



# Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper

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## Executive Summary

Outdoor play as a means of fostering healthy child development and high-quality early learning experiences is attracting increasing attention. Implementation efforts in early childhood education programs are on the rise despite a number of barriers to progress. Post-secondary education and training do not tend to prepare early childhood educators for outdoor play. While professional development is emerging to fill the gap, demand is increasing quickly: multiple sectors require various levels of education and training to support early childhood education, particularly in regards to understanding and managing risk. At the same time, early childhood education policies and practices governing children's outdoor play are not well developed, resulting in gaps and barriers to outdoor play. Given the critical importance of both early childhood education and outdoor play to healthy child development,<sup>1,2,3</sup> it is imperative that multiple sectors work together to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for outdoor play in early childhood education programs.

In October 2018, the Lawson Foundation convened leaders from multiple sectors at the Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium at the Kingbridge Centre, King City, Ontario, to explore how to advance outdoor play and early childhood education across policy, practice, and research. This discussion paper summarizes the six major themes that emerged from the Symposium presentations and discussions.

### Major Themes

1. The importance of adopting a multi-sector ecosystem lens to address outdoor play
2. Approaches to integrating Indigenous curriculum and ways of knowing about outdoor play into Western early childhood education
3. Building support for, and enabling, risk in outdoor play
4. The need to make outdoor play pedagogy explicit in post-secondary early childhood education training and to support ongoing professional learning needs
5. The multiple gaps and barriers to outdoor play in policies and standards, and the inconsistent implementation of such policies by stakeholders
6. The need to develop a robust Canadian research and knowledge mobilization strategy to support evidence-informed policy and practice

This paper also presents discussion questions and proposed actions related to each theme. This paper is intended to raise awareness and spur discussion about outdoor play in local communities of practice, and to catalyze ongoing work across sectors to advance outdoor play and early childhood education.

# Introduction

Increasing opportunities for children’s outdoor play is a strategic focus of the Lawson Foundation, whose mission is to support the healthy development of children and youth. In October 2018, the Lawson Foundation convened the Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium at the Kingbridge Centre, King City, Ontario, in partnership with Okanagan College, Cape Breton University, the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, and the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)/University of Toronto. The Symposium brought together diverse stakeholders around the challenge of how to advance outdoor play and early learning, particularly in regulated early childhood education programs. A total of 125 participants attended from six countries, 11 Canadian provinces and territories, and several Indigenous communities. Recognizing that children’s access to, and opportunities for, outdoor play are influenced by many factors, participants from multiple sectors were invited, including insurance, public health, urban planning, landscape architecture, playground design, playground inspection, physical activity, philanthropy, family resource, communications, parks and recreation, post-secondary training and research (including faculty, students, and administrators from universities, colleges, and CEGEPs), education, and early childhood education (see Fig. 1). Participants also came from municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal governments. The Symposium program, abstracts, and select presentations are available online at the Lawson Foundation website (<https://lawson.ca/ops/2018-symposium>). In addition, a special issue of the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education (<https://cjee.lakeheadu.ca/>) will publish Symposium papers in the fall of 2019.

Figure 1. This diagram identifies multiple key sectors (in white capital text) and roles (in blue text) that are relevant to supporting children’s access to and opportunities for outdoor play.



## Purpose and Audience

This paper is intended to inform multi-sector stakeholder discussion on advancing outdoor play and early childhood education across policy, practice, and research. It does the following:

- **Synthesize key discussions and presentations** from the Symposium
- **Introduce an ecosystem lens** to examine the complexity, influences, and issues relevant to outdoor play and early childhood education
- **Present discussion questions** to spur ongoing multi-sector discussion, engagement, and collaboration among community partners
- **Articulate proposed actions** to advance outdoor play and early childhood education

These are the stakeholders who may benefit from this paper:

- **Government departments** at all levels responsible for early childhood education programs, post-secondary education, professional standards, health and safety standards, parks and recreation, and funding of related programs
- **Post-secondary administrative leaders and faculty** delivering early childhood education training programs and their students, as well as professional bodies responsible for ongoing professional development
- **Nonprofit organizations and community leaders** responsive to the needs of children and their families, and institutions and sectors with a stake in healthy child development
- **Leaders** in urban planning, landscape architecture and design, and parks and recreation policy and management
- **Insurers** in the context of risk benefit assessment and the provision of insurance to schools and child care centres
- **Researchers** interested in early child development and related interdisciplinary areas of study that influence children's outdoor play

In summary, this document was developed to help stakeholders formulate and realize responses to the currently identified barriers and gaps in outdoor play and early childhood education.

## Format, Scope, and Limitations

This paper reflects the research, policy, and practice shared and discussed during the Symposium. The paper is organized around six major themes identified after analyzing summary notes from all sessions and discussions. Following synthesis of the major themes, we present discussion questions and proposed actions to further stimulate reflection, discussion, and the generation of solutions to increase outdoor play opportunities for children. The proposed actions were developed and synthesized from the more than 50 suggestions put forth during the final working session of the Symposium.

