

Being outdoors is good for us. Why won't the province license outdoor child care?^[1]

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Excerpt

Dr. Bonnie Henry has been urging us to go outside.

Over the past years, research has demonstrated the value of simply being outside. Our physical and mental well-being are supported by fresh air, trees and all the life found outside. As COVID-19 is difficult to catch when you're outdoors, being outside is the best place to exercise as well as to enjoy our communities and cope with our anxieties and uncertainties.

At the start of the pandemic, I went walking to Beacon Hill Park each day to watch the herons building their nests. Both my walking and my observation of the yearly ritual of nest building was calming and centering.

Believing in the restorative power of being in the green and breathing world, nine years ago I helped start B.C.'s first Nature Kindergarten in the Sooke School District.

Once, while walking with some children in the forest surrounding Royal Roads University, I saw how two children, struggling with their own issues, found solace in finding slugs. Having a slug to accompany them on the walk in the forest seemed calming and grounding for them.

There is a growing group of educators who feel that young children benefit from ample time spent in the living, breathing world. Forest Schools and Nature Kindergartens have been a familiar aspect of early childhood education in Northern Europe for more than 40 years. In B.C., Nature Kindergartens have spread beyond Sooke and can now be found in Williams Lake, Salmon Arm and Abbotsford. These programs usually spend all morning outside.

By all accounts, these have been a success, and more are popping up all the time.

Spending time outdoors for learning is catching on, but licensed, full-day outdoor childcare is not legal in B.C. A year ago, a pilot project creating licensed outdoor early childhood programs began in Washington State.... So, why not B.C.?

Early childhood educators in the Victoria area have created outdoor programs for young children, but have run into licensing restrictions. These programs are licensed by the province as an assurance that they meet minimal criteria (staffing, space etc.) for their type of program, whether preschool, child care, or family child care. At the moment, programs are licensed only if they have a physical space which meets provincial requirements. But how can you license the forest, a park, or a beach?

Inspectors say outdoor ECE programs are not possible due to current legislation. Some local programs carry on without a license because the demand is there from families, but unlicensed programs cannot access subsidies for parents who need help with the fees, and they cannot provide assurance that they have met a minimal set of criteria.

The only outdoor ECE programs that can be licensed are those that have a structure, because ultimately it is the building which is licensed. Yet a quality program is not about a structure; people are the key to a good program.

There are various initiatives working to find a way to license outdoor early learning programs. But the issue is broader than simply licensing ECE outdoor programs.

Listening to the advice of health officials, early childhood educators working in currently licensed facilities are looking at ways to move programs outside.

While not all programs want to be outdoors, many educators realize more time outdoors is beneficial to both staff and children; and parents are also looking to outdoor programs as part of the solution to keep their children safe. Parents, government and educators need to have conversations about how to safely license and monitor ECE programs that are outdoors as well as to share information about good outdoor practice.

The benefits of bringing children outdoors are too strong to ignore, and families want outdoor learning options for their young children.

By having this conversation, I believe that the provincial government of B.C. could begin to license child-care programs that operate in a safe and thoughtful manner outdoors, as well as opening opportunities for broader conversations with all early childhood programs on how to be outside with young children.

Not only being able to increase child care spaces, but providing information to programs who want to heed the call to go outside. Programs in Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have shown themselves to be safe and to benefit children's well-being and learning. Programs are being created in New Zealand, Australia, China, Japan and most recently Washington State.

British Columbia could help lead the way for Canada in a time that needs these programs for children and for families.

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