



Get Outside
& Play 

Outdoor Play in Child Care Settings

Recommendations for Child Care Licensing in Alberta

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Executive Summary

Emmett gathers pine needles, creating mounds around the play yard. Lori finds rocks and carries them over, gently placing them on the pine needle mounds. “Shhh,” cautions Emmett, “the baby chicks are hatching.” Lori squats down and watches the rocks with her head in her hands.



The above represents a scene of children exploring their world through play in an engaging, varied outdoor space. What should be a common scene in child care settings in Alberta unfortunately is not. Sterile spaces devoid of nature and variety, often dominated by plastic and rubber, limit play and learning possibilities for the over 100,000 children in child care in Alberta.

Research suggests that children learn best through play, and the best place for play is outdoors, where children connect with nature, explore their physical abilities, spark their curiosity and develop a sense of place and belonging in the world. Updates to *Child Care Licensing* can play an important role in leading the change that is necessary to ensure children have access to these engaging, essential experiences while in child care settings.

In this paper we review the *Child Care Licensing Act* and the associated *Child Care Licensing Regulations* that impact outdoor play for children in child care settings in Alberta. We offer recommendations for change based on the best available research and most promising practices. These recommendations include:

- **Increasing** the amount of outdoor space required per child for all licensed programs.
- **Ensuring** programs have an outdoor space on-site or one that is easily accessible.
- **Providing** guidance through policy and procedures for off-site experiences.
- **Enhancing** the materials in the outdoor space to include natural items.
- **Adding** two or more natural surfaces and sufficient shade as features of the play space.
- **Instituting** a minimum daily outdoor play time requirement based on age and type of program.
- **Specifying** a temperature range for outdoor play to be included in the regulations.
- **Proposing** a two-year diploma as the minimum standard for early childhood educators.

Changing regulations to support more quality outdoor play is fundamentally important to children’s well-being, but change takes time. The proposed recommendations can be implemented in programs now--there is no need to wait to *Get Outside and Play!*

Who Should Read This?

Early Childhood Educators because you are the gatekeepers to outdoor play, you give permission for children to explore their environment and you follow children's lead in making emergent curriculum visible. You do not have to wait for regulation change to implement best practices for outdoor play for children -- you can read this document and begin making changes.



Advocates for excellent early childhood education because quality early childhood education supports children in all environments, both indoors and out, and engages children as citizens 'beyond the fence' in their families and communities, all of which contributes to healthy child development that can only be achieved by getting outside and exploring.



Policy makers because you have the desire to support children, families and communities. You have the power to implement changes that will enable all children enrolled in licensed child care settings in Alberta to access high quality, outdoor play experiences.



1. Introduction

1.1 Outdoor Play and Nature

Outdoor play and nature connection should be as easy as letting children go outside and play. Fundamentally, that is the case. Realistically, it is much more complex given the many factors that may impact children in child care settings having access to quality outdoor play environments and experiences. In May 2019, the Lawson Foundation published an ecosystem lens model that visually represented the context for outdoor play in the early years in Canada.¹ This valuable approach allows us to see the complexity of the system impacting outdoor play in the early years and identifies three fundamental components that must come together, align and collaborate to ensure outdoor spaces and experiences are available to young children. They are:

- multi-sector policy and standards,
- professional learning and
- play opportunities for children.¹



Outdoor Play Ecosystem Lens | From Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper¹

1.2 Theory of Change

Between 2014-2017, Get Outside and Play, a program created under the Alberta Council for Environmental Education with a focus on outdoor play and nature connection in the early years, created a Theory of Change in consultation with hundreds of educators and other stakeholders. The participants identified the following areas where change was needed in child care settings and communities:

- Professional learning for educators
- Engaging spaces
- Regulations
- Public narrative
- Community planning

1.3 Vision

More recently, in June 2018, Get Outside and Play brought together leaders in Alberta that included early childhood educators, program directors, researchers and licensing and health officers to refocus on outdoor play in child care settings and created the following vision:

Outdoor play is an essential element of healthy child development. Children in child care settings in Alberta will have access to:

- **Educators** with the knowledge and skills to guide children's learning outdoors and approach outdoor play experiences with enthusiasm and wonder.
- **Engaging outdoor spaces** created with care and attention that incorporate nature and permit a variety of play experiences that contribute to children's development and learning.
- **Abundant time** in outdoor environments that spark children's curiosity and gives them the time to engage in exploration and discovery that leads to deep thinking and learning.

