

Why the outdoors should be an integral part of every early learning and child-care program ^[1]

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Bilateral negotiations are underway to move the historic federal commitment to a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system from vision to reality. Expanding access for all young children in Canada will require creating and licensing more physical spaces where children learn and are cared for. But what kinds of spaces will these be?

In the face of the growing body of research that reveals how outdoor early learning has significant developmental benefits for children, early childhood educators across the country are reimagining early learning and care in the outdoors.

Governments need to take note of this burgeoning grassroots movement because there are implications for capital infrastructure, regulations and early childhood educator training.

Optimal conditions for learning

In the outdoors children can move freely, follow their interests, take risks and test their limits. This translates into children who are happier, more active, curious, confident and collaborative. High-quality outdoor environments create optimal conditions for learning.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the outdoors as a health-promoting environment that mitigates the risk of spreading airborne viruses — something we can continue to benefit from in the future.

My doctoral research is about the philosophy, practice and policy of outdoor early learning in Ontario. I have become convinced that high-quality outdoor learning should be a significant part of every early learning and child-care program.

Here's what governments should be contemplating as we begin to build a Canada-wide system that embraces and enables outdoor learning.

Infrastructure must include outdoor spaces

When we think of capital infrastructure costs for early learning and care, we tend to think about buildings, but we need to think carefully about outdoor spaces and reframe them as outdoor learning environments. Regulations across the country currently do not require more than seven sq. m per child of outdoor space. That is just half the size of a parking space!

Fortunately evidence-based design guidelines already exist for planning high-quality outdoor learning environments. Criteria for early learning and care infrastructure funds to create new spaces should require high-quality outdoor learning environments as part of any new construction or renovation.

Schools, local green spaces

Of course, access to outdoor space is a challenge in many urban centres. However, accommodations can be made.

First, early childhood education programs can be delivered through schools, which tend to have outdoor space. This would maximize existing assets and benefit all children in a school. The Nova Scotia government has done so with its pre-primary program for four-year-olds. The government recently announced a new fund for outdoor learning environments in partnership with the federal government.

Second, partnerships with municipalities and parks agencies can support access to local green spaces. Partnerships can help ensure access to infrastructure such as bathrooms and running water.

Investing in high-quality natural play spaces in school yards and local parks would also leverage benefits for everyone in the local community. This is especially important given that access to green space is not equitable in Canada.

Forest and nature schools

We also need to enable early learning programs in which children spend the majority of their day outdoors, such as forest and nature schools.

Currently government regulations for early learning and care in every jurisdiction require an indoor facility in order to obtain a licence to operate. However, such buildings are a poor and unnecessary use of money when programs plan to be mostly outside. Community buildings, cabins and shelters can provide sufficient protective space during inclement weather.

In the U.S., Washington state recently licensed outdoor preschools. Pilot program budgets demonstrated that outdoor programs require around 30 per cent less in operating funds than traditional early learning and care programs.

In St. John's, N.L., Cloudberry Forest School has just started a three-year pilot project to explore the licensing of outdoor early learning and care programs. Other jurisdictions will soon be able to benefit from their learning.

Educator training

Quality in early learning and care is influenced by the educational attainment of the staff who work with children. Currently, the majority of post-secondary early childhood education programs across the country do not explicitly prepare educators for outdoor teaching and learning. However, this is changing rapidly.

There are new post-secondary transformations taking place in Alberta, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick. In Ontario, Humber College is embracing a "Two-Eyed Seeing" approach, whereby both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives influence early land-based play and learning. Their work is guided partly by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action.

Existing evidence-based professional learning resources and training programs could be scaled and paired with apprenticeship approaches to educator training to help meet the urgent need for qualified educators.

Canada needs an additional 20,000 staff each year to expand the early learning and care system, most of whom need to be educators who will work directly with children. Outdoor early learning is a source of untapped potential for recruitment.

Passionate professionals in parks, conservation and outdoor education might reimagine their careers through early childhood education in outdoor learning environments if supported to make the transition. Recruiting for outdoor programs may also attract more males to early childhood education. The fact that educators report their own improved well-being and professional engagement outdoors may help attract and retain more early childhood educators.

Scotland as an international model

Scotland recently expanded its early learning and care and emphasized the importance of outdoor play and learning in its policy. A grassroots movement led by early adopters, and then supported by champions within government, laid the groundwork.

The Scottish government also developed a robust set of resources for educator training, play space design and implementation guidelines to support outdoor programming. Government, local authorities and non-profits in Scotland worked together to enable early learning and care programs to use local green spaces. This is a model Canada should pay attention to.

The Public Policy Forum recently recommended that the federal government invest in an infrastructure fund for early learning and care as well as the expansion of post-secondary programs for early childhood educators. As government and educational plans unfold, children should not have to depend on the goodwill of an educator to access high-quality outdoor learning; good policy and investment are the solution, and all levels of government have roles to play.

Building a new Canada-wide early learning and care system will be one of the most significant social investments in decades. With the goal of serving every young child in Canada, it is incumbent upon us to imagine and build a system that reflects children's innate needs and desires to learn outdoors in order to enhance child-care quality as well as child and educator well-being.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/system> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9054>