The Symposium also sought to explore the Lawson Foundation's interest in learning more about Indigenous approaches to outdoor play amid concurrent uncertainty around how to begin such a dialogue and journey with respect and thoughtfulness. The Symposium dialogue and resulting reflections on Indigenous approaches to outdoor play tended to focus on supporting non-Indigenous communities to become more aware and inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing. We believe this was a good first step as part of a commitment to Reconciliation and that there is much more to learn on the journey ahead.

Given the great variation in how early childhood education programs are delivered across jurisdictions in Canada, the Symposium attempted to be inclusive of all regulated programs, with particular interest in kindergarten and child care. However, discussions often emphasized child care, due in large part to the more restrictive nature of child care legislation as compared to education acts, as well as the higher proportion of Symposium participants involved in licensed child care rather than schools. Aside from the particular details of child care legislation, much of the content of this discussion paper should be relevant to diverse types of early childhood education programs. Content may also be relevant to increasing opportunities for outdoor play for older children and in other contexts, such as recreation and community environments.

This discussion paper does not purport to comprehensively represent all issues and perspectives relevant to advancing outdoor play. Rather, it presents the prominent themes that emerged in the context of the Symposium. The perspectives shared and proposed actions reflect a synthesis and do not as a whole represent any single organization or individual involved in the Symposium, including the Lawson Foundation and its Symposium partners.

## Key Definitions

**Early childhood education (ECE)** is defined in this discussion paper as “programming for young children based on an explicit curriculum, delivered by qualified staff and designed to support children’s development and learning. ECE includes early learning, child care, and school-operated kindergarten and prekindergarten programs, as well as Aboriginal Head Start and parent and child programs.”<sup>4</sup>

**Outdoor play** refers to “play options executed, opportunities created, or actions taken by children when their curiosity and sense of wonderment are triggered in their natural outdoor world.”<sup>5</sup>

**Risk benefit assessment** is “a practical process and tool for making judgements about the risks and benefits associated with an activity and play space. It includes the control measures that are required to manage the risks while securing the benefits. It assumes that caregivers in the place of play are trained and entrusted with the capacity to make judgements.”<sup>6</sup>

**Risky play** means “thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury. Risky play provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury risk. Risky play is subjective and changes for each child.”<sup>7</sup>

For a complete glossary of outdoor play terms and concepts created by Canadian sector leaders, please see the Resources section of the Outdoor Play Canada website (<https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/resources/>).

## Themes, Discussion Questions, and Proposed Actions

Six major themes emerged from qualitative analysis of the Symposium presentations and discussions.

### Theme 1. An ecosystem lens and a new paradigm for ECE

At the opening of the Symposium, the Lawson Foundation proposed a new paradigm for ECE programs that would include regular and repeated access to outdoor play in engaging outdoor environments, across the seasons, in all weather, and for extended periods of time.<sup>8</sup> Such a paradigm calls for an understanding and recognition of the breadth of the ecosystem that influences and supports quality outdoor play. An ecosystem refers to systems or networks of interconnecting parts and interactions among those parts within the environment. The Lawson Foundation used the metaphor of an outdoor play ecosystem as a lens to conceptualize bringing all of the sectors, disciplines, and stakeholders into dialogue with one another in order to support high-quality outdoor play experiences for children. The Symposium focused on uniting three fundamental components of the proposed ecosystem: a) professional learning, b) multi-sector policy and standards, and c) play opportunities for children, specifically in regulated ECE programs (see Fig. 2). Currently these components and their stakeholders are not well aligned with one another, and the result is gaps in understanding and barriers to high-quality outdoor play experiences for children.

Figure 2. Outdoor play: an ecosystem lens



Who influences the outdoor play ecosystem and who is invested in it? What are its component parts and how are they connected? Symposium participants identified benefits to answering such questions. For example, identifying community stakeholders would allow for the creation of collective networks while reducing duplication of effort; the resulting synergies could facilitate discussions, interactions, and decision-making among key stakeholders from various disciplines and sectors, with the net result collectively advancing outdoor play.

Applying an ecosystem lens to children's outdoor play would have the following added benefits:

- It would inform and aid development of holistic political, economic, educational, legal, and social policies that support children in their need to have access to, and opportunities for, outdoor play.
- It would foster a change in societal attitudes at all levels toward outdoor play and greater recognition of its importance for children.
- It would align multi-sector stakeholders so that they might better work together to integrate research, policy, and practice when developing professional learning models and curriculum, as well as policy and standards, in order to deliver high-quality programs and opportunities to children in a variety of settings.

### Discussion questions

- What changes would make the ecosystem lens illustrated in Figure 2 more robust for your work? Why?
- Within your context, how might adopting an ecosystem lens lead to policies, decision-making, and/or (re)assessment of resources and strategies that advance outdoor play?
- How might the use of an ecosystem lens change the process and results of policy development, research, community programming, post-secondary ECE programs, and/or professional development in your sphere of influence?

### Proposed actions

- Using a multi-sector ecosystem lens, create networks and alliances to foster systems-level thinking about the planning, design, and implementation of research, policy, and practice related to outdoor play.
- Create demonstration projects that engage multi-sector stakeholders and multiple components of the outdoor play ecosystem to develop, test, and evaluate best practice models to increase the quality of outdoor play experiences for children in ECE programs.

