



Conversation with Lais Fleury

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: I'm a journalist and editor working on a project about collective well-being. I'd like to talk with you about the foundation you work for, your love and passion for nature, and childhood education and development. Let's start with you introducing yourself, telling me about yourself and about the foundation and its mission?

Lais Fleury: I'm Lais Fleury. I work with Alana, a Brazilian-based global group of organizations, whose mission is to promote children's rights and inspire a better world for children. We work in three areas: nature, digital environment, and social equality. I'm from Brazil, but I'm based in Oregon. I work specifically for the Alana Foundation, within Alana, which is a group of organizations. We have three organizations that work together to achieve our goals, to bring more force with different strategies. The foundation is the philanthropic arm and I'm head of partnership and nature portfolio. I work primarily in the area of children and nature.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me what is distinctive and unique about the work you do with children and nature and combining these two areas?

Lais Fleury: First of all, we understand that nature is a natural habitat of children. We understand that children are a part of nature and the best place that the child can be is in their natural habitat and that is nature. Nature is essential and mandatory for children to thrive and also to grow in a very healthy environment. We advocate, first of all, for children to have this bond and connection with nature.

[But this bond isn't necessarily embedded] in environmental education. For example, we advocate that they need to have direct contact with nature and free play, especially for early childhood. It's not play that is directed, oriented or instructed by an adult. They have time to connect because naturally, they will be happy, and they will aim to play freely in nature. This is our main goal: to make sure that children have this direct contact with nature in a very organic way.

We also understand that children have the right to have a very healthy environment and access to a healthy and ecologically sustainable environment.

We advocate for children to have access to nature because we are becoming a more urbanized civilization. Children who are born and raised in urban settlements [may not have] direct access to nature in their daily routines. We also understand that this is a shared responsibility and that everyone has an important role to make this connection to happen. For example, we advocate for pediatricians to prescribe nature for the families. It's a matter of preventive health so pediatricians can do that.

Urban designers could also design more natural spaces for children and [create] more child-friendly cities. In education, nature should be guaranteed in the curriculum. Children should have natural playgrounds that they can play when they're in school. They also should have time to play outside and not be indoors all the time. Also making sure that the national parks and public lands have structures so they can be family-friendly. I'm offering some examples so that we understand nature as an ally and that everybody has a role to make this connection happen.

In early childhood, a child needs the support of an adult to be exposed to nature because the caregiver is the one who is making decisions about what that child is going to be exposed to, such as what stimulus they need to have. This is something that we understand: the importance of the caregivers' role. I think this is very unique to our organization.

For the last three to four years, we've added another layer to our work [to include] climate change to understand that this is a polycrisis that we are facing. It's the loss of biodiversity. This perspective, especially in early childhood, shows that children are the most impacted, the most vulnerable to climate change right now.

This is not because people often associate children with the climate change crisis because they're going to inherit a more challenging world. What we say and share is not that they're going to inherit a challenging world, but that right now they already are being hugely impacted by climate change. We've incorporated this layer now to bring this awareness that children are the most impacted and the most vulnerable and that [we need to] have policies that prioritize children in all the negotiations and all the climate policies that are coming out from [countries].

Ashley Hopkinson: You talked about the importance of multiple groups coming together. Physicians have a role, policymakers have a role, urban designers and people who are designing cities have a role in this. What role do collaborations or partnerships play in your work? Is there a

strategy that you think has been significant in helping you to create and cultivate these partnerships?

Lais Fleury: [Partnering] is the way Alana works. We only work through partnerships because we understand that the impact is bigger when we work together with different organizations. We also like to bring organizations that have different backgrounds together to work in the same field. I'm going to give an example so that we can have a clear vision of the way that we work.

In 2017, we invited the [[Sociedade Brasileira de Pediatria](#)] in Brazil to write a [report] with us because there was research in Brazil done by [a foundation] here that highlights how much families trust pediatricians. Whatever the pediatrician says to the family, the family follows. We understand that the pediatrician plays a huge role so it was important to have them prescribing nature [for children] as they have a huge influence in the families.

In this [report], we brought in examples of how pediatricians could incorporate nature in their clinics, but also recommendations that they would give to schools, and/or for families, or for different agents.

This [report] played a very important role as an advocacy tool in Brazil. Everyone who wanted to advocate for the connection between children and nature mentioned the document. It was a very successful strategy.

But 2017 was a very different world from now. So we just did a review of this [report] and we invited the [Federação Brasileira das Associações de Síndrome de Down](#) (FBASD) (National Federation of Down Syndrome in Brazil) to be part of the updated version. We also invited [ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability](#) that works with urban designers. In this new [report], we added different layers. We brought in the perspective of children with disabilities. We brought the perspective of the urban designs, what is their role and what is the role of cities, and we brought in climate change and what contact with nature has to do with that.

We've just launched this [report] and have translated it into English. We invited international partners [to work with us on this translated report]. In the United States, for example, we worked with the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). [In other countries], we invited international partners to write the [report] with us. This is a good example because we have different perspectives with the same goal: to make sure that children have contact with nature. Every partner can incorporate this message in their work, in their own agenda, and bring their narrative according to their network.

