

Outdoor Spaces Report

An Evaluation of Forest Explorers' Outdoor Environments

Introduction

After observing the four outdoor spaces in use at Andrew Fleck Children's Services Forest Explorers program, I have concluded that each of the spaces provide children with opportunities for open-ended play, appropriate risk-taking, and inclusive participation through a combination of natural materials, loose parts, sheltered areas, and child-directed play experiences. There have also been significant changes and improvements to the spaces since the previous evaluation was conducted last summer.

Guided by the 7Cs Framework, this report re-evaluating the outdoor play spaces at Forest Explorers was informed by observations and interactions with children engaged in the spaces, and conversations with educators at the Forest Explorers program.



Fig. 1 – Ducks space

Ducks

Infant



Fig. 2 – Ducks space

Ducks

Infant

Since the previous evaluation, several changes have been made to the Ducks' outdoor space to support children's independence, exploration, and engagement. The most apparent change is that the space has been expanded, providing children with the chance to explore within a larger area. Additional swings and hammocks have also been introduced and positioned lower to the ground, enabling children to freely enter and exit them independently.

Fig. 3 – Ducks space



Ducks

Infant

There is a variety of natural, loose parts available to children in the Ducks' outdoor space, including sticks, rocks, planks, and logs. These materials can be used in different ways, providing opportunities for open-ended play, sensory exploration, and age-appropriate risk-taking. The hammock and slide also provide opportunities for children to assess and manage risk in appropriate ways.

One particularly interesting feature within the Ducks' space is a board that contains different locks, latches, and switches, allowing children to develop their fine motor skills with unique tools and items.



Fig. 4 – Ducks space



Fig. 5 – Ducks space

Overall, the Ducks' team has provided infants with plenty of opportunities to explore, experiment, and engage with the natural environment around them.