## Theme 2. Walking together: learning about Indigenous approaches

In order to explore the potential of a common narrative in Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to outdoor play, the Lawson Foundation invited Dr. Angela James, Indigenous scholar, researcher, and educator, to deliver a keynote address about what Indigenous curriculum can teach us all.<sup>9</sup> Dr. James shared her wisdom and experience of how and where Indigenous curriculum supports and relates to outdoor play and ECE policy. She related how, among the Dene people, a child is born with a Drum in its hand; every child is born with integrity and worth and they are to be acknowledged and respected. Dr. James introduced participants to a *capable person pedagogy*. This pedagogy emphasizes that for the child to flourish they must be viewed as a “capable person.” Understanding this approach helps to guide discussions, learning, and practices in outdoor play ecosystems and the effort to integrate Indigenous education values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that are culturally appropriate.

Dr. James called for members of the outdoor play ecosystem to engage in an assessment that would acknowledge and incorporate key Indigenous values, which include the following:

- The reverential attitude toward the child in Indigenous families
- Parents as first teachers
- Grandparents’ (Elders’) love for children, which is the most profound love that the Creator has for humankind
- Importance of identity and self
- Holistic developmental understandings (mind, heart, body, spirit)
- Relationships to people, place, and time
- Spiral guides and spiral learning
- Spirituality as an extension of culture
- Experiential learning and storytelling as key modes of learning

Dr. James provided an overview of the contrasting approaches of Western and Indigenous perspectives to be considered when trying to establish cross-cultural understanding (see Table 1).

Table 1. Indigenous ways and Western approaches

INDIGENOUS WAYS	WESTERN APPROACHES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurturing, love, belonging, and trust</li> <li>• Cyclical learning</li> <li>• Spiral learning and metaphors</li> <li>• Listening, smelling, touching, tasting</li> <li>• Prayer, protocol, and ceremony</li> <li>• Mind, heart, body, and spirit</li> <li>• Remember the other three parts</li> <li>• Respect for self, others, the land, and spirit world</li> <li>• Four sacred elements: air, water, earth, and sun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early learning</li> <li>• Sequential stories</li> <li>• Linear and scientific reasoning</li> <li>• Experiential</li> <li>• Mindfulness and centering</li> <li>• Holism</li> <li>• Cognitive dominance</li> <li>• Relationality</li> <li>• Outdoor play</li> </ul>

Reprinted with the permission of Dr. Angela James

Many participants acknowledged the importance of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* report for their work.<sup>10</sup> Many non-Indigenous participants, however, had no road map for how to take action and effectively include Indigenous viewpoints in that work. Many non-Indigenous participants articulated a need to learn more about the Indigenous curriculum from Indigenous educators, Elders, and leaders in their communities, and then to build relationships with these people through conversations about how to integrate Indigenous perspectives, protocol, and ceremony into outdoor play activities with children and families. Participants professed a desire to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into their practice, concern about their lack of knowledge and experience, and a fear of unknowingly misappropriating cultural aspects or strategies into their programs. Still other participants emphasized the importance of moving slowly when approaching Indigenization with respect to advancing outdoor play and ECE and ensuring that Indigenous advice is sought continually along the way, via Indigenous Elders, mentors, and appropriate resources.

The Symposium highlighted and modelled *walking together* as one approach for non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants to enrich outdoor play for children. Co-presenters Louise Zimanyi and Lynn Short of Humber College in Toronto shared how they had moved Indigenous ways of knowing into practice in an ECE program.<sup>11</sup> They articulated how a connection with the land combined with participation in a land-based program can trigger children's curiosity. They noted that when ECE programs view nature as a culture and embrace Indigenous ways of knowing and being, the place-based opportunities reshape pedagogies to reflect this experiential learning through various means, including exploration and storytelling. When children and practitioners learn both *from* the land and *with* the land, the greater relatedness and reciprocity that result can lead to transformative practices and pedagogy.



While they acknowledged that beginning with a land- and place-based approach was beneficial, participants expressed the need to learn more about, and become more comfortable with, Indigenous holistic theory that is based on the principles of whole, ecological, cyclical, and relational, as well as the Medicine Wheel, Four Directions, and Circles.<sup>12</sup> How could these assist them to bring Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and believing into their ecosystem? Some felt that it would be useful to have facilitated communities of practice involving various experts from a broad range of disciplines who could connect with Indigenous communities and open the door to more discussion, learning, and experimenting with the transfer of learnings to practice. This would in turn help to embrace an Indigenous lens that could guide and influence outdoor play and contribute to research topics and strategies, policy development, space design with and for children, post-secondary ECE training programs, and professional development models.

### Discussion questions

- How do the content of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* report and the principles of Indigenous ways of knowing currently inform your work?
- How, and to what extent, do you see Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and believing incorporated and used as part of the ecosystem lens when creating or revising policies, programming, and research decisions related to outdoor play and learning?
- How could a process guided by Indigenous ways of knowing contribute to improved outdoor play research, policies, post-secondary ECE curriculum, and practices for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children?

### Proposed actions

- Build relationships with Indigenous Elders, advisors, and community partners to learn about Indigenous curriculum and ways of knowing. Create communities of practice to spur more discussion, learning, and meaningful transfer of learning into practice.

