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Promising Practices for Children's Unstructured Play: *Emerging Programs, Initiatives, and Policies across Canada*



Photo credit: Rebecca Seiling, 2015

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Throughout Canada, programs have been developed and implemented that support children's access to unstructured play. These programs address issues ranging from the design of play spaces, to developing local policies and programs supporting access to unstructured play. This section provides a series of examples that were self-identified as promising practices by the sponsoring organization.

Promising Practices:

"A Promising Practice is defined as an intervention, program, service, or strategy that shows potential (or "promise") for developing into a best practice. Promising practices are often in the earlier stages of implementation, and as such, do not show the high level of impact, adaptability, and quality of evidence as best practices. However, their potential is based on a strong theoretical underpinning to the intervention."

Public Health Agency of Canada

Available at: <http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/interventions/search-interventions/>.

In Canada, there are increasingly limited opportunities for children to engage in play that is self-directed, free, and natural. It is important to develop new and emergent interventions and programs that support unstructured child-led play so that the children can benefit from their physical, mental, and social development opportunities. The following programs have self-identified as promising practices.

Design:

- 7 C's to Designing Play Spaces, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia
- Risk Reframing Tool, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia
- Jooay App, McGill University: PLAY Project, Montréal, Québec

Policy:

Community

- The Calgary Play Charter, City of Calgary, Calgary Alberta
- Healthy, Outdoor Playspaces for Children, Peterborough Public Health, Peterborough, Ontario
- PlayVenture, City of London, London, Ontario

Schools

- The Recess Project, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario
- New Recess Rules Policy, Horace Allen School, Coleman, Alberta

Program:

Community

- Nurturing Development of Active Play, Regroupement des centres de la petite enfance de la Montérégie, Saint-Hubert, Québec
- Outdoor Play in the Early Years, Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture, and Heritage, Halifax, Nova Scotia
- Open Streets Toronto, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario
- Kentville Plays Initiatives, City of Kentville, Kentville, Nova Scotia
- Wild Child Outdoor Play Group, Childreach London, London, Ontario
- Dangerous Camps for Kids, Humanist Risk Management Consultants, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories
- Bright Start Program, Inkster Parent Child Coalition, Winnipeg, Manitoba
- CNC ChildMinding Support Centre, Rexdale Women's Centre, Toronto, Ontario
- South Region Parents as Teachers, Parents as Teachers Affiliate, South Lethbridge, Alberta
- StreetPLAY and POP-UP Adventure Playgrounds, Earth Day Canada, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario
- Le lion et la souris (The Lion and The Mouse), Adventure Play Programs, Montréal, Québec

Schools

- Forest and Nature School, Child and Nature Alliance/Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Ottawa, Ontario
- Loose Parts Adventure Playground, Meadowlands Public School, Ottawa, Ontario
- Cariboo Chilcotin Outdoor Classrooms, School District No. 27, William's Lake, British Columbia
- Discovery School, Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools, Red Deer, Alberta
- Random Acts of Play, Brant County Health Unit, Brantford, Ontario
- Outdoor Play and Learning, Earth Day Canada, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Design

7 C's To Designing Play Spaces, Vancouver British Columbia

The 7 C's are a play space design approach that incorporates character, context, connectivity, change, chance, clarity, and challenge into the built environment. The approach was developed with the vision that encouraging children to engage with natural materials will benefit well-being.

Researchers have used the 7 C's play space design criteria to examine the effects of increased opportunities for nature and risky play in the outdoor play environments of two childcare centres using a repeated measures mixed methods design. They measured changes in play, social behaviour, psychological well-being, and physical activity in 45 children aged 2-5. While most study principles assess the presence or absence of features, the 7 C's are unique in assessing the quality of the design.

Findings

- Improved socialization
- Improved problem-solving
- Improved focus
- Improved self-regulation
- Greater creativity
- Decreases in depressed affect
- Greater play with natural materials
- Increased independent play
- Increased prosocial behavior
- Reduced antisocial behavior
- Increased physical activity
- Improved self-confidence
- Reduced stress
- Reduced boredom
- Fewer injury experiences

Risk-Reframing Tool, Vancouver, British Columbia

The goal of the risk-reframing tool is to provide an easily accessible, evidence-based measure to reshape parental attitudes towards risk. The tool is a two-hour, in-person group session in which parents and educators are led through a series of reflection points designed to change attitudes and behaviours related to children's outdoor play.

It was developed to decrease anxiety-led caregiving, and misconceptions of risk being inherently negative and without benefit. It is delivered to parents under the belief that societal attitudes about injury and harm for children shape parental perspectives and fears of their children's outdoor risky play activities. There is also a digital version of the tool available at: www.OutsidePlay.ca. The workshop version of the tool provides various materials on the goals that are accessible through PowerPoint, a facilitator and participant manual.

Findings

The tool addresses and reframes parents' perspectives on risk. It is easily suited to ongoing curriculums, while the digital format allows accessibility and smooth dissemination for those wishing to use it. Parents can learn more about the benefits of children's risky play, which may shift parental perspectives on risk towards one of having both benefits and costs. The tool can play a role in shaping parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play.

Links

Brussoni, M., Ishikawa, T., Han, C., Pike, I., Bundy, A., Faulkner, G., & Mâsse, L. C., (2018). Go Play Outside! Effects of a risk-reframing tool on mothers' tolerance for, and parenting practices associated with, children's risky play: study protocol for a randomized controlled trial. *Trials*, 19(1), 173.

