

Primal Playground

The environment that many of us live in is not representative of the environment that our bodies evolved to interact with. Put simply we no longer move by evolutionary design, but by human design. Our generalised movement demands and characteristics have been radically altered by the social, cultural and environmental changes brought about by agricultural, industrial and “transport” revolution. There is a huge “miss-match” between our design for life mapped by 6 million years of hominid development and the imposed design of 200 years of recent socio-economic development. The impact of this upon our health, health systems and wealth systems is becoming apparent. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss this aspect of losing touch with our “primal movement and lifestyle heritage”, however this author, among many, does consider that our cultural acceptance of the proliferation of degenerative disease, diabetes, cardio-vascular disease, obesity related pathology and movement dysfunction is **unsustainable**.



Primal Learning

Just as there is an obvious miss-match between our evolutionary design for movement and our current movement characteristics, perhaps the same can be said of our “design for learning”. If, by functional design, we perform to our optimum within a primal environment, then learning to move and physically exploit this environment will be a major developmental “educational” goal. Learning in order to move, and moving in order to learn. There has to be a relationship between our primal environment and our learning environment, and at some stages they are one and the same thing. Of course our understanding and utilisation of the primal environment will extend much further than acquiring a physical education. We are designed not only to move within a primal environment but also to exploit, respect and overcome the challenges that it presents. Biology, meteorology and geography sit happily with constructional skills, navigation, and nutritional knowledge. The primal gym is also a primal classroom, and, of course, for our children it is a primal playground. Research is scant but the suggestions are that put most fundamentally, this is the way we are designed to learn. It does not take a great leap of faith to accept that our structural, physiological, neuro-biological and psychological learning “apparatus” have been sculpted by our primal heritage. Just like our current physical “state”, is there a rapidly developing “miss-match” between learning by design, and our more recent designs on learning?

Of course there is an obvious counter standpoint. We live in a new environment, this is our new functional profile, we should equip ourselves to meet its challenges appropriately. For me, appropriate is not good enough.

Appropriate means no longer knowing when to take a coat with you.
Appropriate means not knowing if you can jump the dyke or not.
Appropriate gets you stung by nettles and frightened of blisters.
Not knowing how far away that tree is.
Over-estimating how much you can carry to the car.
Unable to appreciate shades of the same colour, estimate numbers within a group (herd), or just gets you plain lost!

However, clearly an entirely primal based educational system is as in-appropriate as an entirely “post-modern” one. As with most things, a balance needs to be struck. Letting the outside into the classroom, and releasing the classroom into the outside is the beginnings of a plan that can help us solve the developing “miss-matches” within our physical and educational learning pathways. There are current initiatives that are doing just this, and the rest of this article outlines my own vision. It is a personal vision, and by no means visionary. It could be seen as naïve, but to steal a phrase from US educator Frank Forencich, it is “**Primal, Practical and Playful**”, and for my own children I feel this is appropriate.

The Setting

8 acres of semi-wooded grassland terrain.
A lodge.
Space to park a bus.



This is not a curriculum, it is a typical day trip:-

- Children meet up, really unthreatening welcome. This is not a boot camp...far from it. Before even introducing the plan I would want them to just wander straight from the bus. Touch what you like, stretch your legs, come back in 20 minutes. The best way of making children feel comfortable is to let them initially explore a new environment themselves.
- Wooden lodge type building. Big space but low on chairs! Low tech but comfortable though. Not a barrack room. Find your own space. A presentation on primal heritage. Good quality, good images, good sound. Good eye candy history. Bit of a juxtaposition thing going on. They are about to be taken out of the classroom, so allow them to feel safe with their familiar high tech presentation media. From this point on the toilets will still flush but that will be about it.

- Children supplied with quality overalls (or waterproofs according to season). All same colour, durable, (Health and Safety etc), start to break down the baggagethey are just hominids now! No watches, no phones, no hats! If you are thirsty drink now.
- The rest of the plan is to learn by doing and learn by playing with the activities tweaked according to the age group.
- Movement first...warm up (wake up). Kick a line in the dirt and go through some three dimensional type line jumps/strides and total body functional movements. Children feel uncomfortable about being forced to be inventive too soon, may be society has made them too self-conscious, or may be that's the way it is. This can be developed to become more freestyle. Credit children with "new moves". Bring in clapping, rhythm, stomping...no one gets a chance to be un-involved. Set the scene by literally shaking off some urban baggage.
- Get acquainted with your new class room...you've got 30 seconds to bring me 5 different stones....go! 5 different leaves....go. Something with legs....go. etc.



