



Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Outdoor Play Sector)

Lessons Learned and Key SRDC Evaluation Findings

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Cover image: *Children engaged in outdoor play at the Ottawa Forest and Nature School.* | Quality and transformative outdoor play-based learning: Scaling the Forest and Nature School approach in Canada, Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC).

References (for Preface, p. 1)

- 1 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/>.
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Why the Lawson Foundation is investing in outdoor play

Children’s outdoor play encompasses a wide range of experiences. Building a fort using natural and fabricated loose parts. Climbing a tree and gauging whether it is safe to jump off or wiser to climb back down. Burying their hands in the dirt to craft with mud, grow a garden, or simply experience the sensation. Sliding across ice-packed snow and painting a snowbank with food colouring.

Outdoor play has been associated with improved health, social and cognitive outcomes for children,¹ yet many barriers exist to its widespread implementation, including policy, lack of training and capacity, and societal attitudes toward risk.^{2,3}

“Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.”

– Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

In 2013, the Lawson Foundation decided to explore outdoor play as a lever to reverse the inactivity crisis and as an essential element to support healthy child development, the Foundation’s ultimate goal.

Following an initial investment in research to develop the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, the Foundation launched the Outdoor Play Strategy. The vision of this strategy is to ensure that all children in Canada have access to high-quality and play-rich opportunities outdoors that support risk taking and healthy development. The Lawson Foundation committed \$2.7 million in initial funding to 14 projects across Canada that covered a broad spectrum of topics, sectors, and geographic reaches. Projects that received funding ranged in length from 12 to 36 months over 2016–2018, often had strong community connections, and presented clear short- and long-term impacts for children and communities. Over the course of the Strategy, the total investment rose to \$4.5 M including additional granting and programming resources to convene the projects.

This document summarizes the learnings of individual projects and the findings of the third-party evaluation of the Strategy as conducted by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). Beneficial practices and key learnings that emerged from projects are summarized for use by outdoor play champions, where applicable, in their own work. To learn more about evaluation findings of interest to funders, we invite you to read *Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Philanthropic Sector)* at lawson.ca/OPS-Philanthropic-Report.pdf.

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Outdoor Play Strategy

The Outdoor Play Strategy (OPS)

In 2016, the Lawson Foundation launched the *Outdoor Play Strategy*: an exploration of community-level action as part of a wider movement to promote outdoor play as a means to promote healthy child development.

Goals of the Outdoor Play Strategy

The ultimate vision of the Strategy is that *all children in Canada have access to high-quality, play-rich opportunities outdoors that support risk taking and healthy development.*

The Strategy breaks this vision into three main goals:

- 1. Enhance understanding** of what is needed to normalize and create enabling environments for outdoor play.
- 2. Foster use of learning** from the Strategy in communities of funded projects and elsewhere to increase opportunities for children's self-directed play outdoors in all settings.
- 3. Support the development of a strong, coordinated, multi-sectoral national coalition** of sector leaders, funders, and policy makers supporting children's outdoor play at multiple levels.

The approach

The Foundation adopted the following four approaches to achieve the goals of the Outdoor Play Strategy.

- 1. Fund multiple projects in various sectors and with diverse approaches**
- 2. Foster a cohort approach**
- 3. Develop collaborative relationships**
- 4. Embed evaluation**

The Lawson Foundation contracted the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to develop and conduct a developmental evaluation. The aim of evaluation was to understand the strategic impact of the Lawson Foundation's investment in the Strategy, and how and to what extent its support has added value to individual projects and the emerging movement of outdoor play in Canada. SRDC collected quotes from grantees during interviews and as part of the evaluation process; many of these quotes appear throughout this report to reflect grantee perspectives. Quotes have been left anonymous to maintain confidentiality.

As part of the evaluation, SRDC worked with the Foundation to develop a theory of change (p. 3) that explains the rationale, strengths/challenges, desired long-term results, factors influencing change, strategies/approach, and assumptions of the Outdoor Play Strategy in greater detail.

“The strength of the breadth of the cohort helped push forward our understanding of what those different communities look like, and what play advocacy looks like in policy development or early childhood education, that sort of thing.” – Grantee

Outdoor Play Strategy theory of change

RATIONALE/NEED

The Lawson Foundation supports healthy child development. As a private national foundation, it seeks to identify areas where funding, convening and thought leadership could help move the needle on an issue.

Children in Canada are not getting enough outdoor play, with its risks, which is essential for healthy development.

Community tools, training, resources and implementation approaches that look beyond playgrounds are required. Designated funding for a coordinated approach to outdoor play that recognizes the importance of risk does not currently exist.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

STRENGTHS

The Foundation's strong track record of identifying and convening promising projects and commitment to the investment needed to support the Strategy.

The cohort's expertise and experience, commitment to share learning with one another and engage with their networks, and contribution to the evaluation of the Strategy.

CHALLENGES

Keeping diverse projects across Canada connected over three years.

Balancing a safe internal learning space with sharing learning and connecting externally.

Gaps in the Strategy (social inclusion, Indigenous peoples, older youth, etc.) prevent it from reaching the full range of outdoor play populations and settings.

Additional partners and funders needed to achieve transformative change.

Some projects will need support to sustain results and continue to work beyond the Foundation's funding.

DESIRED LONG-TERM RESULTS

Enhanced understanding of what is needed to normalize and create enabling environments for outdoor play.

Learning from the Strategy is used within the cohort and more broadly to increase opportunities for children's self-directed play outdoors in all settings.

A strong, coordinated, multi-sectoral national coalition exists of sector leaders, funders and policy-makers supporting children's play at multiple levels.

All children in Canada have access to high-quality, play-rich outdoor environments that support risk-taking and healthy development.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGE

Current policies and practices.

Societal attitudes (including negative press).

Increasing awareness and interest.

Funding and funder collaboration.

STRATEGIES/APPROACH

Fund projects in diverse sectors with a common focus on outdoor play.

Form a cohort of diverse but complementary organizations and projects.

Develop collaborative relationships with key stakeholders.

Evaluation is embedded in the Strategy to maximize knowledge-sharing, build capacity and improve implementation.

ASSUMPTIONS

A multi-sector approach will be of greater benefit than a targeted approach.

Working as a cohort will enhance each project's work, the Foundation's investment and potential for collective impact.

Evaluation can help the Lawson Foundation improve its grantmaking approach and help grantees enhance the usefulness of their outcomes.

Communities and other stakeholders will adopt the successful resources and implementation models developed under the Strategy, as well as learnings from challenges and failure.

Sharing learning from the Strategy and showcasing successful models will inspire more funders to invest in outdoor play.

Meet the grantees: The Outdoor Play Strategy cohort

The following 14 grantee organizations and their project leaders formed the “cohort” of the Outdoor Play Strategy. The projects covered a wide range of sectors, interventions and geographic reaches (Fig. 1). The timeline on page 11 provides the start and end dates for each project as well as key events at the Strategy level (e.g., the Foundation’s convening events), Evaluation level (e.g., grant reporting), and within the broader outdoor play sector (e.g., conferences).