The image displays three screenshots from the digital risk-reframing tool. The top screenshot shows a grid of six small images depicting children in various outdoor play settings, with the heading "CHAPTER 1 - THINK OF A CHILD" and introductory text. The middle screenshot features a woman's face in a video player interface, with the heading "CHAPTER 2 - WHAT WOULD YOU DO?" and text about role-playing. The bottom screenshot shows a printed "MY OUTSIDE PLAY JOURNEY & ACTION PLAN" worksheet with various sections for reflection and planning, with the heading "CHAPTER 3 - CREATING YOUR ACTION PLAN" and text about personalized plans.

Jooay App, Montréal, Québec

The Jooay App helps parents, youth and other users find leisure and community activities close to where they live for children and youth with disabilities aged 0-21 years old. The App allows the user to rate and comment on activities, create a community, and build networks around adapted and inclusive leisure opportunities. The goal is to provide an accurate, comprehensive list of activities in all provinces, and have users engaged in the Jooay community to review activities and support each other. In the process, the aim is to identify optimal dissemination strategies about health information through social network analysis, and conduct research about how to increase participation by providing information through mobile-health solutions. A final goal is to identify resource gaps across regions to provide evidence-based information to policy-makers.

The Jooay App (www.jooay.com) was launched in Spring 2015 in response to research showing that the lack of access to information about inclusive leisure activities was a major barrier to participation for children with disabilities and their families. The app is now available for iPhone, Android, and the web, and currently lists over 1,500 adapted leisure activities in all 10 Canadian provinces, and has recently been implemented in Australia.

Findings

In the last year, the number of activities on the Jooay App has doubled and the number of registered users increased to over 2,000. Parents of children with disabilities find new leisure opportunities through the App for their children. Clinicians (occupational, physical, and recreational therapists), as well as physical educators and community programs can help families identify the best activities for their clients and students. The base number of users is growing, and more than 50% of users come back to the App regularly. Parents in the online community have stated that it is a practical solution that provides great ideas and supportive comments to adapted leisure, sports, and other resources in general.

Links

More about Jooay: www.jooay.com @JooayApp jooay@childhooddisability.ca

Policy - Community

Calgary Play Charter, City of Calgary, Calgary

Calgary's Play Charter is intended to be a unifying document outlining why the co-signatories believe play is important and how, in working together, they can create a community that supports and encourages comprehensive play opportunities for all Calgary children. The Charter was developed by a group of organizations under the banner of YYC Plays whose mission was to increase understanding, value, importance and participation in, for and about play. The Charter was developed as a legacy component from the 2017 International Play Association (IPA) Triennial World Conference that was hosted by the City of Calgary. At IPA 2017 the Charter was signed by 36 organizations. The signatories committed to undertaking "three big things for play" in the following year and to report on their success in 2018.

In developing the document, YYC Plays used a collective impact approach to identify seven high leverage activities to focus their collective efforts, including:

- Advocacy and promotion
- Communication and marketing
- Partnerships
- Play spaces
- Policy and practice
- Programs
- Training

Findings

In September 2018 the Play Charter was re-signed by the original 36 signatories, and welcomed more organizations to this exciting work. The Collective Impact Report for the Charter can be found at: <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/2018/11/22/calgary-play-charter-collective-impact-2018/>.

Links

Calgary Play Charter

<http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/Recreation/Pages/Research-and-development/Calgary-Play-Charter.aspx>.

Play in the City of Calgary

<http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/Parks/Pages/Locations/Adventure-Playgrounds.aspx?redirect=/play>.

Healthy Outdoor Playspaces for Children, Peterborough, Ontario

Peterborough Public Health began this initiative when the injury prevention program decided to investigate why that area had playground injury rates nearly twice the provincial average. A brief literature review revealed that proper maintenance of playground equipment; adequate fall surfacing; age-appropriate play; and supervision were key components in reducing injuries. This information was reviewed by a committee of municipal parks and recreation representatives and a decision was made to work together to improve playgrounds. A playground safety checklist was developed with partnered groups. The partner groups offer training on playground safety and all nine municipalities in Peterborough now have trained playground inspectors.

Through these consultations, a distinction was made between safe playgrounds and healthy outdoor play experiences. This process led to the development of an extensive literature review concerning children's outdoor play, including: types of outdoor play spaces (including natural play spaces); risk and play; injuries and playground safety; risk-benefit analysis; and the built environment. An early draft of the report was reviewed with a Technical Advisory Committee made up of representatives from the education sector (principal, teacher, and an early learning educator), the municipal sector (recreation, planning, public works, and accessibility) and the community sector (environmental advocates and landscape architect). Their feedback is leading to the development of a position statement from public health that will be used by various sectors in setting and/or justifying their own policies and practices to improve access to unstructured play.

Links

Evidence Review

<https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2017-08-31-Outdoor-Playspaces-Evidence-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>.

PowerPoint Presentation

<https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Healthy-Outdoor-Playspaces-for-Children-evening.pdf>.

