

The Power of a Relational, Values-Driven Approach to Building Adult Capacity



A Practical Resource for ECE Leaders

About this Resource

The Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0 (OPS 2.0; see p. 3 to learn more) was a pan-Canadian initiative that sought to build adult capacity to impact outdoor play in early childhood education (ECE). OPS 2.0 demonstrated that effective approaches to changemaking in outdoor play for Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) are multi-pronged and include four main components:

- professional learning,
- design and use of existing outdoor and natural spaces,
- parent engagement, and
- organizational policy change.

This resource translates the evidence and learning from OPS 2.0 into a practical resource that you can use on your journey to creating high quality outdoor play experiences for young children. It includes four calls to action that can drive your approach as early childhood education (ECE) leaders seeking to build adult capacity among your early learning community and multi sector partners.

This resource is organized into the following sections:

- **Background on OPS 2.0 and the eight projects**
- **Using this Resource, including tips for getting started**
- **Four calls to action from OPS 2.0:**
 1. **Lean into values to drive quality and change**
 2. **Equip and empower people at all levels**
 3. **Strengthen organizational culture through collaboration**
 4. **Nurture an ecosystem approach for long-term impact**

Purpose and Audience

This resource is intended to enable those with prior knowledge and experience in outdoor play as a pedagogical practice to act on the calls to action. It is designed for ECE leaders such as post-secondary ECE faculty and ELCC directors, managers, and pedagogical leaders. We hope this resource will support you in your leadership role nurturing meaningful, sustained changes in quality outdoor play practice and policy for the groups of early childhood educators (ECEs) and other early learning professionals you serve.

Limitations

This is not a comprehensive or standalone resource about outdoor play but the knowledge-translation product of an evaluation report; it reflects only what was learned from the eight projects that were partners in the evaluation.

Leaders seeking primary professional learning resources can consult the Lawson Foundation's Recommended Resources to Support Outdoor Play, at <https://lawson.ca/op-resources/>.

Acknowledgements

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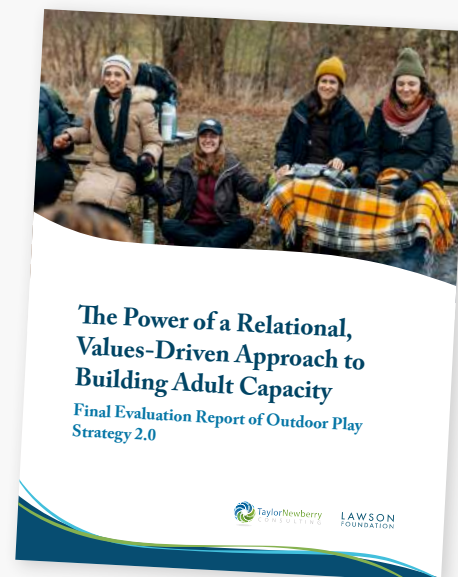


Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0

Eight projects across Canada participated in OPS 2.0 from 2021–2023. Their work focused on various changemaking aspects of the outdoor play ecosystem.¹ They targeted

- **ECE professional learning** – for post-secondary ECE faculty and students as well as in-service programs for certified educators.
- **Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) programs** – implementing in-service training, creating and using outdoor spaces, developing policies, and engaging parents
- **multi-sector influencers of outdoor play** – such as government policymakers and regulatory officers, landscape architects, nonprofit partners, etc.

To read the OPS 2.0 final evaluation report by Taylor Newberry Consulting and to learn more about the eight projects, please visit <https://lawson.ca/our-work/outdoor-play/second-phase/>.



¹ For a map of the outdoor play ecosystem, visit https://lawson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/LawsonFoundation_MediaCard_Ecosystem_V02.jpg.