Earth Day Canada* | The OPAL project: Modelling outdoor play and learning in school communities

Earth Day Canada provided training and coaching to pilot an established UK model, —Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL)—in six elementary schools in Toronto. They worked with teachers, administrators, child care staff, caretakers and parents to develop a play implementation plan for outdoor recess including kindergarten playtime, recess, lunch, and before and after school. The pilot successfully developed a play culture at schools including children of all ages, teachers, parents and staff. Teachers have reported “outstanding shifts” in students’ levels of happiness, social-emotional development, creativity and learning readiness. They also contributed to the body of knowledge on procuring and storing loose parts in a school setting. At the end of the project, the Toronto District School Board was working to develop a board-wide play policy. Earth Day Canada was able to leverage their learning with a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to begin scaling OPAL to additional schools.

*Earth Day Canada changed its name to EcoKids.

Vivo for Healthier Generations | Play Ambassadors

Vivo implemented its Play Ambassadors training program in play facilitation for the recreation sector and provided free play opportunities at eight Calgary parks over two summers. Their strategy included increasing unstructured, outdoor play through the creation of enriching environments for play and increasing the quality of play by training community members as Play Ambassadors. They used traditional sports equipment and loose parts to support child-led play. More than 2,600 community members participated—four times more than were present when no Play Ambassadors were on-site. Program participation grew by 71 per cent between summer 2016 and summer 2017. This project contributed learning about how practitioners can support children’s outdoor play, particularly in new suburban areas with little natural infrastructure. The project’s 13-module training program was supported through evaluation by Mount Royal University and may enable replication of the Play Ambassador model in other communities outside Calgary.

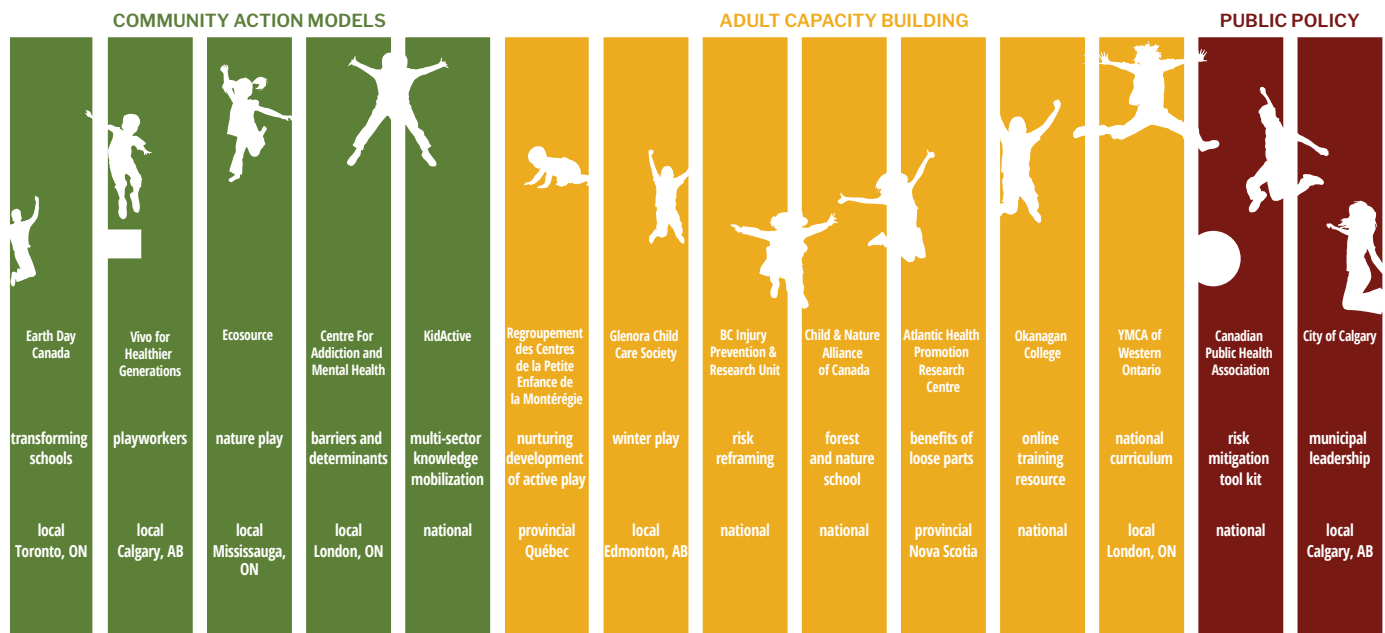


Figure 1. The grantees of the Outdoor Play Strategy, their topics and geographic reach. Note: while colours indicate project categories, these overlapped in some projects.

Ecosource | *Dig into play!*

Ecosource's Dig into play! program increased opportunities for over 1,000 children 0–12 years old to re-discover outdoor, unstructured play in six community gardens across Ontario's Peel Region. The pilot explored a neighbourhood-level model for fostering active outdoor play that respects and works with diverse cultural perspectives and socioeconomic status including low income and newcomer families. Ecosource also established a set of design considerations and best practices to increase capacity for other organizations to create hands-on nature experiences that incorporate gardening.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) | Children's outdoor play experiences: Why they play and how they benefit

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health conducted focus groups and a large-scale survey of parents and children 11–13 years of age in London, Ontario schools to identify key barriers and determinants of children's outdoor play. Their main findings were that children spend much less time outdoors in the winter, girls spend significantly less time outside than boys, older children spend less time outdoors than younger children, and children who are recent immigrants or members of at least one racial or ethnic minority group spend less time outdoors than their peers. Their findings help fill a sizable gap in the Canadian research literature by pointing to clear levers that might support enabling environments for outdoor play, including promoting the benefits of outdoor play among parents and caregivers and targeting specific groups of children. Their research also highlighted the need to better include historically underrepresented and marginalized communities in outdoor play initiatives.

KidActive | Active Outdoor Play Position Statement activation and impact

KidActive provided secretariat support for a collaborative leadership model to co-ordinate and gather existing and potential resources, social networks, data, opportunities and insights to further the reach and deepen the impact of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play across Canada. They built strong collaborative relationships and developed a cohesive leadership voice for outdoor play by convening the Canadian Outdoor Play Working Group, which later became Outdoor Play Canada, and they published an Outdoor Play Glossary of Terms to develop common language and understanding across the sector. They completed a network mapping survey, a key resource for Outdoor Play Canada to identify influencers and stakeholders across Canada in order to more effectively connect and learn from outdoor play initiatives and leaders. Finally, the project resourced a Speaker's Fund, which helped to strengthen working relationships and share the Position Statement through presentations and working sessions at several venues, notably the Canadian Parks Summit in 2016. Together, Outdoor Play Canada reached more than 3,200 stakeholders with the evidence, key messages and recommendations from the Position Statement.

Funding from the Lawson Foundation was augmented by funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation partway through implementation of the Outdoor Play Strategy to explore developing Outdoor Play Canada as a collective impact initiative.

Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie (RCPEM) | Create nurturing outside environments: Supporting infant and young children's free movement and active play

Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie provided information and training to six pilot communities to address limitations in outdoor play, outdoor play spaces, and parental attitudes to outdoor play. They developed and tested a number of tools and resources for child care providers and community partners in the form of French-language training modules, workshops and webinars, which are now ready to be deployed across Québec. They also developed resources for the general public and parents on how to better support children in taking risks while they play. They are continuing to increase the capacity of community partners through regular newsletters and personalized support to project implementation committees, and their outdoor play space evaluation framework is available to be applied with or without RCPEM involvement.

Glenora Child Care Society | Embracing our winter city: Extending, enhancing and expanding winter play opportunities for preschoolers

The Glenora Child Care Society worked with staff in their centre to provide specialized training and capacity to facilitate high-quality outdoor free play in winter months in almost any weather for children aged one to five. They worked with staff to identify and overcome the most challenging barriers to winter outdoor play, such as fears about risk, feeling comfortable in challenging weather, and providing play-rich environments in winter. This project demonstrated that outdoor winter play, even among very young children, is not only achievable but enjoyable and beneficial for children and staff alike. Loose parts, short-distance field trips and risky play allowed children to build their confidence and flex their creativity. The project also demonstrated the importance of sharing knowledge (e.g., providing workshops and training to other educators), developing strong parent relationships, and fostering staff comfort and competence to break down barriers in this area.

University of British Columbia (UBC)—BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit | Go play outside! Reframing risk to promote children's outdoor play

The goal of this project was to stimulate a societal shift in attitudes toward outdoor risky play by focusing on changing parents' mindset about its importance to child development. Dr. Mariana Brussoni's lab developed and tested OutsidePlay.ca and assessed its resonance with parents of children aged 6 to 12 years. A randomized controlled trial of 451 parents was conducted in Metro Vancouver to evaluate effectiveness through surveys that recorded attitudes and behavioural change towards children's risky play. Analysis showed that the online tool was more effective than the control condition (the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play) in promoting change in attitudes in the short- and long-term whereas the in-person workshop was more effective than the control condition in the short term. The risk reframing toolkit provides a means to bolster users' confidence and skills around children's risky play and serves as a springboard to help apply the concepts at home or other settings. Ultimately, Dr. Brussoni hopes that the risk reframing toolkit will help to expand the conversation about the importance of risky play and lead to a larger cultural shift. The project has now expanded to modify and test the tool for educators.

Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) | Quality and transformative outdoor play-based learning: Scaling the Forest and Nature School approach in Canada

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada developed and scaled a practitioners' training course to expand Forest School Canada training across Canada. The goal of this training is to support knowledgeable and skilled educators who support a pedagogical framework of place-based, play-based, emergent, inquiry-based, and experiential learning in order to provide children across Canada the opportunity to play and learn in nature on a regular and repeated basis. They have grown from a team of two to a team of 35 staff and facilitators across Canada and have seen deep impacts on the ground as practitioners become respected leaders in their communities. Through project delivery, CNAC had significant learning about the people, processes and mechanisms required to scale professional learning while supporting quality.

Dalhousie University—Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre* | Can loose parts foster unstructured, self-directed, risky outdoor play? A multilevel intervention in early years settings

Dalhousie University implemented and evaluated the Physical Literacy in the Early Years (PLEY) Project, a randomized, mixed methods control trial focused on improving physical literacy, physical activity and active outdoor play in Nova Scotia preschoolers by integrating loose parts into the outdoor spaces of 19 regulated child care centres. The project incorporated resources for educators and parents, a professional learning module for early childhood educators, and the use of pedagogical documentation to support outdoor play. Emerging findings from this research are showing that through outdoor loose parts play, children are improving key components of physical literacy, taking healthy risks, building relationships and leadership skills, and much more.

*The AHPRC is now called the Healthy Populations Institute at Dalhousie University.

Educator attitudes, intentions and understanding of play have changed over the course of the intervention, as they have become more comfortable in supporting healthy risk-taking and outdoor exploration. Their work has led to policy connections at the provincial level to embed their results in before- and after-school care in the province, and enhancements to one of the courses for early childhood practitioners at the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education.

Okanagan College | Building capacity: Creating specialized outdoor play training to empower children's experiences

Okanagan College developed and piloted OutdoorPlayTraining.com, an open access, web-based learning resource, with more than 1,375 early learning and child care professionals trained from across Canada during the funding period. This resource was the first of its kind in Canada and filled an important gap: most participants reported that this was their first course with a specific focus on outdoor play. The course improved learners' self-rated knowledge around various aspects of outdoor play and contributed to the development of several peer-reviewed articles in progress. Okanagan College, Lethbridge College, Northern College, and the Justice Institute of British Columbia have all benefited from the project, and are either planning to or already have expanded their focus on outdoor play. This resource is now available for a modest fee through the Canadian Child Care Federation.

YMCA of Western Ontario* | Outdoor classroom specialist

YMCA of Western Ontario expanded the YMCA Playing to Learn curriculum with new training to include a focus on self-directed and unstructured "risky play" for children, with the goal of filling the gap between research and practice of risky outdoor play. In the first year of the project, 172 early learning professionals received training and an evaluation component tested their perceptions related to risky play before and after the training. The YMCA also completed outdoor play audits at 10 pilot site play spaces and found the amount of loose parts at the pilot site play spaces had increased. Using these results, YMCA created and delivered their final learning module to several audiences including YMCA educators and directors in 2017. The project highlighted the value of the training and revealed the importance of certain elements (e.g., addressing attitudes about risk, the importance of experiential learning experiences in educator training, etc.). The YMCA is now examining how to scale this training across its national network of associations to benefit over 3,000 early learning professionals and 87,000 children over the next five years.

*The YMCA of Western Ontario is now the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario.