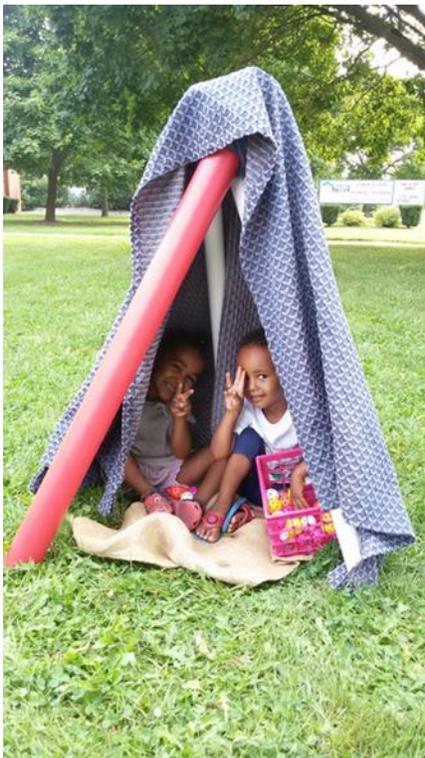
PlayVenture, London, Ontario

PlayVenture is a collaboration of community agencies in London, Ontario, that are working towards improving access to free public play opportunities for children. The collaboration provides a platform from which to engage in conversation about outdoor, natural, loose-parts, risky, and unstructured play with children, educators, and parents. The goal is to promote imaginative and manageable risky play, and provide a play alternative to screen- and sedentary-related activities.

A pop-up playground structure supports children's adventure-based learning and increases children's motivation to be physically active outdoors. A large activity kit containing recycled and new loose parts is available for use by community members. Workshops and training are available for community organizations to support their interest and involvement in the project. The community is supportive of the initiative and many organizations help promote it.

Findings

The collaborative partnership was formed in February 2017. Originally it was a committee of community members who sponsored a London, Ontario stop on the summer 2017 Canadian tour of the Pop-Up Adventure Play Group from the United Kingdom. The event was enjoyed by 1,000 children, and a professional learning session was attended by 80 local educational and recreational professionals. PlayVenture was a continuation of this success and has a goal to further promote, support, and provide professional learning for self-directed and adventurous play in the City of London.



Policy – Schools

The Recess Project, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario

The Recess Project is an action research project hosted by Ryerson University. The objective is to study, change, and improve the recess setting. In partnership with Physical and Health Education Canada, organizers work with national partners to leverage system level changes in the way Canadian schools approach recess.

A typical recess in a Canadian school is often barren, crowded, minimally staffed, and characterized by negative social behaviours such as bullying, exclusion, and marginalization. The problem is rooted in the conventional, low-priority approach to recess – as it is considered “extra-curricular” and often overlooked in school improvement efforts. Organizers of The Recess Project provide schools with a well-trained coordinator/master planner for each recess for the entire school year. Their role is to provide children with a continuum of meaningful opportunities in an inclusive and accepting climate. Coordinators work with the children to organize the playground, provide activities, manage equipment, train and supervise Junior Recess Leaders, and liaise with staff and community members. Most importantly, they work to develop settings that mitigate the risks of bullying and social harm.

Findings

Children are more engaged, happier, safer, and physically active. Victimization, loneliness, and social conflict are notably reduced or eliminated. Such findings are important in that they are well-known predictors of children’s mental health, well-being, school engagement, and academic success.

Link

<http://www.recessprojectcanada.com/>.



New Recess Rules Policy, Coleman Alberta

The Horace Allen School has new recess guidelines that offer children more free-play with less adult intervention. This policy was derived from the success of their whole school Outdoor Play Days program. That program allowed students to manage their own play and spend full days engaged in outdoor activity (e.g., making mud slides, exploring creeks, and building forts out of loose parts). Children learned to manage their own risk and make choices that feel right for them.

The program consisted of a week-long series of pre-recess assemblies to introduce the new concepts of outdoor play to students. Rough and Tumble Play, exploring the playground, the “big hill”, and play with snow were discussed. Through images and skits, educators explored what was and was not acceptable. Educators also prompted the use of the "Kelso's Choices" program, where students utilize problem-solving strategies with their peers to manage “small problems” more independently. The New Recess Guidelines align with the school establishing an Outdoor Learning Space, where children will be able to engage with outdoor fauna and flora and loose parts, as well as in self-directed play and learning.

Findings

Survey results from the children have described the excitement and joy they experience engaging in outdoor play time. Feedback from parents was also positive. Overall, these new recess guidelines allowed children to engage in outdoor play in a multitude of settings. The benefits of this experience can be seen in children’s smiles and laughter outdoors.



Program - Community

Nurturing Development of Active Play, Saint-Hubert, Québec

The Nurturing Development of Active Play initiative organized by Regroupement des centres de la petite enfance (CPE) de la Montérégie, is a three year (2016-2018) project for daycare services that aims to: sensitize communities in six regions of Quebec (CPE teams, parents and local partners concerned by child health and development) to the innate capacities of children to move and take risks in stimulating outdoor environments; improve the outdoor environment to promote physical, social, and mental development of children; and adapt tools and refine training regimes to reflect the wishes of the communities. The long-term goals are that all Quebec childcare services should have access to the tools needed to transform their outdoor play spaces to support children's development. The Quebec network of CPE and their partners (user parents, teaching staff, local health tables, etc.), has access to training, conferences, workshops and tools to understand the importance for young children of daily play in high quality and fun outdoor environments that support risk-taking and healthy development.