- Let the games commence. Hide and seek, group hide and seek. One hides all seek. Tag. Team tag. "Carnivore". Mud touch tag. Make your own rules tag etc. Introduce indigenous games... Polynesian mud ball, Honduran catch games. Gorri, Koolchee, Pana (aboriginal games). Practical environmental skills... how to make a grass stem ball, fashion a bat, use sticks for markers etc.



- Tracking. What you already know may surprise you. Track a friend...make it easy. Being tracked as prey....learn how to make it hard. Tracking groups. Tracking animals. Concentration. Inclusively structured... sometimes the slowest movers are the most successful!



- Are you hungry!!! Fire is your friend, earn its respect. Food... a new perspective. Bring food back to life, and bringing the life back into food. Sharing collection and preparation of natural food sources (experimenting with natural food stuffs will need a concession to prior preparation and safety guidelines). Time to talk about the role food plays in our physicality, social history, current history etc....an introduction to the campfire lecture theatre and discussion table.



- Back on the Velt...time to throw rocks, climb trees, push things up hills, scramble a boulder, dig, balance on logs, make up a few moves. Pairs lifts, co-operation climbs, team trials. Solve problems. Understand the unsolvable. Primal brain gym.



- Modern games in a primal setting...bush football, fashioning your own soccer ball, twenty fun things to do with a stick, ten more once you've turned it into a hoop.
- Finish with the hunt. Fear, success, survival, flight, relief, fun.... the emotions of being both a hunter, and hunted gatherer.

The purist in me would like the whole environment to be unadulterated. Strictly no assault course type constructions, no ropes, no ladders. Just as it is. We make of it what it is. The whole idea is that you don't need this "outside" influence, you just need to be "outside". The realist in me says that "natural" construction and embellishment may be necessary. Logs, rocks, boulders, trees, crossings, plantings etc positioned and maintained to encourage and invite use with due safety considerations. The sites presentation needs to invite imagination and discovery via freedom of physical movement and expression. Trees need to look like they can be climbed and may need to be maintained as such, the same applies to boulders and inclines. The right type of sticks and the right size rocks need to be available in the right places. Mud should always be available, so the mud pool will need to be maintained. To make a rattan type ball there needs to be rattan type plants. All this can be achieved by landscaping, selection and where necessary introduction... but it can still look and feel entirely primal.

Throughout the process the job of the "educator" is to feed this process of learning by doing, play and fun...which way is the wind blowing, why to avoid that clearing, where is your shadow, climbing techniques, teamwork suggestions, sit in the mud and listen to me, then get on with it and let me learn by watching you.