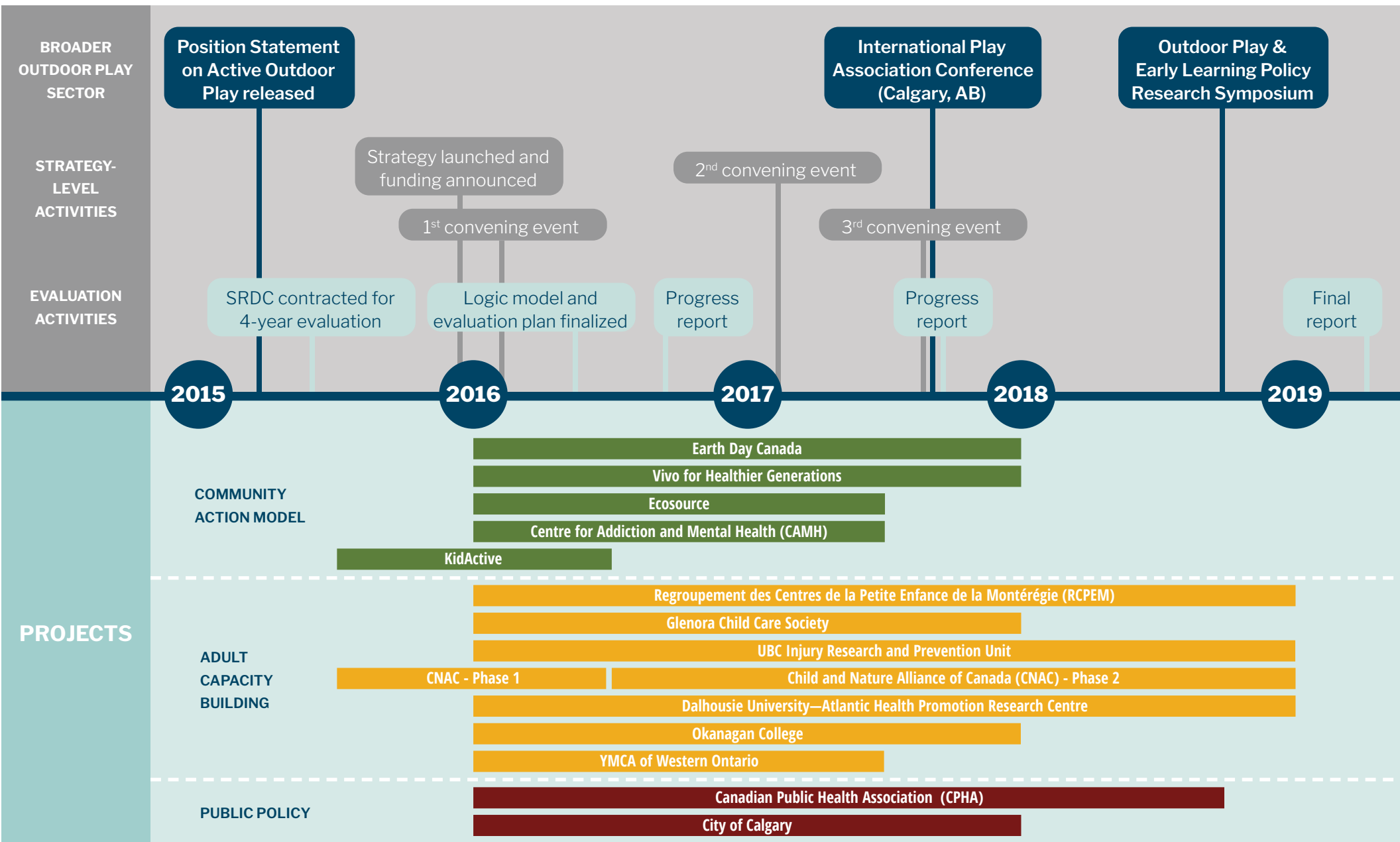
Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) | A child's right to free play: A risk mitigation policy toolkit to support risky play

The Canadian Public Health Association investigated the causes of risk aversion from a social and liability perspective through a series of semi-structured interviews and a parents' attitudes survey. This information was used to develop the Unstructured Play Toolkit with several components, each designed for a different audience: infographics for the general public, policy tools and research briefs for municipal and education decision makers, promising practices for program managers, and a discussion paper for researchers and policy decision makers. Their work also provided the inspiration for CPHA's position statement on *Children's Unstructured Play*.

The City of Calgary | YYC plays

The City of Calgary provided leadership and worked across multiple departments to better understand parental barriers to outdoor play and pilot mobile adventure playgrounds. Their research helped shed light on parental perceptions of and barriers to outdoor play and contributed to the development of a local play champions' community of practice. Project personnel demonstrated the power of the municipality as both a thought leader and delivery agent. In partnership with local organizations, they created Canada's first municipal Play Charter and have since received multiple requests for the Charter and its accompanying framework from sectors and individuals nationally and internationally.

Outdoor Play Strategy timeline of activities



Effective outdoor play interventions

The strong focus on evaluation throughout the design and implementation of the Outdoor Play Strategy has resulted in a broad body of evidence and examples to support effective outdoor play interventions, as documented and reported by SRDC. Learning to date from the projects can be categorized under three broad areas of activity: capacity-building of adults to support children's outdoor play, community implementation models, and policy. This section summarizes the evaluation findings and provides *beneficial practices* and *lessons learned* for each area.

At a broad level, an important learning for all projects and for the Lawson Foundation was the need for *strategic planning* to support ongoing decision-making, conduct data collection and evaluation effectively, and communicate (with participants, stakeholders, and in the case of the Lawson Foundation, the grantees themselves). In hindsight, many projects identified missed opportunities that could have been captured through enhanced strategic planning and more robust evaluations. This learning is something that grantees will now be able to build on when developing future programs, and will be a focus for the Lawson Foundation as it works to improve its support and capacity-building of future grantees.

Capacity-building of adults to support outdoor play

A key learning from the projects was that *addressing values and attitudes about play and risk is fundamental*. Children's access to quality outdoor play is facilitated by—or limited by—the attitudes and capacity of parents, caretakers, educators and decision makers.

Nearly all the projects developed tools or training to help increase adult capacity to support outdoor play, whether as a primary or secondary objective. Many beneficial practices have emerged from these projects, as well as lessons learned and resources for practitioners in the outdoor play sector. Resources are provided in Training, Tools and Resources.

Beneficial practices

Provide tools
Coaching/mentoring
Provide for diverse needs
Engage purposefully



Outcome

New knowledge and tools help shift adult attitudes and build their confidence and capacity to support outdoor play.

Beneficial practices for building adult capacity

- **Intentionality is key: adults need the appropriate tools to proactively foster outdoor play for children.** Many projects noted the importance of providing specific training and guidelines for adults to enable them, in turn, to invite children into rich play opportunities.

EXAMPLE

Dalhousie, RCPEM, CNAC and CPHA found a need to provide training in the use of loose parts and clear policies and guidelines for loose parts and nature-based play.

- **Shifting adult attitudes requires more than training.** Additional support including mentoring and coaching are an important extra step to shift the attitudes of adults, who are often risk-averse and fearful of judgement from their peers. Meaningful change takes time.
- **Take the time to deeply engage with project stakeholders**—the extra effort will help build stronger relationships with them, which in turn strengthens engagement and buy-in.

EXAMPLES

CAMH met with every class individually before the survey, even though combining them to form larger groups would have been more efficient. The high survey responses were attributed in part to this extra step to engage participants.

The Glenora Child Care Society supported a shift in attitude and practice by taking extra steps to ensure that all staff—at all levels—were aware of the project's goals and purpose.

- **Communicate purposefully with stakeholders.** Practitioners should have a plan for what to share, when, with whom, and how—for example, diagrams and information sheets for participants, staff, and external stakeholders.

EXAMPLE

Okanagan College and CNAC found that regular email and phone communication with participants increased course and assignment completion.

- **Take into account the diverse needs of participants.** Several projects noted the importance of planning for varying needs when engaging participants in training or research, not only to increase effectiveness but to make projects more inclusive and accessible.

EXAMPLES

Okanagan College honoured diverse learning methods and styles by incorporating a combination of text, videos, slides, discussion forums, and quizzes into training modules. Most participants found the variety helpful.