Findings

Short-term outcomes include: improved knowledge of the impact of outdoor play, risky play, and children's ability to navigate freely-chosen physical and mental tasks; and a better understanding of the role of adult supervision for children during outdoor play and the influence that it may have on children's activities and development. Program evaluations have been positive, with participants indicating the training is very relevant to their practice.



Outdoor Play in the Early Years, Halifax, Nova Scotia

The Outdoor Play in the Early Years initiative aims to promote child learning through play by developing a model of professional learning for early learning practitioners. The purpose is to increase the quality of outdoor play experiences throughout the four seasons and in various weather conditions.

Phase 1 (2012-2014) of the initiative involved working with 7 Early Learning (EL) Centres in East Hants County, where 25 early learning practitioners participated in professional learning workshops, coaching, focus groups and training. Four resources were developed, including: pedagogical documentation panels; a training manual; an assessment tool for play spaces; and parental education materials. Phase 2 (2014-2016) involved expansion of the initiative into Colchester County with four goals in mind: engaging communities; building capacity; mobilizing the professional learning model; and continuing support for East Hants. Since completion of Phase 2, a Nature Activity Resource and Curriculum Supplement has been developed and distributed to pre-primary teachers, daycares, municipalities, libraries, etc. Two separate leadership groups have developed and delivered professional learning series of modules within and beyond the Fundy region. As well, one of the participating EL Centres has opened a Loose Parts centre that is available to local daycares and pre-primary programs for their use.

Findings

This course has offered new ideas and impressed the need for more natural and fewer plastic materials. The initiative has led to the perception that risk is a good thing and has inspired more risk taking and nature-related activities. The participating children are more content and less likely to have disputes; more interested in going outside; more creative and imaginative; inclusive of each other; and likely to create group projects. Educators participating in the project often go on to lead their own initiatives such as professional learning series; loose parts centres; a Forest Pre-School pilot; and natural play space enhancements.

Open Streets Toronto, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Open Streets is a free, publicly accessible recreation program where streets are temporarily opened to people and closed to cars. Streets become “paved parks”, where people of all ages, abilities, and social and ethnic backgrounds can participate in healthy recreational outdoor activity (e.g., riding bikes safely down city’s main streets and taking part in programming housed within OS’ multiple activity hubs).

Open Streets Toronto Inc., a Toronto-based not-for-profit, has worked closely with the City of Toronto and supportive City Councillors to establish the Open Streets program. This program is the largest of its kind in Canada and its goal is to open up streets to children and youth, and foster social and physical development by promoting safe outdoor play spaces that are accessible and free for all members of the community. A platform is provided for City Divisions such as Parks, Forestry & Recreation, Public Health and Environment & Energy among others, to showcase physical activity-related offerings to an engaged audience. The two 2018 “Open Streets” program dates each attracted more than 65,000 people to the heart of downtown Toronto. The program route (6.0 km of car-free roads) allowed participants, especially kids, to engage with programmers within 13 “activity hubs”. Examples of programming within these hubs include offerings from the YMCA, Active TO, bike obstacle courses, basketball drills, hip hop dancing, skipping rope and hopscotch, etc.

Findings

Respondents to surveys have indicated that Open Streets has motivated them to participate in physical activity and recreation when they would not have, as well as to make them more likely to walk, ride bikes, and participate in other forms of physical activity as part of their daily lives. More than 50% of program participants spent at least one hour being active during Open Streets, with 70% of participants arriving at the program by walking or cycling. Open Streets is an important initiative for cities seeking to address public health inequities while combatting rising levels of physical inactivity. The program provides an opportunity for children living in a dense, urban setting, to safely experience walking and riding their bikes, among other things, on the street. Children also feel a sense of belonging and connection to their city.



Kentville Plays Initiatives, Kentville, Nova Scotia

The *Kentville Plays!* Initiative includes monthly play challenges for the community, play events, *Kentville Playboxes*, and play stations at town events. Elements of play are incorporated into town strategies (Physical Activity Strategy, Active Transportation Strategy) and public education, and awareness campaigns are conducted about the importance of play. With the launch of *Kentville Plays!* the town is on a quest of becoming Canada's most playful community; one that takes play – and all of its benefits – very seriously. It is an initiative of the Town of Kentville's Parks and Recreation Department and is supported by the town's Mayor and Council who attend events, share messaging and generate excitement for the initiative.



Kentville Loose Parts Baby Barn is a collaborative project that supports outdoor, unstructured loose parts play for primary students of Kings County Academy (up to grade 8), and campers of the town's summer day camps (ages 5-15). Staff who facilitate loose parts play are trained by town Parks and Recreation staff. Funding and ongoing management for the program is a collaborative effort between the town Parks and Recreation Department and the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Filling and updating the loose parts is done by both the school Parent-Teacher Association and the Parks and Recreation Department. The loose parts are used by the school at recess and lunch and by Town Day Camp programs through the summer.

Testimonials from staff and kids show the collaborative, active and imaginative play that can happen when the baby barn doors are open.



Trailblazers After School Program is a free, outdoor, nature exploration and forest play program that has been running in the fall, winter and spring since 2016. Students who apply for the program participate in 4-8 week sessions led by passionate and experienced after-school leaders. For two hours 1-2 times per week the children have a chance to play in nature more adventurously and creatively than allowed at a school playground. They are encouraged to explore height, elements, use tools, find space and quiet, and to move with speed or participate in rough and tumble play. The Town of Kentville leads this program and it is supported by the

school, who shares information about the program with staff and parents.



