

# PLAY

A MAGAZINE FOR FAMILY SUPPORT PRACTITIONERS

ISSUE 2





# PLAY

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## Editor's letter

“Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development.”

That is the first line of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play. Informed by the best available evidence, interpreted by a group of Canadian experts representing 14 organizations, and reviewed and edited by more than 1,600 stakeholders—it is the go-to document for anyone who wants to know more about the net effect of outdoor and risky active play.

Everyone has a role in supporting children's access to outdoor play.

Parents, educators and caregivers, health professionals, school and childcare administrators, and governments are just a few stakeholders whose actions can help children get the right start in life. Rain or shine, sun or snow, there are always opportunities to play outdoors. There are always opportunities to support children's healthy development.

In our last issue of the Play magazine, we introduced Canada's growing outdoor play movement, delved into innovative play projects happening from coast-to-coast-to-coast, and featured tips for you to use in your work with children and families.

In this issue, we want to point you towards comprehensive opportunities and tools that will help you really dig into outdoor play concepts. What professional development opportunities out there can help you incorporate outdoor play into your work? What resources can you use in your conversations with parents? How can you advocate for change within your organization—and what tools can help you do so? We hope you find answers between these pages.

Before you start reading, a few thank yous are in order. The Lawson Foundation has been a leader in Canada's outdoor play movement. They supported the development of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play as well as the innovative projects mentioned in Issues 1 and 2.

And last but not least, family support practitioners have an incredibly important role in bringing together families, programs, and communities. Thank you for your tireless efforts to give children the right start in life.

**Rebecca Balcerzak**  
Editor and Senior Project Officer  
Families Canada





Marlene Power, Child and Nature Fellow at The Child & Nature Alliance of Canada

# Bringing Early Childhood Education Outdoors

By Rebecca Balcerzak

Marlene Power, Child and Nature Fellow at The Child & Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) and Founder of Forest School Canada, discusses professional learning opportunities for anyone interested in supporting children’s healthy development through outdoor play and learning.

### In a nutshell, what does the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada do?

Our vision is MORE CHILDREN IN MUDDY BOOTS, OUTSIDE. We want to see all children thrive through playing and learning in forests, parks, meadows, and mud puddles. Essentially what we mean by that is we support children’s access to quality play and learning opportunities in nature by working with practitioners across Canada. We support practitioners to build strong connections with the natural world for children across what we call the ‘nature continuum’—both in nature and nearby nature, in little pockets of urban green space as well as in immersive natural spaces. So not just provincial parks and national parks, but also tiny ravines, mud puddles, and five trees at the back of a school ground. We believe nature is everywhere! We view the

child in the context of their families, their schools, and all the systems they interact with on a day-to-day basis in order to break down barriers to outdoor play and learning.

Through Forest School Canada, we deliver a year-long Forest and Nature School Practitioner Course. It’s an intensive course for educators and early childhood educators to learn the pedagogy of Forest and Nature School and also the very practical application of being in the outdoors, supporting children in the outdoors, and supporting outdoor play. We have a national facilitation team who live and work across Canada from coast to coast to coast, and we deliver our courses at host sites across the country.

In addition to that really intensive year long course we also deliver a variety of different introductory workshops. Often, we get grandparents and parents who just want to learn more about Forest and Nature School. We also get administrators and researchers who enroll in those one- or two-days workshops.

### Are the introductory workshops also meant for practitioners?

Absolutely! We really encourage practitioners to register for the workshops to see if it is a good fit for them before diving into the more intensive work.

We deliver a two-day introductory workshop, as well as a risky play workshop which helps educators and practitioners understand their duty of care and how to balance risks found in outdoor play and keep children safe while outdoors. We are also doing a pilot Outdoor

Play First Aid course that we are very excited about! It’s kind of a combination of wilderness first aid with infant first aid but aimed at working with young children near nature and in pockets of green spaces. Lastly, we deliver customized workshops based on the needs and interests of groups.

### Where can practitioners get trained?

With funding from the Lawson Foundation we’ve been scaling up our professional learning arm called Forest School Canada. We have 16 new facilitators and representation from Newfoundland to British Columbia to the Northwest Territories. These facilitators deliver our courses and workshops on our behalf. And every year we’ve been adding additional courses.

We deliver all of our professional learning in partnership with organizations such as early years centers, conservation sites, parks, and education associations and federations. Our hope is to build on the momentum and communities of practice that already exist in various regions, and not be a ‘one off’ by coming into a community and then leaving. We really want to build community capacity so that practitioners feel supported and connected.

