

A Compilation Table of Resources on Quality in Outdoor and Land-based Early Childhood Education Programs

Outdoor and land based early learning and childcare (ELCC) programs are growing rapidly in Canada and internationally, driven by increasing recognition of the benefits of outdoor play, place-based learning, and connection to land and nature for children's overall health and development. **Compared to indoor spaces, outdoor spaces can vary substantially, and therefore the quality of the space, and the experience of play and learning outdoors, can in turn vary substantially.**

Questions of quality are central to discussions about regulation and access to subsidy, including the Canada-wide Early Learning and Childcare System (CWELCC), which aims to provide \$10/day childcare for children under 6 years old. Policymakers and regulators often question how quality can be assured in outdoor and land-based programs, particularly when conventional indoor indicators and standards do not easily translate to outdoor contexts. **How to measure, monitor, and uphold the quality of outdoor play and learning across Canada is an ongoing conversation and evolving practice.**

This table was developed by the Quality Subcommittee of [the Canadian Centre for Outdoor Play's National Panel on Regulating Outdoor and Land Based ECE](#) to bring together key resources that illustrate how quality has been framed across different jurisdictions, systems, and professional contexts. The resources included here reflect a range of approaches, including regulatory standards, inspection and quality improvement frameworks, professional recognition systems, evaluation studies, and pedagogy-driven guides. While these resources emerge from different legislative and cultural contexts, they reveal important commonalities in values, principles, and conditions that support high quality outdoor and land-based programs.

Rather than proposing a single definition of quality, this compilation is intended to support dialogue and shared understanding. Across the resources, quality is consistently framed as multidimensional, relational, and context responsive, shaped by pedagogy, educator judgement and training, environments, health and safety practices, leadership, and administrative conditions. Importantly, many of these resources move beyond checklist-based compliance models, emphasizing reflective practice, continuous improvement, and value-informed decision making.

Do you know of resources that could be added? Email us: info@outdoorplaycanada.ca

Resource / Jurisdiction	Intended Audience	What It Is	How Quality Is Framed	How It Is Used (Practice / Policy / Regulation)	For more information
Lawson Foundation – Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0 Final Evaluation (Canada, 2025)	Policymakers, funders, system leaders, researchers	Evaluation report synthesizing cross-sector initiatives to embed outdoor play in ELCC systems	Values-driven, relational, multidimensional, context-dependent. Quality emerges from shared values (agency, experiential learning, risk as inherent to play). Moves away from fixed indicators toward reflective dialogue.	Strategic systems-level reference for policy development, advocacy, and sector transformation. Supports shared understanding of quality across jurisdictions.	Access the full report here.
Cloudberry Forest School – Informing the Road to Regulation (Canada, 2024)	Policymakers, regulators, practitioners	Evaluation of a forest school pilot project informing licensing conversations in Newfoundland & Labrador	Multidimensional and context-responsive. Organized across five domains: pedagogy, educators, health & safety, environment, administration. Balances pedagogy with structural conditions.	Regulatory review tool and conceptual framework to guide licensing outdoor ELCC within provincial systems.	the report here.
Forest School Canada – Head, Heart, Hands Guide (Canada, 2014)	Educators, forest school practitioners, program leaders	Practice-oriented pedagogical guide articulating 12 principles of forest and nature school	Ethos- and principles-driven. Does not use the term “quality” explicitly. Quality emerges through educator judgement, reflective practice, and responsiveness to land and learners.	Professional learning, program planning, and pedagogical grounding. Flexible adaptation to local contexts.	the full guide, click here.
Burns et al. (2024) – Understanding & Defining Quality in ECEC Outdoor Environments (Canada)	Researchers, policymakers, designers, educators	Participatory academic study comparing stakeholder perspectives (including children) on outdoor space quality	Relational and experiential. Quality emerges from interaction between space, play opportunities, relationships, and agency. Highlights children's voices.	Research-informed framework for inclusive policy, design, and participatory evaluation processes.	the full article here
Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families – Chapter 110-302 WAC (USA, 2022)	Regulators, licensing bodies, outdoor preschool providers	Legal licensing standards for outdoor nature-based child care	Prescriptive and standards-based. Explicit regulatory requirements adapted to outdoor contexts (ratios, supervision, safety, qualifications).	Licensing and compliance tool. Integrates outdoor programs into mainstream regulatory systems and QRIS.	Washington State's prescriptive standards, click here
Forest School Association – Full Principles & Criteria (UK)	Forest School practitioners, trainers, organizations	Professional recognition framework grounded in 6 core principles	Ethos-driven and principle-based. Quality occurs when all six principles (long-term, nature, risk, holistic learning, leadership, community) operate together.	Basis for UK Forest School recognition and reflective self-assessment. Professional governance model.	Forest School Principles, click here
Education Scotland & Care Inspectorate – Quality Improvement Framework (Scotland, 2018)	Inspectors, ELCC providers, system leaders	National inspection and self-evaluation framework for ELCC (including outdoor learning)	Continuous improvement & professional judgement. Quality tied to child outcomes (wellbeing, agency, inclusion). Risk-benefit thinking embedded.	Official inspection tool + self-evaluation framework. Collaborative improvement model rather than compliance-only.	Scotland Framework here.
Toronto Children’s Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement (OE-AQI) 2025	Educators, operators and communities	The city of Toronto's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) for	Dynamic, inclusive and culturally grounded. Quality is defined through clear expectations and developed through	A structured self-assessment and continuous quality improvement tool. Reflection	Access the full document here.

Resource / Jurisdiction

Intended Audience

What It Is

How Quality Is Framed

How It Is Used (Practice / Policy / Regulation)

For more information

outdoor early learning and child care environments

ongoing reflection, assessment, and intentional improvement to support holistic early learning.

prompts specifically focused on outdoor environments.