The eight projects were:



Outdoor Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education: From Colleges to Communities

Lead: Okanagan College (Kelowna, BC), with partners at Bow Valley College (Alberta), Saskatchewan Polytechnic, and New Brunswick Community College



A Two-Eyed Seeing Approach to Land-based Play and Co-learning in ELCC Ecosystems

Lead: Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (Toronto, ON)



The Community Consultation Project (Solidifying the Pan-Canadian Infrastructure for Forest and Nature School Training)

Lead: Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) (Ottawa, ON)



Embedding Outdoor Play Training: A YMCA National Early Learning and Child Care Transformation

Lead: YMCA of Southwestern Ontario (London, ON), in partnership with YMCA of Greater Toronto, local YMCAs, and Curriculum Champions



PROMoting Early Childhood Outside (PRO-ECO): An Outdoor Play Intervention for Children Aged 3 to 5 Years in Early Learning and Child Care Programs

Lead: Outside Play Lab, University of British Columbia (UBC) (Vancouver, BC), in partnership with the YMCA of Greater Vancouver



Creating Optimal Outdoor Spaces for Infants and Toddlers in Early Learning and Child Care

Lead: Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie (RCPEM) (Saint-Hubert, QC)



Informing Early Learning and Child Care Legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador

Lead: Cloudberry Forest School in partnership with O'Brien Farm Foundation (St. John's, NL)



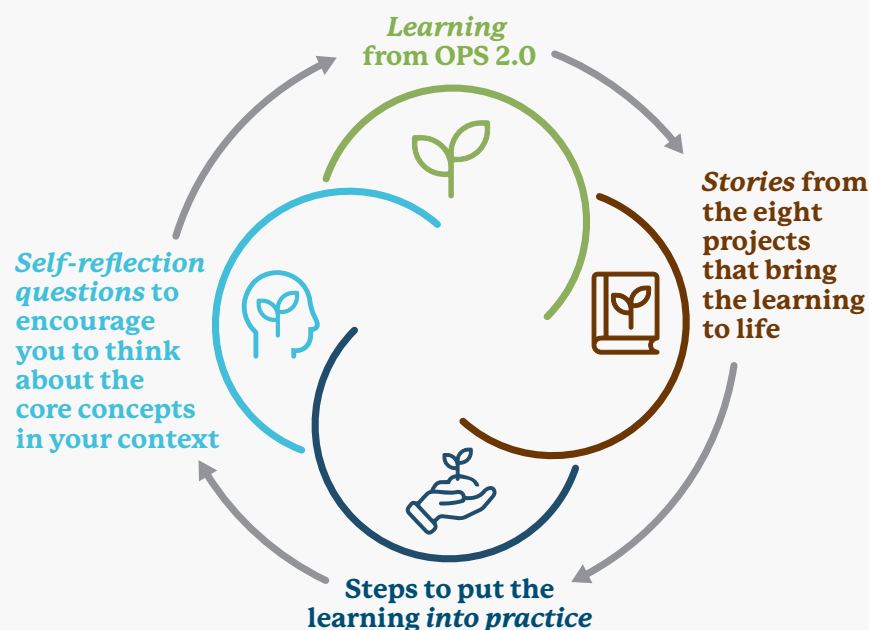
Outdoor Play Canada

Lead: Outdoor Play Canada in partnership with Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute (Ottawa, ON)

Using this Resource

In the pages that follow, we use the calls to action to unpack the core components of building capacity. We show you how a variety of successful OPS 2.0 strategies, insights, and examples support embedding this important work in practice at ELCC programs (ELCCs), at post-secondary institutions, in government policy, and in other spheres.

For each call to action, we share concepts and learnings organized into four interconnected types of information:



These pieces work together to illustrate important connections between big ideas and on-the-ground practice. Together, these pieces will support your journey in building adult capacity, ultimately planting the seeds for high quality outdoor play experiences for young children. (Note: All quotations in the stories are taken from the OPS 2.0 final evaluation report.)

Getting Started

Meet colleagues “where they’re at”

To change practice in ECE and ELCC programs, OPS 2.0 learning suggests you begin by seeking buy-in from staff and leadership for the importance of outdoor play. Then, negotiate a way of approaching the work that makes sense to your team and is actionable in your space. Leverage your team’s skills and interests and adapt your approach to your local context. It is important to be attuned to organizational culture and to take a gradual approach to creating change at the organizational level through sustained engagement, making space to meet different people “where they’re at” and providing continued support along the way.

Work with adults the way you work with children

Here’s an important OPS 2.0 reflection to guide your work: The relational, experiential approach that educators use with children outdoors also supports adults working with adults on outdoor play implementation and systems change. So take your team members outside, inspire their curiosity, and be responsive to their interests and needs. This approach underlies all of the suggested strategies in this resource.