### What core principles underline your approach to training practitioners?

We strive to promote the principle that children are competent, capable and curious. All of our curriculum and our professional learning is aimed at helping to break that down. Like, ‘what do we mean by children are competent?’ and ‘what do we mean by children are capable and curious?’ and ‘how do we support that? What does confident, capable and curious look like, sound like, feel like?’

Another core principle is the idea of ‘walking the walk.’ A lot of our professional learning involves some component of being outdoors, experiencing nature, being playful and actually experiencing the elements.

Another big principle of our work that we’re really invested in is building relationships. A big part of this is meeting people where they’re at. I’ll give an example—often when people talk about

# What is Play?

Play is what children and youth do when they follow their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons. Play is freely chosen (a child chooses when, if and how to play), intrinsically motivated (a child plays because they are motivated internally to do so), and personally-directed (a child individually and/or collectively directs their own play).

*Definition provided by Outdoor Play Canada*



outdoor play and connecting children with nature, there's the shaming that happens, like shaming parents and educators. I'm a single parent so I know how difficult it can be and I think if we do that whole shaming and blaming bit, people just shut down. But if we can acknowledge some days are hard and we're not perfect and we can be vulnerable, I think that really helps people feel accepted and not threatened.

**Are there any anecdotes that come to mind that really speak to how your training has changed how people relate to and view outdoor play?**

Oh my gosh, so many. We had one educator in a course that I facilitated last year who came into the course with very little knowledge but so much passion. Like so much passion. Throughout the workshop she kept saying 'I've never heard some of the words that I'm hearing before' and 'I've never seen people communicate with each other the way we're communicating with each other in this course' and 'I've never thought about resolving conflict in these ways. I've never thought about having these kinds of conversations about risk with children, I've never thought about trying to engage my community in my work before, I've always worked in a silo.' And by the end of the course it was just amazing to see how much she had observed and really taken in. In our training, that is such a regular experience for people.

**What are some challenges that practitioners may face during or after they take the workshops or the full year course?**

It really takes a year of working in one space over four seasons to understand the challenges and opportunities that will arise in that one particular natural space—regardless if it's a city or woodland. Every season, when you teach outside, your classroom changes every single day. In a school, or preschool center you turn off the lights at the end of the day, you leave and most likely when you come back it's cleaner than when you left it and everything is exactly as it was the day before. Whereas in an outdoor classroom or

in nature, everyday there's something new and every season there's new conditions. It really takes four seasons on the land to learn what kind of challenges will arise.

And then there's challenges in storing loose parts. There are a lot of loose parts that can be found in nature and outdoors, and in addition we will bring some loose parts in like baskets and pulley's, sometimes ropes, extra logs and stumps, planks, that kind of thing. Some loose parts can stay outside but some loose parts really do need storage—so that's something that needs to be discussed and planned in advance.



“Every season, when you teach outside, your classroom changes every single day.”

**Let's say someone took your practitioners course and then started to implement what they learned. What would that look like?**

Part of the beauty of Forest and Nature School is that it can be really diverse. Some programs go out once a week. Some go out every morning. In some programs, like our Ottawa one, we're outside most of the time. Also, a program will look different in a coastal community versus in the mountains. A program in a downtown park will look different than in a provincial or territorial park. The programs will look a little different based on where they're running, the culture, the community, the landscape, the seasons, the natural world.

What will be consistent is the ethos, pedagogy and model itself. Forest Schools have two key features. First, they are in the same natural space in an extended period of time. The idea is they are not a one-off experience for children. Going into that same natural space is what allows children to build relationships with

the land, each other and the teacher. That wouldn't happen if they're only going once a month.

Second, learning in Forest Schools is play-based, inquiry-driven, and child-directed, rather than curriculum-based and teacher-directed. So children always start with play. The ideas that emerge in play are the jumping off point for all learning. Children lead based on their own interests, their own curiosity, what is emerging on the land and what is emerging between children, educators and visitors. The role of educators is to step in only when needed to support with inquiry a deeper understanding of something, or just to support a deeper process of inquiry around a particular subject idea that emerges. So there's all kinds of experimentation and just really rich play that emerges on the land. That's what you would see if you go into a Forest and Nature School.