## Theme 3. Building support for risk

Outdoor play and risk are essential elements for healthy child development.<sup>13</sup> As discussed by Henry Mathias, the outdoor environment provides children with opportunities to experience risk and thereby learn risk management, whereas adults manage the hazards which provide no benefits and need to be removed from the play space.<sup>14</sup> Despite its importance, risky play is often curtailed by provincial and territorial policies and regulations, internal ECE program policies, and adult attitudes, due in part to the fear of injury and potential liability.



### Insurers as allies, not opponents

Contrary to popular belief, outdoor play does not pose great risk of injury to children, nor is the insurance industry risk-averse in this regard. Based on this revelation at the Symposium, participants noted the urgent need for the insurance industry and the outdoor play sector to come to a mutual understanding and to work better together in supporting the adoption of risky play. The insurance industry can be a strong ally to advance outdoor play given its mandate to assess risk, develop mitigation strategies, and provide insurance products precisely to enable program implementation. The insurance sector would benefit from learning more about risky play as it relates to ECE pedagogy. Similarly, ECE organizations seeking insurance require a more in-depth understanding of the questions to ask insurance providers. Jointly, the two sectors could determine how to establish policies, procedures, and training related to risky play that reflect evidence-based best practices.

### Equipping ECE professionals to support risk

Dutch researcher Martin van Rooijen emphasized the importance of involving public health inspection organizations through providing guidelines towards risky play, and including the facilitation of children's risk-taking in staff orientation and in-service training.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Dr. Blair Niblett, Marlene Power, and Kim Hiscott<sup>16</sup> noted that forest and nature schools ensure their practitioners have ongoing professional development in outdoor play pedagogy and program implementation, including the process of conducting risk benefit assessments. This practice helps to ensure children are exposed to outdoor spaces, natural environments, and built environments that meet the highest standards. The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada is currently developing a Canadian risk benefit assessment framework to support practitioners and decision makers.

Symposium participants stressed the importance of addressing another misconception: that risky play is dangerous to children. It was important to participants that provincial and territorial governments responsible for post-secondary ECE training (college curricula and programs) encourage appropriate members of the ecosystem to collaborate in developing risk benefit assessment competencies that would be required for graduation. These competencies would reflect the knowledge, skills, and level of risk tolerance needed by ECE faculty, students, trainers, consultants, and practitioners to support children's interactions in nature, while furthering the necessary cultural shift to adults viewing children as capable learners.

Requiring that ECE students and practitioners be trained in risk benefit assessment could positively influence organizational policies and practices to support risk. It would demonstrate to insurance and government sectors that ECE programs have policies and procedures in place to support risk and know the due diligence to be exercised in mitigating hazardous situations.

### **Educating and empowering parents**

Van Rooijen outlined the need to involve parents in reframing attitudes toward risky play in ECE programs.<sup>17</sup> When parents and ECE practitioners work together to reframe risky play, parents learn to trust in practitioners' autonomy and practitioners gain an internal permission to support individual children in their desire to engage with risk. Dr. Mariana Brussoni reinforced the benefits of providing parents with tools to help them understand why risky play is important to child development and convey the confidence necessary to support their children.<sup>18</sup> Such tools should help parents adjust their perceptions of risk by allowing them to understand the disadvantages associated with overprotecting children. In presenting a case study about nurturing curiosity in the outdoors, Lotje Hives reinforced the importance of engaging families in conversations about risk to deepen understanding about the benefits of active play outdoors.<sup>19</sup> In reference to learning outdoors through the seasons, one family noted how their child "has become so confident 'moving' on different surfaces and being so comfortable on knowing what his body can do."

### **Discussion questions**

- To what extent are participants in your local and regional ecosystem talking and learning about risk and risky play?
- How might a national risk benefit assessment framework support ECE post-secondary faculty and students, and ECE directors and practitioners, in fostering an evidence-based risky play philosophy in their practice?
- What recommendations would you want insurance providers and/or governments to adopt to support risk?

### **Proposed actions**

- Update provincial and territorial curriculum frameworks and post-secondary ECE program curricula to include evidence-based competencies for risky play and risk benefit assessment.
- Create pathways to training in risk benefit assessment for all relevant stakeholders, including faculty delivering post-secondary ECE programs, supervisors and educators in ECE programs, program and playground inspectors, and managers of community spaces and parks. Evaluate risk benefit assessment training for its effectiveness and potential to be adopted as a standard.
- Identify key ECE informants on risky play to engage and partner with the insurance sector to develop cross-sector understanding and jointly support the development of policy for outdoor play and risk.
- Compile accessible Canadian resources on the nature of children's injuries obtained during outdoor play, program models which embed risk into outdoor play environments, and risk benefit assessment processes. Use this information to educate parents and inform policy development, space design, insurance policies and products, and ECE programming.

## Theme 4. Strengthening professional learning for early childhood educators

Outdoor play is influenced by how adults, including ECE practitioners, support or inhibit children's opportunities to engage with their environments. The interactions of adults with children, which include role modelling and connecting children with place, influence how children act upon and embrace options for exploration and learning. Post-secondary training and professional development programs contribute to the knowledge and skills that inform early childhood educators' philosophy and practice. The Symposium revealed tremendous variety in such programs across the country.