The *Kentville Playboxes program* has three Playboxes deployed in Kentville that are filled with sport equipment, lawn games, and outdoor toys to promote accessible unstructured outdoor play for children and families. The Playboxes are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week for free. They are positioned in different parks in the town to be accessible to as many neighbourhoods and families as possible. They will also be used by the Kings County Family Resource Centre in their outdoor unstructured play programs. The Kentville Playboxes are a project of the Kings County Family Resource Centre & the Town of

Kentville and are made possible with funds from the Province of Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage.



Link

<http://kentville.ca/recreation/kentville-plays/>.

Wild Child Outdoor Play Group, London, Ontario

Wild Child is a free, nature-based program for families with children of all ages. It is funded through the City of London's Healthy Kids Community Challenge. Wild Child is based on an informal and unstructured approach where the experience is child-led. Each week, children and parents head into the woods to enjoy free play in a natural setting where program leaders demystify the risks of outdoor free play and increase parents' confidence and competence in permitting child-led, inquiry-based opportunities for their children. The goals are to have children: climb trees; dig holes; get muddy; skin knees; find bugs; be tired; eat plants; and be happy. The goals are for parents to: understand the importance and enjoyment of nature-based play; recognize personal behaviours, beliefs, and feelings about independent play; develop insight into their children's interests and abilities; and validate the values and perspectives they hold about parenting. The funding allowed Wild Child to pilot the play group, raise its profile in the community, and evaluate outcomes.

Wild Child has been offered since September 2015 and currently operates three weekly drop-in playgroups year-round in all weather in three different corners of London.

Findings

The most significant changes experienced were:

- Parents increased their participation in outdoor activities; had increased enjoyment and appreciation for being in nature; experienced personal development; observed increased confidence and personal development of their child; and altered their parenting styles based on information they learned.
- Children had increased interest in the outdoors and engagement with nature; increased comfort and confidence in exploring the natural environment, their abilities, and outdoor play while interacting with other children; increased capacity to learn; and increased engagement with other children and meeting new friends.
- Eighty-six per-cent of parents reported that their children are more engaged in risky play activities (climbing, sliding, and rolling down hills), and 73% said their children are more active in taking the lead during play.

Overall, parents are providing their children with more opportunities to: play independently; freely explore their environment; take the lead during play; and have new experiences. Eighty-four per-cent of parents report that they provide their children with more risky play opportunities outside program time. Similarly, children are engaging more in risky play and child-led play as their parents provide them with more opportunities, encourage more free exploration, and allow them to play more.

Dangerous Camps for Kids, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Dangerous Camps for Kids draws on principles of unschooling, tinkering, and wild play, to encourage children to play outdoors. An experiential five day camp is available for children aged 9-14, while three summer courses and a March break course have been offered. The emphasis of these courses is on participant-driven experiences that incorporate skills such as the use of edged tools, fire lighting and shelter building with experiential activities such as low ropes courses. There are also team tasks to develop problem-solving, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Through these activities, children learn how to better approach and navigate complex and potentially dangerous situations.

Dangerous Camps was developed to respond to parents' concern that their children were experiencing negative consequences from growing up in structured environments that lacked the opportunity to experience critical life lessons that only come from challenging play. These courses are based on the organizers' experience working with children and adults in high-risk humanitarian environments such as Somalia and Afghanistan.

Findings

Students are taught how to carefully navigate the risks presented by the environment and materials they use so that they may grow physically, socially, and mentally. The benefits include: greater independence and self-reliance; self-understanding of how to approach and navigate dangerous situations outdoors; improved capability to problem solve and make good decisions; greater confidence; and improved relationships with their peers. Children are able to experience these benefits by being engaged with an environment that is stimulating, challenging, and to some parents, dangerous.

Link

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/dangerous-camp-yellowknife-1.4262292>.



Bright Start Program, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Bright Start Program is for families who are expectant parents with children up to age 5. The program provides a warm and inviting environment for the whole family to gather for intentional play-based programming with the goal of showing these families the importance of intentional play and attachment-based parenting strategies. The program's objectives include: giving parents, guardians and their children opportunities to interact with other children and parents; teach parents positive ways to interact with children; increase and improve knowledge about health and well-being; provide assessment, treatment, education and follow-up; provide counselling, support and advocacy; increase knowledge of healthy foods; improve infant and toddler nutrition; improve prenatal health/healthy pregnancy; provide education, information and resources; and provide free-play opportunities with unique materials.

Families who drop-in are further supported with: on-site one-on-one breastfeeding support; pelvic exams; pre- & post-natal care; immunizations; pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infection testing; well-baby check-ups; and baby weighing. The program also provides a free hot breakfast (at morning program), or healthy snacks (afternoon program), as well as bus tickets/coins to support group participation. Bright Start is currently running three times a week at three sites within the Inkster Community: Access NorWest, Weston Memorial Community Centre, and Gilbert Park Gym.

Findings

According to testimonials, participants look forward to participating. Further, children are provided with ample opportunities to interact with peers, and parents can interact with other parents. Importantly, children have opportunities to play with other children in free environments, and to learn more about nutrition and health.



Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) ChildMinding Support Centre, Toronto, Ontario).