Occasionally you might see a teacher start off the day with a meeting. We'll do like a circle meeting—that's where we ask children what they're interested in doing that day, we'll debrief what they did the last time they were on the land and we'll make some decisions

on where we might go, what we might do that day. Then occasionally throughout the day we'll ask questions, or we'll participate in children's play but hopefully what you see is lots of play and children playing individually and playing together as groups.

**Have indigenous people participated, collaborated or shared their perspectives on your programming? If so, how were they involved?**

Last year we partnered with an indigenous school on Manitoulin Island called KT—Kenjgewin Teg. We partnered with them to deliver two workshops, an Intro to Forest School workshop and a Risky Play workshop, and then we went back in the spring and delivered a practitioner course. About three fourths of that cohort self-identified as indigenous.

It was huge learning for us. We're still unpacking that and looking at what that means, and we hope to work together again!

# Teaching Through Outdoor Play

Online Professional Development  
By Rebecca Balcerzak

Beverlie Dietze, Director of Learning and Applied Research at Okanagan College, discusses professional development opportunities for early learning and childcare practitioners who want to champion outdoor play in their everyday work.

## What's your earliest memory of playing outdoors?

I grew up in a very rural part of New Brunswick and I come from a family of eight. Our entire day—whether it be winter, spring, summer or fall—was spent playing in playhouses that we had built out of wood and old scraps. We played in the trees, we played in the grass. We had the opportunity to just be free in our environment. And that was play. There was no structure to it at all. My mother basically opened the door and the world was at our fingertips.

## Why is outdoor play so important for children?

Outdoor play is the way in which children learn best. It supports children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. In contrast, indoor play generally supports children's cognitive and social development. So outdoor play is essential for supporting their overall development.

## What professional development opportunities are out there for practitioners who want to encourage outdoor play?

Outdoor play is fairly new in the professional development realm. To meet this need, Okanagan College led in the development of an online 36-hour, 12-module series on Outdoor play and pedagogy that is now available through the Canadian Child Care Federation.

## What can practitioners expect to learn from these modules?

Primarily the modules support early learning and childcare practitioners in embracing outdoor play in their practice, supporting children's sense of curiosity and wonderment, providing children with invitations and provocations that will spark their curiosity to be



Beverlie Dietze,  
Director of  
Learning and  
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at Okanagan  
College





## Children lead based on their own interests, their own curiosity, what is emerging on the land and what is emerging between children, educators and visitors.

outdoors. The content of the modules supports practitioners in looking at children's learning outcomes when they play outdoors. The modules also support practitioners in analyzing how they use language and opportunities for children to examine the space that they're in. The modules aim to empower the participants to expand their skills and knowledge of outdoor play and to position outdoor play effectively in children's lives. They also cover new knowledge on outdoor play and how to move that new knowledge into practice.

**In the future, do you think a basic education in outdoor play is going to be a key requirement for people who work with children?**

An understanding of outdoor play pedagogy is essential for practitioners working with children. I believe that people working with children will provide the best opportunities to children when they embrace outdoor play. This requires them to have knowledge, skills and abilities on outdoor play pedagogy. Outdoor play pedagogy differs significantly from indoor programming. So yes, my hope and dream would be that colleges, universities, pre- and post-service professional development opportunities would always focus on children and outdoor play.

**Given that some of the people who sign up for the training may have different educational backgrounds, do the modules try and meet people where they're at?**

They do—there are a variety of teaching and learning strategies within the modules. There are opportunities for people to engage in a discussion forum and do quizzes to see what their understanding is. Participants also have an opportunity to embrace a reflective process within the modules. They can

determine how much they want to invest in the modules, and what they want to get out of them.

**Is there a certificate provided at the end?**

During the pilot project certificates for those who completed the 12 modules were issued.

**Does the online tool recreate the community of practice or mentoring relationships that you would traditionally find in a classroom learning setting?**

Very much so! Within the modules there are discussion forums where people are posting questions and comments. So I might write something and someone might say "Beverlie you really need to think about it in this way," or "this doesn't really work in this community because of this" so there's been great connections made in the online environment. And as you look at the comments that have been posted, you can see that people have been meeting offline and in-person communities of practice have been set up by people who want to continue the conversation.

