



RISK-BENEFIT ASSESSMENT FOR OUTDOOR PLAY: A CANADIAN TOOLKIT

To cite this toolkit: Gill, T., Power, M., & Brussoni, M. (2019). Risk Benefit Assessment for Outdoor Play: A Canadian Toolkit. Ottawa: Child & Nature Alliance of Canada.

To link to this article: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/44ed054b-917b-4e02-a1e3-e6c4cbfe0360>

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Disclaimer

This toolkit was developed in Canada and takes the applicable Canadian laws into account. Although it attempts to address the spirit of the law as it applies across the country, each jurisdiction has legislation that must be considered when you craft your policies and procedures. We recommend that you seek legal advice in your jurisdiction relating to the applicable standards for childcare and outdoor play.

This toolkit was created as an open source resource. Be aware that its legal review only applied to the original source document, and modifying or adapting any forms or policies may affect their legal validity. We recommend you seek legal advice relating to laws that affect the provision of outdoor play in your jurisdiction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit was initially supported by a generous grant from the Lawson Foundation, and its publication, as well as phase two of this project, is supported by the Frank Cowan Foundation. We thank our lead writers, Dr. Mariana Brussoni, Tim Gill, and Marlene Power; our evaluation team, Dr. Casey Grey and Fritha Munday; our editor, Jil Beardmore; and our designer, Terry Kelly.

We are grateful to members of the Risk-Benefit Assessment Advisory Committee for their insights and expertise throughout the process:

- Allison Palis: Ontario School Boards' Insurance Exchange
- Aron M. Bookman: Carfra Lawton LLP Lawyers
- Barb Szychta: Frank Cowan Company
- Brett Tackaberry: Rebel
- Cam Collyer: Evergreen
- Chris Markham: Ophea
- Deborah Doncaster: Earth Day
- Dr. Casey Grey: Independent evaluation and research
- Frank Welsh: Canadian Public Health Association
- Heidi Campbell: Evergreen, Child-Friendly Urbanism
- Leanne Collar: City of Lethbridge, Integrated Risk Management
- Pamela Fuselli: Parachute
- Peter Kells: Grace-Kells Consultant Inc. and Executive, Canadian chapter of the International Play Association (IPA Canada)

Thank you to the practitioners, researchers, and policymakers who provided feedback on drafts of this toolkit, and to the national sample of practitioners and organizations who participated in the evaluation.

We are also grateful to the numerous individuals who have committed to the outdoor play movement in Canada. We all envision a time in the near future, when more children in muddy boots will be outside.

This toolkit is dedicated to every child who seeks adventure. We see you, and we believe in your right to play freely outdoors.



1. Getting Started

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

WHAT IS ITS AIM?

THIS TOOLKIT SUPPORTS PRACTITIONERS WHO ENCOURAGE CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR PLAY. IT TAKES A BALANCED APPROACH TO RISK AND SAFETY.

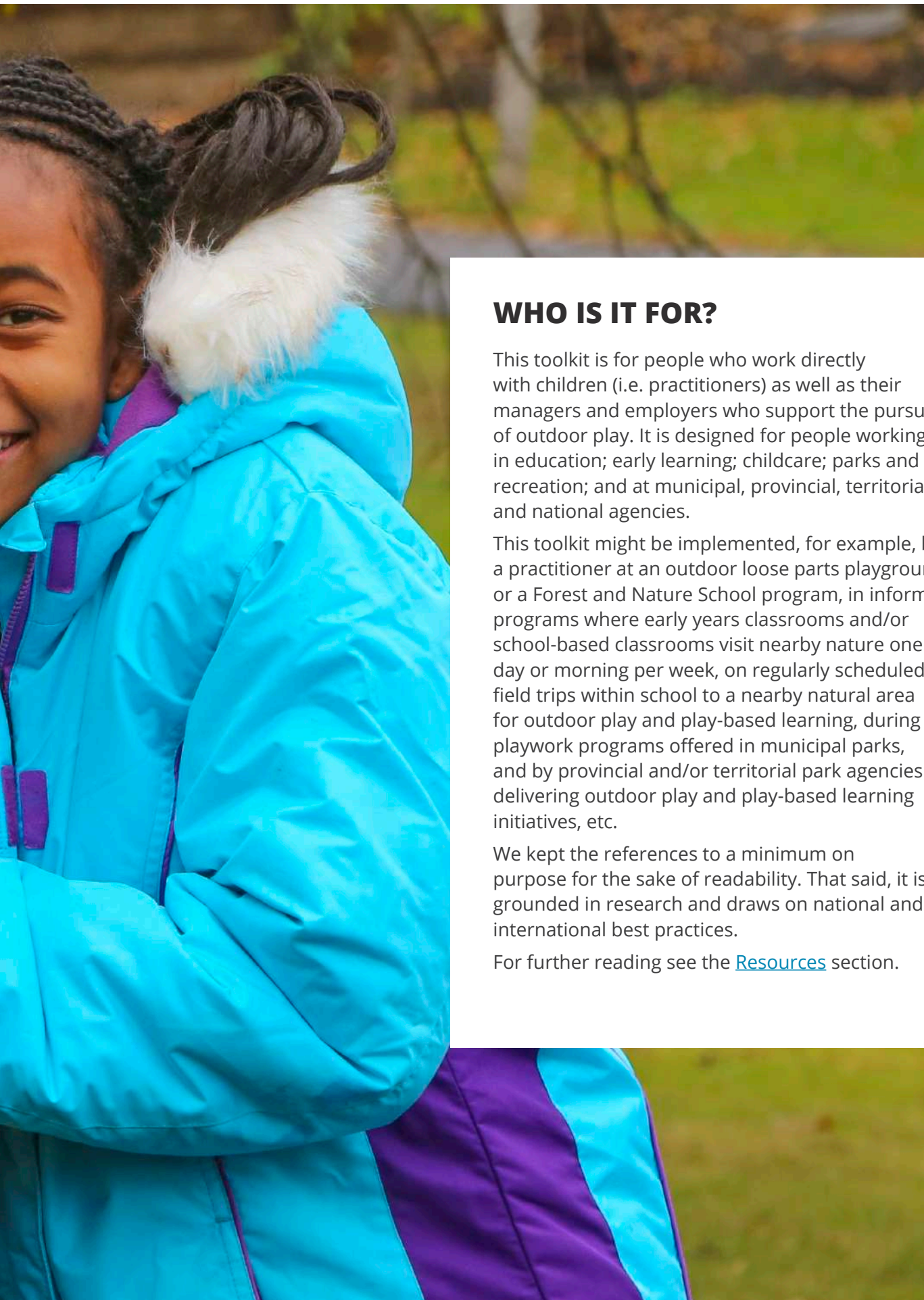
We created it because of growing concerns that children are overprotected when playing outdoors or stopped from going outside altogether. As a result, they miss out on the joy and sense of adventure they should have from playing outside, and lose out on the long-term benefits of outdoor play.

For more information about why and how we developed this toolkit, see the [This Toolkit's Development](#) section.









WHO IS IT FOR?

This toolkit is for people who work directly with children (i.e. practitioners) as well as their managers and employers who support the pursuit of outdoor play. It is designed for people working in education; early learning; childcare; parks and recreation; and at municipal, provincial, territorial, and national agencies.

This toolkit might be implemented, for example, by a practitioner at an outdoor loose parts playground or a Forest and Nature School program, in informal programs where early years classrooms and/or school-based classrooms visit nearby nature one day or morning per week, on regularly scheduled field trips within school to a nearby natural area for outdoor play and play-based learning, during playwork programs offered in municipal parks, and by provincial and/or territorial park agencies delivering outdoor play and play-based learning initiatives, etc.

We kept the references to a minimum on purpose for the sake of readability. That said, it is grounded in research and draws on national and international best practices.

For further reading see the [Resources](#) section.

HOW WILL IT HELP ME?

The toolkit is designed to help practitioners and agencies gain confidence in allowing children to play freely outside, and resist the pressure to overprotect children and overregulate their play. This also helps children gain the full benefits of playing freely, such as learning from their own efforts and mistakes while developing their confidence, competencies, and capacities.

This toolkit will help you take a balanced, thoughtful approach to risk and safety in children's outdoor play. It contains introductory material, forms, and checklists, and resources that will increase your confidence in leading children as they play and learn outdoors. It will help you focus on **significant** and **likely** benefits and risks, not those that are remote or trivial.

Adult anxieties about liability, litigation, and blame can make it difficult to strike the right balance between children having the freedom to play and keeping them safe from harm. Along with these anxieties, there is sometimes significant pressure to use an overcautious approach or provide written documentation for every decision. This may lead to disproportionate procedures that undermine good judgement and leave children worse off, often indoors. The toolkit helps you find a balanced approach to making informed decisions that empower children to play freely, without overinvolved adult intervention.