While parents and caregivers attend the Rexdale Women's Centre's workshops, programs, events and Family Summer program, children are provided with a free ongoing program where they have free play time, and can learn songs, make crafts and interact with other children. Planned activities led by staff focus on providing opportunities for children to have time for free play, and to develop and/or enhance social, motor, cognitive, language and sensory skills. The program is available for children from 2-12 years of age and runs at various days, times and locations for three hours/ program.

The registered early childhood educator staff review children's engagement by evaluating their participation in all the program's activities. Staff observe children and facilitate their social, cognitive, language, self-help, fine motor, gross motor, and hand and eyes coordination skills development. If educators identify any concerns, they meet with the child's parents to discuss possible strategies that might be helpful to the child and could be implemented at home. If necessary, staff will refer the parents for additional support with an appropriate specialist (family doctor, etc.).

Findings

The evaluation process is as follows: parents provide verbal feedback or complete a Participants' satisfaction questionnaire at the end of the program. The child's progress is also tracked by staff utilizing a client information management system; milestones and improvement are regularly noted. Staff complete and do follow-up calls with participants for feedback after 3-6 months of program completion. Staff provide ongoing reports regularly to program Coordinators and, when required, produce written reports.

South Region Parents as Teachers, South Lethbridge, Alberta

“Parents as Teachers” is a model program that provides home-visitation, child screening, and group connections to families. Through this evidence-based program parents are encouraged to promote and participate in their young child's play to help his/her learning thrive.

The home visitation component consists of certified Parents as Teachers educators visiting with families to partner, facilitate, and reflect with them to support parent-child interactions and understand how to engage with children. Parents who understand that high-interaction, at-home activities (e.g. reading or playing with children) present opportunities for highly effective parenting may feel less stress than those who feel compelled to arrange out-of-home opportunities. The first home visit with a parent begins to lay the foundation for strengthening parent understanding of and involvement in their children's play. Home visitors continue to facilitate positive play interactions to promote parents valuing and facilitating more playfulness and free play opportunities for their children, including outdoor play around their home and neighbourhood.

Findings

This program has resulted in increases in parent knowledge of early childhood and improved parenting practices; prevention of abuse and neglect; increases in children's school readiness and school success; early detection of developmental delays and health issues; and increases in parental involvement. These findings are in line with the published literature which has shown that home visiting programs have consistent effects on family economic self-sufficiency, as well as increasing family stability. Similar programs in the United States have shown a benefit-cost ratio of 3.44 (Washington State Institute of Public Policy).



StreetPLAY and POP-UP Adventure Play, Earth Day Canada, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Earth Day Canada is a national charity that inspires and supports people across the country to connect with nature and build resilient communities. It believes that outdoor play is the foundation of environmental education and action. Earth Day Canada aims to put self-directed outdoor play back into the lives of children as a natural part of their day-to-day lives by addressing play provision in schools, streets, parks and community green spaces.



StreetPLAY

StreetPLAY brings play back to residential streets – our most immediate community spaces. By opening up local streets for free, accessible and safe play for children and youth, neighbourhoods are transformed into vibrant community play spaces. It's a simple, low-cost solution to create safe space for active recreation and socializing, and support more livable and sustainable cities. StreetPLAY provides an opportunity for neighbourhood children and youth to roam and play on a regular basis (usually once or twice per week,

for three to four hours at a time) on large stretches of their streets that are protected by barricades and staffed by volunteers. StreetPLAY also allows for play that is inclusive and allows children of all ages to socialize. This is in contrast to the scheduled recreation and sports programs that are commonly divided by age and sometimes gender.

Findings

- StreetPLAY has enabled more than 800 hours of active outdoor play for children from 545 homes.
- The majority of parents were more likely to allow their children to play outside since the start of the StreetPLAY program (56%)
- Children aged 4-7 years made up the largest group to attend StreetPLAY (40%), followed by children aged 8-11 (34%).

The StreetPLAY Program has received support and endorsement from City of Toronto Councillors with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.



POP-UP Adventure Play

The POP-UP Adventure Play Program aims to re-establish outdoor child-directed free play, and encourage the remodeling of green spaces in communities. POP-UP Adventure Playground events are staffed by trained play workers who model the role adults can perform to support children's play. POP-UPS have been one-day events held in different communities and are now transforming into recurring events with partner organizations in tandem with staff training. Staff are trained in play work principles to re-frame the risks and

benefits of play, and to develop curated spaces with loose parts (natural and upcycled materials) and tools to support open-ended outdoor play experiences for children and youth.

Findings

The program has received support from parents, children, and community organizations. Over 14,000 children have participated in more than 75 POP-UPs since the beginning of the program. Over 320 staff have been trained at 110 different sites. Kids enjoy the opportunity to work together with total abandon and complete focus in their work.

Links

<https://earthday.ca/earthplay/streetplay/>

<https://earthday.ca/earthplay/parkplay/adventure-playgrounds/>

Le lion et la souris (The Lion and The Mouse), Adventure Play Programs, Montréal, Québec

The Lion and The Mouse's adventure play programs are weekly meetings of groups of 8 to 16 children and families in urban green spaces for the sole purpose of playing outside together. It started with a shared desire for more unstructured play opportunities for local children who quickly came to embrace the potential of green spaces. Program staff now work with families to provide the necessary space, time, materials (loose parts) and support for free play in multiple public green spaces in the center of Montréal, including official city parks and appropriated citizen spaces. They support participants in returning to a process-based experience and offer the safe framework they need for experimentation and healthy risk-taking. The regular and repeated nature of the programs builds connections among the participants, nurturing a community for play. It also promotes connections to the spaces where the groups meet; developing a greater understanding of local supports and challenges to play.