Take your time

Finally, we recognize that getting started can be overwhelming. Take your time. Anticipate challenges and be responsive. Quality takes time.

Our Hope for You

It is our hope that the insights offered here will complement and deepen your professional learning and support you to build lasting change in your outdoor play work. Once you have digested this resource, please take the learning outside!


Call to Action 1: Lean into Values to Drive Quality and Change

 **Making time and space to discuss and reflect on values is key to achieving quality outcomes and has the power to nurture transformative change at all levels.**

- Thinking about what quality looks like is a good place to start when planning changes in your outdoor play practice.
- Exploring underlying values (including perspectives and worldviews) is an effective approach to developing a shared vision of quality within project communities.
- Dialogue and reflection about values equips leaders, in different roles (e.g., practitioners, faculty, policymakers) and from diverse perspectives and contexts, to explore and operationalize high-quality outdoor play experiences.

It can take time and effort for educators to understand and integrate the core constructs of outdoor pedagogy into practice (e.g., the importance of experiential learning; risk as inherent to play and necessary for learning;

Indigenous Land-based ways of knowing, being, and doing). Sometimes, trainers start by translating these constructs into checklists or rules or strategies. While this approach can be helpful,

 OPS 2.0 found that **learning is often deeper if learners are given the opportunity to reflect on how and why these constructs are important to them as individuals and as a team.** Then



these constructs come to be seen as values that can be expressed in different ways and in different settings, eventually becoming transformative supports to the translation of theory into quality practice.

Further, adult leaders can leverage their values-informed learning to take new kinds of action, not just within their personal practice but at organizational and systems levels.

Story: A Values-Driven Approach to Changing Policy

The Cloudberry Forest School in St. John's, NL, had extensive experience using experiential learning strategies when working with children, informed by shared values about the power of self-directed exploration in nature as a strategy for learning. When Cloudberry invited provincial policymakers and regulatory officers to visit their Forest and Nature School program in person, they encouraged these visitors to play and explore. They wanted government officials to find their own way of connecting to the forest space so that they might come to a personal understanding of the essence and value of Forest and Nature School. The intention was to inform the development of new regulations for the licensing of outdoor-based ELCC programs. Project evaluators heard from parents and educators about the importance of preserving “the magic” of Forest School in the process of regulating it. Project evaluators also undertook ethnographies with policymakers to understand the values and perspectives they brought to the policy discussion. Collectively these perspectives created a clear vision for what a high-quality regulated Forest and Nature School program could be.



Story: Decolonizing Outdoor Play by Centring Indigenous Voices and Land-based Learning

At Humber College and the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC), decolonization and ethical engagement with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, and connecting were core values and processes which profoundly (re-)shaped their work. Both projects focused on relationships and trust-building with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers and centring the Land and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in their work. CNAC's new approach to training centred the value of ethical relationships with Land and First Peoples, leaving room for facilitators and local Elders and Knowledge Keepers to express these values in their own ways.



In Practice

- Make time and space to discuss and reflect on your values—individually, as a team, and as an organization—by
 - fostering discussions about the importance of outdoor play and your vision of quality at the beginning of your process;
 - embracing and exploring diverse perspectives among your colleagues; and
 - considering how your particular context shapes your views and the goals for your work.
- Develop and document the shared values that will guide your journey.
- Apply a values-driven approach at whatever level(s) you are seeking to make change: individual, organizational, policy, systems.



Self-Reflection

- What values do I hold about outdoor play? What experiences and beliefs inform my values?

- How am I considering my relationship to Indigenous peoples and knowledge of the Land where I play?

- What do quality outdoor play experiences look, sound, and feel like to me? To the young children with whom I work?

Call to Action 2: Equip and Empower People at All Levels

The greatest lever for changing practice is to increase adult capacity to advance knowledge and to implement and support outdoor play. The most successful changes in OPS 2.0 resulted from a highly collaborative approach, engaging educators and leaders as partners in the change process. It is important to work with people at all stages of their ECE careers, as well as those in supportive roles (e.g., maintenance staff).