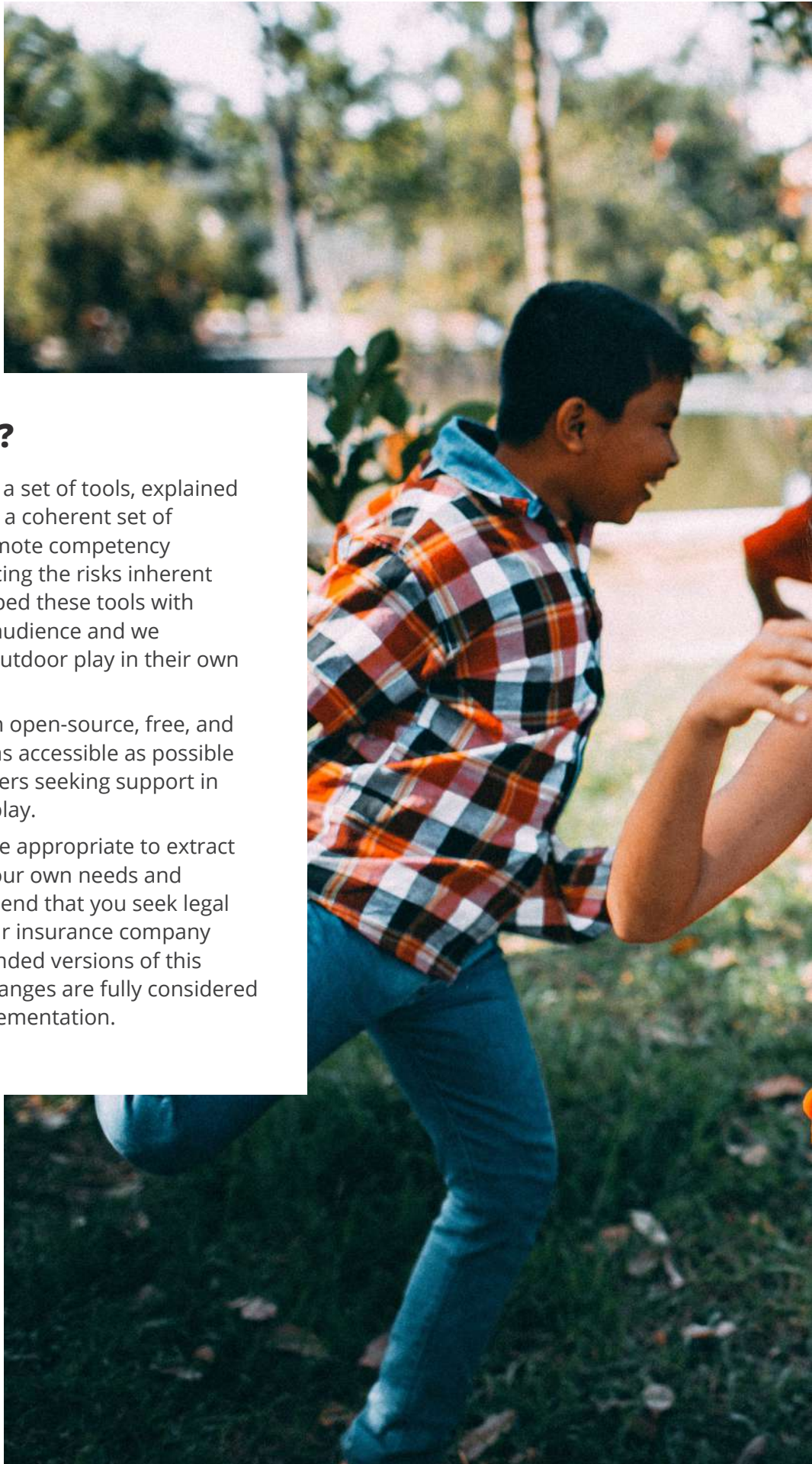


HOW DO I USE IT?

At the heart of the toolkit is a set of tools, explained in detail. Together, they are a coherent set of resources that work to promote competency and best practices in balancing the risks inherent in outdoor play. We developed these tools with practitioners as our target audience and we envision them supporting outdoor play in their own professional setting.

This toolkit is available in an open-source, free, and editable format to make it as accessible as possible across Canada to practitioners seeking support in balancing risks in outdoor play.

In some situations, it may be appropriate to extract and amend content to fit your own needs and circumstances. We recommend that you seek legal advice and consult with your insurance company prior to implementing amended versions of this toolkit, to ensure that all changes are fully considered and approved prior to implementation.







DOES IT FIT WITH MY EXISTING POLICIES?

This toolkit was reviewed by legal counsel. It takes into account what is reasonable in terms of your professional duty of care. Duty of care varies from setting to setting and within different professions, but it is important to note that duty of care in a professional setting does differ from that of a parent or caregiver. Duty of care in an outdoor play setting refers to your professional and legal obligation to always act in the best interest of children, and to not act (or fail to act) in a way that results in harm. As a professional, you are required to act within your sphere of competence and not take on anything you do not believe you can safely do. This toolkit aims to increase your competency in safely navigating and balancing the risks inherent in outdoor play.

Depending on your setting, policies and procedures that are mandated by legislation and/or regulations will greatly inform your practice. Familiarity with legislation and regulations within your province or territory is key and a necessary step before implementing any new program.

This toolkit may raise questions about your existing organizational policies and procedures, some of which may have been shaped by excessive risk aversion. We recommend that you consider your setting's existing tolerance for risk and review your current policies and procedures with a view to amending them to enhance and promote play in your programs. This toolkit is not meant to fully replace your existing organizational policies and procedures.

This toolkit moves away from adopting strict rules, an approach taken in some settings. For example, in some settings, rules may state how old children must be before they may play on a fallen log, or which areas of the school grounds are out of bounds in the winter. Rules like these, which sometimes arise from kneejerk reactions to minor events, are arguably based on excessive fear of litigation and a misunderstanding of injury prevention standards and guidance. They have sometimes led to decisions that fly in the face of common sense.

Writing an explicit policy about outdoor play, which includes the importance of a balanced approach to risk, can kickstart the process of critically revisiting your policies and procedures.

See the [Resources](#) section for items that can help you develop a play policy.



HOW DOES THE TOOLKIT ADDRESS LIABILITY?

The toolkit supports a reasonable approach to safety. In doing so, it also aims to rebuild trust and confidence: trust in children's natural abilities to learn, parental trust in educators, and trust between practitioners and the agencies responsible for their work.

In making judgements about liability, the courts explore whether or not a defendant is reasonable in their approach. You can demonstrate your approach by documenting the processes and dialogue that resulted in your risk management measures. The courts will then determine whether risk was managed appropriately. The tools in this toolkit, when used correctly and implemented in practice, will help you demonstrate that your actions were reasonable and that you fulfilled your duty of care.

A precedent-setting 2015 judgement on a playground injury claim shows that the courts accept that sometimes accidents happen in children's play and no one is to blame¹. The judgement ruled against a claim, citing that risk is an inherent part of children's outdoor play.

¹ Supreme Court of British Columbia. *Thompson v. Corp. of the District of Saanich*, 2015 BCSC 1750 (2015). Victoria.









HOW DO I ENSURE AND DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCY?

Supporting children's outdoor play is resurfacing as a priority and practice in Canada. Professional learning and qualifications specifically supporting unstructured, outdoor play are few and far between, and are therefore of limited use in judging competency. Practitioners come from varied backgrounds, including education, outdoor learning, recreation, conservation, the performing arts, community development, and play work. What's more, different sites and programs need different levels and types of professional competency and specialist/technical knowledge. For example, if you offer specialized programs, use hazardous tools, or operate in unusual environments or circumstances, you may need specific skills, experience, training, or qualifications.

That said, a love of the outdoors, confidence in being outdoors, belief in the value of outdoor play, emotional maturity, and the ability to engage positively with groups of children are fundamental, and arguably as important as formal qualifications, professional knowledge, or experience. You/your staff may need to have up-to-date certifications such as First Aid or CPR, depending on your program and its context.

See the [Your Professional and Organizational Development](#) section for guidance on helping practitioners improve their practice through training and professional development.

As more people and agencies move to support children's play, the number of professional development programs and qualifications is set to grow. Accreditation and benchmarking systems are also likely to emerge and evolve. In the meantime, you can compare your approach to that of similar settings and programs. It is valuable to connect with relevant regional and national bodies such as those listed in the [Resources](#) section.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DOCUMENT?

Before using the forms and checklists in this toolkit, ask yourself what written documentation—if any—is necessary. Strike a healthy balance and aim for the most notable and significant risks, rather than a comprehensive ‘laundry list’ of risks that may be present. It is not helpful or feasible to keep records of everything. Recording too much can leave you overburdened and may lead to resistance or cynicism about the process. If the demand for paperwork starts interfering with your decision making when you are with children, it may even leave them in greater danger, because your attention may move away from what is happening in front of you.

It is not possible to give concrete examples of what may or may not need to be documented, because much depends on the specifics (such as the children taking part, the environment, and the adults present). As a good starting point, consider the unusual or out-of-the-ordinary aspects of the program/experience compared with the rest of the lives of the children taking part. Getting to know the land or site you work on and getting to know the children you work with is integral as it allows you to make sound judgements about risk.

See the [Tips and Tricks for Practitioners](#) section for help in applying the Risk-Benefit Assessment Toolkit.





WHO SHOULD I INVOLVE IN REVIEWS AND ASSESSMENTS?

Risk management works best when the approach is shared and understood by everyone who has a role in programs or experiences. This does not mean everyone needs to be involved in every decision. But it is best to have a collective, consensual approach to decision making, rather than expecting one or two individuals to do all the work.