These programs are a key component of the organization's larger vision of change. The experiences shared in these programs then allow for knowledge sharing, contributing to a collective understanding of the world and empowering individuals so that they may encourage play in other spaces. With an engaged and empowered community for play, advocacy and collective action then reduce the individual barriers experienced by families. This allows more people greater access to play positive environments, starting a ripple effect in their home communities.

Findings

Neighbourhoods have incorporated periodic play sessions with our staff into their events and cultural programming to increase play opportunities and raise awareness of the importance of play positive spaces in the city.

Our weekly programs are evaluated at the end of each session by parents and staff against our mission to create, encourage and advocate for spaces for child-led play.

Comments from parents:

"To date, The Lion and The Mouse has given me confidence as a parent to give my children more opportunities to go outside and play freely. There are few similar examples around us (for instance, to go outside even in bad weather, or to let children get dirty). I am much more daring when it comes to letting them explore by themselves now."

"The Lion and The Mouse's activities are a constant reminder to make space for child-led play in our daily life."

"Child led outdoor play was a big part of my childhood. The combination of living in the city with no backyard and both parents working full time with careers that are relatively demanding, means that I often lament not being able to provide my kiddos the same experiences that I enjoyed growing up. Adventure club lets them have a little bit more (or a lot more, over the summer) of what I consider to be an integral part of childhood, and this makes me happy."

Link

Video with organizational overview and parent testimonial:

<https://zonevideo.telequebec.tv/media/42074/le-lion-et-le-souris/format-familial>

Program – Schools

Forest and Nature School, and Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

The vision of Forest and Nature School educators is to have outdoor, intrinsically motivated and free play be mainstream for and accessible to all children. By guiding and educating children about the outdoor environment, educators are teaching children how to approach risky situations outdoors. These children, in turn, will become better at assessing and approaching risky situations outdoors throughout their lives. This teaching practice is well-supported by research.

Educators work with two classes at a time from the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. They meet the classes for one full-day, one day per week for six consecutive weeks. The day begins with educators walking down the path with the children, gathering around the fire, acknowledging the land, telling a story, and inviting the children to play. Educators encourage children’s learning during play, they ask questions to better understand children’s thinking and explore the environment, while playing with the children. The children’s perspectives help educators develop safety guidelines for play activity, and employees strive to say “yes” to a child’s play request as long as the activity can be done safely. Educators document their observations throughout this time and support other educators in understanding whether or not the initiative has visible results for children. Educators also provide mentorship for educators and children who wish to continue learning about nature and the land during play.

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) supports the Forest and Nature School and provides evidence-based, practical training and mentorship for educators to facilitate learning through play on their own. CNAC offers a year-long certificate course for Forest and Nature School Practitioners - those interested in starting a Forest and Nature School program or incorporating elements of the ethos into their existing practice. They also offer a variety of workshops, including Outdoor Play First Aid, Risky Play, and an Introduction to Forest and Nature School.

Findings

Since 2013, 300 people have taken the Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course, with an additional 900 people participating in 14 workshops across the country and five study tours at headquarters, the Ottawa Forest and Nature School. Course participants are working in Forest and Nature School programs



from Newfoundland to the Northwest Territories to Victoria, BC, reaching exponentially more children each year. The Forest and Nature School has grown from a launch with five families and children to include a community of over 100 children and families, through its innovative school-aged and preschool programs. The Forest and Nature School also operates Forest School Day Camps, now reaching 1,500 students, by working with the Ottawa Carleton District School board.

Link

<http://childnature.ca/ottawa-forest-nature-school/>.

Loose Parts Adventure Playground, Ottawa, Ontario

The Loose Parts Adventure Playground at Meadowlands Public School is part of a three-year research study, with the University of Ottawa, to examine the effect of Forest School and Loose Parts Play on teacher practices.

The adventure playground is set up at regular intervals throughout the school year where, during learning hours, loose parts are selected by students and then set up outdoors by students and organizers. Children are provided with ample time to play with their materials and are often found building, breaking apart, and re-constructing various things. If organizers feel that students are not motivated to use the materials, they will engage in provoking strategies, such as reading time (e.g., reading about leaves and trees) and conversation with students to provide them with ideas of what to build and use in their learning. Educators use risk mitigation strategies to reduce the likelihood that children will come to serious harm when engaging with loose parts. Educators strive to provide an environment that allows children to be creative, have fun, and be self-directed, curious and responsible. Children have been observed eating snacks inside a house they built; writing in journals about their interactions with nature; climbing fences; and running with long strings through sandy areas.

Findings

Teachers report many benefits of engaging in long-term participation of the Loose Parts Adventure Playground, including children: taking more risks; working collaboratively with peers; experiencing more in-school achievements; having better socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being; developing better learning and problem-solving techniques; developing resilience; and having greater nature-outdoor knowledge.