**Did your research show that the modules changed the way practitioners go about their daily programming?**

For many, very much so. We did a pre- and post- survey with participants to examine if outdoor play pedagogy changes practice. The participants clearly articulated that they are spending more time actually investing in planning for outdoor play—whereas before if they opened the doors, they let the children go outside without outdoor play being an intentional part of their programming. Some feedback identified that some staff groups are now discussing outdoor play in their staff meetings. They are

looking at how children behave outdoors, the strengths of different outdoor play experiences, and how to actually reconfigure opportunities for children to have stimuli outdoors. They are looking at the space and how outdoor play may be taken "outside the fence".

**Where can practitioners assess these modules?**

The modules can now be accessed through the Canadian Child Care Federation.

**Any words of encouragement, tips, or key messages that you want to tell practitioners who are interested in championing outdoor play?**

Oh that's one for me! I encourage people to absolutely look at outdoor play and expand their unique perspectives on working with and influencing children's desire to be outdoors and the outdoor play agendas in their community. It's through professionals and the emerging professionals that we're going to give children in Canada the best opportunities to access outdoor play, which will trigger their curiosity and learning in all seasons and in all kinds of weather. This may set the foundation for a love of the outdoors and environmental stewardship for life.

**Practitioners can access the modules online at [outdoorplaytraining.com](http://outdoorplaytraining.com).**

**The modules currently cost \$50 for CCCF members and \$60 for non-members. CCCF provides an experienced facilitator who connects with participants throughout the course as well as a certificate of completion for 36 hours of professional development.**

**Participant intake occurs twice a year in fall and spring. To be notified when intake is coming up, subscribe to CCCF's e-newsletter or follow them on Facebook.**



# What is Outdoor Play?

Outdoor Play is play that takes place outside and includes concepts of risky play and nature play. Outdoor play is the umbrella term that assumes the above definition of play and takes place in a very broad continuum of spaces that include urban, rural, suburban, and wilderness settings.

*Definition provided by Outdoor Play Canada*



# Risks and Rewards

## Changing the Conversation About Unstructured Play

By  
Karen Hutchison

Unstructured play is essential to children's development. It is how children exercise, socialize and grow. In Canada, many child-centred organizations may have policies designed to limit, reduce or eliminate "risky play" rather than support unstructured play.

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) set out to understand why organizations focus on reducing risk instead of focusing on the benefits of unstructured play. With their research findings, the CPHA has developed a collection of resources to help organizations create policies that better support children's need for unstructured play.

Among their resources is the Unstructured Play Toolkit. This resource gives key information on risky play and guides organizations with tips on developing new and improved policies that would benefit childcare.

Families Canada reached out to Frank Welsh, Policy Director, and Christine Pentland, former Project Officer at CPHA, to learn more about the work they are doing to encourage more organizations to embrace unstructured play.

### Defining Unstructured Play

The CPHA understands unstructured play as child-led play in which children follow their own ideas. It is intrinsically motivated without a defined purpose or outcome. Unstructured play can take place indoors or outdoors and includes some elements of risky play such as play at speed, at heights, or with tools or sharp objects.

Unstructured play, and the subsequent exploration of new challenges, allows children to build many skills, thus supporting their cognitive and personal development.

### The Importance of Unstructured Play

Research conducted by CPHA shows that play gives kids the chance to understand and manage risk, interact effectively, and gain self-confidence.

When children are given a chance to test their limits, they learn valuable lessons about managing risk, while promoting positive feelings. As outlined in CPHA's 5 Key Findings infographic, when children have access to unstructured play they feel "joy, thrill and competence" as they conquer challenges. However, when unstructured play is restricted, children report feeling "bored, sad, and angry" as they do not have an outlet for their energy and creativity.

Through unstructured play, children learn to compromise and cooperate, improve their problem-solving skills, boost their emotional intelligence, and

strengthen their ability to empathize.

The CPHA's Unstructured Play Toolkit also states that childcare centers report fewer problems with undesirable behaviours like bullying and distraction when unstructured play is accessible. As outlined in their Children's Unstructured Play Position Statement, when children direct play they can "engage in social and emotional learning, such as the ability to control aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration."

### Making a Case for Unstructured Play: Talking to Parents

Finding the balance between policies that are too restrictive or too relaxed is a challenge every organization must navigate. Christine Pentland noted, "Often, when a parent has a concern or a complaint, the response is just to take away the activity altogether." Parents may discourage activities such as cartwheeling and could pressure service providers to restrict activities that they believe are dangerous or too risky. As a result, sometimes parental concerns shape organizations' practices and policies. The Unstructured Play Toolkit gives childcare workers information-based resources and tools to talk to parents about the benefits of unstructured play.

