

# Children at this northern daycare often spend most of their day outside <sup>[1]</sup>

Northern Manitoba outdoor daycare says there's no bad weather, 'just bad clothing choices'

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It's a chilly winter morning in Thompson, the largest Manitoba city north of Winnipeg, and kids at the early learning and child-care centre are running around playing in the snow and building forts.

This isn't recess, though — this is how they spend the majority of their days at their northern daycare.

Unless it's exceptionally cold or there are frigid windchill warnings, the early learning and child-care centre on campus at the University College of the North aims to have the kids outdoors as much as possible.

Barb Carlson, the board chair of the centre, says weather shouldn't keep kids inside.

"I don't think there's any thing such as bad weather, it's just bad clothing choices. The children, of course, aren't going to go outside when it's -50 and there's lots of wind, so we're always looking at that as well to keep the kids safe."

The daycare's forest and nature program officially opened at the centre near the end of November. It's geared toward kindergarten-aged kids who still attend the daycare outside of school hours. The daycare currently serves approximately 50 children, with eight in the full forest nature program.

It's focused on being child-led and child-inspired, with minimal curriculum and minimal structure. Days are typically based on the children's interests.

## Benefits of outdoor education

Carlson has worked in early childhood education for three decades, and said research and experience reaffirm the value in getting kids outdoors.

"We all know that children have too much screen time, too much sitting. There's a lot of health problems attributed to that sedentary lifestyle, so for children to be outside and to be physically active, they're more competent," she said.

"They problem-solve better. You see less aggression. You see more co-operation and socializing and their imagination just goes. Without having any type of toys, children can find so many things to do out in the forest and out on the land."

To keep the children engaged in different settings, the centre has three different outdoor spaces they rotate them through: the Boreal Discovery Centre; a space along the Millennium Trail, which loops around the city, and another trail along the Burntwood River; and the

UCN sweatlodge compound and outdoor classroom.

Deveny Zahayko's four-year-old son, Hunter, attends the daycare. She said her son has gravitated toward the new activities at the outdoor daycare.

"I think it's good for them to get out there. A lot of kids just get their backyards or go to the park, but this way they get to go out there and just play and be themselves in a safe kind of environment."

Zahayko, who works at UCN in planning and program analysis and is Métis, said she still has family members who are trappers and that she grew up spending time with her father while he worked in the bush. She said she likes that her son is getting a chance to connect with the land like she did.

"It's just that getting out there, appreciating it, respecting the land that we do live [on].... We camp all the time, so he does get outside, but to actually get in the bush and look at things and learn what things are, it's just that whole understanding and appreciating and respect for where they're going."

Carlson estimates that 80 per cent of the parents of kids at the daycare are Indigenous, and said their outdoor programming can also play a role in reconciliation.

"Mother Earth is very important and when our children are out on the land they build that connection to the land. They learn about the place in which they live, which is so important for children to have that connection, and more important for First Nation children."

### **Outdoor learning 'exploding' across Canada**

Mavis Lewis-Webber is a course assessor with Forest School Canada, a national organization that aims to support forest school programs across the country.

She said the outdoor education model has been taking off across the country in the last few years.

"It's exploding. It is going crazy in every province and territory and really gaining a foothold with parents and educators, with the whole acknowledgement that children need to be away from screens and outside."

In Winnipeg there are a few programs that currently offer outdoor learning opportunities.

FortWhyte Alive runs a preschool program three days a week, but not during the summer months. The Discovery Children's Centre also has two half-day sessions and a third half day at the Living Prairie Museum. Momenta, which offers youth programs, has full-day camp-type outdoor programming, including full-day sessions on school in-service days.

Lewis-Webber said organizations face challenges operating nature-based learning, as the bodies that certify daycares don't know how to license an outdoor space. As a result, the programs that do exist typically run camp-style programs or do field trips, whereas the centre in Thompson has a licensed indoor facility and chooses to spend more of its programming time outside.

Lewis-Webber is hoping governing bodies will take notice of the interest in learning outdoors, and its potential value.

"Regulatory bodies and administrators really need to start paying attention to the value. There's more to it than just children being outside. There is a pedagogy and there is a professionalism and training that goes into nurturing children."

-reprinted from CBC News

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