1.4 The Regulatory Environment

Work by the Lawson Foundation at the national level converges with work by Get Outside and Play at the provincial level and highlights similar factors required to increase outdoor play in child care settings. This paper focuses on the *Alberta Child Care Licensing Act* and associated *Child Care Licensing Regulation* that impact outdoor play for children in child care settings. The Act, which is the foundation upon which all licensed programs in Alberta must operate, impacts 124,824 children in 2710 licensed and approved child care programs in Alberta.²

The time is right to implement change in the regulatory environment for three important reasons:

1. Evidence from academic research is overwhelmingly in favour of outdoor play. In Canada, the benefits to children's health, well-being and learning have been well documented and summarized in recent publications by several groups, including ParticipACTION, the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) and the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.³⁻⁵ Moving research into practice through regulation changes will benefit children.
2. Interest in outdoor play from educators, parents and community leaders is growing, as demonstrated by the rise in forest schools, nature programs and loose parts play. Government regulations need to reflect

evidence-based research so that children and early learning professionals can be exposed to outdoor environments that emulate best practice in outdoor play pedagogy.

3. The Government of Alberta's child care regulations expire in 2020, at which time they may be reviewed, which will provide an opportunity to propose and/or implement these recommendations.

1.5 Purpose

This paper begins by making a case for outdoor play by highlighting the international, national and provincial initiatives that clearly champion outdoor play. To further support the case, a summary of the research on outdoor play and promising practice tools that move the research to application is presented. Finally, we make recommendations to change the existing *Child Care Licensing Act* and *Child Care Licensing Regulation* with a focus on the size and location of outdoor spaces and the materials available in these spaces to support high quality outdoor play in child care settings.

1.6 Terminology

A note on terminology. Alberta uses the term “Early Learning and Child Care Centres” (ELCC) to refer to the programs involved in the \$25/day Affordable Child Care Program for infants to 5 years old. “Child Care” is used to refer to provincially licensed programs that provide care for children from infants to 12 years, separate from their parents/guardians. We will use the term “child care” in this paper and include all programs (day care, group family care, out of school care and preschool) covered under the *Child Care Licensing Act*.

1.7 Regulators Leading the Way - An Example from Scotland

Since 2008, Scotland's Care Inspectorate has been implementing changes to their child care system. These changes were in response to the first forest school nursery that applied for registration.⁶ That nursery challenged the existing system as they did not have a building and did not meet the environmental standards set forth in the regulations. Working with the operator of the nursery program, concerns like infection control were overcome and changes to the licensing process occurred that were built on examining the benefits of outdoor play. This process resulted in a shift in how the Care Inspectorate approached outdoor play. The Care Inspectorate actively moved to dispel myths surrounding outdoor play, including the adoption of a risk-benefit position rather than a risk-averse stance. As building relationships with operators of nursery programs was seen as a priority, individual settings and circumstances were examined and adaptations made as required. The Care Inspectorate, along with Play Scotland, travelled the country to support the culture change around outdoor play and shifted their role from enforcer to enabler.⁶

To further support this shift, the Care Inspectorate released a statement on risky play that was endorsed by the Minister for Children and Young People. The statement includes the following:

The Care Inspectorate supports care service providers taking a positive approach to risk in order to achieve the best outcomes for children. This means moving away from a traditional deficit model that takes a risk-averse approach, which can unnecessarily restrict children's experiences attending registered services, to a more risk-benefit model.⁷

In addition to this statement from the Care Inspectorate, in 2012, the Health and Safety Executive, another regulatory body in Scotland, released a three-page statement entitled *Children's Play and Leisure - Promoting a Balanced Approach*. The document makes clear statements, including the following statement on play and risk:

Play is great for children's well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.⁸

When different regulatory bodies within the same government converge and endorse statements such as those above, it gives clear top-down direction to programs and services. It is an important step to enable programs to implement best practice and communicate this with children, parents and the wider society.