The focus of the conversation has to change from unstructured play's risks to its rewards. "Accidents, bumps and grazes are all a part of growing up," Frank added. "It's actually helping them grow and develop, and they'll be better kids overall."

### Creating the Unstructured Play Toolkit

CPHA developed the Toolkit to help organizations support healthy childhood development while also having reasonable limits on risk. To create the toolkit, they held a series of interviews with subject experts, decision-makers, policy experts, lawyers, researchers, educators, and playworkers on subjects such as playtime, the benefits of play, and mental health. Through these interviews, they captured important considerations for creating play policies and making informed decisions.

The Unstructured Play Toolkit was

developed in partnership with Ottawa Public Health and Saskatchewan *in motion*. The project was funded by the Lawson Foundation.

### The Content of the Toolkit

The Unstructured Play Toolkit contains a variety of tools and resources to help improve children's access to unstructured play. Within it, there are infographics, promising practices, research summaries, decision making tools, and a discussion document. Topics include: evidence-based frequently asked questions, unstructured play and mental health, loose parts policies, parental perceptions of play, accessibility and usability of play spaces, approaches to policy development, and more!

The Toolkit is designed to be adaptable to different contexts. Service providers can access the Toolkit at [www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play](http://www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play).

### A Resource for Everyone

The Unstructured Play Toolkit can be used by people in a variety of professions, including childminders, family support practitioners, support workers, teachers, public servants, and policy creators. In particular, the infographics are great tools for professionals working directly with children; they can be used as a handout for parents to address concerns about unstructured play. The Developing a Play Policy tool has been expressly designed to assist decision-makers who want their organizations to champion unstructured play and positive early childhood development.

### Reflections

When considering the toolkit, Frank Welsh reflected, "I think the underlying theme [...] is the need for communication."

Discussions between support workers and parents are essential for understanding how to address children's needs for unstructured play. Open channels of communication allow organizations to figure out a way to meet children's needs for unstructured play while ensuring that parents feel that their children are safe.





# The **Why Play?** series suggests play activities for children in the following age groups:



The Why Play series is based on the content of the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.

**For more information or to order print copies, please visit [FamiliesCanada.ca](http://FamiliesCanada.ca) or [Child-Encyclopedia.com/play](http://Child-Encyclopedia.com/play)**

**Available in:** English, French, Arabic, Punjabi, Simplified Chinese, Spanish

## Coming soon!

### **Why Play?** pamphlets on:

- Language development
- Expression of emotions
- Prosocial behaviour
- Self-regulation

### **Why Play?** pamphlets specifically for:

- Parents of children with intellectual or developmental disabilities
- First Nations families

# Resources

### Outdoor Play Canada

OutdoorPlayCanada.ca is a growing hub of evidence, training, knowledge, tools and resources for anyone who wants to support outdoor play.

### In-Person Professional Development

Forest School Canada is the flagship educational project of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. They provide evidence-based, practical, and inspiring professional learning opportunities for everyone interested in supporting the healthy development of children through play and learning outside. Check out their courses at [childnature.ca/forest-school-canada](http://childnature.ca/forest-school-canada).

### Online Professional Development

Okanagan College led in the development of an online 36-hour, 12-module series on Outdoor play and pedagogy that is now available through the Canadian Child Care Federation. Participant

intake occurs twice a year in fall and spring. To be notified when intake is coming up, subscribe to CCCF's e-newsletter or follow them on Facebook. Practitioners can access the modules online at [outdoorplaytraining.com](http://outdoorplaytraining.com).

### Why Play? Pamphlets and Activity Cards

Based on the information available in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, the Why Play? series suggests play activities for children. Visit [FamiliesCanada.ca](http://FamiliesCanada.ca) or [Child-Encyclopedia.com/play](http://Child-Encyclopedia.com/play) to order print copies. These resources are available in English, French, Arabic, Punjabi, Simplified Chinese and Spanish.

### Podcast (coming soon!)

The first season of Families Canada's podcast Supporting Families: Latest Science, Best Practices focuses on a variety of key topics, including play. Visit our website and join our mailing list

to be notified when new episodes are available.

### Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

The Position Statement can be accessed online at [OutdoorPlayCanada.ca](http://OutdoorPlayCanada.ca).



Play. Learn. Explore.





# Did you know?

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to play!



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[WWW.FAMILIESCANADA.CA](http://WWW.FAMILIESCANADA.CA)