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A guide to the Micro-Adventure approach for those working outdoors with children and young people:

Facilitating a sense of wild adventure in urban environments

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Abstract

Are adventure/wilderness type therapies limited to geography? Can they only take place in what are traditionally considered 'wild spaces' or is it possible to facilitate a sense of adventure and wilderness in urbanised areas? This article explores the idea of micro-adventure/wilderness therapies for children and young people both for group work and one-to-one support, and demonstrates how to deliver adventure type interventions in highly developed areas.

Introduction

This article explores the concept of Micro-Adventure/Wilderness approaches to supporting children and young people's wellbeing in urban environments. It discusses what is needed to facilitate such an approach, and how to work with children and young people using the method for groups and one-to-one work. Adventure and Wilderness Therapies sit under the broad umbrella of nature-based approaches to wellbeing and can be characterised by the element of risk-taking involved (Bowen & Niell, 2013), with wilderness therapies having the additional element of working in more isolated wild environments. Risk-taking can include travelling in rugged terrain, bushcraft and camping expeditions, to name a few. Notably, adventure and wilderness therapies place emphasis on the importance of establishing a sense of community and working with groups. This article examines and demonstrates how to bring an adventure/wilderness approach to supporting people in a more local setting, providing such experiences to those who do not have access to traditional forms of adventure and wilderness therapies due to their geographical location.

The literature and varying definitions

There is a plethora of research into the benefits of using the outdoors to support wellbeing (Bowen et al, 2016; Tracey et al, 2018; Harper & Dobud, 2021) with adventure therapies getting an increasing amount of attention within this diverse field (Harper, 2017). However,

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academics and practitioners are still struggling to find a universal definition of adventure therapy. The difficulty in defining adventure therapy lies in the problem that the idea of adventure itself is subjective (Mackenzie and Hodge, 2019). For some, hiking Mount Everest is considered an adventure but, for others, the sense of adventure may be found closer to home. To complicate matters further, adventure therapy can be defined in various ways and based on cultural understandings as demonstrated by Crisp (1998). Carpenter & Pyror (2021) state that the field of adventure therapy can be seen as different tribal groups who have different thoughts and perspectives on what adventure therapy is. Regardless of school of thought, what is important is that adventure therapy is founded on physical activity, contains a certain amount of considered risk, combined with intentional therapeutic outcomes.

The definition of wilderness faces the same challenge as adventure, in that its definition is complicated and its complication increases when therapeutic concepts are attached (Russell, 2001). Wilderness is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as 'A large area of land that has never been developed or used for growing crops as it is difficult to live there'. Yet, for those who have never seen a true wilderness, what is determined as wilderness may be subjectively reframed. Within England, for example, it can be argued there is no true wilderness as the country is so densely populated. Therefore, for children and young people, and in particular those from highly urbanised environments, what is considered wilderness may be significantly different to children and young people from rural Canada for example.

Ord and Mallbon (2018) provide a very good linguistic argument as to why the notion of wilderness is hard to define, and suggest that wilderness is relative to civilization and, therefore, what constitutes a wild space is dependent upon a person's conceptualisation of wilderness in relation to their familiar surroundings. Within the context of this article, the anthropocentric view of wilderness as a human construct will be used. This article will approach the concept of Micro-wilderness/adventure approaches to wellbeing and education from a constructionist point of view, meaning that what constitutes wilderness and adventure is co-constructed by the facilitator and those accessing such services.

Crisp (1998) succinctly shows how wilderness-adventure therapy is a combined approach of the two forms - adventure and wilderness therapies - but is distinct in its own right as the combination of the two can be done in short session formats. This approach negates the need

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for isolated wild spaces and advocates for using a natural, but not necessary isolated, environment.

The present contexts of the micro-adventure approach to therapy, mentoring, group work and wellbeing

Blackham (2022) offers insight into using a micro-adventure approach to counselling children and young people and its benefits. This article highlights the importance of the use of space, how it is set up for adventure-type activities such as fire lighting, tool use and nature connection and how space is co-produced to instil a sense of adventure as part of the therapeutic process. This process takes into account the affordances of a natural environment which can enhance the therapeutic experience. Gibson (1977) highlighted that affordances within an environment can offer various benefits for growth and development. Setting up for a micro-adventure approach presents various opportunities for such growth due to the materials required and natural objects found within the environment.