Before you start a new program or experience, ask the following questions:

- ☐ Who is directly involved in its delivery?
- ☐ Who needs to know what is happening if something goes wrong?
- ☐ Who has a regulatory role in this program/experience?
- ☐ Who may have views about the impact of this program/experience on the land or its flora and fauna?
- ☐ Do parents/caregivers need to be informed at the start of this program/experience and on an ongoing basis? If so, how can we do this in a supportive and constructive way?
- ☐ In some situations, you may need specialist or technical input. For example, if you plan to build a complex, permanent play structure, we recommend that you seek the advice of a playground designer, structural engineer, or other professional. Or, if you plan a program in an unfamiliar or unusual setting or environment, you could benefit from having informed input about the hazards you may encounter there. In rare cases, you may need to consult other types of specialists. In most ordinary situations, however, you can manage risks without specialist or technical input.

It is very important at some stages of your program delivery to involve children in the process of assessing and managing risks, as it will empower them to better understand some risks and how to mitigate them. This is found most often in the dynamic risk assessment process, where real-time dialogue and decision making happens in children's play.

Note that in certain circumstances, there may be arguments against formally involving children in risk management. That may be true, for example, if it interferes with the flow of their play, or makes it harder for them to learn intuitively. Shape children's input into risk management based on your program/experience's overall objectives.

ABOUT OUTDOOR PLAY

WHAT IS THE CANADIAN CONTEXT FOR OUTDOOR PLAY?

Indigenous peoples have thrived on the land now called Canada since time immemorial. Nature remains integral to Indigenous systems across the country, encompassing languages, politics, governance, and of course, education and childrearing.

There are fundamental differences in the worldviews of Indigenous and European cultures, values, practices, and actions. Understandings of outdoor learning and play are no exception².

In Canada, connections with land have been greatly impacted by colonization. Tactics of displacement and mindfully disconnecting people from the land were used to gain control of lands and peoples. Colonization led to urbanization, consumerism, and industrialization. It led to an overpowering of Indigenous systems by Euro-western systems. This includes education systems, where residential schools constituted a cultural genocide, depriving Indigenous children of their languages, cultures, and ways of life. Canada's mainstream systems have evolved with a very Euro-Western frame/worldview. One result of this is that our daily lives and needs have been separated from our environment. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children across Canada were increasingly disconnected from the land.

The benefits of learning outdoors are extensively proven in both Euro-Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. When looking for solutions, it is important to understand that Indigenous perspectives are rooted in place. That means culture and teachings vary greatly across the country.

Canada is culturally diverse when compared with Europe, given its many First Nations and peoples. There are more than 630 distinct First Nations across the country. No matter where you teach or learn, you are on traditional territory. That territory has unique characteristics, teachings, and peoples. It has evolved with those peoples and their knowledge.

Today in Canada, there is a growing movement to connect children with nature. Outdoor learning programs, injury prevention organizations, insurance companies, NGOs, licensed child care programs, school board districts, municipal parks and recreation, provincial parks, and others are coming together. Forest and Nature Schools have become an international movement and have taken hold, especially in Europe. As more and more organizations get on board, let us remember that we already have systems of learning in place in Canada, for effectively learning on land. The land's knowledge systems continue today; they are intact and they are dynamic. There is much to learn from Indigenous perspectives on outdoor play, perspectives that are rooted in the very places where all children play today.

² Valarie Angela James, Chloe Dragon Smith, Wendy Lahey. Indigenizing Outdoor Play, in Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, (2019).







WHY DOES OUTDOOR PLAY MATTER?

Every child deserves space and time for free outdoor play. Play is a basic right, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Outdoor play is also a vital part of a happy, healthy childhood that brings with it a wide range of health, social, cognitive, and emotional benefits.

Children in all cultures and of all ages and abilities are naturally curious and want to explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them. These natural impulses are most fully expressed when children are outdoors and engaged in free play.

When they are outdoors, children find diverse challenges and items (sometimes called natural or loose parts) that have limitless possibilities for play, such as sticks, stumps, planks, leaves, rocks, dirt, and puddles. These loose parts serve multiple functions. A stick can be a wizard's wand in one moment, then a poker for digging up crabs or a storytelling stick by the end of the day.

The outdoors does not control or contain children in the way a playroom or gymnasium does. When children are outdoors, they are exposed to a degree of uncertainty and challenge—in other words, to a degree of risk. The elements and materials found outdoors are dynamic and always changing. One day, a site can be blistering with heat, mowed grass, blooming flowers, tiny bugs, and a stream. A few months later, the same site can have fallen branches, scat from local coyotes, frozen puddles, and a stump that has come down in strong winds.

We want to encourage children's natural curiosity and help them find the adventures awaiting them outdoors.

A photograph of children in winter clothing playing outdoors on a mulched surface. In the foreground, a child in a purple snow suit with a fur-lined hood is seen from behind. To their right, another child in a blue and white striped snow suit is partially visible. In the background, other children in various winter clothes are playing. A white text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A PRACTITIONER IN SUPPORTING OUTDOOR PLAY?

In simple terms, your role is to help create the conditions for children to play freely, so they enjoy the experience and learn from the powerful opportunities that arise, while keeping the risks at an acceptable level. Settings and educators vary in the emphasis they place on free play and in the values that underpin their approaches. Some may embrace a degree of structure, or emphasize certain types of play more than others. Nonetheless, what connects all play-based pedagogies is a belief in the intrinsic value of giving children space and time during which they are relatively free to choose what they do, based on what engages, interests, and motivates them.







ABOUT RISK IN PLAY

WHY IS RISK A HEALTHY PART OF PLAY?

Children's outdoor play involves risk. You can address this by preventing children from playing outside or attempting to remove every risk they face outdoors. Or you can use tools that help you say yes to outdoor play while keeping the risks to an acceptable level. The toolkit helps you do the latter.

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 nature³.

Risk is often seen as a bad word. But in play, risk doesn't mean courting danger—like skating on a half-frozen lake or sending a preschooler to the park alone. It means the types of play children see as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but they can recognize and evaluate challenges according to their own ability. It means giving children the freedom to decide how high to climb, to explore the woods, get dirty, play hide 'n seek, wander in their neighbourhoods, balance, tumble and rough-house, especially outdoors, so they can be active, build confidence, autonomy and resilience, develop skills, solve problems and learn their own limits. It's letting kids be kids—healthier, more active kids.

Recommendations for educators: regularly embrace the outdoors for learning, socialization and physical activity opportunities, in various weather conditions—including rain and snow. Risky active play is an important part of childhood and should not be eliminated from the school yard or childcare centre.

A risk-benefit assessment (RBA) approach is the heart of this toolkit. RBA reins in the tendency to remove all risk from programs and activities. Risk plays an important function in healthy childhood development. Children need to experience appropriate levels of risk in their play in order to feel challenged, learn, test their limits, and set boundaries for themselves and others.

Practitioners and agencies can fulfil their duty of care by finding the right balance between allowing everyday risks in children's play and taking reasonable steps to limit harm.

³ Extracts from Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, published by ParticipACTION and developed by 17 agencies and academics



HOW RISKY IS OUTDOOR PLAY?

Playing outdoors is a relatively safe activity. Minor, easily healed injuries like bruises, cuts, and scrapes are common and often result from falls. Broken bones and head injuries unfortunately happen. Severe, life-changing injuries are rare, and fatalities are nearly unheard of.

The BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit analyzed decades of provincial data on playground injuries. The data show that each year, approximately one in every 2,000 children aged 1–14 was admitted to hospital as the result of a playground fall. Almost all of them were admitted for fractures (from which most children fully recover). Two playground equipment-related fatalities were recorded in Canada between 2007–2017. There were no child fatalities resulting from falls from trees between 2000–2017.

Canadian statistics about injuries in specific educational and leisure programs are not readily available. However, statistics from early childhood education centres in Norway (which have a strong focus on outdoor play) paint a similar picture. Minor injuries (frequently involving falls) are common, but life-changing injuries are rare. One study looked at more than 95,000 children (the vast majority attending full-time) in more than 2,000 settings and found that only three serious injuries occurred over the course of one year.







WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PLAYGROUND SAFETY STANDARDS?

In Canada, product safety standards have been drawn up for fixed play equipment, surfacing, and the like, in playgrounds and in some other dedicated spaces for play. They have an important role in ensuring that such play spaces are well-built, well-designed and reasonably safe (though they do not eliminate the risk of injury). However, they are not directly relevant to spaces such as forests or other natural outdoor spaces, and they do not apply to the kind of loose parts that are used in many outdoor play programs.

HOW DO I MANAGE UNEXPECTED RISKS THAT ARISE DURING PLAY SESSIONS?

Children's outdoor play is unpredictable. It is impossible to be sure how play sessions will unfold and impossible to plan for every scenario. That is why a key part of your overall approach to risk management during play sessions is how you respond to the unexpected. This is called dynamic risk management.

As with anticipated risks, the aim is to take a balanced and thoughtful approach. In this toolkit, we use the term 'dynamic risk-benefit assessment' (dynamic RBA) to describe that approach.

Dynamic RBA is not about following pre-set decision-making procedures. No procedure can cope with the complexity and fluidity that happens in children's play.