The Care Inspectorate created *My World Outdoors*, a comprehensive guide for programs that tie outdoor play directly to the Care Inspectorate's well-being indicators of safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included. Programs in Scotland are required to illustrate to the Care Inspectorate how their programs support these indicators. Also included in this resource are examples from all types of programs, the expectations of the Care Inspectorate and guidance for programs looking to register an outdoor-focused service.⁷

In Scotland, outdoor-based programs now receive higher grades than the national average for children's daycare services and are popular with parents.⁷ The number of services registered under the outdoor category is small but increasing every year, and the practices highlighted in these outdoor programs are influencing more traditional daycare services.⁷

The regulations and policies in Scotland illustrate how the government and operators of child care programs can collectively enable outdoor play in all childcare settings by evolving their approach and setting out clear expectations for programs and services.



2. Outdoors as a Place for Play

Play is how children experience, engage with and make sense of their world; it helps children develop the skills necessary to build strong bodies and brains. As such, play has been recognized by local, national and international bodies as a fundamental right of children. Position statements, charters and curricula have been created by various groups to ensure the right to play is recognized and protected, with outdoor play and nature being infused into these documents. Key examples documents are described below.

2.1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The right to play and rest is recognized under Article 31 of the UNCRC and is regarded as being as important as basic nutrition, housing, health care and education.⁹

The Committee on the Rights of the Child expands on the meaning of Article 31 and lists several factors that would create an optimal environment for children to exercise their right to play and rest. The following factors reference outdoor play and nature specifically. Children should have:

- *An environment sufficiently free from waste, pollution, traffic and other physical hazards to allow them to circulate freely and safely within their local neighbourhood;*
- *Space and opportunities to play outdoors unaccompanied in a diverse and challenging physical environment, with easy access to supportive adults, when necessary;*
- *Opportunities to experience, interact with and play in natural environments and the animal world.*¹⁰

2.2 Position Statement - ParticipACTION

Every year, ParticipACTION creates a report card grading children's physical activity in Canada. In 2018, a D- was assigned to overall physical activity for children age 3-12 years old, and this grade has remained unchanged for many years. In 2015, the report card was accompanied by a Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play.³ This Position Statement was informed by evidence from two systematic reviews of the academic literature, an expert panel of 14 organizations and a review process that involved 1600 stakeholders. The following statement was endorsed by 14 of the 17 members of the expert panel and 1000 other supporting organizations:

*Access to active play in nature and outdoors - with its risks - is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings - at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.*¹¹

Once released, the Position Statement was endorsed by the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health along with the listed recommendations.¹²

This Position Statement has galvanized conversations, programs and projects across Canada and has been credited with jump-starting the movement to get more children outside to play in Canada.

2.3 Position Statement - Canadian Public Health Association

In March 2019, the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) released a Position Statement on Children's Unstructured Play. Their definition of unstructured play focuses on "child-led play that takes place preferably outdoors but also indoors, and includes the concept of risky play."⁵

A comprehensive list of interconnected actions are listed in the Position Statement. Several that relate directly to child care include:

- *Strengthen investments to enhance and protect natural and inclusive play spaces within walkable distances from where children live and learn.*
- *Invest in unstructured play facilitator training and development for child and youth workers, educators, and principals.*
- *Influence the use of risk-benefit assessment processes to mitigate play-associated liability concerns for child care providers and school boards.*
- *Add loose parts and natural elements to manufactured play facilities, and develop dedicated natural play spaces that include loose parts.*⁵

To support the implementation of this Position Statement, the CPHA created a comprehensive tool kit that includes infographics, research summaries, decision-making tools, promising practices and a discussion document.

2.4 Play Charters

Two Alberta cities, Calgary and Lethbridge, have developed charters signed by local organizations that describe the importance of play in their community. Both charters have been recognized by their municipal councils and continue to guide the work of signatories. These charters are more than documents--both cities have groups that meet monthly to connect and actively advance play in their communities.^{13,14}

2.5 Curriculum Framework

Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework was first released in 2014 under the name *Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework* and was renamed and refined in 2018 in consultation with educators. Play is central to the curriculum and is laid out in its purpose: "a set of holistic, play-based goals for children's learning and care."¹⁵ A strong case can be made for outdoor play and environments supporting all aspects of the curriculum framework, as highlighted by three of the four framework goals: Well-being, Play and Playfulness, and Diversity and Social Responsibility.¹⁵



3. Research on Outdoor Play

The evidence from the academic research is overwhelmingly in favour of outdoor play. The benefits to children's health, well-being and learning have been well documented and summarized in several recent publications from the CPHA, ParticipACTION and the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.³⁻⁵

The research cited in this section focuses primarily on systematic reviews of existing academic literature. It is not an exhaustive literature review.