Blackham (2022) published a second article in the same year, aimed at the outdoor education community which highlighted how bushcraft can be used as the main vehicle in a micro-adventure approach to support the development of positive attachments between mentor and mentee. Bushcraft is an immersion in the natural world where one attains knowledge and understanding through physical exploration and practical learning. Bushcraft provides a sense of adventure due to the nature of its activities such as shelter building and it contains risk due to the environment and tools needed. Within this approach, when delivered in a group setting, micro-communities are formed; these communities come together with shared goals and values which support both individual and group wellbeing.

The Micro-wilderness-adventure approach: responding to the perceived limitations of geography

The Micro-wilderness-adventure approach was a necessary response to the limitations of geography and lack of physical wilderness. The author was raised in and works within the West Midlands and, arguably, at the heart of the industrial revolution in the area known as the Black Country (Henderson, 2015). Due to the nature of the location, access to what would traditionally be used for Adventure or Wilderness type therapies such as camping, shelter building and isolated conditions is limited. The question posed however was how limiting was

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this in reality? If one considers the use of space to be a co-produced construction, then an adventure or wilderness-type therapy from an anthropic perspective can be conducted in a compact natural space such as in a small woodland, a school with an environment that includes trees or local park.

What is needed to ensure a safe experience both physically and psychologically?

Once the location is set, the next steps are to begin facilitating a sense of wild adventure in such a space. To develop a co-produced construction, a few things are needed that support a micro-adventure approach:

- First Aid Kit (FAK)
- Fire safety equipment - fire blanket, water and items to prevent environmental damage
- Shelter
- Bushcraft tools such as knife, saw, fire lighting equipment and item for boiling water such as a kelly kettle
- Hammocks

Despite the safer geographic location of the approach, the reality is that risk is still inherent due to the adventurous nature of the activities such as fire lighting, tool use and weather, so physical safety precautions are necessary. A FAK should meet the basic needs of a person and any additional requirements of outdoor work such as burn kits, tick removers and catastrophic bleed kits. The contents of the FAK must be determined by the practitioner and their risk assessments. Fire safety equipment is there to respond to any fire-related needs to prevent flames spreading, reduce injury and respect and protect the environment used. Shelter is essential and needs to respond to varying weather conditions. A basic three-by-three metre tarp is sufficient to protect practitioners for one to one work and small groups, a larger tarp is needed for larger groups. These should be set up at the start of each session to account for any change in weather. From the author's experience this set-up, along with a lit fire, brings to life the sense of adventure and wilderness from the beginning, transporting participants to a new world, regardless of environment.

Basic bushcraft tools are made available to enhance the outdoor experience, offer educational opportunities and can be used therapeutically. For example, many participants find using a knife to carefully peel bark to be a therapeutic experience in itself; whilst doing this the

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practitioner can observe their skills while engaging in a therapeutic dialogue. The same can be said for the use of fire: by lighting the fire together and sitting around and feeding the flames, participants have something to focus on whilst talking about topics important to them. These two examples highlight how affordances such as bushcraft tasks can enhance therapeutic engagement in counselling, mentoring or group work processes. These ideas are explored further below. Hammocks are used in lieu of chairs but have the added quality of one being able to relax further. As discussed, the micro-wilderness-adventure approach is a very tactile approach and offers affordances which the indoors cannot. Hammocks are versatile in their use, allowing people to gently swing, cocoon themselves or simply lie back and look at the scenery above. Use of hammocks in situations of calm can lead to deeper discussions and facilitators can offer mediation as part of the experience, dependent on the practitioner's capabilities.

In practice - assessing the environment

With the correct environment identified and the basic kit in place, a trained practitioner is ready to work with children and young people. The micro-wilderness-adventure approach can be applied to anyone, but the author finds it particularly beneficial to those who have special educational needs, looked-after children and young people or those who have experienced significant trauma. Each session should begin with the risk assessment of the area, regardless of any previous work as the outdoors is arguably in a constant state of flux. Check the four layers which includes the canopy of trees - danger of falling branches, Shrub layer (small bushes) - danger of cuts from lashing, field layer which can include dangerous flora or fauna such as poisonous mushrooms and animal sets, and ground/soil layer for anything that may trip a person up for example. Once the area has been assessed, the shelter is raised and the hammocks are hung, the practitioner is ready for the work to begin. Below are two case studies which demonstrate how the micro-wilderness-adventure approach works in practice for group work and one-to-one support.