However, **building the capacity of individual educators was the main driver of change in practice.**



Story: Early Childhood Educators at the Centre of Changemaking

In a multi-pronged research intervention led by the Outside Play Lab at the University of British Columbia, researchers learned that individual educators were key to success in all aspects of changemaking: “ECEs are the trunk of the tree connecting the branches of the program. They connect to every part of this work with the children, families, policies, outdoor play areas, loose parts, and re-connection to the Land and plants. Their attitudes and approach to their practice deeply impacts all aspects of the children’s experiences and opportunities for outdoor play.”



Sustained connections to teachers, mentors, and coaches over time are particularly important for learners to move from an introductory understanding to a stage where they can translate this knowledge into practice.

To develop new knowledge, competencies, and relationships,




effective professional learning approaches for adults in OPS 2.0 often included a combination of the following key elements:



Teaching and Learning

- **Occur outside** and support learners in building strong connections to outdoor environments.
- **Use flexible, learner-centred, individualized approaches** to learning, co-creating curriculum, and evaluating progress.
- **Prioritize ongoing coaching and mentorship** on-site, embedded in local practice and tied to real-world practice, to support the transfer of knowledge and skills to practice.
- **Utilize formal and informal communities of practice** and other forms of peer support to encourage ongoing learning, reflection, and documentation.
- **Support early childhood educators** in becoming leaders and mentors within their own programs and in advocating for broader changes in practice.

 Effective adult teaching and learning approaches **occur outside and support learners in building strong connections to outdoor environments.**

In Practice

- Consider your local context and adapt teaching strategies to help adult learners develop a strong connection to the outdoor spaces where they work, whether they be proprietary outdoor spaces or public parks/Land.
- Engage, and develop reciprocal relationships, with local Indigenous partners to incorporate the unique history and context of the Lands on which professional learning will take place.



ECE students explore playing with snow and fabric at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Saskatoon campus.
Photo by Deidre Craig



Story: Adapting to Available Spaces for ECE Programs at Post-Secondary Institutions

Okanagan College supported three partner post-secondary institutions to integrate outdoor play into their ECE programs. Each partner institution found a different way to access outdoor spaces for teaching and learning.

- At Bow Valley College, ECE faculty took students to a public park in downtown Calgary, where ongoing work to restore native plants became the starting point for teaching about the use of garden spaces and environmental stewardship.
- At New Brunswick Community College, a new outdoor teaching space was built in an existing space on the Woodstock campus, leveraging collaboration among the departments of ECE, Carpentry, Plumbing, and Skilled Trades Techniques.
- At Saskatchewan Polytechnic, faculty taught students in public park spaces, which often allowed students to interact with other community members (such as gardeners in the park, teachers from the local school, or groups of children from an ELCC co-located at the institution) in new ways as part of their learning.



Story: Engaging with Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing

OPS 2.0 sought to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Many projects made efforts to collaborate with, or seek input from, Indigenous leaders and Knowledge Keepers by inviting them to visit classes, co-teach, or by creating advisory committees inclusive of Indigenous partners. These engagements enriched and diversified the experiences of teachers and learners and the resources created in the projects.

To help promote engagement of Indigenous partners, the Outside Play Lab at the University of British Columbia consulted an advisory committee that included Indigenous ECEs, parents, and Elders. To inform landscape architecture design work, they consulted a Métis herbalist. Information about traditional Indigenous uses of plants was also added to information binders for educators, and a list of age-appropriate books about local First Nations people was created.



Self-Reflection

- What kinds of relationships among people and outdoor spaces do I want to nurture?



Effective adult teaching and learning approaches use **flexible, learner-centred, individualized approaches to learning, co-creating curriculum, and evaluating progress.**



Story: Co-creating Curriculum with Facilitator

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada developed a new facilitator guide based on the idea that facilitators should facilitate the course just as practitioners facilitate Forest and Nature Schools for children. As such, it focuses on building relationships, starting conversations, and following an emergent, learner-informed process rather than a set list of concrete strategies or quality indicators. It emphasizes that the Land should be at the centre of the learning process. It includes guiding questions to start conversations. As facilitators put it:

With the new guide, we're in a better position to support the learners coming into the circle. At the same time, it has been helpful as facilitators to have back-pocket ideas like 'maybe it's time to move our bodies' or 'maybe we need to have a sit spot.' The guide gives us ways of reading group dynamics and checking in. The guide encourages us to hear from all voices when developing a particular relationship. Those pieces of how we do what we do are important to... creating the course, how the course evolves. This is a course like no other—it's not a delivery of a program or of knowledge, but very much a co-creation.