### Post-secondary education and training: variety in curricula and approaches

Educational requirements for qualified early childhood educators vary from one province and territory to another. Dr. Beverlie Dietze presented research that found no consistent approach to curriculum content or delivery models in post-secondary ECE programs at publicly funded colleges.<sup>20</sup> Often, the curriculum content, depth, and balance of theory to application is at the discretion of faculty, programs, or institutions rather than defined by government policies.

Dr. Dietze's study also revealed a wide range of views about if, where, and how to position outdoor play pedagogy in post-secondary ECE programs—from embedding outdoor play in learning outcomes, to embedding outdoor play in every course, to creating a course or certificate in outdoor play programming. Post-secondary faculty from across Canada identified that curriculum changes at colleges can take up to a year to be approved, resulting in a long waiting period before implementation.

One of the core issues expressed at the Symposium was that not all faculty have access to resources or current research on outdoor play pedagogy. As well, faculty may not have education or experience in facilitating outdoor play pedagogy. This led to discussions about ways in which faculty could gain access to evidence-based professional development on outdoor play pedagogy and practices. Ideally, such access would enable faculty to better advocate for explicit outdoor play-related learning outcomes in both the theoretical and practicum portions of post-secondary ECE programs. It could also contribute to faculty creating more/new professional development opportunities for ECE practitioners and community partners within the ecosystem.

## Professional development programs: more variety, few standards

The variety in curricula and standards that ECE graduates encounter as students is matched by the variety in government policies across Canada that influence their ongoing professional development as ECE employees. Some of these differences include the required professional development hours that employees must complete annually, the funding sources available to individuals and programs, the types of training that qualify as professional development, and if and how training qualifies toward professional development hours.

Various models are used to deliver professional development training, such as on-site and online workshops, specialized courses, study tours, discussion and reflection groups, and on-site mentorship programs. Each model has strengths and limitations. How ECE practitioners transfer theory learned in training to practice is influenced by the background of facilitators, the spaces in which the training occurs, and participant learning styles. Currently, there are no professional standards associated with who may offer professional development sessions nor is there any guarantee that those delivering training do so with the most up-to-date research in theory or in practice.

## Linking provincial/territorial policy to post-secondary faculty expertise

Some faculty and researchers at the Symposium identified the need for better connections among legislation, policy development, research, post-secondary programs, and professional development. For example, one college faculty member pointed out that examination of policies under development by all in the ecosystem could broaden the spectrum of issues and build support from an array of perspectives. There was a sense from some faculty that their expertise is often not drawn upon, nor are they informed of new policies that should be influencing the post-secondary curriculum. Other faculty and researchers identified how their research expertise and connections to ECE programs could strengthen policy development related to post-secondary training and professional development offerings.

### Discussion questions

- How can post-secondary ECE programs be supported to update curricula to include outdoor play pedagogy?
- Who are the stakeholders in your ecosystem who could support post-secondary faculty, researchers, and trainers in advancing outdoor play pedagogy?
- How can collaboration be strengthened to ensure evidence-based outdoor play pedagogy and professional learning opportunities?

### Proposed actions

- Upgrade the curricula of post-secondary ECE programs to include evidence-based outdoor play pedagogy, and advance professional development opportunities that do the same.
- Ensure that all ECE students engage in quality outdoor play programs during practicum placements.
- Develop regional and provincial strategies to deliver the professional development training needed to support all stakeholders in the outdoor play ecosystem. Consider training and mentorship models to support changes in practice.
- Ensure all professional learning includes outdoor experiences to support the translation of theory to practice.

## Theme 5. Gaps and barriers in Canadian policy, legislation, and standards

ECE programs are required to comply with municipal/regional, public health, and playground inspection guidelines in addition to kindergarten and child care policy. However, policies in Canada governing children's outdoor play are currently not well-developed to support outdoor play. The Symposium introduced new Canadian policy research catalyzed by the call for abstracts, and all Symposium discussions included implications for policy. Presenters and participants from outside Canada provided an international perspective.



Madison Predy provided an Alberta perspective on legislation, policies, and practices.<sup>21</sup> Key points presented that could align across jurisdictions include examining a) the scope within policies to support and increase outdoor play and the way such policies are modified and implemented; b) centre policies, such as weather and clothing, to ensure they support rather than restrict children's access to outdoor play; and c) policies on education for families and professional development for ECE practitioners.

### Lessons from Scotland and the United States

Keynote presenter Henry Mathias identified a key to the advancement of ECE and outdoor play in Scotland: as more outdoor play and forest nurseries evolved, the Care Inspectorate responsible for ECE regulations recognized the need to a) shift from measuring provider inputs to assessing the impact of services on children's outcomes, and b) provide capacity-building resources to the sector.<sup>22</sup> Drs. Michal Perlman and Nina Howe found that ECE policy development in Scotland had been influenced by a number of factors: a broader interest in healthy development; national curriculum support for outdoor play; leadership at high levels of government; international examples of the importance of outdoor play; and, in particular, existing Scottish ECE programs serving as demonstration models.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Sarah Baray and Sandy Weser of San Antonio, Texas, also emphasized how investing in model education centres that serve as demonstration sites and incubators of curriculum innovation can inform policy development and promote access to quality outdoor play experiences.<sup>24</sup>

## Designing and evaluating play spaces

Drs. Petter Åkerblom and Helen Lynch indicated the need for policies related to outdoor play space to focus on size, varying terrain, design, accessibility, safety, and ability to fulfill intended activities, including all types of play, recreation, and pedagogic work.<sup>25,26</sup> Dr. Lynch recommended that Universal Design (UD) principles be embedded into policies so that the design of outdoor play spaces and products within them allow people to effectively engage in the space without the need for adaptation or specialized design. The lack of national and regional policies and guidelines for inclusive environments, including UD in playground designs, requires attention.