RCPEM increased workshop lengths to allow participants more time to process the content.

Lessons learned... building adult capacity

- Values and beliefs play a key role in perceptions of outdoor play initiatives and must be addressed as part of any outdoor play initiative.
- Many educators, facilitators, and stakeholders have an interest in increasing outdoor play but have varying levels of resources, training, experience and expertise to do so. Professional development opportunities that included coaching, reflection, dialogue and theory benefited these practitioners and enhanced project results. Many projects observed this need for professional development, including the Glenora Child Care Society, CNAC, Okanagan College, and more.
 - Educators were more excited about tackling a challenge—in the case of the Glenora Child Care Society, winter outdoor play—when they received training and resources to help them provide engaging play opportunities for children.
- Challenges included scheduling conflicts, a lack of consensus around what constitutes a quality program and unfamiliarity with learning models (e.g., collaborative learning models). High-quality communication must be planned and built into project budgets.
- Several projects found that parents valued outdoor play, but pressures and judgement they perceived from other parents and society were powerful barriers to their participation or their engagement with outdoor play principles and practices.
- Relatively quick transformations are possible through training and experiential learning. Medium-term outcomes of empowering and influencing stakeholders emerged earlier than anticipated, which may be due to experiential learning: *seeing and doing is believing*.



Children cook bannock over an open fire. | Embracing our winter city, Glenora Child Care Society, Edmonton, AB.

Community implementation models

Many projects piloted, implemented or researched the impacts of community implementation models for outdoor play. These models invited community members to participate in loose parts play, community gardens, drop-in nature play programs and more.

Community implementation models presented unique challenges but yielded important benefits, including reaching audiences and participants who may have been unable to access, or unaware of, more conventional programs (e.g., registered day camps or nature-based child care). Stakeholder involvement and active outreach were common themes among these projects.

Beneficial practices

Active outreach
Prioritize diversity
Align stakeholders
Consult community



Outcome

Programming reaches more children, including those less often reached, and has community support.

Beneficial practices for community implementation models

- **Develop a plan for reaching diverse participants and the “unconverted” in communities through active outreach.** Many projects struggled to reach diverse audiences (e.g., low-income, culturally diverse, or children with one or more disabilities) or parents/adults who did not already have outdoor play on their radar. Reaching these audiences requires deliberate efforts and planning, for example by prioritizing inclusivity and representation among the adults delivering programming.
 - Part of this outreach should include explaining what outdoor play programs are. Play facilitators play an important role in both outreach and education by building bridges of understanding and nurturing play.



EXAMPLE

Vivo Play Ambassadors played this role by engaging and educating families in their recreational outdoor play opportunities in Calgary. Vivo later provided this training to the City of Calgary staff facilitating mobile adventure playgrounds.

Pictured: A City of Calgary Mobile Adventure Playground employee connects with a child during loose parts play. | YYC plays, City of Calgary, Calgary, AB.

- *Consider diverse participants from the start and build the program accordingly* to ensure it is accessible and engaging for all participants.

EXAMPLES

Ecosource identified the importance of building a program that was accessible to English Language Learners and children with special needs.

CAMH engaged with members of the community and held a focus group with First Nations parents to better understand their unique needs and expressions of outdoor play.

- *Align stakeholders at an early stage of project design.* These stakeholders may provide important feedback (e.g., safety standards that must be met), logistical support, and more.

EXAMPLE

The City of Calgary noted the importance of aligning stakeholders in risk management, communications and marketing, site and/or asset owners, and planning and operations teams during pilot development. This was also an advantage of municipal program delivery: these diverse departments could easily be aligned and provide support for the program under the City's umbrella.

- *Explore synergies between outdoor play and Indigenous practices, ways and values.* Indigenous educators, Elders and community leaders can provide transformative perspectives and knowledge with the potential to reshape pedagogies to include land-based exploration, storytelling and much more.

EXAMPLE

CNAC had the opportunity to listen and learn from Indigenous community members during delivery of Forest and Nature School workshops on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. One of the key learnings from this experience was the importance of allowing community members to lead the teaching and learning process.

- *Consult with the community* to foster ownership and acceptance of projects and provide additional insights into which elements of a program the community enjoys most.



EXAMPLE

Ecosource fostered buy-in for their community gardens through engagement and learned that preferred activities included mud labs, tea kitchens, and natural loose parts.

Pictured: A child explores loose parts play at an Ecosource community garden. | Dig into play!, Ecosource, Mississauga, ON.

Lessons learned... community implementation models

- Diverse, marginalized and “unconverted” populations can be challenging to reach. Reaching people beyond those already engaged with outdoor play requires focused and thoughtful effort but is critical to increasing and mainstreaming opportunities for all children.
- Projects do not happen in a vacuum: there is value to understanding what is already being done in the community for outdoor play.
- Attendance at drop-in programs is influenced by delivery location and time. For example, the City of Calgary found that sessions held on weekends were least attended and Vivo learned that sessions held in parks closer to the street were better attended, and they each adjusted their programming accordingly.
- Implementation requires extensive logistics and planning. For example, sourcing and storing loose parts is a significant operational issue that would benefit from guidelines for communities and sourcing loose parts at scale.
 - It may be possible to adapt existing materials or assets. For example, the City of Calgary identified existing safety protocols within their other programs that could be adapted to suit their pilot.
 - At times, there may also be simple and elegant solutions to operational challenges. For example, Earth Day Canada found that participants (children) can be put in charge of putting away loose part materials.
 - CPHA developed a [loose parts policy](#) that can be adopted by schools, child care centres, municipalities and other community-based initiatives to support implementation of outdoor play opportunities.
- Research and evaluation are resource-intensive, requiring more staff and time than may be anticipated. However, clearly defining outcomes and planning to collect data on outcomes can help keep a project on track.
 - Promoting and aligning with other groups’ research can help projects build off existing efforts and add to the scope of existing data.
 - Some projects felt, in hindsight, that additional staffing and improved succession management would have been beneficial.



Pictured: Elementary school children play with loose parts at recess. | The OPAL project: Modelling outdoor play and learning in school communities, Earth Day Canada, Toronto, ON.

Policy

Policy is an important lever in increasing access to outdoor play. It is often referred to in terms of policy *barriers*, fuelled by an aversion to risk and liability and typically slow to change—however, many projects successfully modelled strategies to begin to move the needle on policy. Although progress on this front is still in the early stages, more significant barriers are expected as projects try to move from pilots to scale.

Beneficial practices

Build relationships
Start small and build
Build evidence
Work with stakeholders



Outcome

Policy makers are on board and programs work with stakeholders rather than coming up against them.

Beneficial practices for moving the needle on policy

- **Build relationships and focus on communications to open doors, even if at a small scale.** While this is a time intensive process, anecdotal evidence suggests that these steps have yielded results in breaking down policy barriers.
- **It's okay to start small and build up.** Some projects that tackled policy at a smaller scale have since seen interest and even adoption at larger scales.