Story: Co-creating with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada and Humber College both developed curriculum and training programs grounded in decolonization and reciprocity. They worked closely with Indigenous Elders and other Knowledge Keepers to co-create their courses. Indigenous partners also co-deliver both training programs along with instructors who are trained in outdoor pedagogy. Both projects de-centred the written word, reducing or eliminating binders, handouts, and slide decks. Both courses now cover content not typically included in Euro-Western-centric outdoor play courses.



Story: Reflective Assessment Practices

In Land-Based Play and Co-Learning through Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing, an ECE course at Humber College, students created “journey sticks” that marked their journeys in the course through visual and oral assessments and allowed students to explain the nuances of how they applied course teachings to their own reflective practice and perspectives. Braiding both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, students also a) created story-maps that involved connecting to and decolonizing a place in the Arboretum and b) engaged in co-learning groups to develop outdoor experiences that nurture respectful and reciprocal relationships to and with the Land.

ECE students at Humber College create journey sticks to support assessment of their learning.
Photo by Louise Zimanyi



In Practice

- Include quiet reflection time outdoors as part of teaching strategies. Invite learners to be present and to learn from nature and the Land through reflective practice.
- Consider co-creating the curriculum with learners. Use action-oriented, individualized assessments.



Self-Reflection

- How can I adapt my ideas for supporting others in their professional learning to be responsive to my learners’ needs?



 Effective adult teaching and learning approaches **prioritize ongoing coaching and mentorship on-site, embedded in local practice and tied to real-world practice, to support the transfer of knowledge and skills to practice.**

Story: Multi-pronged Professional Learning

At the YMCA, professional learning about outdoor play across the national network happens through a multi-pronged train-the-trainer approach supported by online resources and responsive coaching strategies implemented at the local level. The standardized outdoor play curriculum is delivered first to pedagogical leaders (known as regional Curriculum Champions) who then deliver training to staff in individual ELCCs.

This is part of the initial onboarding process for new staff. A centralized website and periodic webinars provide content to support the process and to address staff turnover. Importantly, Curriculum Champions train and coach early learning professionals on-site and offer ongoing responsive coaching during program time. Outdoor pedagogy is discussed at staff meetings and embedded in the software used for sharing pedagogical documentation with families.

YMCA of Southwestern Ontario project leads provide experiential training outdoors in local ELCCs.
Photo courtesy of YMCA SWO



Story: Informal Coaching and Feedback


The Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie is an ELCC capacity building organization in Québec that worked to increase quality outdoor time for infant and toddler programs. Using a three-session training model, coupled with other visits for design and planning, or parent engagement, the pedagogical leader met regularly with ELCC staff and watched them work in their environments. As she put it: “It’s little by little. You plant the seed and get them on board.” It was only during the third session that some of the staff really “got it.” Building rapport over time enabled the leader to provide informal coaching and feedback, which was key to sustainable changes in practice.

In Practice

- Work with entire staff teams on-site in a flexible way. Meet regularly with staff to appreciate their pedagogy of place and to observe how they work in their environment. Build rapport over time to create a supportive environment for new learning and change.
- Drop by while staff are working with children to share tips or resources, demonstrate a technique, or reinforce content delivered during formal training sessions.
- Nurture permanent on-site champions, such as supervisors and pedagogical leads, to be mentors and coaches who support the learning of their colleagues on an ongoing basis.

Self-Reflection

- How will I foster learning and mentor colleagues?

 Effective adult teaching and learning approaches **use formal and informal communities of practice and other forms of peer support to encourage ongoing learning, reflection, and documentation.**

Story: Why Create a Community of Practice?


Communities of practice and similar strategies facilitate ongoing mutual support among educators and learners within and/or across organizations as they work to shift practice. Communities of practice create space for critical reflection on research evidence and enable collaborative strategizing and problem-solving as the work unfolds. Pedagogical documentation of the learning journey supports reflection and the sharing of learning. This kind of connected support builds confidence on an individual level and gives educators and learners ideas for addressing common barriers to outdoor pedagogy. Nurturing a community of practice requires leadership supported by human and financial resources.