Physical activity, health and wellbeing - When children play outdoors they are more active and less sedentary than when they play indoors.^{16,17} In a large Canadian sample, children ages 5 and 6 who had more outdoor time were more likely to meet national physical activity guidelines.¹⁸ In a review of studies of early childhood education programs and physical activity, outdoor environments and the size of the play space were both found to increase physical activity for children.¹⁹ This increased physical activity will result in improved physical, social and emotional health, and cognitive development.^{20,21}

Access to green space in schools and communities is important to the mental well-being and overall health of children, and being out in nature or simply having a view of vegetation from indoors has been shown to reduce stress in students.²² Adding natural elements to a child care play space was found to be associated with children's decreased depressed affect and anti-social behaviour.²³ Outdoor play has also been found to be associated with reduced vision problems in children,²⁴ and improved vitamin D levels.²⁵

Learning - Nature-based learning models in academic contexts outperforms traditional instruction and is evidenced by higher test scores, improved attention, self-discipline and interest and enjoyment in learning.²⁶ Further, experiences such as gardening and field trips are associated with educational benefits such as an increase in knowledge about the environment.²⁷ Studies have also found a 'dose-response relationship', meaning that the higher the 'dose', measured by percentage of tree cover or number of nature-based instructional episodes, for example, the better the learning outcome.²⁶ It is likely that a combination of the pedagogy employed by educators outdoors and the outdoor setting is having an impact on learning outcomes, as outdoor learning is often more hands-on, student-centered and activity based.²⁶⁻²⁸

Environmental stewardship - There is a strong relationship between children having nature experiences and their attitudes and behaviours as adults towards the natural environment.²⁷⁻²⁹ Early experiences focused on playful styles of engagement with nature, 'wild' nature and hands-on, active experiences were the most powerful pathways to positive environmental attitudes and behaviours as adults.²⁷⁻²⁹

The research supporting outdoor play is strong and touches on all aspects important to child development. The challenge is then translating this research into tools that can be used directly by child care programs and early childhood educators. The following section highlights four promising practice tools that have translated this research.

4. Promising Practices

Promising practices are intended to give direction to educators by taking the research and translating it into useable tools. The practices highlighted provide evidence that support the regulation changes suggested in this document, and are also valuable guides to improving all aspects of outdoor play in Alberta child care settings. Details from these promising practices will be discussed in section 8.

NAP SACC - An evidence-based tool created by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that begins with a self-assessment of 20 elements of outdoor play and learning. These 20 elements are divided into the following sections: outdoor playtime, outdoor play environment, education and professional development and policy. Embedded in this tool are the best practices recommendations for each element.³⁰

POEMS (Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale) - An externally administered tool to assess outdoor play and environments. A child care program is assessed on 56 elements in the following five domains: physical environment, interactions, play and learning settings, program and teacher/caregiver role. This tool was tested and validated using 41 child care centres.³¹

An Assessment Tool in Support of Creating Children's Outdoor Play Environments with a Sense of Wonder - This tool, created in Canada, evaluates 32 elements of outdoor spaces divided into the following seven sections: play zone, play environmental elements, physical movement and risk taking, loose parts, experiential play, involving parents and families and the role of early learning practitioners. The tool was tested and validated with child care centres in Nova Scotia.³²

Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence - This is part of the NAAEE (North American Association for Environmental Education) guidelines for excellence series. The document focuses on six key characteristics with associated guidelines and indicators. The six key characteristics are: program philosophy, purpose and development, developmentally appropriate practices, play and exploration, curriculum framework for environmental learning, places and spaces and educator preparation.³³



5. Regulators of Child Care in Alberta

To ensure child care programs are safe environments for children, programs work with several different regulatory agencies. This paper focuses on child care licensing, but we must acknowledge that change is needed throughout the system to ensure more outdoor play.

Child care licensing - This is the minimum standard child care programs must maintain. Licensing ensures the programs are in keeping with the physical, social, intellectual, creative and emotional needs of children. For every licensed child care program, at least two inspections must occur annually.