EXAMPLE

The City of Calgary developed a Play Charter as a public declaration at the municipal level, but the group of signatories grew to include provincial and federal stakeholders including the federal Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities. Other municipalities have expressed interest in applying Calgary's learning to their communities.

- **Build a body of evidence.** Embedding evaluation in project design and implementation makes it possible to collect valuable data on the outcomes of outdoor play interventions. A deep and credible pool of evidence on the benefits of outdoor play provides decision makers with the motivation and authority to enact policy change.
 - **Identify in advance how outcomes will be measured.** Key concepts such as how play is defined and how quality of play is measured should be established during project design—input from national-scale bodies including Outdoor Play Canada and the Lawson Foundation may be helpful in determining how best to measure outcomes.

EXAMPLES

KidActive raised the profile of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play and promoted it as a “seminal evidence base” for the outdoor play sector.

CPHA included research summaries as part of its Unstructured Play Toolkit as evidence to support decision-making.

UBC used a robust randomized control trial design to test its risk reframing tool.

- *Keep having open conversations with stakeholders.* These conversations help to build relationships, increase mutual understanding, and better identify challenges and potential solutions to making outdoor play available. Depending on the project, these conversations could (and should) be ongoing with play advocates, parents, insurance providers, municipal/provincial/education decision makers, educators, playground inspectors, and more.

EXAMPLES

CPHA, YMCA, and CNAC reported conversations with stakeholders including insurance providers, playground inspectors, local school boards, and more to help explore strategies to support loose parts and risky play while meeting safety standards.

Continued engagement by Dalhousie with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Communities, Culture and Heritage have resulted in learnings from the PLEY project being incorporated in the province's Before and After School pilots for the Pre-Primary Program.

Lessons learned... policy

- Some projects found that it was best to work within existing systems (e.g., child care centres, schools and school boards, etc.) to effect change, despite the inherent challenges of this approach. For example, the early success of Earth Day Canada's pilot helped build their relationships with the school board, which in turn led to increased support for the project.
- The Outdoor Play Strategy and Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play are unique examples of national-level collaborative work to address policy barriers to outdoor play. Play sectors in the United Kingdom, Norway and the United States are interested in the potential of these models and the work in Canada to inspire progress in their respective countries. In Scotland, stakeholders used the Canadian Position Statement as a model to develop its own national coalition and statement on play and learning.
- The interpretation of liability laws appears to be an important barrier in allowing risky play and points to the need to provide information and solutions to stakeholders, including those in other related sectors such as insurers. CNAC's development of the Risk Benefit Assessment Toolkit, funded later in the Strategy, helped bridge this gap.



Pictured: Preschool children play in the mud at child care. | Nurturing development of active play, RCPPEM, Saint-Hubert, Québec.

Contributions to the broader outdoor play landscape

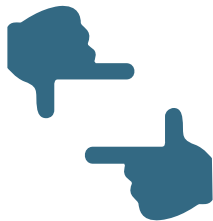
Through the hard work of its grantees, the Outdoor Play Strategy has made several important contributions to the outdoor play sector. These contributions have stemmed from the projects themselves, as well as from additional field-building activities undertaken by the Lawson Foundation to share knowledge and convene stakeholders.

Projects built and shared a powerful knowledge base

The projects of the Outdoor Play Strategy have provided tremendous value to the outdoor play sector by developing and mobilizing a deep knowledge base, both for the sector itself and for the public. Through community implementation, training and knowledge sharing, they have directly reached thousands of individuals.

Resources for building capacity and enabling outdoor play

An important component of this reach was the development of a *broad base of resources for the outdoor play sector*, including training materials, online tools, and published research. These resources are listed in the next section with hyperlinks and provide an important knowledge base for members of the outdoor play sector and the many stakeholders they interact with. Examples of these resources include:



a free online risk reframing tool,
developed by the UBC Injury
Prevention Unit



an Outdoor Play Glossary of
Terms, coordinated by KidActive
and published by Outdoor Play
Canada



an Unstructured Play Toolkit,
developed by CPHA



early childhood education (ECE)
online training in outdoor play,
developed by Okanagan College

There appears to be considerable appetite within the community for these resources and learnings, to the point that demand has in some cases exceeded grantees' capacity for delivery. For example, CNAC's Forest and Nature School courses and workshops fill within minutes and they maintain waiting lists for these programs. Similarly, over 3,000 people expressed interest in participating in Okanagan College's pilot training program (OutdoorPlayTraining.com), prompting them to increase the number of spaces in the pilot. This high demand highlights both the relevance and need for these resources, and the importance of further coordinated knowledge mobilization efforts.

"I think the more that we see in news, too, about the importance or the connection of nature to our overall health and wellbeing, I think that will also help foster and promote this idea of outdoor play and the importance of people getting out." – Grantee

Reaching the public: Dissemination and outreach

Grantees were also able to share knowledge beyond the outdoor play sector and its stakeholders through *media opportunities*. Grantees reported more than 160 media opportunities, with some grantees becoming “go-to” resources for mainstream media. These media opportunities have helped increase awareness about outdoor play locally and across Canada.

EXAMPLES

Michelle Stone from Dalhousie University spoke on the radio show CBC Information Morning about children’s play, physical literacy and physical activity, and the preliminary findings from her project. She also did an interview for CBC News Nova Scotia.

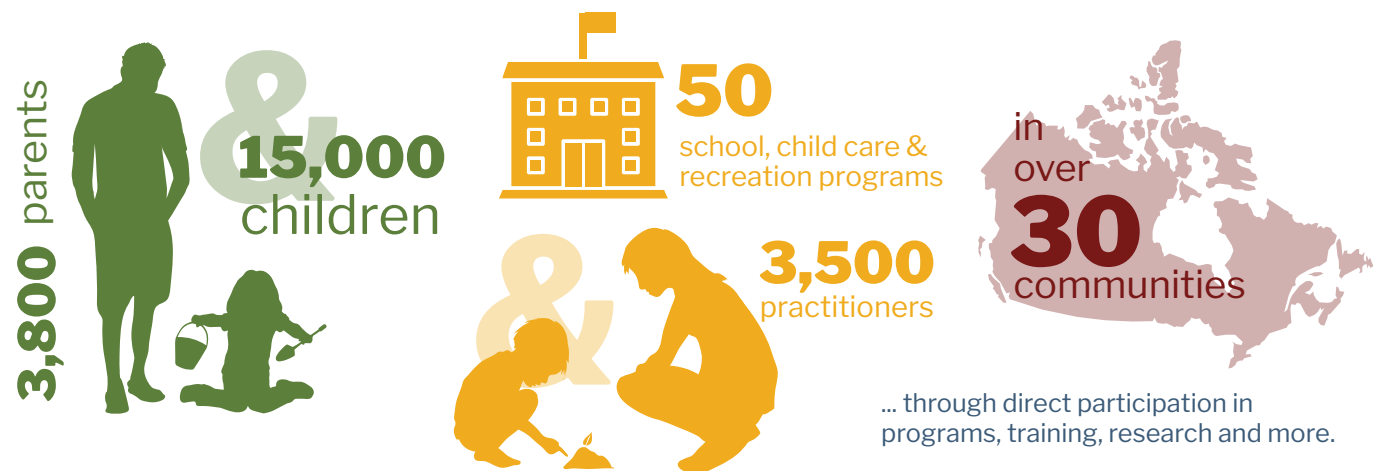
Mariana Brussoni from UBC shared her knowledge and work in a variety of ways, in over 134 broadcast and online media opportunities since March 2017. These included radio and television appearances and magazine and newspaper features. Notable examples include her appearance in a CBC Nature of Things documentary entitled “The Power of Play” and an article she wrote for the Conversation Canada, “Why kids need risk, fear and excitement in play.”