In Practice

- Create a community of practice by
 - resourcing a leader with paid time to facilitate the community of practice;
 - providing training and creating a brief Terms of Reference for how the community of practice will function; and
 - fostering curiosity about outdoor play and drawing on research and practice to stimulate dialogue and new ways of thinking.
- If you don't have the time and resources for a formal community of practice, use less formal strategies such as periodic group discussions or a loosely structured working group.

Self-Reflection

- What elements or activities of a community of practice do I already engage in with colleagues? How might I build on these?

 Effective adult teaching and learning approaches **support early childhood educators in becoming leaders and mentors within their own programs and in advocating for broader changes in practice.**

Story: Learners Become Leaders

ECE faculty champions from Bow Valley College, New Brunswick Community College, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic came to see themselves as leaders in the field able to articulate major shifts in pedagogical thinking and professional identity. This was a result of belonging to, and recognizing ownership and professional presence in, the growing field of outdoor pedagogy. This growth has enabled them to confidently articulate and advocate for both applied research and putting theory into practice with their college leadership and communities.



Leaders from four post-secondary institutions of the Okanagan project.
Photo by Christine Alden

In Practice

Use participatory planning and encourage peer support among leaders to develop advocates within programs who can continue to promote outdoor play to educators, families, and decision makers on an ongoing basis. This might include opportunities for trainers or coaches from different ELCCs to connect with one another, or emerging leaders to share their reflections with families in a blog or newsletter.

Self-Reflection

- How can I empower leadership in others to promote outdoor play?

Call to Action 3: Strengthen Organizational Culture through Collaboration



Progress in building implementation capacity requires sustained engagement from the right people. It requires teams to **build relationships and buy-in to the process, develop a shared vision to guide the work, and then work in a deeply collaborative and localized way** to address three key implementation areas (in addition to professional learning shared in the previous section, Equip and Empower People at All Levels):

- Changing the design and use of outdoor play spaces (including natural space)
- Engaging families and caregivers as partners in promoting outdoor play
- Changing organizational policy and culture

Changing the design and use of outdoor play spaces (including natural space)

Outdoor play can take place in different outdoor spaces, including both fenced spaces connected to traditional buildings and spaces beyond the fence, such as public parks and wild landscapes.

Infrastructure and design impacts outdoor practice, as do natural features of nearby nature.



Story: Why Training and Consultation Should Come First

Barriers to changing physical spaces at YMCA ELCCs included cost, time required, adapting to local spaces, and staff skills. At one YMCA ELCC, for example, the local staff team began to make physical changes to the site before their staff had received training from the YMCA team and without a comprehensive infrastructure plan in place. They had replaced artificial grass with real grass but struggled to keep the space dry during the wet season due to water accumulating on uneven surfaces. As a result, many of the children got wet while playing outside. Since the site does not have a drying machine, sometimes children were unable to return outdoors after their initial outdoor play cycle in the morning. Once they had participated in training, the local team learned new tips for acquiring and using appropriate outdoor clothing (e.g., full-body waterproof suits known as Muddy Buddies and rubber boots). After experiences like this one, the project team started encouraging YMCA sites to move slowly with big physical changes to their space and to get feedback from families and staff first.



Story: Bringing Together Multiple Partners to Change Outdoor Spaces

The Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie in Québec created a new paradigm for supporting infants and toddlers outdoors. Underpinned by values-driven training and ongoing mentoring for staff, the project fostered close collaboration among supervisors and managers at ELCCs, furniture builders, architects, and local evaluators. All were actively involved in the process of designing the new spaces to ensure that

all elements of the project were adapted to local geography, to the design of the building, and to the particular educators, families, and children involved. Technical experts such as architects and furniture builders were chosen partly for their ability to work closely with staff on-site at ELCCs to develop plans, and these relationships evolved considerably over time. The construction of covered terraces, outdoor courtyards and new purpose-built furniture for infants and toddlers enables eating, sleeping, and toileting outdoors in addition to outdoor play. However, each step of the process took longer than expected, from updating the architect's plans following the workshops with the educators through to finding contractors willing to do this out-of-the-ordinary work and adhering to regulations from multiple levels of government.