Similarly, dynamic RBA does not involve documentation or record keeping. The fluid, rapidly evolving nature of play sessions means it is not easy to document decisions and actions in real time. In the moment, your focus needs to be on what is happening around you. The time, effort, and energy you spend documenting decisions and actions, or showing that you have followed a particular procedure can take your attention away from the children's play. This may well undermine decision making and increase the risks.

That is why this toolkit does not specify in detail how to manage risks dynamically. While it does offer some guiding questions and ways of thinking about the process, these aim to support dialogue (with the children), reflection, and sound judgement. They are not procedures that must be followed.

Similarly, this toolkit does not include any tools for documenting your approach to dynamic risk management. Instead, it emphasises the importance of professional competence and confidence, which should be grounded in your organization's values. See page [Risk-Benefit Assessment \(RBA\)](#) for further thoughts on dynamic RBA, which focuses on supporting professional knowledge and practice through reflection and supportive discussions.





HOW DO I HELP PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND OTHERS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF OUTDOOR PLAY?

It is beyond the scope of this toolkit to go into detail about how to advocate effectively for outdoor play with parents/caregivers or other stakeholders. That said, the following approaches and tactics may be helpful:

- Add outdoor play to your organization's or program's vision, mission, or value statements and include these on your website as well as in your parent handbook.
- Host a parent's/guardian's information night and address outdoor play. Include a conversation about risk-benefit assessment.
- Invite adults to reflect on their own childhood memories of outdoor play. For many people, giving them the opportunity to recollect adventurous experiences outdoors can be powerful reminders of their value and significance.
- Share photos and videos of children at play. Images can be more powerful than words in communicating the richness and depth of children's play experiences.
- Directly observe children at play with educators/playworkers on hand to highlight the value of their experiences.
- Suggest that adults visit <https://www.outsideplay.ca>. It's a tool to help parents think differently about risk in play and make a plan to support change.
- Signpost authoritative resources such as those listed throughout this toolkit in the [Resources](#) section. Promoting material from leading children's rights organizations, educational bodies, public health agencies, and others can demonstrate the breadth of support for outdoor play.



2. The Tools

WHAT IS IN THIS TOOLKIT AND HOW DO I USE IT?

THE TABLE BELOW LISTS THE FIVE TOOLS IN THIS TOOLKIT AND SUGGESTS WHEN TO USE THEM:

TOOL	TITLE	WHEN TO USE IT
1	Informed Consent Form	Use this when you need parental permission
2	Standard of Care Checklist	Use this when you start significant new programs.
3	Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form	Use this before beginning new programs and/or play experiences that involve significant risks
4	Site Risk Assessment Form	Use this before a program begins operating on a new site that involves significant risks. Use it whenever you visit a new site. Use it annually if you visit the same site on a regular and repeated basis, and immediately after significant changes to that site.
5	Incident Report Template	Use this whenever a child or adult is injured.

This toolkit aims to be a coherent, consistent set of resources. Again, we recommended that you seek legal advice if you adapt it to your own needs.



TOOL 1: Informed Consent Form

About this form

This form documents the judgements and actions you took to manage the risks associated with your program and/or experience while taking into account the program's benefits. There is a section at the bottom that calls for specialist or technical input if it is necessary.

Use this form when you create or amend a program that involves significant risks. If you have more than one program that meets these criteria, complete a separate form for each.

Focus on **significant** and **likely** benefits and risks, not ones that are remote or trivial. In other words, do not list every possibility, just the most important ones.

TOOL 1: Informed Consent Form

About this form

The toolkit uses an informed consent form rather than a waiver. Waivers typically ask parents/guardians to sign away their children's right to legal redress in the event of an injury. Waivers are questionable in legal terms, and depending on your province or territory, as well as your situation, they may not stand up in court. Moreover, they are not helpful in getting parents/guardians to understand the risks and benefits inherent in outdoor play, and do not allow for genuinely informed consent to be given.

Use this form whenever you need a parent/guardian's permission for a child to take part in a program. It should contain clear information about the program so they can make an informed decision about their child's involvement. If they agree to the child's participation, they need to sign the form and return it to you. Adapt this form so it is specific to each program, or create a blanket consent form for all programs.

SETTING

PROGRAM/EXPERIENCE

Introduction

At *[insert setting]* we support children in becoming confident, capable people who have a sound sense of their abilities and interests, and the ability to take age-appropriate responsibility for their own safety. Adult anxieties about children can lead adults to overprotect them. This makes it harder for children to learn the consequences of their actions and makes learning less engaging. Furthermore, educators, public health professionals, and child development experts are concerned that children today spend less time playing and learning outdoors, with damaging results for them and society. For this reason, unstructured outdoor play *[insert "and learning" if it's applicable]* are central to this program/experience.

[insert setting] takes reasonable steps to manage and balance risks, while at the same time allowing children to play freely. Program participants acknowledge its inherent risks of harm and personal injury. While minor injuries like bruises, bumps and scrapes are not uncommon, serious injuries are rare, and life-changing injuries and fatalities are unlikely in the extreme. Still, as with almost any activity, indoors or outdoors, it is impossible to guarantee that they will not happen. You are required to accept this as a condition of your child's participation.

Risks

The variety of risks is more than can be listed here and will vary depending on the program. However, educators are trained and experienced, and their role is to support children in learning and playing, while keeping the risks to an acceptable level.

Below is a list of some of the more significant risks:

- Injuries from executing strenuous and demanding physical activities
- Injuries resulting from matches or fire *[if applicable]*
- Injuries resulting from the presence of harmful plants, natural loose parts, wild animals, and/or ticks
- Changing and inclement weather, including storms, high winds, and lightning
- The possibility that your child may not heed safety instructions or directions given to the group or delivered individually
- Injuries arising from the actions of other children
- Negligence on the part of other participants

TOOL 1: Informed Consent Form

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed

- That while the injuries sustained in outdoor activity are mostly minor, they can be severe, and on extremely rare occasions, even fatal
- That all rules are designed to enhance the safety of your child and others and are to be followed at all times
- That fire and open-fire cooking require special instructions and training from the facilitator
- That your child's risk of injury increases with fatigue

Use the table below if you believe that additional specialist or technical input is necessary. Any information added here should be reflected in the main form.

In unstructured, outdoor play, children freely choose which experiences and forms of play they are comfortable engaging in. Your child is under no obligation to participate in all experiences and may choose not to participate at any time during the program.

I/We have read the risk-benefit assessment summary for the program/experience.	<i>initial here</i>
I/We have reviewed the risk-benefit assessment summary with my/our child and have explained to the child that they need to listen to and follow the instructions provided.	<i>initial here</i>
I/We are aware that, alongside the benefits, participation involves risks, dangers, and hazards, including but not limited to those referred to in the risk-benefit assessment summary, and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freely and voluntarily assume the risks, dangers, and hazards inherent in participating, including all those described in the risk-benefit assessment summary and the possibility of personal injury, and the remote possibility of fatality. • Being satisfied that participation is suitable for my/our child, I/we give my/our permission and consent for him/her to participate. 	<i>initial here</i>
I will notify you if my child suffers from any medical or health condition that may cause injury to themselves or others, or may require emergency care during their participation.	<i>initial here</i>

Child's name

Date

Parent/guardian's name (PRINT)

Parent/guardian's signature

Emergency contact's name

Emergency contact's phone number





TOOL 2: Standard of Care Checklist

About this form

This checklist covers the key policies and procedures that need to be documented at your setting. It is adapted from a checklist published in 2019 by the Canadian Public Health Association.

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Program/experience risks and benefits (See Tool 3: Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form)

- ☐ Have the risks and benefits been identified? Document any specialist/technical input that was sought.
- ☐ Have decisions about the need for action/control measures been justified?
- ☐ Has appropriate action been taken?

Site risks (See Tool 4: Site Risk Assessment Form)

- ☐ Have the site risks been identified and assessed?
- ☐ Has appropriate action been taken?

Staff training and certification (See section 00)

- ☐ Are staff certifications up to date (e.g., outdoor play qualifications, standard/wilderness First Aid, CPR, or risk-management training)?
- ☐ What child protection training and certification is needed?