Sylvie Melsbach from RCPEM has had several opportunities to share her knowledge about outdoor play through magazine articles and a television appearance in Québec media.

A wide reach

A significant outcome of the 14 projects of the Outdoor Play Strategy was their wide reach despite the fact that scale was not a primary objective of the Strategy: they have collectively empowered and influenced a wide range of stakeholders through project participation, training and knowledge sharing. The projects are estimated to have directly reached over 15,000 children; over 3,800 parents; over 30 communities or municipalities; over 50 programs including schools, child care, and recreation; and over 3,500 educators or other professionals working directly with children.

The Outdoor Play Strategy reached over...



... through direct participation in programs, training, research and more.

Beyond the Outdoor Play Strategy

Beyond the projects themselves, the Lawson Foundation has played an active role in generating excitement and interest that has encouraged individuals, training programs, media outlets and researchers to focus their work on outdoor play. Continued communication efforts have increased understanding of the problem, nurtured a community of practice and elevated the successes of practitioners across Canada.

The Foundation has also played an important role in synthesizing and mobilizing the learnings of the Outdoor Play Strategy for the outdoor play sector through convening and knowledge-sharing of the cohort and broader stakeholders. In some cases, these activities have proven to be catalysts for larger shifts in the field of outdoor play.

At the IPA conference in 2017, the Lawson Foundation hosted an event that brought together grantees with broader influencers of outdoor play to build relationships and understanding. This opportunity for deeper conversation and engagement around outdoor play resulted in several invitees indicating their willingness to become actively involved in taking the subject forward in their work, including provincial government representatives, school system leaders, and the insurance sector.

In 2018, the Foundation hosted the Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium, convening some Outdoor Play Strategy grantees, diverse stakeholders, and thought leaders in outdoor play to share the latest empirical and theoretical research in outdoor play and think critically about the path forward for the early childhood education sector. Importantly, multi-sector stakeholders—for example, insurance, public health, playground design and inspection, postsecondary training and research, and governments—were brought together in dialogue through the sessions and networking events. The results of this Symposium are synthesized in *Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper* (lawson.ca/op-discussion-paper), and specific presentations are featured in a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* funded by the Lawson Foundation (cjee.lakeheadu.ca/issue/view/90).

The Foundation has also helped expand the reach of projects' contributions by brokering connections with Canadian and international stakeholders, for example by:

- connecting grantees with external groups (e.g., connecting the City of Calgary to a Calgary program based on British playwork principles, Earth Day Canada to the Recess Project at Ryerson University, and EcoSource to the Ithaca Children's Garden);
- engaging with organizations interested in potentially funding outdoor play projects (e.g., the Ontario Trillium Foundation); and
- engaging with individuals or organizations working in or interested in supporting outdoor play in Canada (e.g., Recess Project, Canadian Council on the Social Determinants of Health, UNICEF Canada).

Training, tools and research

Many Outdoor Play Strategy projects produced training materials and programming, tools, and published research as part of their implementation or planned project outcomes. While some of these resources remain internal to the projects' organizations, others have been made available for use by the outdoor play sector at large. The following resources, divided into several themes, are publicly available at the time of this report. We also encourage you to visit lawson.ca/op-training-tools-research where you will find additional resources and publications as they become available.

Resources are available without charge unless otherwise indicated with a dollar sign (\$).

Building adult capacity: Training and tools for adults



TRAINING

[Forest and Nature School courses and workshops](#) (\$) | CNAC

[OutdoorPlayTraining.com: ECE online training in outdoor play](#) (\$) | Okanagan College; now administered by the Canadian Child Care Federation

[Play Ambassador training](#) | Vivo

[Aménager un espace de jeu pour tous](#) (\$) | RCPEM



RESOURCES

[Outdoor Play Glossary of Terms](#) | Coordinated by KidActive in partnership with the leadership group that became Outdoor Play Canada



RESEARCH

[Perceptions that early learning teachers have about outdoor play and nature.](#)

Dietze and Kashin (2019). LEARNing Landscapes 12(1): 91-105.

[Why leadership matters in advancing outdoor pedagogy in early learning programs.](#)

Dietze (in press). International Journal of Early Childhood. | Okanagan College

Building adult capacity: Loose parts and physical literacy



RESOURCES

[Play Outside NS/The PLEY Project reports and publications](#) | Dalhousie University

[Educator perceptions on the benefits and challenges of loose parts play in the outdoor environments of childcare centres.](#)

Spencer et al. (2019). AIMS Public Health 6(4): 461-476. | Dalhousie University

[A loose parts randomized controlled trial to promote active outdoor play in preschool-aged children: Physical Literacy in the Early Years \(PLEY\) Project.](#)

Houser et al. (2019). Methods and Protocols 2(2): 27. | Dalhousie University

[Let the children play: Scoping review on the implementation and use of loose parts for promoting physical activity participation.](#)

Houser et al. (2016). AIMS Public Health 3(4): 781-799. | Dalhousie University

[PLEYing outside the box: Using loose parts to increase physical literacy in the early years.](#)

Joshi et al. (2019). Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education 31(3): 14. | Dalhousie University



RESEARCH

Building adult capacity: Loose parts and physical literacy, cont.



RESEARCH

[Accelerometry-measured physical activity and sedentary behaviour of preschoolers in Nova Scotia, Canada.](#)

Stone et al. (2019). Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism 44: 1005. | Dalhousie University

[Are parental perceptions of risk and attitudes towards risk-taking during play associated with preschoolers' physical activity and physical literacy?](#)

Stone et al. (2020). Canadian Journal of Environmental Education 23(2): 10. | Dalhousie University

Building adult capacity: Risk and adult attitudes



TOOLS

[OutsidePlay.ca: Risk reframing tool](#) | UBC Injury and Prevention Unit

[Risk Benefit Assessment Toolkit](#) | CNAC

[Go Play Outside! Effects of a risk-reframing tool on mothers' tolerance for, and parenting practices associated with, children's risky play: study protocol for a randomized controlled trial.](#)

Brussoni et al. (2018). Trials 19: 173. | UBC

[Go Play Outside! A web-based and in-person risk reframing intervention to influence mothers' tolerance for, and parenting practices associated with, children's outdoor risky play: Results of a randomized controlled trial.](#)