Links

Loose Parts at Meadowlands Public School: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKLiJChLCXU>

Outdoor Play and Learning: Loose Parts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDI5T51zhh0>

Outdoor Play and Learning: Loose Parts Routines: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHfmFm79q7Q>

Lesson plan: <https://canadac3.ca/en/learning-resource/learning-outside-loose-parts/>

Cariboo Chilcotin Outdoor Classrooms, Williams Lake, British Columbia

School District #27's Cariboo Chilcotin Outdoor Classrooms initiative has been working to increase children's unstructured play time in nature by fostering children, administrator and teacher comfort with children's thrilling outdoor play. A Nature Kindergarten program provides students with a full-day program where children engage in play (mud, water, climbing trees, wrestling, and building with hammers and nails) during their time outside. This play leads to prosocial skills, as well as feelings of competency and self-agency in these 4-6 year olds.

The Grade 7 Outdoor Academy has students spending one day a week outside challenging themselves through various learning and play opportunities. They also take three overnight field trips throughout the year where they can canoe, cross-country ski to back country cabins, and go backpacking. Students also participate in nature observation through journaling, stewardship activities, and citizen science projects.

Findings

Classroom operators have been able to shift practice around going outside at lunch and recess. These changed practices now reflect the research where the benefits of outdoor play are favoured over the adult assumed risk of harm (or personal preference). Both programs have received public district support and are now permanent programs within the district with approved job descriptions, policy and funding specific to outdoor teaching.



Discovery School, Red Deer, Alberta

The Discovery School is a pilot project that works in conjunction with River Bend Golf & Recreation Area where programming is offered to over 400 children attending Pre-K within schools. The goal is to emphasize the importance of play inside and outside the classroom.

Children are led through a week of inquiry, outdoor exploration and learning, and developmentally appropriate practices that encompass teaching to the whole child. They engage in an open-ended play classroom for a portion of the day to work on problem-solving skills and language development, and then go outdoors to explore over 420 acres of forest and open area. Through this outdoor exploration, children engage in: gross motor skill development; meditative practices through feeding birds and observing their surroundings; developing appreciation for the natural world around them; and risky play on a natural playground and free open space. Parent meetings are offered to gain an understanding and appreciation for inquiry-based, authentic learning that their children will be engaged with throughout the week. It is the hope that the program can be expanded to all Pre-K and Kindergarten children.

Findings

Teachers have reported that they are focussing on two goals: increased emphasis on outdoor play and exploring the natural world through authentic discovery; and inquiry-based learning to stimulate problem-solving of the whole child. In addition, observing children in the space allows educators to see that their variety of exceptionalities are less noticeable, and allows children to regulate and function in a positive manner within the Discovery School model.



Random Acts of Play, Brantford, Ontario

In an effort to encourage physical activity among the school-aged population, the Brant County Health Unit (BCHU) piloted the Random Acts of Play (RAP) initiative from February to May 2018. RAP days were an opportunity for elementary school-aged students to engage in unstructured active play during their nutrition breaks (or recess) once a week at 10 schools in Brant. This pilot project was proposed as an alternative to the active playgrounds initiative that the health unit had been employing since 2005.

The RAP initiative provided students with various toys to facilitate active/unstructured play by simply bringing them to schools and letting the children use them. Each school is visited once per week. The equipment provided ranged from various types of balls (soccer, football, basketball, dodge ball etc.) to bubbles, chalk, streamers, hula hoops, and rubber chickens, to scarves and much more. Two staff members from the health unit brought the equipment and monitored which pieces were used and how the students used them. The pilot ran until the end of the school year and is being evaluated to determine impact and whether it should be continued next year.

Findings

The outcomes for the project included: increasing engagement in physical activity; improved interactions between the grades; and reduced frequency of bullying incidents, while fostering a sense of community among the youth. Schools and participants enjoyed implementing the program and the support staff members were eager to advocate for children's play. On average, 58 students per school participated, with the highest engagement coming from students in grades 1-5. Over time, the students complained less, stopped asking for their own equipment, started taking turns and played together. Students were happy and excited about having RAP at their school; BCHU staff members were met with cheers, exclamations of gratitude, children charging at them and requests to bring the equipment more often. All the schools that participated are interested in having the program run again.

Outdoor Play and Learning, Earth Day Canada, City of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Earth Day Canada is a national charity that inspires and supports people across the country to connect with nature and build resilient communities. It believes that outdoor play is the foundation of environmental education and action. Earth Day Canada aims to put self-directed outdoor play back into the lives of children as a natural part of their day-to-day lives by addressing play provision in schools, streets, parks and community green spaces.

The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) program brings together school administrators, teachers, lunch supervisors, parents and support staff to enrich outdoor play opportunities at school. The program focuses on improving support for play through planning and supervision practices, introducing loose parts to promote self-directed play, and creating environments that are interesting and challenging for students. Through a year-long process of guidance from an OPAL Mentor, schools facilitate play events and participate in professional development workshops and community outreach, leading to the development of a school-wide play policy. The result is a unique strategy for each school to sustain a more inclusive, and supportive environment for outdoor play.

Findings

The OPAL program will roll out to over 35 schools in the Toronto District School Board by 2020. A formal evaluation and testimonials from kids, teachers, and school principals illustrate that kids benefit from: the increased opportunities for being physically active; an improved attitude to creative play; working as a team; and engaging in exploration. OPAL reduces stress for teachers and kids alike since the former don't have to constantly say "no" to kids and kids gain a greater understanding of where the line is drawn between safe and unsafe behaviours. One challenge reported by teachers and a school principal is maintaining access to a continual supply of loose parts.

Links

<https://earthday.ca/earthplay/schoolplay/>