Compliance with internal procedures

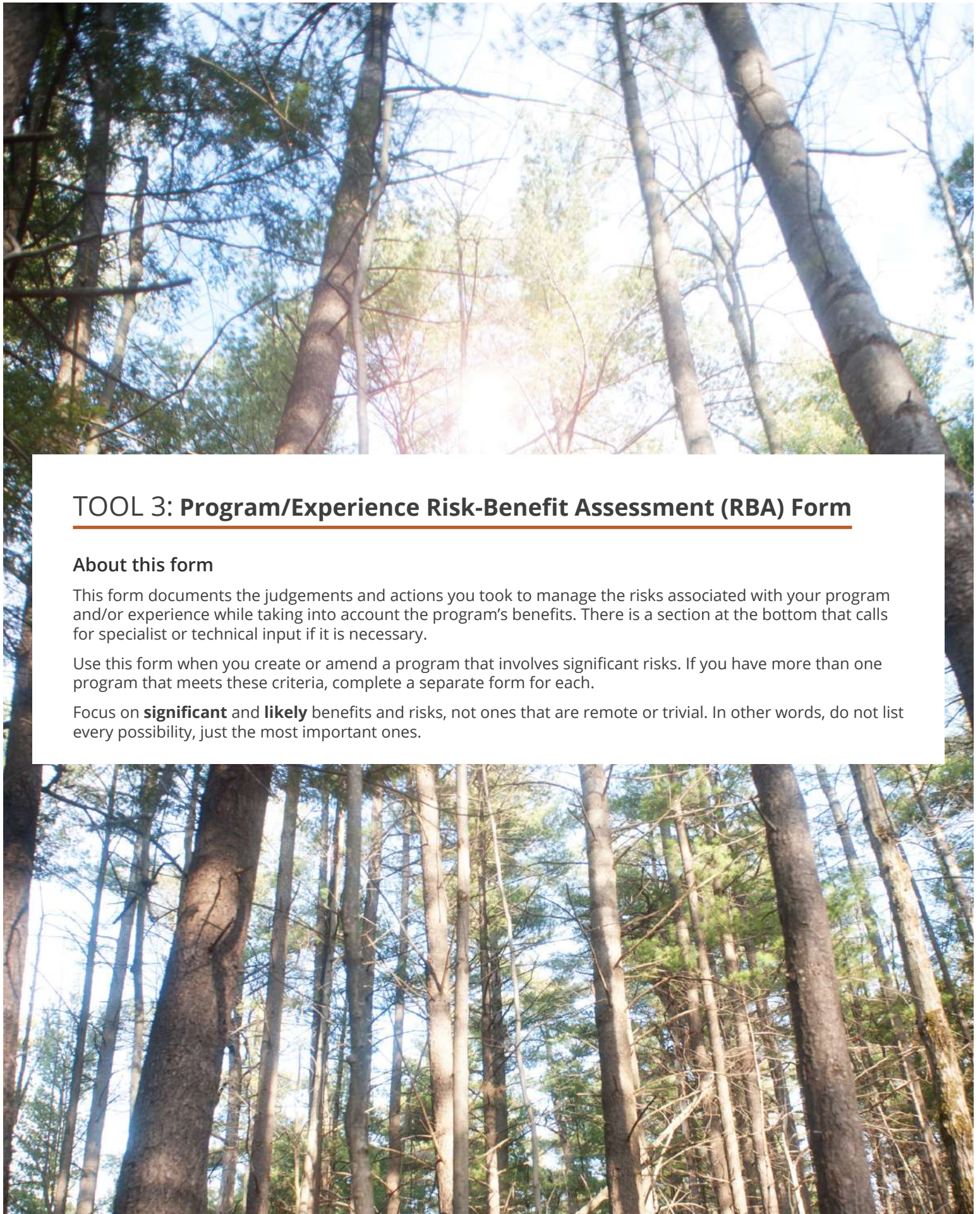
- ☐ Does the program comply with your organization's relevant internal policies and processes (e.g., supervision ratios)?
- ☐ Have relevant safety standards been followed, and were audit records of compliance maintained?
- ☐ Is the paperwork involved proportionate and appropriate for its purpose?

Incident monitoring (See Tool 5: Incident Report Form)

- ☐ Are incidents recorded as they arise?
- ☐ Have reasonable mitigation strategies been implemented when appropriate?

Knowledge and risk-related information sharing

- ☐ Has information been provided to parents/caregivers about the risks and benefits of engaging in a program?
- ☐ Have informed consent forms been used? (See Tool 1: Informed Consent Form)
- ☐ Is there reasonable cautionary signage on the play site to inform users of risks?



TOOL 3: Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form

About this form

This form documents the judgements and actions you took to manage the risks associated with your program and/or experience while taking into account the program's benefits. There is a section at the bottom that calls for specialist or technical input if it is necessary.

Use this form when you create or amend a program that involves significant risks. If you have more than one program that meets these criteria, complete a separate form for each.

Focus on **significant** and **likely** benefits and risks, not ones that are remote or trivial. In other words, do not list every possibility, just the most important ones.

TOOL 3: Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form

Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form		
Program/ Experience name		
Assessor(s) details	Name(s)	
	Position(s)	
	Date	
Site location(s)		
Date for review		
Benefits		
Risks (taking into account specialist input, if any)		
Site factors worth noting		
Precedents and/or comparisons (if any)		
Decision		
Action(s) taken		
Ongoing management and monitoring		
Sign-off signature		

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed

Use the table below if you believe that additional specialist or technical input is necessary. Any information added here should be reflected in the main form.

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed		
Area of knowledge or specialization	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed

TOOL 3: RBA Sample 1: Loose Parts Play

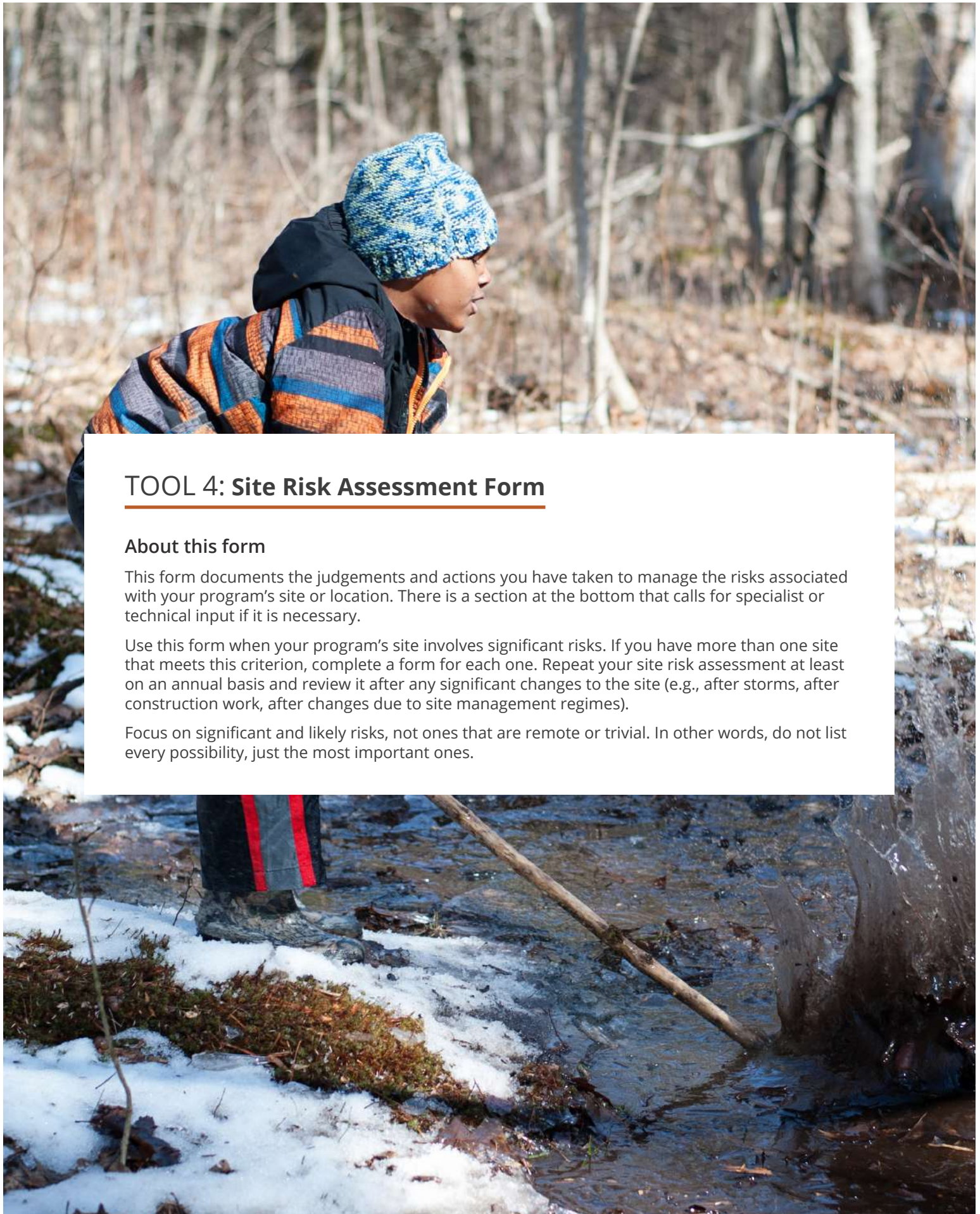
Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form		
Program/Experience name	Preschool full-day outdoor play program	
Assessor(s) details	Name	Eric Ericson
	Position(s)	Preschool Educator
	Date	1 Jan. 2019
Site location(s)	Within licensed childcare playground and in the forest behind licensed early years centre, which can be accessed by a gate.	
Date for review	1 Jan. 2020	
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Loose parts stimulate children's imaginations as they serve multiple purposes. * Loose parts build children's fine motor skills. * Knife skills are central to many craft and bush craft activities, including carving, tool-building, and cooking. * Loose parts promote respect for loose, natural materials found in the forest, and facilitate sustainable resourcing. * Loose parts help children learn to assess and manage relevant risks for themselves. 	
Risks (taking into account specialist input, if any)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Injury to child through inappropriately using/handling of loose parts * Injury to others through child's deliberate actions * Children running away while in forest and off licensed property 	
Site factors worth noting	* This group spent time throughout last year outside playing and visiting the local forest. The forest behind the preschool is owned by the municipality and has few visitors. The ground there is very even and the trees are healthy.	
Precedents and/or comparisons (if any)	* This group spent time throughout last year outside playing and visiting the local forest. The forest behind the preschool is owned by the municipality and has few visitors. The ground there is very even and the trees are healthy.	
Decision	* This group spent time throughout last year outside playing and visiting the local forest. The forest behind the preschool is owned by the municipality and has few visitors. The ground there is very even and the trees are healthy.	
Action(s) taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Trim branches at gate at eye level * Spend first two sessions inside licensed area to remind children how we stay safe and take care of each other * Loose parts checked daily for hazards * Educators supervise children closely and we maintain licensing ratios while inside and outside of licensed space * Educators continually reinforce and model appropriate behaviour * Produce written notes and ensure these are updated as necessary, and accessible to all staff 	
Ongoing management and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Revisit Risk-Benefit Assessments at staff meetings * Staff with relevant experience always oversee less experienced staff for at least 2 sessions and ensure that feedback is given immediately after each session 	
Sign-off signature		