“Experimentation has shown that there needs to be a shared vision and good synergy between the various stakeholders involved: [ELCC] teams, architects, contractors, ministry, municipalities, etc. As soon as one party encounters an obstacle, all the others are affected. If a day-care centre wishes to produce layout plans, they must be close to the field: both practical for the day-care centre teams and realistic for the contractors to carry out the work. Otherwise, it adds steps, costs and deadlines that can be detrimental to the motivation of the educators.”

Story: Using Nearby Natural Spaces

At Humber College, a post-secondary course is delivered throughout the adjacent Arboretum, a 250-acre natural ecosystem of old-growth forests, meadows, ponds, and Gaabekananag Ziibi—“the place of the flat rocks” in Anishinaabemowin, also known as the Humber River. Located on the traditional and treaty Lands of the



RCPEM project lead and CPE staff revise designs for an outdoor space for infants and toddlers. Photo by Robert Cornelier

Mississaugas of the Credit, in what is known as Adoobiigok—“Place of the Alders” in the Michi Saagiig language—the space provides opportunities to connect learners to flora and fauna that can be also be found throughout the city of Tkaronto/Toronto, or in other contexts.

The Cloudberry Forest School is situated on the O’Brien Farm, a historic site and working farm in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The children and educators have a central base camp for programming in the forest, and they enjoy the freedom to explore the meadows, fields and streams of the farm, visit the goats, and interact with local farming activities.



In Practice

- Work with entire staff teams as well as families, government regulatory officers, maintenance staff, and landlords to plan and create engaging spaces and buy-in. Start with training and consultation before making changes.
- Be aware of regulatory requirements and work with partners around issues of interpretation. Anticipate delays along the way.
- Design outdoor spaces that are site-specific and unique, taking into account how the space will be used, the climate, and local contextual factors like shade, windbreaks, and sounds from highways.
- Include a mix of permanent features (e.g., climbers) and moveable features (e.g., large and small loose parts).
- Create spaces that make it easy for staff to use them well (e.g., plants that are easy to care for, spaces that are designed to evolve).
- Create maintenance plans and agreements with landlords or facilities managers. Build and sustain a staff team which can make good use of those spaces over time.
- Ground all efforts in education, support, and opportunities for deep reflection on the values that drive the work.




Self-Reflection

- Who do I need to bring together to successfully develop an outdoor space that reflects our team's values and vision?

- How can I nurture sustained staff use of the outdoor space?

- What nearby nature can I access to diversify children's experiences outdoors?

Engaging families and caregivers as partners in promoting outdoor play

 **Families and caregivers must be engaged as partners in getting their children outdoors** because of their crucial role in supporting outdoor play in ELCCs.

In Practice

- Engage and educate families and caregivers about the benefits of outdoor play. Create opportunities for them to explore how the values of outdoor pedagogy connect to their personal values, their culture, or their relationship to outdoor spaces.
- Address any concerns about safety and risk and explain how staff support children in risky play. Make expectations (about clothing, getting dirty, etc.) clear, and make accommodations for families with limited resources.
- Model outdoor play as a component of quality ELCC by greeting families outside at the beginning and end of the day.
- Use informal and efficient ways of engaging families on an ongoing basis through chats at drop-off or pick-up, sharing pedagogical documentation, information-sharing apps and posters.
- Host open house days and take parents/caregivers to play spaces so they can engage with their children.



Self-Reflection

- How can I excite families and caregivers about supporting outdoor play?



Recommended Resources to Share with Families and Caregivers

- **Outdoor Play: Hard-wired for nature!**¹ is a parents' guide to outdoor play from the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development.
- **Go Play Outside!**² has an interactive tool for parents and caregivers from the Outside Play Lab at the University of British Columbia.
- **Thrive Outside**³ has a collection of resources for parents from the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada.

1 Available from https://mcusercontent.com/16c671e5e89c0b85361546745/files/880f3340-f897-c8e5-bbd7-f1110b75b9f2/Outdoor_Play_Info.pdf.

2 Available from <https://www.outsideplay.org/tool-microsites/parent-tool>.

3 Available from <https://childnature.ca/parent/>.

Changing organizational policy and culture

Using a relational, values-driven approach leads to new ideas about how to change policies and practices. **Work is most successful when the different dimensions of change in practice are approached as expressions of the shared values of the team working in that program.** In other words, focus on changing organizational culture.