Foxes

Toddler

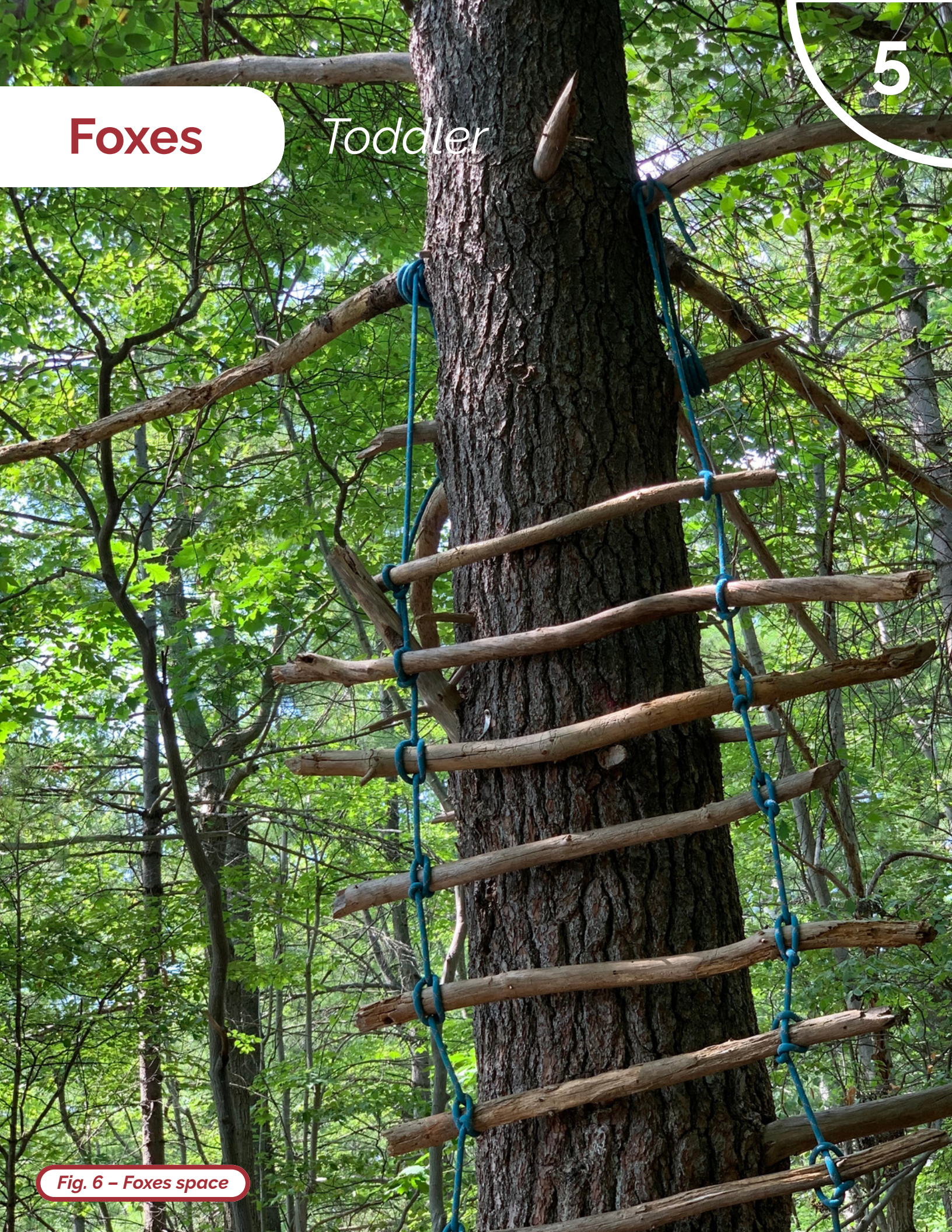


Fig. 6 – Foxes space

Foxes

Toddler

The range of loose parts and natural materials within the Foxes' outdoor space is a major strength; their outdoor environment includes sticks, rocks, planks, logs, and so much more. The space also includes a small kitchen area, complete with utensils, bowls, pans, and other essentials.



Fig. 7 – Foxes space

Authentic wheelbarrows are also included in the Foxes' space, further supporting open-ended play, problem-solving, and collaboration as children transport, build, and create within the space.



Fig. 8 – Foxes space

Foxes

Toddler

The Foxes' outdoor space has also continued to evolve since the previous evaluation. Similar to the Ducks, the most notable change is the physical expansion of the space. The additional space provides children with greater freedom to navigate the environment and creates more opportunities for gross motor movement, exploration, and discovery.

Another change to the space is the addition of slacklines; in addition to the rope ladder and climbing skids, slacklines create more opportunities to engage in physical challenges that help children develop balance, coordination, strength, and confidence.

Overall, the Foxes' team has provided toddlers with a balance of challenge, exploration, and child-directed play that encourages active engagement with the environment.



Fig. 9 – Foxes space

Frogs

Preschool



Fig. 10 – Frogs space

Frogs

Preschool

The Frogs' outdoor space continues to provide children with a wide range of opportunities for exploration, creativity, and risk-taking. One notable addition since the previous evaluation is the rain barrel, which creates new opportunities for sensory exploration and child-led play involving water.

The Frogs' space also continues to provide opportunities for challenge through features such as the slacklines, hammocks, and an area for tree climbing.

Similar to the Ducks' and Foxes' spaces, the environment contains a variety of natural loose parts, tools, and materials that can be used in many different ways. An educator from the Frogs group commented on the fact that different children and groups will use the same materials in different ways.

For example, planks and logs are commonly used by the Frogs for construction play, but commonly used by the Owls for climbing. This reflection highlighted the importance of having flexible, open-ended materials in the outdoor environment.



Fig. 11 – Frogs space

Frogs

Preschool

The most striking addition to the Frogs' environment is a visual communication board; this supports inclusive participation by providing children with another way to express themselves and communicate with others within the space.

Fig. 12 – Frogs space



Overall, the Frogs' team has provided preschool children with unique opportunities for play, risk-taking, and exploration of their interests.

Owls

Preschool



Fig. 13 – Owls space

Owls

Preschool

Several additions have been made to the Owls' outdoor space since the previous evaluation. The introduction of a slackline provides children with the additional opportunities to develop balance, coordination, and confidence while engaging in appropriate risk-taking.

Similar to the Frogs' space, the Owls' environment contains a visual communication board, providing children with other ways to communicate and express themselves.

The inclusion of natural, loose materials is prevalent in the Owls' space as well. Sticks, rocks, planks, logs, crates, and benches can all be used in a variety of ways, allowing children to lead their own play experiences and experiment with the materials.

Overall, the Owls' team has provided preschool children with a variety of materials, tools, and other features to explore, supporting meaningful engagement with the outdoor environment.

Fig. 14 – Owls space



Conclusion

Through the lens of the seven Cs, it is evident that each of these spaces demonstrates a strong alignment with the framework.

Across the four spaces, children benefit from environments that are rich in character and context by reflecting and connecting to their natural surroundings. The open-ended materials, tools, and natural features of these spaces support connectivity and chance, and the evolution of these spaces and their materials between reports reflects change. Features such as visual communication supports, clear play spaces, and recognizable gathering areas contribute to the spaces' clarity, while climbing opportunities, slacklines, hammocks, and tools provide appropriate levels of challenge. Perhaps the most defining trait that all of the outdoor spaces share is a fire pit: a place for gathering that supports each of the seven Cs.

Together, these elements create outdoor environments that support children's development and play experiences, ensuring that children of all abilities can engage meaningfully in the outdoor environment.



Fig. 15 – Frogs space