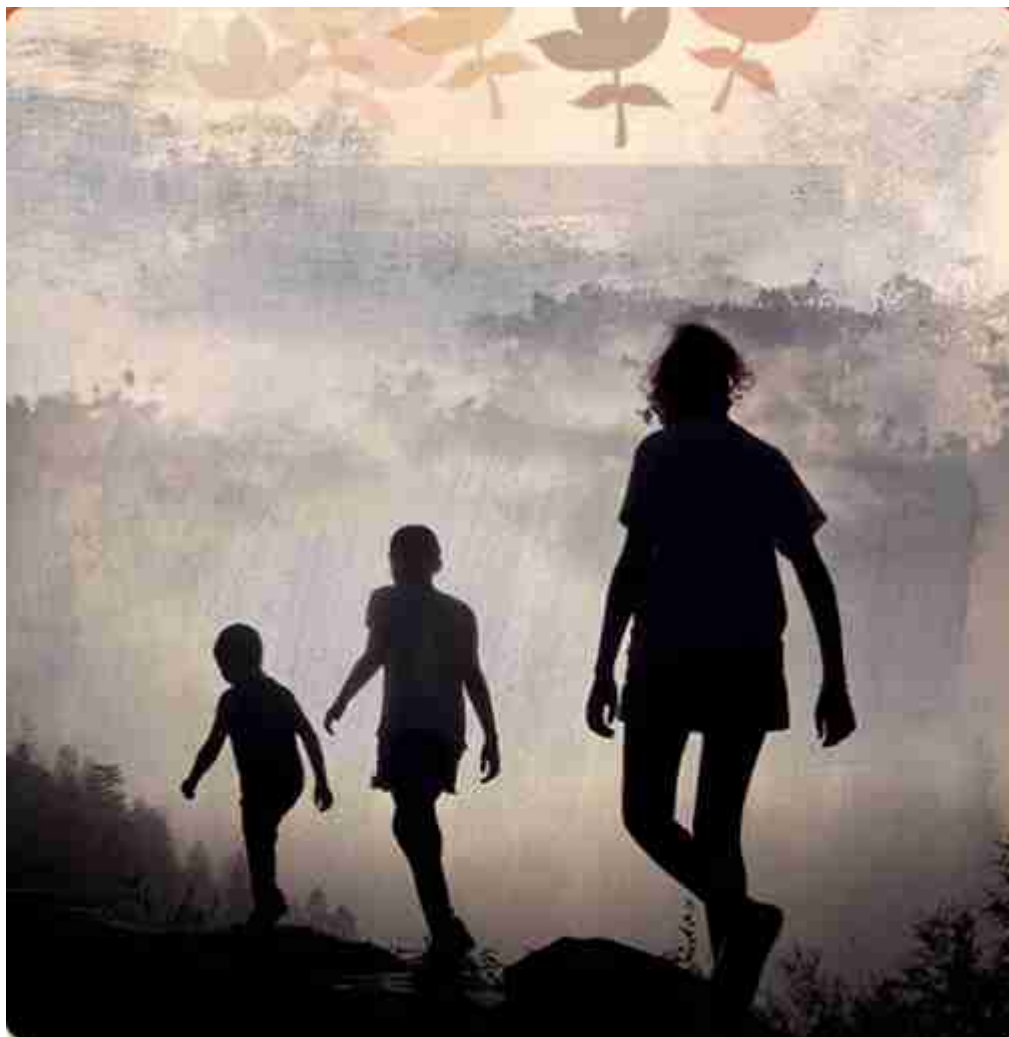
I have spoken to many people about this, including "mainstream" educators at all levels. The majority were positive and supportive. Some saw me as an idealist, but in a negative way and not a positive way. They could not see past the litigation and health and safety issues...which is the incredible paradox of trying to actually allow a child to do what they have been doing for hundreds of thousands of years before we had lawyers. Bruises, scrapes and stings are little temporary medals and achievement badges as far as I am concerned. Funnily enough I have also spoken to Lawyers... they were much more positive, and not in terms of realising huge fees, but actually expressing that the risk assessment for such a venture is no higher than that of established outdoor activity centres, and that clear guidelines are now in place anyway and they saw no barriers. The feedback I got from parents was almost universally positive. However their main issues were cost related. Children's field camps and day trips are not

cheap. Another paradox, because I still see school buses at theme parks (granted you can learn a bit about gravity at Alton Towers)! If a Primal Playground was to work, and work well, it would need significant development funding, but not at levels exceeding current initiatives and sites within the child “physical education” field.

I think in the next few years we are going to see more research, writing and discussion on education and health from a primal perspective. This way of thinking is gathering momentum at all levels, and of course never lost momentum for the billions of people in the world that still lead a more primal lifestyle.

As a movement educator and physical trainer I, and many of my colleagues are now seeing the benefits of taking an understanding of Primal and Functional theory into our work with foundation level pre-school classes all the way up to elite level athletes and beyond to securing safe movement for our elderly populations.

My own representation of a Primal Playground would use movement, physical activity and games as it’s main vehicle for learning about social and natural history, nutrition, environmental awareness, and topography etc (cross-curricular education). It would provide an environment that is purpose designed to encourage invention, expression, teamwork and physical and sensory exploration.



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Addendum:

Whilst writing this article over the past few days 3 examples of how the outside environment is being re-introduced to our educational environment were brought to my attention.

- 1) I reviewed an excellent book "Letting the Outside In", edited by Rebecca Austin, Trentham Books, where I read about Forest School initiatives, movement learning and Scandinavian learning traditions.*
- 2) My local TV network ran a story on a village school that regularly teaches class outside and had recently run a "bring your parents" day to allow pupils to share this experience with their parents.*
- 3) The headmaster of my local village school showed me his new outside teaching area. It is as far away from the main buildings as possible, by a pond, under a natural canopy of trees, with benches to share and plants to look after.*

It shows that even in this short time it is possible to appreciate the momentum of potential primal learning initiatives as they gain acceptance and application within our children's education and development.

Please visit www.goanimal.com and www.exuberantanimal.com to view the work of Frank Forencich