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed		
Area of knowledge or specialization	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed
None needed		

TOOL 3: RBA Worked Sample 2: Outdoor Play

RBA worked example 2: Outdoor play program using of ropes		
Program/Experience name	Municipal Outdoor play program, parks and recreation	
Assessor(s) details	Name	B. Roper
	Position(s)	Play Worker
	Date	1 Jan. 2019
Site location(s)	Calgary Municipal Park	
Date for review	1 Jan. 2020	
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ropes greatly expand the scope of children's play opportunities, allowing them, for example, to skip, and to make forts, swings, tightropes and other play features. * Using ropes often requires cooperation and teamwork. * Playing on structures using ropes helps to build children's gross motor skills and upper body strength. * Ropes help children understand scientific concepts such as balance, leverage, material strength, momentum and energy. * Ropes are engaging objects that stimulate discussion and activity around their construction and effective use. * Playing with ropes helps children learn how to assess and manage the various risks around structure building, swinging, and falling. 	
Risks (taking into account specialist input, if any)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Strangulation, whiplash or other injury to user/others through error of judgement * Strangulation, whiplash or other injury to user/others through deliberate actions * Injury through rope breaking/fraying * Injury through the failure of knots * Theft of ropes * Injury to others as a result of ropes being left in potentially dangerous arrangements * Emotional distress through triggering painful memories or associations 	
Site factors worth noting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Our community includes families for whom ropes may have strong negative associations * Site is publicly accessible at all times 	
Precedents and/or comparisons (if any)	* Programs and guidance from Canada and other countries	
Decision	* Incorporate rope use into session as set out below	
Action(s) taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Activities using ropes only to be included where suitably trained staff are on site (as noted in supplementary form below) * Assess appropriateness of type of rope for planned and unplanned activities. As per notes below, only use suitable mountaineering rope for weight-bearing structures * Staff constructing weight-bearing structures should be familiar with suitability of knots * Staff involved in the construction of tree swings should be familiar with suitability of trees (e.g., visual signs of healthy/diseased trees or branches) * No ropes should be left in place between sessions, due to the possibility of their being used by the public * Supervise children's rope use closely in first few sessions, intervene as necessary to support appropriate use, and adjust level of supervision in the light of patterns of use * Ensure all children are aware of strangulation and whiplash risks and how these arise, and check their awareness regularly * Hand out ropes in controlled manner at start of session, and count returned ropes at end * Ensure rope use is discussed in advance with parents/caregivers and community representatives; be prepared to modify program in the light of these discussions 	
Ongoing management and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Record judgements about types of rope used * Record that staff involved in structure building have suitable knowledge of ropes and knots * Staff with relevant experience always oversee less experienced staff for at least 2 sessions and ensure that feedback is given immediately after each session 	
Sign-off signature		

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed		
Area of knowledge or specialization	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed
Rope specification	B. Roper	Sole person authorized to purchase ropes
Knot Knowledge	B. Roper and other staff who have had appropriate training/briefing	Ensure at least 1 staff member has knowledge on suitability of ropes and knots used for structure building



TOOL 4: Site Risk Assessment Form

About this form

This form documents the judgements and actions you have taken to manage the risks associated with your program's site or location. There is a section at the bottom that calls for specialist or technical input if it is necessary.

Use this form when your program's site involves significant risks. If you have more than one site that meets this criterion, complete a form for each one. Repeat your site risk assessment at least on an annual basis and review it after any significant changes to the site (e.g., after storms, after construction work, after changes due to site management regimes).

Focus on significant and likely risks, not ones that are remote or trivial. In other words, do not list every possibility, just the most important ones.

TOOL 4: Site Risk Assessment Form Template

Site Risk Assessment Form		
Site name		
Assessor(s) details	Name	
	Position(s)	
	Date	
Site location(s)		
Date for review		
Risks (taking into account specialist input, if any)		
Decision		
Action(s) taken		
Ongoing management and monitoring		
Sign-off signature		

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed

Use the table below if you believe that additional specialist or technical input is necessary. Any information added here should be reflected in the main form.

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed		
Area of knowledge or specialization	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed

TOOL 4: Site Risk Assessment Form worked example 1: Urban park

Site Risk Assessment Form		
Site name	Downtown Toronto	
Assessor(s) details	Name	Johnny Johnston
	Position(s)	Educator
	Date	1 Jan. 2019
Site location(s)	Main St. park entrance and surrounding green space (which includes public toilets)	
Date for review	1 January 2020 (earlier if site changes significantly)	
Risks (taking into account specialist input, if any)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Children leaving park entrances and being at risk from traffic * Attack by aggressive dogs * Injuries from hazardous litter * Heavy rain/snow * Dehydration in hot weather * Illness/injury to child or adult that warrants an emergency response * Injury or distress arising from adult park users * Drowning in ornamental pond in SE corner of park 	
Decision	* Use site if weather is suitable; review weather forecast up to morning of session and have fall-back plan in place	
Action(s) taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Maintain 8:1 staff ratio and minimum of 2 staff (children in this program are between 4 and 6 years of age) * Designate 1 member of staff to lead on making regular headcounts * Ensure adequate drinking water is available * Establish 'return to base' call with children, and practice call at least once each session * Liaise with local dog-walking group in advance of 1st session, and put up sandwich board near Main St entrance for duration of session, to inform dog owners of presence of children * Carry out rapid visual sweep check of core area of site on arrival (including toilets) at the start of each session, and adapt location/activities as necessary * Check cell phone reception at start of each session * Keep all children at least 100 metres away from pond unless pond visit is part of session plan (in which case ensure all children are closely supervised throughout) 	
Ongoing management and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Carry out annual site visit * Hold annual meeting with municipal Parks Dept. to review issues 	
Sign-off signature		

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed

Use the table below if you believe that additional specialist or technical input is necessary. Any information added here should be reflected in the main form.

Supplementary Form: Specialist or Technical Input Needed		
Area of knowledge or specialization	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed
None needed		

TOOL 5: Incident Report Template

INCIDENT REPORT TEMPLATE	
<p>This report must be completed as soon as possible after an incident occurs, and no later than 24 hours after the incident occurs. Your policies and procedures will dictate who needs to sign off on an incident report, and who, beyond the family of the child, needs to be informed.</p>	
Date:	
Lead Staff on Incident Report:	
Other Staff Involved:	
Children Involved:	
Time & Location:	
Details of Incident:*	
Specific Action Taken During Incident:	
Specific Action(s) Taken After Incident:	
Emergency Contact Informed:**	
Signature of Staff:	
Signature of Supervisor (If Required):	

* Please be sure to use objective language with clear and succinct details of the incident that occurred, and not individual perspectives on how or why the incident occurred.

** For example, who was informed, why and through what means?

3. Managing Risk in the Moment: Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment

AS WE HAVE ALREADY NOTED, CHILDREN AND THE OUTDOORS ARE UNPREDICTABLE. A KEY PART OF YOUR APPROACH TO MANAGING RISKS IS HOW YOU AND YOUR TEAM RESPOND IN REAL TIME TO CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR PLAY.

In the toolkit, we call this process dynamic risk-benefit assessment (dynamic RBA). Dynamic RBA is not about following pre-set, decision-making procedures. It is not about filling out formal documentation. So what is it about?

There are many moments in children's play when risk is heightened and you have not thought through how to manage it. For example, you might enter a part of your site that you visit regularly, but the children might want to do something they have never wanted to do before (e.g., build a bridge to the other side of the swamp, make swords for a pirate game, create a pulley system with loose parts). In supporting unstructured outdoor play, we want to support these emerging experiences. But how?

It is important to be nimble, flexible, and open while navigating the unknown and what is emerging. Actively listening and asking open-ended questions, as well as playing the role of facilitator and guide will help children make good choices in their play. The goal of dynamic RBA is to continue allowing children to play freely when new ideas emerge, so they can learn from their own efforts and mistakes, while also learning how to take responsibility for keeping themselves and others safe while they are playing. When engaged in this process, practitioners can adhere to their duty of care while still saying "YES!" to the ideas and momentum unfolding in play.

More often than not, our instinct is to stop children when we see them engaging with an element of risk. We might say "Be careful," or take over what they are doing to ensure they do it safely. Saying no or intervening in this way limits children's right to play and their ability to learn how to safely navigate everyday risks. It also limits their ability to feel the joy and sense of accomplishment that comes from succeeding and overcoming adversity.