Dr. Janet Loebach identified the need for licensing officers to use evidence-based tools to evaluate children's outdoor spaces in ECE programs and school environments.<sup>27</sup> Evaluation findings from evidence-based tools would be more convincing to policy-makers and more reflective of the needs of children and their outdoor play desires. Dr. Marketta Kytta reinforced the importance of community outdoor space that is designed to be child-friendly.<sup>28</sup> This can best be achieved by having children participate in the planning process.

Dr. Robin Moore reminded Symposium participants of the correlation of children's natural settings to their behaviours and physical activity.<sup>29</sup> He outlined the benefits of using behaviour mapping codes and physical attributes to acquire objective, operational measures of predictable behaviour patterns across settings and sites. This type of information is beneficial in advocating for evidence-based regulations and new standards of practice. Similarly, Dr. Eva Oberle identified that family demographics and backgrounds should be considered when planning space, as these influence how the space will be used.<sup>30</sup>



### Lost in translation: policy versus the interpretation of policy

One of the strongest messages Symposium participants expressed, despite their differing backgrounds and perspectives, is inconsistency in the interpretation and resulting implementation of legislation and policies. The same legislation and policy set for a province or territory is interpreted differently from region to region and inspector to inspector. Many directors and practitioners suggested that in some regions, those inspecting ECE programs do not have an educational background in child development. The end result is that inspections are undertaken on the basis of a rigid checklist rather than how the program and space (natural or manufactured materials) does or does not support children's play.

They suggested that there was an absence of understanding—of outdoor play pedagogy, of the benefits of children experiencing outdoor play in their community spaces (such as community parks), and of the value for children in being able to play with natural and manufactured loose parts.

Others outlined the challenges faced when policies from different aspects of the ecosystem conflict with one another. For example, some participants have found that outdoor play spaces met the early childhood licensing requirements but did not comply with public health requirements.

## How policy can be a barrier: a case study

Dr. Blair Niblett, Marlene Power, and Kim Hiscott's case study of forest and nature school programming highlighted the challenges of attempting to operate a licensed outdoor play ECE program in Ontario when such programs are required to follow policies within the Child Care and Early Years Act that was developed primarily for indoor facilities.<sup>31</sup> Such policies, when combined with inconsistent implementation processes, restrict opportunities for children to be immersed in the forest and nature school context. These barriers exist despite the advanced professional development and practices staff may draw on to design quality experiences and manage risks and hazards.



## Filling policy gaps and making policy changes

Participants at the Symposium identified the need for a paradigm shift so that key stakeholders within the ecosystem work together to reformulate outdoor play policies and practices.

In his presentation, Dr. Patrick Maher shared a government and community model being used to advance outdoor play in Nova Scotia.<sup>32</sup>

He identified three key factors that contribute to the success of the model:

1. There are outdoor play champions within government and communities that are collectively working to advance outdoor play.
2. Government departments are working collaboratively to support and promote outdoor play in a variety of ways across the province.
3. Various government departments and health boards have invested financially in various initiatives—from training to research to resources.

This form of government involvement echoes the Government of Scotland model.<sup>33</sup> A sustained investment of time, funds, and professional learning is necessary for any change to be implemented, adopted, and maintained.

Participants reinforced the importance of government and sector organizations partnering to create and test resources to support this new paradigm. Such a collaborative approach would help build capacity and experience in the short- to medium-term, before legislative changes are introduced. Piloting special licenses for leading practitioners was also suggested as an innovative way for governments to explore the benefits of outdoor play.

Symposium discussions highlighted the need to review relevant provincial and territorial legislation and create opportunities to influence policy through advocacy and evidence-based positioning on policy and legislation change. Participants identified the need to create a robust network of policy influencers that includes community, national and provincial champions, all levels of government, school boards, sectoral networks, provincial and national parks, education providers, landscape architects, and others. Working together as an ecosystem network will build cohesion and consistency and increase the likelihood of successfully influencing policy, legislation, and ultimately practice related to outdoor play.

### Discussion questions

- What current provincial, territorial, and municipal/regional policies, along with internal ECE program policies, are positively or negatively influencing children's outdoor play in your community? Is it the policy or the interpretation and implementation of the policy that is impacting children's outdoor play?
- What gaps in knowledge, capacity and/or experience must be filled before specific policies are modified or created?
- What key policy supports and changes at each level of government (provincial, territorial, and municipal) are required to advance outdoor play in Canada?

