

# Have a go!

When it comes to risk-taking and resilience, Japan's settings get the most out of adults and the outdoors, finds **Julie Mountain**



### about this series



After visiting kindergartens in Yokohama in 2017, I was determined to return to delve

deeper into the exhilarating outdoor play programmes I'd seen. Supported by a generous grant from the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, my colleague Mary Jackson and I last year spent two weeks visiting schools and settings, talking to practitioners, parents, children and designers, and observed hours of rich outdoor play and learning.

Our visits were curated by landscape architect Dr Ko Senda, of Tsurumi Junior College. The professional backgrounds of Ko and his colleague Ryutu Otsubo (of Japan's Playground Safety Network) helped us to investigate the theory and practicalities that enable such high-quality, risk-taking play to take place. In particular, we focused on how risk-taking outdoors can foster resilience in young children.

In this series, we share our findings to help UK settings plan for risk-taking outdoors.

**R**esilience can't be taught; it is gained when children have the confidence to try and fail repeatedly, to work through problems themselves, safe in the knowledge that adults will help if needed but won't interfere or take over.

On my visits to Japanese kindergartens in 2017, I was struck by the physical and emotional confidence on display when children played outdoors. The longer visit in 2018 allowed me to study how children interacted with their landscapes, with one another and with their key adults. The quality of these interactions is at the root of Japanese kindergarteners' ability to persevere, take turns, communicate and succeed.

Challenging play spaces require adults to know them intimately – every prickly bush, slippery

walkway and climbable tree. Adults also need to play in these landscapes and care for them in the same way the children do. Japanese practitioners embrace and truly 'live' the concept of benefit/risk assessment in order to maximise the value of these testing and often expansive landscapes, in which children are allowed to roam freely.

Adults' words, deeds and body language create an ambiance where children have the confidence to try and fail many times before succeeding; where they can observe other children – older or younger – building physical and emotional resilience and reach for similar goals.

Resilience is built when children's play is uninterrupted by adults with adult agendas; scaffolding risk-taking so that children are able to balance their current physical and emotional confidence against their ambitions. In Japanese kindergartens, even the very

**The landscape is used to its full risky-play advantage at Yurikago (see Case study)**

youngest babies immerse themselves in outdoors with their whole bodies, feeling their way around their environment and discovering their physicality; making eye contact with practitioners who respond with warm smiles and positive gestures.

Characteristic of this was the joy and exuberance of adults and children at play together at Miyamae Kindergarten and Iijima Kindergarten. In both settings, groups of children played alongside their key person, or with a completely different group of children (those coloured caps make it easy to identify cohorts). Adults welcomed children from any cohort into their activity group and where an activity had begun as adult-led, practitioners allowed children to shape it with new resources, moving to new locations and changing narratives. The diverse, ecologically and topographically ➤





varied landscapes influence the play and provide natural resources and backdrops to imaginative as well as physically active play.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

The outdoor spaces we visited shared a number of characteristics:

- They exploit their natural contours, using slopes and inclines for slides, climbing walls, rockeries, bridges and tunnels, rope swings and platforms.
- Vegetation is varied, mature and extensive. Children are able to hide in and up trees and shrubs, which are chosen for amenity value (for example, how playable they are) as well as ecological value. Children of all ages can find vegetation of the right height and challenge for their developing physical needs.
- Growing, cooking and eating food from the garden is a cultural priority – all the settings have allotments of some kind, and all children are involved in cultivating plants.
- Shallow running water is common. Watercourses are often unfenced, or separated by low rope barriers or step-over fencing in order to alert children to their location. These watercourses might irrigate growing areas, but are also for paddling in and providing water for messy play.

- Man-made structures are designed to build physical strength, dexterity, resilience and confidence. They incorporate drops, steps, ropes, nets, tyres, prospect and retreat. Some elements can only be accessed if collaborating with other children or adults; some are easily accessible too but offer tantalising glimpses of what will become possible with developing strength and confidence.
- The most widely used surface in Japanese kindergartens is dirt. Decking is often installed adjacent to classrooms (for shoe changing, story time, etc.) and some play equipment has rubber surfacing below, but in most cases, children are playing on, and in, soil. Sandpits are also soil – practitioners told us they rotated 'sand play' areas weekly to avoid them becoming compacted.



- Microclimates are recognised and encouraged – for example, deep or dappled shade, wetland areas, mini wind turbines and solar panels to power outdoor features such as weather stations, paddy field irrigation.