It's a different perspective with the same goal. It brings more force, reaches different audiences with different characteristics and has a wider impact. This is just one very recent example that I can give and it's the way that Alana likes to work.

Ashley Hopkinson: With this strategy, you demonstrate the value in all these different areas for what people are really passionate about and what they care about.

Lais Fleury: It also brings the perspective that everyone has a role. If you're an urban designer, you can collaborate. If you're a pediatrician, you can collaborate. If you work with children with disabilities, you also can collaborate. It's a common universal message that brings everyone to the commitment and to do something about it.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is a teachable lesson or an insight that you've learned that others could use to integrate this approach into their work in other countries?

Lais Fleury: First of all is this perspective that we are all nature. It doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter what context you live in. If you're in Africa, North America, or Europe, all the children, especially the ones who live in cities, are facing a nature deficit disorder. It's a term that we should know, but it's not a medical term. If we don't expose children to nature, we will have children that grow up without having contact with nature. This is a common cause that can unite all of us. It doesn't matter the religion you are. It impacts everyone, and everyone has a different role to do something.

For example, Africa has a very different context to North America. Unfortunately, the way that we understand how we should develop as nations is to put nature aside. It's not necessary to integrate nature. Africa, for example, is becoming urbanized the way that Brazil is being urbanized, and unfortunately that puts nature outside [of development]. So this common awareness gives us an opportunity to provide a message that resonates with everyone. Children and nature, it's a very charismatic message because it's hard to find someone who will be against it.

This perspective—the importance of connecting children to nature— is important especially now in the climate crisis that we are facing. It's a very important tool to mitigate climate change because what is happening right now is [rooted] in our disconnection to nature. It's becoming evident we're not prioritizing life and we're not prioritizing nature. This is why we are facing so many crises. I think it's becoming even more strategic to advocate for children to be connected to nature to make sure that at least we're going to have more people committed to preserving nature. It's challenging, but it's a good opportunity because I think everybody is on the same page.

Ashley Hopkinson: What evidence is there that you're making progress toward the goal of people understanding the nature deficit in children?

Lais Fleury: We had a partnership with Urban95, a project sponsored by the [VanLeer Foundation](#), which works mainly in early childhood. They have a network in Brazil of 27 municipalities and they advocate for more child-friendly cities.

They create and implement natural playgrounds, not only natural school grounds, but also natural playgrounds in cities. With this strategy, we could achieve different goals. Children would have better mental health, children would develop better, and the community would gain a place to be together. Also, it's a tool that would make the city more resilient to climate change. One indicator is whether this strategy, with so many benefits, could really reach different goals at the same time.

We saw that once the first municipality implemented natural playgrounds, other municipalities had more interest and were willing to do the same. They would say, "Whoa, this is so interesting. This is so nice. This is simple. This is not expensive. This is good for everyone, for the city, for the kids, for the community. We really want to do that." We saw other municipalities asking to implement natural playgrounds. Some of them not only implemented one or two [natural playgrounds], but also turned [the concept] into a public policy. For example, in Fortaleza, they created 40 natural playgrounds in the unprivileged areas throughout the city.

In another example, the subject of nature and children came up during a national conference of pediatricians in Brazil. At the opening session, the president of the pediatricians said that he considered one of the most important panels at the conference, and the one that he recommended attending, was the one on children and nature. In different fields, we have different indicators, but we are seeing people recognizing how important this connection is and how important it is to prioritize nature. When we see our actions moving forward in an organized way, I think it's a good indicator that the work that we're doing is impacting everyone.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges or limitations that you face in your work and how are you actively working to solve one or two of these challenges?

Lais Fleury: [A challenge] is to bring awareness of the priority of this issue. Schools have so many priorities, especially with the pressure that they face right now for children to have knowledge. It's the culture we have these days. Nature often gets set aside when raising a child or as cities urbanize. It's also a paradigm shift. Changing culture is hard. The challenge is to bring even more awareness of how

important nature is. This isn't necessarily evident in the way that we live these days. We are risk averse and we want to make sure that kids are safe out there. There're so many different forces or reasons for why children are not playing outside. That means we can't depend on one solution. I think it needs to be integrated in how you prepare a child to be ready for the world that she's going to receive and people don't necessarily think playing in nature is important.

People think that it's more important that the child has more cognitive knowledge. We need to make sure that everybody has the data and everybody has the awareness to prioritize [nature]. Once we reach that goal it's very natural that families and schools prioritize nature in their daily lives.

Ashley Hopkinson: As we close, how would you define well-being?

Lais Fleury: Well-being is very connected to mental health. I see, unfortunately, that mental health is becoming day by day a very serious issue. Well-being also is [connected] to the health of humanity and the health of nature as well. We can see that nature doesn't have the same balance anymore. Nature is really telling us all the time that we're not doing right, that we're not going in a very good direction. I think I would relate well-being to health in a holistic way, and to mental health and planetary health.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*