

Talking with Lions and Swimming with Elephants. Being Brave and Courageous - Overcoming Fear through the Support of a Trusted Companion

Author: Robyn Lawrence



Researchers claim that from birth - and most likely before birth - babies seek the companionship and engagement of others. These companions are of all ages. They are interesting, trustworthy people who have a playful respect for others. If this is so then in what ways can teachers of young children become trusted companions? Does the companionship of another nurture the tendency to take risks, try out new things and thus shorten the gap that exists between being unsure and having the courage to try?

Some years ago, I joined a group of women on a caving adventure weekend to the Waikato. For myself and my friends this was a very first time experience. We stayed over night in a youth camp and met the others in the group. I didn't sleep well; excitement and anticipation were all mixed up with nervous anxiety as the image of deeply dark narrow spaces flashed by. I had no idea how I would be and it began to play on my mind. The next morning, dressing for the trip was fun and everyone joked about the mud, the cold and the dampness. Finally the last boot lace was done up and the woolly hat was pulled down around my ears. Into the van we went, the door was shut and everyone went very quiet.

Entering the cave was surprisingly simple, in fact it was fun as we wandered along a small creek into a gap in the hill. An increasingly cold wind sent a few shivers up my spine and we switched our head lamps on as the thin light from the cave entrance disappeared. Surrounded by invisible companions we kept walking, knowing that up ahead the tunnel would narrow, we would be reduced to a crawl and then eventually we would meet up with the challenge of the post box opening commonly known as 'the slot'.

For me, my greatest challenge lay in my head - I was always aware of a hidden tendency to be terrified of being in the dark in enclosed spaces and feeling walls closing in on me. Anxiously I wondered if I would be up to it. Eventually the tunnel narrowed and we crawled and slithered on our tummies uphill through a trickle of running water on a slippery slope. Our little lights

bounced around and we chatted quietly in the dark. Then everyone stopped in a wider space and we sat and waited. Here we were at the post box where only one could slither through at a time.



One by one we negotiated the space listening to the constant comfort of the instructing voice of our guiding companion. My turn came at last. With my head jammed and twisted under the cave roof and my forehead, chin and cheek squeezed against the rock I had to control my panic. In the darkness I listened to the calm and patient instructions and eased myself through, muscle by muscle between the walls of the narrow space. Slithering into the muddy, wet darkness, down the wall on the other side I was trembling, almost overcome by the euphoria of release and the relief of success. A feeling I will never forget. I now knew myself in a different way, knowing that in challenging circumstances and physical difficulties I could overcome fear and succeed. I left that cave clambering into bright warm sunshine, fully aware of how much it meant to have that calm, patient and knowing companion who had confidence in me and talked me through when I needed it and left me feeling a conqueror through my success. I had managed many of the difficulties on my own but when it was too hard I sought out support and encouragement and instruction from a trusted companion.

Having a trusted companion

The dictionary describes what it is to be a companion: to attend on; to accompany; to have a feeling of fellowship and comradeship. Perhaps in our own lives it is easier to recognise, as I did in my caving experience, the essentials we seek in our companion.

Colwyn Trevarthen from the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh has been researching and writing about companionship for some years. In 2005, he wrote a paper entitled *Making Friends with Infants*. He seeks to clarify the underlying essential requirement for all humans to develop relationships with others that goes beyond protection, care and comfort. Trevarthen describes companionship as essentially a relationship that goes beyond attachment. He states that security found in a loving caregiver is important, but is not everything a child needs.

Infants are born with a self consciousness that soon takes responsibility for independent acting and thinking but that also may feel pleasure and pride in the approval of others (as well as) the shame of failure. (Trevarthen, 2005)



As teachers, we seek to be a person that encourages and supports children to be life long learners and it is commonly recognised that children who take risks, who try out difficult tasks, and keep on trying again-and-again when confronted with difficulty become successful and resilient learners.

Being brave: taking time to summon courage

During the holidays, I watched the movie *We bought a Zoo*. One saying one of the main characters (the father) used throughout the story has stayed with me "It takes only 20 seconds of courage." But my question is, "Where do those 20 seconds of courage come from?" What is it the child draws from that gives them the courage? Being brave is different for every person, fear comes from many directions and experiences. Bravery often emerges from a sense of fear, anxiety or extreme alertness. The

decision to enter that place and to overcome fear at that particular time is intentional and belongs to the child.