### Proposed actions

- Determine and address gaps and barriers to outdoor play in current government regulations and policies.
- Establish guidelines for outdoor play spaces based on Universal Design. Also, develop policy and procedures that support regular access to, and use of, community spaces and parks for outdoor play and learning.
- Separate Canadian Standards Association (CSA) standards for the engineering-related issues of manufactured play equipment from value-based judgments on the use of the play space and inclusion of natural materials and loose parts.
- Ensure provincial and territorial ECE curriculum frameworks and complementary resources include explicit recommendations on outdoor play programming and facilitation strategies to engage educators and children in high-quality outdoor play experiences.

## Theme 6. Advancing the ecosystem through research, evaluation, and knowledge mobilization

A significant amount of research on outdoor play derives from international scholars and institutions; only a small network of leaders and organizations within the Canadian ecosystem are currently engaged in this type of research. Research and evidence-based practice in a Canadian context are necessary to advance outdoor play and influence societal attitudes, policies, and practices here in Canada. Symposium participants discussed priority research areas to advance outdoor play.

These were the most commonly identified research themes:

- **Impacts of outdoor play**—on various outcomes such as economic return for families and communities, the health and well-being of children, and wider social impacts
- **Identification of best practices and quality programming**—in a variety of settings
- **Risk factors**—the impact of climate, injury, liability, and illness related to outdoor play versus the risks of not taking part in outdoor play
- **Existing training gaps**—that inform the content, competencies, and delivery methods of education and training related to outdoor play
- **Policies**—their impacts on outdoor play
- **Indigenous ways and contexts**—exploring where and how Indigenous viewpoints are incorporated into training, professional development, community programs, and children’s outdoor play experiences
- **Play space design**—adoption of Universal Design principles in play space designs and construction

Some participants suggested the need for governments and research funding agencies to commit to supporting longitudinal studies that would encompass many of the research foci above and consider the impacts of outdoor play in local, regional, and national contexts. Of particular interest was the need to gather available longitudinal results on the effects of regulation and legislation on outdoor play and on the impact of training and related models specific to outdoor play pedagogy. As well, other participants identified the need to create a centralized, web-based portal or compendium of key resources and research related to outdoor play.

### Discussion questions

- Are there key areas of research missing from those identified at the Symposium? If so, what are they and why are they important?
- What is your individual and collective role in moving this important research agenda forward?
- Is a national information portal feasible and would it be useful? How do you see such a portal being operationalized for use across Canada?

### Proposed actions

- Conduct research on the suggested priorities to inform current practice and policy.
- Increase opportunities for researchers at Canadian institutions to engage in collaborative research that examines the current national state and impact of children’s outdoor play.
- Determine the feasibility of creating an information portal with a compendium of research and resources on outdoor play for the benefit of all stakeholders, nationally and internationally.
- Design and launch a network-based advocacy process to influence Canada’s federal, provincial and territorial governments with the goal of improving policies and guidelines for outdoor play programs and spaces on the basis of evidence-based research.

## Conclusion

This paper has synthesized and shared the 2018 Symposium dialogue in an effort to advance outdoor play and ECE in Canada across policy, practice, and research. The Symposium and this resulting paper propose the use of an ecosystem lens to examine the complexity of sectors and stakeholders who influence outdoor play. If we can bring these diverse actors and influencers into dialogue and collaboration, then we may forge a new paradigm of ECE that creates rich outdoor play opportunities and meaningful experiences for children. We hope that the thematic synthesis, discussion questions, and proposed actions offered in this paper fuel new and ongoing efforts to advance outdoor play and ECE across Canada.



## Appendix – Canadian Resources

These are resources with pan-Canadian relevance that were referenced at the Symposium.

### Research Synthesis

**Outdoor Play (May 2019)** – <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/outdoor-play/>

A topic edited by M. Brussoni in the online Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, edited by R. E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, and Ray DeV. Peters, and published by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development.

### Research Network

**PLaTO-Net (Play, Learn, and Teach Outdoors Network)** – <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/plato-net/>

A global network of thought-leaders interested in advancing research and practice related to outdoor play, risky play, outdoor learning, and teaching through play.

### Professional Learning Opportunities

**Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course** – <http://childnature.ca/forest-school-canada/>

Offered by the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada.

**Outdoor Play Training** – <https://outdoorplaytraining.com/>

Online, self-directed 12-module course available through the Canadian Child Care Federation.

### Position Statements (Advocacy)

**Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play (2015)** – <https://www.haloresearch.ca/outdoorplay/>

Developed and supported by a coalition of organizations.

**Active Outdoor Play Statement from the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health (2018)** –

<http://www.phn-rsp.ca/aop-position-jae/index-eng.php>

From the Pan-Canadian Public Health Network.

**Children’s Unstructured Play Position Statement (2019)** –

<https://www.cpha.ca/childrens-unstructured-play>

From the Canadian Public Health Association.

### Tools for Outdoor Play

**Outdoor Play Canada** – <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/>

Outdoor Play Canada is a collective of individuals and organizations interested in outdoor play and whose website is becoming a portal for news, information and resources related to outdoor play.

**Outsideplay.ca** – <https://outsideplay.ca/>

A proven, research-based, online tool for parents and caregivers to support shifting attitudes to risk.