Alberta Health - In order for a child care facility to operate, health approval from Alberta Health Services is required. This involves an inspection of the child care facility and any areas used by the children, including the outdoor playground, by a Public Health Inspector. Child care facilities are required to adhere to six sets of health regulations administered by Alberta Health Services.

Accreditation - Although not a regulation or required, these voluntary standards support child care programs to extend their program and quality indicators beyond licensing regulations and promote excellence based on current research and leading practices. Programs apply for accreditation by providing documentation and are visited by accreditation inspectors to ensure the standards are being met.

Fire code - Child care facilities are required to comply with the maintenance requirements identified in the *Alberta Fire Code*.

Municipal - Municipalities impact child care programs by determining zoning bylaws that impact where child care facilities can be located in a community. Municipal bylaws mostly come into play when child care facilities are seeking a space to operate.



6. Child Care Licensing

The *Child Care Licensing Act* and *Child Care Licensing Regulation* play an important role in enabling educators with the physical spaces, infrastructure and guidelines to ensure all children in licensed programs have access to engaging outdoor spaces and educators who are able to provide quality outdoor experiences.

The four areas of the *Child Care Licensing Act* that could be changed to support more outdoor play are:

1. **Act** is the law created by the legislature that governs child care licensing in Alberta. Any changes to the Act must be approved by the government.
2. **Regulations** are the laws put in place by the Province of Alberta to carry out the *Child Care Licensing Act*. Regulations are enforceable by the province and ensure a basic standard of child care. Changes must be approved by the government.
3. **Policy and procedures** are an opportunity for the Government of Alberta to further detail the meaning of specific standards and how those standards are administered within the child care sector. All policies and procedures are directly related to the standards within the regulations, the Act and/or other applicable legislation.
4. **Program plans** are created by an organization wanting to run a licensed child care program under the Act. Program plans show how a program will operate and further ensure the regulations are met. The program plans are reviewed and regulated by the Government of Alberta. The components of the program plan are detailed in the licensing regulations.

Regulations, policy and procedures and program plans hold the most opportunity to increase outdoor play in child care settings.



7. Structure of Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations

Recommendations align with the three important aspects of the Vision set out in Section 1.3 of the Introduction (knowledgeable educators, creating engaging outdoor spaces and abundant time outdoors). Recommendations will be made in each of the following areas: Engaging Outdoor Spaces (Size, Location, Materials and Features); Abundant Time; Temperature and Weather Conditions; and Educators.

7.2 Support for the Recommendations

Each section begins with the recommendation by stating the current regulation and how it should be changed. In addition to the regulation, opportunities for clarification through policy or updates to the program plan are presented. Each recommendation is supported by the following sections, if applicable:



Research

This section lists points from the research relevant to the recommendation.



Promising Practices

This section supports the recommendation with the promising practices highlighted by NAP SACC, POEMS, An Assessment Tool in Support of Creating Children's Outdoor Play Environments with a Sense of Wonder, and Guidelines for Excellence from the NAAEE.



Alberta Child Care Accreditation Standards promotes excellence in child care settings and are based on current research and leading practices. This section sets out the standards and indicators that support the recommendation.



Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework is a key document leading the work of early childhood educators in Alberta. This section highlights the connections between the framework and the recommendation.



Regulations from **other provinces** are compared with Alberta's regulations to determine how Alberta compares to other provinces and to give direction on what is possible.



Discussion questions raise points that can spark deeper discussion and conversation about why these changes are necessary to support child development.

8. Recommendation Areas

8.1 Engaging Outdoor Spaces

At the most fundamental level, children need an outdoor space. Children and educators may have the motivation to go outside; but, if there is no actual physical space to go to, they will stay indoors. The three elements of space discussed are size, location and materials/features.

Size

Children require space to have a wide variety of engaging outdoor play experiences, from running freely to sitting quietly and everything in between. Alberta has the lowest amount of space requirement for children in child care settings across Canada. Updating this regulation is needed to bring Alberta in line with or have it exceed the standards set by other provinces.



Recommendation

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|--|--|
| Daycare Child under 19 months 2m ² Child over 19 months 4.5m ² Outdoor space must accommodate 50% of centre capacity | 7m ² 7m ² Remove |
| Group Family Care and Out of School Care No amount specified | 7m ² |
| Pre-school Program No outdoor space required | 7m ² |

Policy and procedure support - Increasing the amount of space for existing programs may prove challenging given their current location. For these programs, creating a policy that gives the alternative option of allowing them to identify nearby nature and park locations and how they would access these spaces would meet the goals of this regulation change and give children a variety of engaging outdoor play spaces.