In my research, I began to wonder if bravery is about knowing what not to fear. This motivation or desire to be brave, to put one's finger into the finger painting, to make a mark on the paper, to cross a moving bridge, to splash the water, to speak out against injustice and maybe confront a bully is intrinsic - it comes from inside oneself. Often, the child's self awareness of their own ability and past experience is sufficient and they will choose a difficult situation with confidence and support themselves intrinsically. Here, the role of a trusted companion becomes one of affirmation and celebration, and the pleasure of a shared experience.

An example of this is the story of Sofia and the Lion at Wellington Zoo. 3-year-old Sofia is leaning against the solid clear window watching Malik the massive 7-year-old lion tear into his food. He notices her and comes to the window eye balling her. Fascinated she watches. Suddenly, in a series of rapid movements, he begins to paw at the window. She jumps and then peers more closely and asks her mother, "What is he telling me?" On line comments from Sophia's father mention the quiet confidence with animals she has always had and he follows that statement by saying, 'but she's certainly more confident with a lion than I would be, that's for sure.'



Paul Hatton, the zoo's team leader of carnivores and primates, told the New Zealand Herald, 'There were a couple of moments where she was a little bit surprised,

which is fair enough completely, but she didn't seem too bothered.' Intrinsically motivated children not only have the confidence in challenging situations to be fearless but they often become inquisitive, asking questions as a journalist does in a potentially dangerous situation.

Sofia appears to be in tune and ready for this encounter. Her interest in Lions (she is very keen to return to see the lions on her birthday), her confidence that she is safe and her understanding that she is brave, enable her to find out more, to make the most of this unexpected occasion. Her enquiring mind questions Malik's motives when she asks, "What is he telling me?" She is, as Margaret Carr (2001) would say, 'ready willing and able'. Her companions - her mother and father - restrain any inclination to rescue her and enter the discussion with her, supporting her in this moment with deep interest and focused attention.



However, what happens when it just is too hard? The extrinsic support may come in many forms. The wisdom of a companion relies on knowing exactly the help the child is seeking. A trusted companion is one who already has a relationship, is paying attention, is deeply interested and shares the thinking and intention of the child. They are a person prepared to go to the hard place with the child and to be present physically and emotionally. Trevarthen goes as far as to suggest that person is also an adventurer and a discoverer

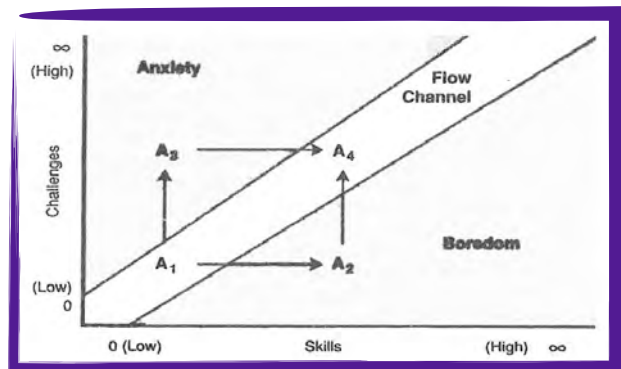
From birth a child's learning also depends upon sharing this acting and thinking with other familiar persons who themselves are experimenters and discoverers and eager to share what they think and do. (Trevarthen, 2005)

What a challenging description of teachers who aspire to be trusted companions to the children they teach on the

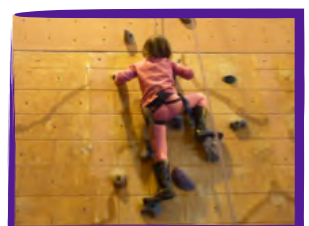
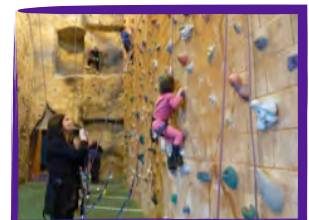
learning journeys these children choose. That they themselves are experimenters (researchers) and discoverers and eager to share. That they are risk takers and are passionate about supporting that inclination in others.

