need. See Lavelle (2014) for a critique of the power relationships operating within them.

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