Case studies

Boys Group: supporting those with social, emotional and mental health needs

This group was developed and delivered to meet the needs of boys aged eight to ten years old who had social, emotional, and mental health needs, including additional learning needs. The

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working environment was based in a school which had a small forest school/outdoor learning area situated in the corner of the school grounds with a small copse of trees. The group began with establishing boundaries for the site and creating a group agreement on how we would work together whilst outdoors. Over the course of the six-week programme, participants engaged in a range of activities from learning woodcraft and bushcraft skills to establishing a role-playing fantasy game. Time was set aside at the start and end of each session to explore emotional wellbeing and what they learned and gained from the group experience.

The foundation of the approach with the group work was informal, using democratic learning and Smith's (1981) philosophy of creators not consumers. This allowed for participant-led activities and, due to the power balance between facilitators and participants, a Micro-Community of learning and wellbeing was formed. Micro-Communities are defined by Fine and Van Der Scott (2011) as groups of people who come together with a shared goal to learn, share common interests and improve wellbeing. Blackham et al (2021) found that in outdoor environments such as Forest Schools, groups are able to establish their own micro-community independent of other groups they may be affiliated to due to the co-constructed environment where space is shared metaphorically and physically, a sense of community is grown and power is shared between learners and facilitators.

The overall average wellbeing score across the group showed a 30% increase in subjective wellbeing, with group members identifying common themes which they believed contributed to their positive outcomes. These themes were:

- Feeling happier
- Calmer
- More fresh air
- Working together
- Feeling relaxed outdoors
- Improved confidence
- Time spent with others

The work with such groups reflects the findings of Ungar et al (2005) who noted that outdoor programmes support positive outcomes in children and young people. Outdoor programmes do this through engagement in the natural world, safely pushing comfort zones whilst offering experiential learning opportunities which develop confidence and resilience. Inherent in these

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experiences is the *connection* to the place and others which the own author's experiences concur with.

One to One - working with anxiety

This case study reflects on work with a young person who accessed a micro-wilderness-adventure approach to therapy due to their experiences of anxiety and worries around death. When they began therapy, they were unsure of what to expect and how to engage with a therapeutic process. The worker introduced the concept of micro-adventure therapy by explaining the set up and what experiences were on offer. From there, both sat in the hammocks and discussed counselling: what it means, how it can help, and explored what the young person would like from their time in therapy.

The young person was keen to learn how to light fires with a ferrocerium rod and this was the initial step in learning nature-based survival skills. During the firelighting process, the counsellor would support the young person in discussing their thoughts and feelings. Once the fire was lit, it became a focal point with the young person and counsellor feeding it whilst talking in a person-centred manner. Fire is often a source of relaxation during these processes as it requires care and attention, allowing for silent reflection as much as stimulating campfire conversation.

As the sessions went on, the young person explored their feelings around anxiety and how it can impact their wellbeing, although they struggled to express how the anxiety manifested. Using the natural affordances around us, we created a human body out of sticks, stones, pinecones and flowers. Using our nature-made person, the young person was able to identify how their anxiety feels and what part of the body it affects. From there we were able to see how anxiety feels in the stomach, heart, lungs and brain and find solutions to managing anxiety such as meditation. The young person was able to link bodily feelings of anxiety and learn to reduce the impact through use of meditation and reframing their thinking on anxiety and death-based fears. All this was achieved through engaging in the natural-world and using the space to facilitate psychosocial learning and wellbeing.

The young person's wellbeing score showed a 23% increase in their wellbeing. They stated that the sessions helped them feel calmer, understand themselves more and were able to regulate their emotions.

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Conclusion

Whilst, traditionally, adventure or wilderness therapies take place in wild spaces, often with groups and include campouts, there is an argument to be made where a micro-wilderness-adventure approach can be used to facilitate a sense of wild adventure in a familiar location, closer to home and in urban environments; which can be used for both groups and individuals to improve wellbeing and support growth and development. The author's experience as a counsellor, mentor, youth worker and outdoor leader for groups has demonstrated the positive impact using the outdoors has for personal growth and educational attainment. The application of a micro-wilderness-adventure approach to support children and young people can be used as a vehicle to support engagement in services in innovative ways and share a natural experience closer to home.

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