Living life to the full requires people to take risks and participate in challenging and often frightening experiences which require courage and bravery. Maybe we are talking about choosing to position ourselves as teachers alongside children outside their comfort zone in times of uncertainty. Becoming wise companions requires a sensitivity to the occasion and deep involvement and understanding.

Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Flow* (1991), writes about the 'Psychology of optimal experience' and relates this to a state of 'Flow'. In chapter 4, a chart illustrates the relationship between challenge, increasing skill and ability and the emotions that indicate progress into a state of 'flow' from 'anxiety' or 'boredom'



Elise, while rock climbing for the first time, accepts the challenge. She has been watching for some time waiting for a harness that fits and she is highly motivated by the time one is available. It is obvious she is aware of her ability and she quickly enters a state of flow. The high level of involvement and the delight she is experiencing drive her to try harder, climb higher and practice the skills of a safe descent. Her enjoyment and success keep the balance and she stays in a state of flow. Optimum participation and rapidly increasing skill and confidence rule out the crippling effect of anxiety and defeat any sense of boredom or withdrawal. Elise's companion, her mother Michele, supports her only as required, watching, belaying the rope and using minimal oral reminders at crucial points of safety.





An understanding of 'shared participation', Rogoff (2003) reminds us, lies in knowing that the role and wisdom of the companion is crucial to the child's confident participation. Modification of ideas and perspectives is necessary for the companion and the child.

In bridging different perspectives, partners seek a common perspective or language through which to communicate their ideas in order to coordinate their efforts. (Rogoff, 2003)

Michele follows Elise's instructions (instead of instructing Elise) who has decided to practice the descent. Elsie calls for her mother's cooperation, going up one step more each time she slithers down in the belay movement. Eventually she climbs confidently to a considerable height and descends safely much to her delight.

Opportunities to take risks emerge from both planned and unexpected opportunities

Imagine setting out on a snorkeling trip and ending up swimming with baby elephants. While watching the video of my grandchildren responding to just such a scenario, I held my breath as the unexpected happened. On their way across the beach returning from a snorkeling trip, they came upon two small elephants bathing in the sea. Lingered in the water with their aunty they watched. Listening to the keepers and watching others playing with the elephants captivated them as the possibilities of maybe a once in a life time opportunity presented itself. Soon it was their turn as the other swimmers drifted off and the keepers invited them over. Their aunty was watching carefully, fully aware of potential danger but also determined to support the children in achieving their hope to ride the baby elephants. I could see the careful 'sussing out' that was taking place as the children took gradual steps towards achieving their goal. One by one they rode the elephant in chest deep water, climbing, riding and then slipping off backwards as the elephant gently lowered them back into the water. Their watching companion, although experiencing the natural anxiety of

the potential danger, stayed with them fully supporting them in their endeavor.

Children who understand the pathways that will take them through the fear of the unknown and untried, and who work collaboratively with a trusted companion without compromising the nature of the challenge they seek, meet opportunities in life that emerge unexpectedly, with great courage, resourcefulness and considerable joy.

From birth a person needs to be both free in hopes and enterprises and to be accepted with approval by those who experience their acting. (Trevarthen, 2005)

References:

- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings. Learning Stories*. London: Sage.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, G. (2012). Now THAT's a Claws Encounter: Moment a Brave Girl, 3, Faces Down Angry Lion Lashing Out Inches from her Face. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2084557/Girl-faces-angry-lion-Wellington-Zoo-Sofia-Walker-3-claws-encounter.html>.
- Trevarthen, C. (2005) *Making Friends with Infants*. Unpublished paper presented at Pen Green Conference, November 12, 2005.

Robyn Lawrence is a Project Facilitator of the Educational Leadership Project (Ltd), a provider of professional development for early childhood teachers in New Zealand.

If you want to use this article, please **reference** it as follows:

Lawrence, R. (2012). *Talking with Lions and Swimming with Elephants*, accessed through: http://elp.co.nz/EducationalLeadershipProject_Resources_Articles_ELP.php