Story: From Restrictive Policy to Supportive Play Declaration

The Outside Play Lab at the University of British Columbia worked closely with leadership at the YMCA of Greater Vancouver and staff at participating programs, so that their input could help shape a new outdoor play policy to guide educators. They started by defining their values; then they worked on policies. However, to do so, ELCC staff had to overcome perceived barriers. For example, at one ELCC, staff felt children could not climb in a small tree on the property because if a child needed assistance, the staff would need to call the fire department. After making time for discussion and a review of organizational guidelines, the policy document evolved into a statement on goals and principles that drive the participating sites' commitment to outdoor play. While many organizational policies at ELCCs typically limit or restrict what staff can do, this new policy focused on what staff are encouraged to do. This paradigm shift resulted in the creation of a “play declaration,” in the form of a poster, to support educators and to share with parents about how their children are playing outside.



Educators and children engaged in outdoor play at New Brunswick Community College.
Photo by Rebecca Derrah



In Practice

- Understand your current context and take the time to reflect on values and build buy-in to the change process.
- Find ways to demonstrate to the team that the organization sees outdoor play as a priority. Develop a new vision and strategic plan that incorporates an ongoing commitment to outdoor play. Develop and revisit policies that reflect that commitment and your values.
- With the support of managers and in coordination with other team members, organize daily routines to facilitate more outdoor time and taking children outside in more flexible ways.
- Embed coaches who can work with staff on an ongoing basis to connect the dots when applying new training and continually develop new ideas about how to animate outdoor spaces.


Self-Reflection

- What policies can I develop to reflect and support our values and vision for outdoor play?




Children in ELCC explore with magnifying glasses. Photo by Deidre Craig

Call to Action 4: Nurture an Ecosystem Approach for Long-Term Impact

 **Changemaking requires identifying and bringing together partners from different parts of the outdoor play ecosystem in your context.** These partners are likely to include

- professionals working in ELCCs;
- families and caregivers;
- post-secondary researchers, faculty, and ECE students on practicum placements;
- government policymakers and regulatory officers;
- Indigenous Knowledge Keepers;
- leaders from partner organizations in the broader non-profit sector;
- media;
- landscape architects and maintenance companies;
- construction companies; and
- private-sector leaders.

Start thinking of these people as potential partners or supporters to discover new and unexpected opportunities to advance outdoor

 play. **Cross-sectoral collaboration is essential to increasing implementation capacity, but it takes time and requires exploring diverse points of view and building a shared vision.**



Story: Building Meaningful Relationships Over Time

Outdoor Play Canada, a pan-Canadian network devoted to advancing outdoor play, focused on building sustained relationships with individuals and organizations in support of the outdoor play sector. By identifying and reaching out to colleagues, new connections were established and built upon. Often, initial contact was made simply to learn about each other's work and had no specific follow-up action, but the conversation built awareness of what was happening in the sector and gave insight into how to support each other's work. Over time and through sustained outreach, this strategy helped build relationships and sometimes led to collaborations further down the line.

The OPC board of directors represents diverse sectors and organizations from across Canada. *Photo courtesy of OPC*



In Practice

- Consider your place in the ecosystem and all of your potential partners and supporters. Identify and bring together the members of your ecosystem. Consider where there are gaps and how to make new connections.
- Take the time to develop quality relationships with partners based on the exploration of values and the development of trust and a shared vision.

Self-Reflection

- Who might I be overlooking as potential partners?

- How can I engage new partners?

Final Words

This resource has shared four calls to action and key insights about building adult capacity to support outdoor play in ELCCs, post-secondary institutions, government policy, and other spheres. We wish you the very best as you take this work outside and forward in your work!



A boy discovers a snail.
Photo courtesy of Cloudberry
Forest School



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Page 5: Centring joy and relationship, learning with the Land. *Photo by Paige Deasley*

Page 7: ECE student practices whittling a stick at New Brunswick Community College, Woodstock campus. *Photo by Rebecca Derrah*

Page 14: RCPem project lead, ELCC staff, space designer, and landscape architect discuss plans for new outdoor space. *Photo by Robert Cornelier*

Page 20: The OPS 2.0 cohort visits the Medicine Teaching Garden at Humber College in 2022. *Photo by Andrew Taylor*