Brussoni et al. (in press). Journal of Medical Internet Research. | UBC



RESEARCH

Community implementation models and tools



TOOLS

[Dig into play! Community garden-based play program](#) | Ecosource



RESOURCES

[Mobile adventure playgrounds](#) | City of Calgary

[How to create a mobile adventure playground](#) | City of Calgary

[Promoting children's play in Calgary, Alberta: A case study of collective impact and municipal leadership.](#)

Glenn et al. (2020). Cities & Health. | City of Calgary

[Outdoor Play and Learning \(OPAL\) in school communities: Results from the pilot programming in Toronto \(2018\)](#) | Earth Day Canada

Transform Laboratory of Transportation and Land Use Planning School of Urban and Regional Planning, Ryerson University

[Outdoor Play and Learning \(OPAL\) in school communities: Results from the pilot programming in Toronto \(2020\)](#) | EcoKids (formerly Earth Day Canada)

Transform Laboratory of Transportation and Land Use Planning School of Urban and Regional Planning, Ryerson University



RESEARCH

Policy tools



TOOLS

[Unstructured Play Toolkit](#) | CPHA



RESOURCES

[Play Charter](#) | City of Calgary

[How to create a play charter](#) | City of Calgary

Synthesizing knowledge from the Outdoor Play Strategy

The following resources were developed external to the Outdoor Play Strategy but draw on its projects, thought leaders, and key learnings.

Families Canada

Two issues of *Families Canada* Play Magazine were dedicated to outdoor play, based entirely on the Outdoor Play Strategy through collaboration with the Lawson Foundation and interviews with the project leaders. These issues showcase the projects and apply their learning to benefit family resource practitioners across Canada.

- Issue 1 (English): <https://familiescanada.ca/publication/play-magazine-issue-1-english/>
- Issue 1 (French): <https://familiescanada.ca/publication/play-magazine-issue-1-french/>
- Issue 2 (English): <https://familiescanada.ca/publication/play-magazine-issue-2-english/>
- Issue 2 (French): <https://familiescanada.ca/publication/play-magazine-issue-2-french/>

Additional outdoor play resources



RESOURCES

Outdoor Play.

Brussoni, M. (2019). Topic in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.



RESEARCH

Multi-sector perspectives on outdoor play in Canada.

Alden & Pyle (2019). *International Journal of Play* 8: 239.

What we learned and what comes next

The Outdoor Play Strategy has been a valuable learning experience for both the grantees and the Lawson Foundation, with tremendous benefits for the outdoor play sector and children in Canada. Each project, through their design, implementation and evaluation, has revealed important lessons about the strategies and approaches that bring us collectively closer to the goal of making outdoor play a reality for all children in Canada.

Synthesis of learning about supporting outdoor play

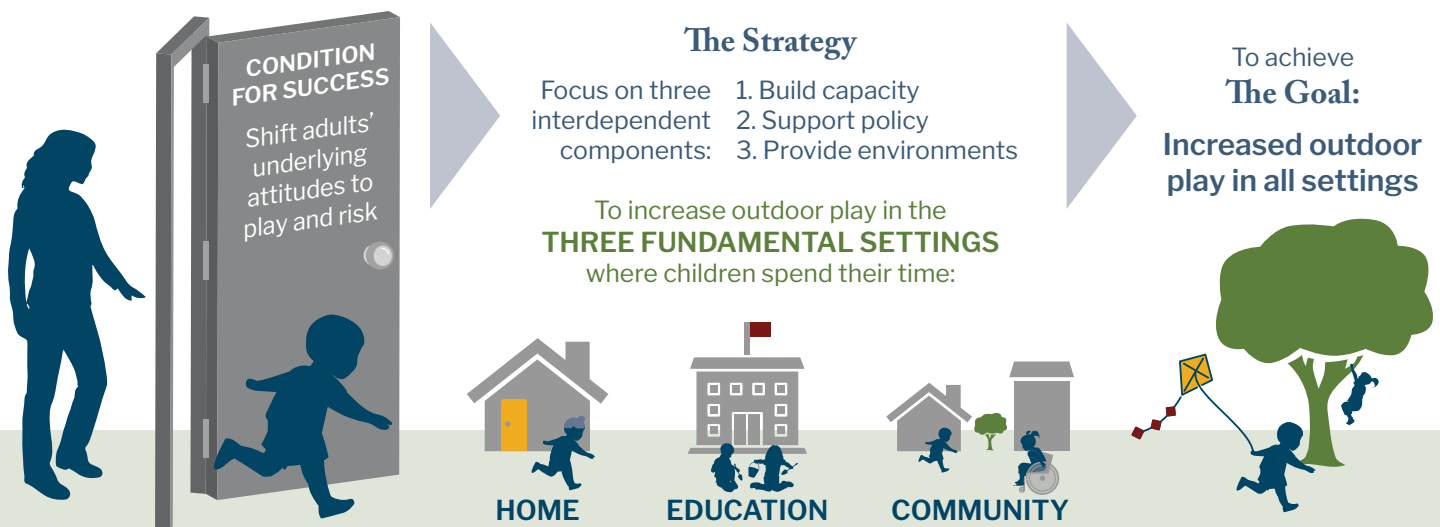
Across the projects, grant reports and experiences of the Outdoor Play Strategy, the Foundation has synthesized its learning about how to increase children’s opportunities for outdoor play.

A consistent theme among projects, and a key takeaway for the Foundation, was that **shifting underlying (adult) attitudes to play and risk will be necessary to successfully enable outdoor play for all children regardless of sector or setting.** We have identified three interdependent tactical components to address this need and increase outdoor play opportunities for children:

- **Build capacity** by informing and educating adults about outdoor play and risk.
- **Support policy** to break through barriers and ensure access and opportunities.
- **Provide environments** for outdoor play and ensure implementation on the ground.

Our *Pathway to increasing outdoor play* infographic depicts what we have learned about how to increase outdoor play in communities.

Pathway to increasing outdoor play



Reflections on building capacity in the outdoor play sector

In synthesizing the findings of the SRDC report, the Lawson Foundation has reflected on three key learnings of relevance to continue supporting capacity building in the outdoor play sector towards the overarching goal of increasing children's opportunities for outdoor play in all settings.

1. There is a need to support more robust evaluation in order to build credible evidence to scale outdoor play opportunities and influence policy. Knowledge mobilization is key to amplify and leverage results and learning, and to avoid duplication.
2. The outdoor play sector would benefit from further connecting and integrating practice, policy and research.
3. Building relationships and a community of practice among sector champions adds value, resulting in a whole that exceeds the sum of its parts. Growing this community of practice beyond the Outdoor Play Strategy cohort is critical.

Next steps

Upon reflecting on all the learning from this first phase of work, the Foundation decided to focus its multi-sector lens into one target sector to achieve greater, measurable impact. Our 2018 Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium and resulting publication, *Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper* (lawson.ca/op-discussion-paper), led us to focus our efforts on building adult capacity to support outdoor play in early childhood education. For information about the Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0, launching in 2021, please visit lawson.ca/our-work/outdoor-play.

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