## ADULT ROLE

Adults manage the space to enable risk-taking:

- They know where and what the hazards are, and make dynamic judgements about what individual children can do safely.
- Resources areas are stored close to the areas they are most likely to be used, but there are noticeably fewer loose parts resources in several of the kindergartens we visited than we would commonly see in the UK. The landscape itself – its hills, mounds and hollows – plays a central part in inspiring and supporting active play.
- Children are able to roam freely across the landscape, but wear coloured caps and are encouraged to always play with at least one 'buddy'. Because they know the space so well, children soon learn how to manage themselves physically – even when their bodies are changing day by day.
- Very few areas are 'out of bounds' and we saw barely any 'instructional' signage (for example, Keep Out, Danger,

## case study: YURIKAGO

The expansive landscape at Yurikago Kindergarten encompasses five 'adventure' or 'nature experience' zones and was by far the largest outdoor space I visited in Japan. Perched above the city of Hachioji, the timber-framed building opens out into a V shape, revealing the enticing landscape from every classroom.

Yurikago means 'cradle' and the enveloping building and inviting landscape are designed to generate a real sense of nurturing and caring for children's most basic, elemental needs. The external classroom walls are fully glazed, and those that open onto the wide decked 'communication areas' slide open to create truly indoor-outdoor learning spaces.

The elegant, award-winning building speaks volumes about the value placed on the education and care of young children; the extensive and uncluttered landscape likewise. However, what really resonated in the landscape was the quality of interactions between adults and children. Mary and I sought examples of how risk-taking builds resilience, and this was exemplified at Yurikago. Practitioners have faith in children as competent, physically confident risk-assessors. The landscape is varied, with challenges and significant risks including open watercourses, steep hills and high platforms and opportunities for prospect.

Children are free to roam the 'five nature experience zones', with practicalities such as their coloured caps ensuring their key person easily locates them. The palette of materials is as natural as possible, and children are encouraged to experience 'raw' nature.

### A uniquely ambitious landscape

The five nature experience zones are:

**Tanada** – rice fields and growing areas. Paddy fields were widespread in the schools and settings we visited. Some were tiny – literally a metre square – but at Yurikago, the rice paddy was a significant feature and incorporated what we'd think of as allotments. Children were independently harvesting, washing and tasting vegetables, and practitioners supported them in cultivating rice, which is a little more tricky to manage.

**'Mountain play' on steep slopes** – practitioners want children to 'feel the danger... and learn how to avoid it' on the steep, dusty and wooded slopes. The designed landscape embraces the setting's natural topography, with tyre

slopes, huge deep steps, rope climbs and platforms shaping the way children access these immense and demanding inclines.

**Ogawa biotope** – water courses. Water flows all around Yurikago, from the outdoor wash troughs, stand pipes and rills through to a working water wheel and ponds and wetlands. None of the water courses are fenced off; some have low-level rope barriers to indicate that there is a hazard ahead, but children are perfectly able to – and do – step over the ropes to play in the running water. Visits to neighbouring rivers and streams have helped to populate Yurikago's watercourses with fresh water creatures and plants.

**Susuki hiroba** – wild areas to encourage biodiversity and wildlife. Interacting directly with nature was a feature in most of the settings we visited. At Yurikago, children have several wild areas to explore, each with different characteristics, and we observed them handling large insects with extreme care and respect, and examining flowers and leaves then discussing their observations with their key adult.

**Woodland, also partially on a slope** – mature trees surround the rear of the site, and border an adjacent country park and conservation area. Precipitous slopes are exploited with huge cargo nets to clamber through, long rope swings and elevated platforms and treehouses to maximise opportunities for prospect and arduous movements.

### Interactive, playful adults

Children's spirited exploration of the Yurikago environment is only possible because of the enthusiastic and knowledgeable adults they play alongside. Without exception, practitioners know the space and its nooks, crannies and idiosyncrasies at least as well as the children do and are able to embrace risk-taking too.

Practitioners' language indicates they are attentive, but not interfering with the flow of children's play; we often saw them 'wait and see' before intervening in conversations or activities, including when children pushed themselves to their emotional and physical risk-taking limits.

Adults and children wear outdoor shoes – trainers or trail shoes – and practitioners also wear aprons or overalls, giving them the freedom to enjoy the space in all its messiness.