If a child is in imminent danger, or is putting another person at risk of imminent danger, we must always act immediately to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. When children are engaging in a level of risk that is beyond their comfort or skill level, they often exhibit signs of fear, and these signs can vary from person to person. Fear is different from the normal feelings of thrill and excitement that happen when children engage with developmentally appropriate risks. With experience, practitioners become more skilled at noticing early signs that a child has moved outside their comfort zone and needs assistance. It is helpful to check in with a child, to ask them how an experience is making them feel, to determine whether they have moved beyond thrilling and exciting into a place of fear.

When you work with new groups of children, it is important to spend lots of time in more familiar areas or areas that are closer to sources of support such as a main building or more accessible part of a park. It often takes many hours or days to get a sense of every child in your group, to see which patterns of behaviour are present that may influence your risk management planning.

During this relationship-building phase, you will see who exhibits higher risk behaviours such as running away or leaving the group, not responding quickly to prompts, running around the fire or near dangerous elements, or engaging in rougher play than is comfortable for their peers. All of these behaviours can be navigated. The relationship-building phase allows you to develop your own plan for working with these challenges and minimizing risk.



At the outset of a new program, it is very important to take time to set the tone for safety and caring for one another in outdoor play. Lean heavily on predictable routines and prompts to support risk management practices. Examples of these routines include:

- Choosing easy-to-access and close-by outdoor spaces when working with a new group for the first couple of sessions
- Starting each session with a storytelling circle and sharing a story about how we look out for one another when we are outdoors
- Developing and regularly revisiting 'Community Standards' to engage children in a conversation about how we want to be as a community of learners and play people (With younger groups, we keep these standards to a maximum of three items and we come back to them often. With older groups, we may want to write the standards on a flip chart and revisit them over a couple of sessions.)
- Practicing the "HOOT" and the "HOWL" or other identifiable and playful calls as prompts to gather a group quickly, when needed
- Using a tangible, bright item as a visual prompt for children on how far they can go (For example, hang a bright orange First Aid backpack called the "bright sun" in a tree. Tell the children that wherever they go, they need to be able to see the bright sun.)
- Having predictable pauses for water, food, and sometimes rest.

Questions to guide your thinking:

- How can I incorporate a thoughtful pause into my practice to give children time to navigate their way through risk?
- How can I support children's intentions and goals in their play while addressing risks (e.g., share my concerns, avoid unclear and non-specific advice)?
- How can I help children better identify and manage risks themselves (e.g., encourage reflection and discussions amongst children)?
- How can I gain control of a potentially dangerous situation (e.g., pausing techniques, gathering signals)?





Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment Process

OPEN OBSERVATION

- Playing alongside
- Trust and caring interest
- Non-intrusive

FOCUSED ATTENTION

- Some warning signs, play and risk escalating
- Proximity and Check-ins
- Dialogue and reflection
- If improves, go back to open observation

ACTIVE INTERVENTION

- Immediate change, steps to reduce risk
- Empowering language
- Safety Prompts

Adapted from Omer's Model of Vigilant Care, 2011





OTHER HELPFUL COMMUNICATION PROMPTS⁵:

- ☐ "Stay focused on what you're doing."
- ☐ "What is your next move?"
- ☐ "Do you feel safe there?"
- ☐ "Take your time."
- ☐ "Does that branch feel strong and stable?"
- ☐ "I'm here if you need me."
- ☐ "Please find a safe spot for your stick while you're running."
- ☐ "I've noticed that this is a really busy area. What are some of the things we need to watch out for with so many kids around?" (and give some examples). Or, "Let's move this to a lower-traffic zone."
- ☐ "I've noticed that there are a lot of fallen trees and sticks to trip on here."
- ☐ "Should we move this game to a more open area?"
- ☐ "Sticks need space. Mike, please back up from Sarah. She's holding a big stick!"
- ☐ "Sticks need space. Sarah, look around you. Do you have enough space to swing that big stick?"
- ☐ "What's your plan with that big stick?"
- ☐ "Rocks need space!"
- ☐ "Find more space!"
- ☐ "Before you throw that rock, what do you need to look for?"
- ☐ "That rock looks really heavy! Can you manage it?"
- ☐ "Please give each other lots of space so that no one feels like they need to push and no one gets knocked over by accident."
- ☐ "Do you feel stable/balanced?"
- ☐ "Do you need more space?"
- ☐ "Check in with each other. Make sure everyone is still having a good time."
- ☐ "Ask her if she's ok."
- ☐ "Ask him if he's still having fun."
- ☐ "Did you like that? Make sure you tell her if you didn't like that."
- ☐ "If you need to run, meet me at the next trail marker!"
- ☐ "Let's check this cave/fort to make sure it is safe to hide in."

⁵ Eperjesi, P. (2017, June 22). When you want to say be careful! [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://childnature.ca/when-you-want-to-say-be-careful/>



4. Tips and Tricks for Practitioners:

1. Building trust takes time. It is important to manage risks carefully with new and less experienced groups and to use a 'gradual-release model' in terms of how much freedom you allow in your program.
2. Consider the potential impact of adverse weather on your program/experience and include this in your program/experience risk-benefit assessment and site risk assessment, as appropriate.
3. More adventurous or challenging programs, activities, and experiences need detailed planning and risk management, involving scaffolded learning opportunities (i.e., building up to a higher level of risk). If children will use knives, tools, or specialist equipment, make sure you engage in careful planning and documentation to show how the risks are managed. Alongside the RBA, consider compiling lists of the equipment you need.
4. Every group is different and every child will navigate their environment and play in different ways. Their comfort and competence in engaging in everyday risks outdoors is not indicative of how they navigate risk at home or in a classroom. Some children who are very shy and quiet indoors can become robust navigators of their outdoor setting, and those who are loud and engage in intellectual risks inside may be quiet and timid when outside. Be prepared to get to know your children in a new light when they are outdoors.
5. Involving and empowering children in assessing and managing risk starts with dialogue. Offer them opportunities to reflect on what is happening in their environment.
6. Do not take children to a space you have never visited!
7. Make sure that the children's basic needs are met, while giving them appropriate opportunities to learn the consequences of their choices. For instance, be sure they drink lots of water and feel rested. Likewise, be sure they are not exhibiting signs of too little sleep or food. Be sure they are not too hot or cold or negatively affected by the elements. Children often lose their balance or fine motor skills as well as their sense of self-mastery if their basic needs are not met. That leaves them vulnerable to injury. In these moments, it is important to pause and sometimes change course to keep them safe.
8. If an injury or incident occurs during a session, it will be valuable to have an accurate record of what happened. While it may not always be possible to document these immediately, it is recommended that you record key details as soon as is practical, ideally on the same day.
9. Consider the need to establish emergency procedures, that outline meeting points, coordination of a group in an emergency, communication with emergency services/first responders, and make arrangements for rescue if you are in a remote location.

5. Glossary

THIS SECTION DEFINES KEY TERMS USED IN THIS TOOLKIT. SOME OF THE DEFINITIONS ARE OPEN TO DEBATE, BECAUSE TERMS ARE SUBJECTIVE, OR OPEN TO INTERPRETATION, OR USED IN DIFFERENT WAYS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS. OUR AIM IN OFFERING THE DEFINITIONS BELOW IS TO HELP BUILD CONSENSUS AND A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THESE TERMS. WE WANT TO MAKE CLEAR THE BASIC PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN THIS TOOLKIT.

Action taken: This refers to what you did as the result of a decision, which could include:

- Doing nothing.
- Introducing or increasing the amount of benefit and risk monitoring.
- Adapting the amount of supervision by introducing increasing, or decreasing it.
- Asking for specialist/technical input.
- Introducing other measures to reduce risks.
- Introducing additional features or activities that increase the level of risk because they also increase the potential benefits.
- Meeting with parents/caregivers or other parties to raise their awareness of your approach.
- Removing a facility/structure or suspending a program/experience.

Benefits: These are the specific, positive things that children — and possibly others — gain from a program/experience. These include social, physical, emotional, educational, and psychological benefits. Benefits can help justify the inclusion of risky aspects of your program.

Dangers: This means the harms that can arise from hazards. The word is similar to risk, but often implies an unacceptable degree of risk.

Decision: This is the assessor's conclusion following a risk-benefit assessment. Here are examples of decisions you can make:

- Continue with no adjustments and monitor the situation.
- Continue with specific adjustments and continue to monitor the situation.
- Cease all programs or activities until work can be carried out and further assessments can be made.

Duty of care: The responsibility or legal obligation of a person or organization to avoid acts or omissions that could likely cause harm to others.

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment: This is an approach to dynamic risk management that emphasizes the need for balance and a sense of proportion.

Dynamic risk management: This refers to the real-time decisions and actions practitioners take during a session.

Hazards: These are the actions, objects, features, plants, animals, or people that could be a source of harm. The word is sometimes used to imply that the hazard should be removed, or that the associated risks are unacceptable and should be managed. This can be confusing, because hazards are everywhere; all objects and actions can cause harm in certain circumstances. In this toolkit, the word is used to label anything that has the potential to cause harm. For similar reasons, the toolkit focuses on thinking holistically about risks as part of a risk-benefit approach, rather than separating out hazards.