**Unstructured Play Toolkit** – <https://www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play>

This online toolkit developed by the Canadian Public Health Association provides infographics that convey the benefits of unstructured play, information about promising practices in Canada, research summaries, decision-making tools, and a discussion paper titled “What’s in the Best Interest of the Child?”

## Endnotes

All presentations from the Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium are identified as “Symposium presentation, October 2018.”

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- <sup>1</sup> H. Yoshikawa, C. Weiland, J. Brooks-Gunn, M. R. Burchinal, L. M. Espinosa, W. T. Gormley, J. Ludwig, K. Magnuson, D. Phillips, and M. Zaslow, *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education* (Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development; New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2013), <https://www.fcd-us.org/the-evidence-base-on-preschool/>.
- <sup>2</sup> M. S. Tremblay, C. Gray, S. Babcock, J. Barnes, C. C. Bradstreet, D. Carr, G. Chabot, et al., “Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 6 (2015):6475–6505.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Brussoni, topic ed., “Outdoor Play,” in *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online], eds. R.E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, and R.DeV. Peters, May 2019, <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/outdoor-play/>.
- <sup>4</sup> E. Akbari and K. McCuaig, *Early Childhood Education Report 2017* (Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development), <http://ecereport.ca/en/>.
- <sup>5</sup> B. Dietze and D. Kashin, *Outdoor and Nature Play in Early Childhood Education* (Toronto, ON: Pearson, 2018).
- <sup>6</sup> Outdoor Play Canada, *Outdoor Play Glossary of Terms*, Draft 5.1, May 2019, <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/outdoor-play-glossary-of-terms-5.1.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> Outdoor Play Canada, “Outdoor Play Glossary.”
- <sup>8</sup> C. Alden, “A New Paradigm for Early Learning Through Outdoor Play,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>9</sup> A. James, “What Can Indigenous Curriculum Teach Us All?” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Author, 2015), <http://nctr.ca/reports.php>.
- <sup>11</sup> L. Zimanyi and L. Short, “The Willow Trees Talk to Us: Thinking with Place and (Re)storing Young Children’s Encounters in a Forest Nature Program,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>12</sup> K. Absolon King, “Indigenous Wholistic Theory: A Knowledge Set for Practice,” *First Peoples Child and Family Review* 5 no. 2 (2010):74–87.
- <sup>13</sup> Tremblay et al., “Position Statement”; Brussoni, “Outdoor Play and Risk.”
- <sup>14</sup> H. Mathias, “Scottish Early Learning Policy and Outdoor Play,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>15</sup> M. van Rooijen and M. Cotterink, “The Right to a Bruise: Professionalizing ECEC Educators to Increase Children’s Risk Competence,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Niblett, M. Power, and K. Hiscott, “Partnering For Outdoor Play: A Case Study of Forest and Nature School Programming in the Context of Licensed Child Care in Ottawa, Ontario,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>17</sup> van Rooijen and Cotterink, “The Right to a Bruise.”
- <sup>18</sup> M. Brussoni, T. Ishikawa, C. Han, I. Pike, A. Bundy, J. Jacob, J. Tellez, et al., “Tools for Reframing Parents’ Perception of Risk to Promote Children’s Outdoor Risky Play,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> T. Scheffel, L. Hives, A. Steele, and J. Scott, “Nurturing Curiosity in the Outdoors: A Kindergarten Case Study,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.

- <sup>20</sup> B. Dietze and A. Cutler, “Outdoor Play Pedagogy in College Early Childhood Education Programs,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>21</sup> M. Predy, N. Holt, and V. Carson, “Examining Outdoor Play Policies in Licensed Childcare Centres in Alberta,” Symposium presentation, October 2018
- <sup>22</sup> Mathias, “Scottish Early Learning Policy.”
- <sup>23</sup> M. Perlman, N. Howe, and C. Bergeron, “How and Why Did Outdoor Play Become a Central Focus of Scottish Early Learning and Care Policy?,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Baray and S. Weser, “Creating a Culture of Outdoor Learning Among Children in a Sedentary City,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> P. Åkerblom, “Child Friendly City Planning Policies, Opportunities and Tools,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> H. Lynch, A. Moore, C. Edwards, and L. Horgan, “From Policy to Play Provision: Inclusion by Design – Design by Inclusion,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>27</sup> J. Loebach and H. Campbell, “Evaluating the Impacts of Outdoor Playspace Interventions to Inform Environmental and Policy Changes Supportive of Outdoor Play for Young Children,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>28</sup> M. Kytä, “Outdoor Play in Urban Contexts,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>29</sup> R. Moore, N. Cosco, W. R. Smith, J. Wesoloski, T. Danninger, D. S. Ward, S. G. Trost, and N. Ries, “Findings and Policy Applications of a Research Study on the Effect of the Outdoor Child Care Environments on Children’s Behaviours,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> E. Oberle, “Outdoor Play in Schools: Meeting Children and Families Where They Are At to Make it a Success!” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>31</sup> Niblett, Power, and Hiscott, “Partnering for Outdoor Play.”
- <sup>32</sup> P. T. Maher, S. Melanson, P. McCracken, G. Riley Gallagher, and H. McIntyre, “Examining the Development of Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education in Nova Scotia,” Symposium presentation, October 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> Mathias, “Scottish Early Learning Policy”; Perlman et al., “How and Why.”