Professor Julie Fisher explains that

conversation flows when children are relaxed and when conversational patterns are focused on children's communication needs; we saw this everywhere at Yurikago. Practitioners kneel or sit in order to be at children's eye level while listening or interacting; despite the language barrier, eye contact, smiles and physical gestures make it clear that discussions are mutually polite, respectful and warm.

### Physically active children

Demanding features and fixtures in the landscape require children to move, vigorously, in order to maximise their play opportunities. The sheer scale of the environment at Yurikago means children build physical resilience simply by exploring it fully. Its hills, embankments, gullies, platforms, tree swings and climbing structures offer graduated challenge, enabling younger or less physically capable children to enjoy testing themselves and watching others as they reach the next goal. We recorded the types of movement children made, using Jasmine Pasch's 'Boing Whoosh RolyPoly!' approach, identifying the equipment, resources or landscape features used:

**Boing** – movement in the vertical plane: children had timber platforms to leap from; many different heights of steps to negotiate; trees to climb; tyre structures to crawl up and down; vertical poles to shimmy up and slide down; branches to hang from.

**Whoosh** – movement in the horizontal plane: hills to run up and down; a vast undulating space for bike and trike play; watercourses to splash in; rope swings and rope ladders; tunnels to crawl through.

**RolyPoly!** – rotational movements: rolling down the hills; swirling around vertical poles; spinning on the rope swings; twirling with ribbons and sticks.





# Outdoors in Japan, part 2



Do Not Touch). Most resources are fully accessible to children, with only sharp tools kept out of children's reach.

- Skilled and knowledgeable practitioners were often supported outdoors by volunteers, students and assistants, raising the adult:child ratio to a point where no child is out of sight and earshot.
- Communication and language are key: rich interaction took place because of the rich environment. Japanese culture prizes politeness and respect, and this could be seen in the way children spoke to and gestured towards each other and adults, and in the way adults modelled turn-taking behaviours.

Japanese practitioners have faith in their children as competent learners, and allow children the time and space to experiment (also known as trying and failing). Children are relaxed and friendly; adults attentive and engaged. Children and adults play alongside one another, developing stories and scenarios and exploring the landscape together: bumps and bruises are to be expected for adults and children alike and a common-sense approach to health and safety is paramount.

They pay attention to details, such as location of resources, wearing the right clothing and the importance of time and space for open-ended, collaborative play. There is much we can learn in the UK about trusting

our children (and, really, ourselves) to find out how the world works, 'the hard way'.

## MAKING IT WORK IN YOUR SETTING

- Recognise the crucial role you and your colleagues have in harnessing the potential of your outdoor space – and your neighbourhood. Let your body language, gestures and facial expressions express your belief in your children as learners and risk-takers.
- Spend more time outdoors. Acknowledge that young children need movement and freedom to choose. In the UK, dogs get more exercise outdoors than our children, and chickens have more rights to outdoor time than our children.
- Dress the part; model the behaviours; get your hands and knees dirty. Show children what it means to be playful and to love being outdoors.
- Use the 'wait and see' approach before intervening verbally (for example, avoiding the dreaded 'be careful!') or physically (by, for example, lifting a child up a tree, holding their hand as they balance or carrying them over tricky terrain).
- Mix up age groups to allow children to learn from one another's achievements. Let them model activities and behaviours and enjoy showing off and sharing. The Japanese

kindergartens' coloured cap system has many advantages, and is cost-effective.

- Develop a benefit/risk assessment approach to outdoor play and share it with parents so they understand your philosophy.
- Ensure all staff understand and can carry out dynamic benefit/risk assessments.
- Count to ten before intervening in risk situations, or interrupting play. Is what you have to say more important than a child learning for themselves? Sit back and watch before deciding on your intervention.

Finally, examining the paperwork and policies at Japanese settings, there is very little recorded about managing outdoor spaces, but lots about what they offer growing children. Settings' brochures and websites make much of the learning that takes place outdoors and focus on risk-taking rather than safety, dirt, mess and fun rather than tidy gardens, and on the health benefits of physically active play in natural environments.

Japan has no equivalent to the Health & Safety Executive's statement on Striking a Balance in Children's Play or the Play Safety Forum, yet messages about the crucial role of risk-taking in play are embedded in everyday outdoor play at kindergartens. Confident, competent, playful practitioners trust their own judgement and that of their charges. ■

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- For more on Yurikago, visit: <https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=ja&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tokyo-yurikago.ed.jp>