Liability: The state of being legally responsible for something; the responsibility for the consequences of one's actions or omissions that are enforceable by law.

Local factors: This includes issues that are specific to what you assess. These might relate to the participants, the site, the surrounding community, or the involvement of parents/caregivers and other adults. Leave this blank if there are no relevant local factors.

Negligence: A breach of the standard of care that is owed by a person who has a duty of care. This usually includes doing — or not doing — something that a reasonable person would do or not do, considering the circumstances and the knowledge of the parties involved.

Ongoing monitoring and management: This refers to future actions you may need to take, including:

- Maintenance schedules
- Inspection regimes
- Reviewing incident records, injuries, or other outcomes
- User feedback exercises

Precedents and/or comparisons: This means lessons learned or insights from similar programs or situations. Could include web links, program names, and guidance/policies/procedures from other agencies. These are particularly helpful when you are dealing with unusual, innovative, unconventional, or novel programs. They can help you justify your departure from a standard approach. Leave it blank if you are dealing with a straightforward program.

Reasonable person: A person who is thought to be careful and considerate in their actions. This ideal focuses on how a typical person with “ordinary prudence” would act. The reasonable person is used as a test of liability in cases of negligence.

Risks: The significant adverse outcomes that may arise from the site, program, activity, or experience. In everyday life and in standard risk management, risks are often seen only as negative. This toolkit is founded on the belief that risks can have upsides. They may create opportunities for learning and development. They may excite, motivate, or engage children. And they reflect the reality of the world in which we all live, which is full of uncertainty, adventure, and possibility.

Risk assessment: This means evaluating or deciding which risks are significant and how they should be addressed. Risk assessment is one part of risk management.

Risk-benefit assessment (RBA): This is an approach to risk assessment in which risks and benefits are considered alongside each other. It allows providers to satisfy their legal obligations, while promoting a reasonable, balanced approach.

Risk management: This is the overall process of systematically evaluating and managing risks in an organization, environment, or program.

Risky play: This includes thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve engaging with uncertainty and the possibility of physical injury. Risky play provides opportunities for challenges, testing limits, exploring boundaries, and learning about injury risk.

Safe: This means something that is below a theoretical level of risk. The word is highly subjective and ambiguous. For some people, it implies no risk of harm at all. It can also imply compliance with relevant standards or benchmarks. It may imply that the level of risk is lower than what is broadly accepted. Because of this ambiguity and confusion, this toolkit avoids the unqualified use of the word safe and recommends that others do the same.

Standard of care: This is only relevant when a duty of care has been established. The standard of care speaks to what is reasonable in the circumstances. If one does not owe a duty of care, there is no need to meet any standard of care.





6. Your Professional and Organizational Development

CONGRATULATIONS! INCORPORATING A RISK-BENEFIT ASSESSMENT INTO YOUR SETTING IS A SIGNIFICANT STEP. IT MEANS REVIEWING PRINCIPLES, PROCEDURES, AND PRACTICE AT MANY LEVELS, INCLUDING:

- Your thinking and understanding about children and their play and development
- Your organization's values and direction
- Your policies and procedures
- Your service management
- The training, professional development, and ongoing supervision and support on offer to you/your staff
- The supervision of your site, practitioners, and children
- Monitoring, evaluation, and performance reviews
- Ongoing maintenance and inspection procedures
- Brochures, mission/vision statements, website content, and other material for parents/caregivers

An organizational review may be helpful in ensuring that the approach is properly understood and implemented. Pilots and group/team discussions can also be useful when first introducing this approach. This may include the following actions and ideas:

- Creating a play policy that sets out your approach to risk and outdoor play
- Viewing audio/video material of children taking part in outdoor free play, as a prompt for discussion
- Visiting innovative sites and settings to observe their practices and learn from their experiences
- Hosting facilitated sessions or programs led by recognized leaders in the field
- Hosting open evenings and information-sharing sessions for parents/caregivers

If you want to dive more deeply into your development options, consult the [Resources](#) section.

7. This Toolkit's Development

THIS TOOLKIT IS THE RESULT OF A BROAD COLLABORATION, WITH INPUT FROM LEADING FIGURES IN OUTDOOR PLAY, ACADEMICS, POLICY MAKERS, AND FACE-TO-FACE PRACTITIONERS FROM ACROSS CANADA. IT HAS UNDERGONE LEGAL REVIEW.

It was first proposed by Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) after six years of piloting a Risk-Benefit Assessment in its 'Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course'. In early 2018, the Lawson Foundation agreed to fund Phase One of this project, to collaboratively develop a Canadian Risk-Benefit Assessment Toolkit for Outdoor Play, recognizing that risk and safety had emerged as key topics in its wider Outdoor Play Strategy.

The British independent researcher, Tim Gill, was appointed to be the lead author, with writing support from Dr. Mariana Brussoni (Associate Professor, University of British Columbia), and Marlene Power (Executive Director of CNAC). Key agencies and individuals were invited to join an advisory committee to inform this toolkit's development and writing. This group (including Tim) met over three days in the spring of 2018 to review the project and give strategic input into the drafting process.

In May of 2019, a draft was shared with the advisory group, with an open invitation to comment. After incorporating their feedback, it was tested with a wider stakeholder group, which included 27 Forest and Nature School practitioners and six Early Childhood Education faculty members from across Canada, as well as 10 other stakeholders in education, child care, playground safety, and municipal play provision, through personal contacts and via an online evaluation exercise led by Mariana.

The resulting toolkit is now available as an open source resource, allowing agencies and sector interests to adapt it to fit their own contexts.



8. Resources

Resources from Canadian agencies

Canadian Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health Active Outdoor Play Statement:

<http://www.phn-rsp.ca/aop-position-jae/index-eng.php>

Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) Authoritative

<https://www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play-including-the-discussion-document>:

What's in the Best Interest of the Child? A Public Health Perspective on Access to Unstructured Play for Children in Canada

<https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/play/playproject-wickedproblems-e.pdf>

Forest School Canada/Child and Nature Alliance of Canada Information, events, training programs, and other resources:

<http://childnature.ca/>

Outdoor Play Canada General information and resources supporting outdoor play in Canada:

<https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/>

Consensus statement authored by 17 Canadian agencies and academics Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play:

<https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/position-statement-on-active-outdoor-play>

Position Statement on Children's Unstructured Play Infographics, practice case studies, research summaries, decision-making tools including: Duty of Care Checklist; Developing a Play Policy; Collaborative Decision-Making: Supporting a Balanced Approach to Children's Unstructured Play; Loose Parts Play Policy

<https://www.cpha.ca/collaborative-decision-making-supporting-balanced-approach-childrens-unstructured-play>

Suggested reading

These non-academic references influenced the toolkit:

Ball D., et al. (2012). *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide*. Published by Play England.

<https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/resources/>

Canadian Parks Council. (2014). *Connecting Canadians with Nature: An Investment in the Well-being of Our Citizens*.

http://www.parks-parcs.ca/english/ConnectingCanadians-English_web.pdf

Canadian Parks Council. (2016). *The Nature Playbook*.

<http://www.parks-parcs.ca/pdf/playbook/nature-playbook.pdf>

Children & Nature Network. (2018). *Connecting with Nature to Care for Ourselves and the Earth: Recommendations for Decision Makers*.

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/Connecting-with-Nature-Summary-English.pdf>

Gill T. (2007). *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*. Published by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

<https://gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch/publication/no-fear/>

Gill T. (2018). *Playing it Safe: A global white paper on risk, liability and children's play in public space*.

Published by Bernard van Leer Foundation.

<https://bernardvanleer.org/publications-reports/playing-it-safe-a-global-white-paper-on-risk-liability-and-childrens-play-in-public-space/>

Health and Safety Executive (UK). (2012). *High-Level Statement: Children's play & leisure – promoting a balanced approach*.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm>

International School Grounds Alliance. (2017). *Risk in Play and Learning: Ubud-Höör Declaration*.

<http://www.internationalschoolgrounds.org/risk>

Lawson Foundation (2019). *Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper*.

<http://lawson.ca/advancing-op-ece.pdf>.

Play Safety Forum (UK). (2012). *Risk Benefit Assessment Forms*.

<https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/resources/>

Relevant academic papers and lay articles

Brussoni M. (2017). 'Why kids need risk, fear and excitement in play.'

<https://theconversation.com/why-kids-need-risk-fear-and-excitement-in-play-81450>

Brussoni M. (2019). 'From obesity to allergies, outdoor play is the best medicine for children.'

<https://theconversation.com/from-obesity-to-allergies-outdoor-play-is-the-best-medicine-for-children-118031>

Brussoni M., et al. (2012). 'Risky Play and Children's Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development'

<https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/9/9/3134>

Brussoni M., et al. (2015). 'What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review'

<https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/12/6/6423>

Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters RDeV (eds). Brussoni M (topic ed). (2019). *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development. Outdoor play*.

<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/outdoor-play>. (See also 'according to experts' papers.)

Waller T., et al. (ed.). (2017). *SAGE Handbook of Outdoor Play and Learning*. Note chapter 7: Risk and Safety in Outdoor Play (Sandseter E., et al.) and chapter 8: The Evolution of Policy on Risk Management in Outdoor Play (Gill T.)

<https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-sage-handbook-of-outdoor-play-and-learning/book245741>