Program plan - Program plans would need to be updated to detail how programs will access nearby nature or park spaces on a regular basis and in all weather, if the outdoor space adjacent to the centre could not increase in size.

Support for the Recommendation



From the Research

- The number of children in a space impacts the levels of aggression, mood, types of play and amount of gross motor activity.³⁴
- Larger outdoor play spaces are linked to higher physical activity levels in child care settings.¹⁹
- Centres with 14m² per child or higher have more flexible space for educators to improvise play activities and there were more gross motor activities like running.³⁴
- Canadian Paediatric Society, in their publication *Well-Beings: A Guide to Health in Child Care*, suggests 6m² is the best practice for the amount of outdoor space per child.³⁵



Promising Practices

None of the four promising practice tools gives an exact amount of space per child. The focus instead is on a diversity of play areas, which would require a significant amount of space.

- An open area large enough for 25 children to run around safely.³⁰
- The space includes 8 or more play areas.³⁰
- A multi-purpose open, grassy area, large enough for 15 preschool children to hold hands in a circle is suggested along with at least four settings with constructed or manufactured elements.³¹
- The outdoor space provides more than six flexible zones, green zones and quiet learning zones.³²
- Individual and group gathering areas, nooks and crannies, areas are designed to encourage adventure and exploration.³³

Accreditation



There is no listing of a specific amount of space in the standards. Similar to the promising practices above, it is more about how the space is used and the activities possible there. The following indicator supports the recommendation:

1.4 Children's development is supported through outdoor environments with active play spaces and opportunities to experience and learn about the natural world.

- a. Organize and equip the outdoor play space to provide a variety of developmental experiences and physical activities for children.*





Flight

Physical activity and exploring movement are best done with plenty of space outdoors. Flight goals that connect to this are:

| | | |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Well-Being | Physical Health - Children explore body and movement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participating in a variety of physical activities, indoors and out• Increasing bodily awareness, control, strength, agility and large motor coordination• Knowing and stretching physical limits• Releasing and restoring energy in outdoor places |
| Play and Playfulness | Dizzy Play - Children take pleasure in being on the edge | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engaging in rough and tumble play• Experiencing exhilarating physical release• Playing at games of disrupting and restoring order |



Other Provinces

Alberta and Quebec have the lowest required amount of space per child compared to other provinces. Alberta is the only province to have a separate space regulation for younger children. Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island have the highest amount of required space at 7m². Saskatchewan Child Care Regulations also recommend 7m², with at least half of this space being adjacent to the centre and the remainder being within walking distance.



Discussion Questions

- Why do cars get more space to park than children get to play? The average parking spot is 25m², where currently only 4.5m² is required for children's play spaces in daycare programs.
- How is children's play limited when they are given access to only small play spaces?
- How would children's play change if they had more space?

Location

The types of spaces needed for children include ‘in the fence’ and ‘beyond the fence’ spaces and experiences. Regulations have a role to play in enabling experiences in both these spaces.

In the Fence

Children in full day programs need easy access to outdoor space, ideally adjacent to the indoor space. This reduces barriers to getting children outdoors to play, giving educators access to the amenities of the program premises. It also offers a potential opportunity, if properly supervised, for children to choose an indoor or outdoor play space and to flow freely from these two environments.



Recommendations

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|--|---|
| Daycare A licence holder must provide outdoor play space that is adjacent to or within easy and safe walking distance from the program premises. | No change recommended. |
| Group Family Care A licence holder must provide outdoor play space that is within easy and safe walking distance from the program premises. | A licence holder must provide outdoor play space that is adjacent to or within easy and safe walking distance from the program premises. |
| Out of School Care A licence holder must provide outdoor play space that is within easy and safe walking distance from the program premises. | No change recommended. |
| Pre-school Program No outdoor space required. | A licence holder must provide outdoor play space that is within easy and safe walking distance from the program premises. |

Policy and procedure support - Define safe and easy walking distance and specify the quality of the outdoor space required for this regulation.

Support for the Recommendation



From the Research

- The optimal location for outdoor space is on-site and directly accessible from the indoors.³⁵
- Private garden (yard) access for children ages 4-6 years was more strongly linked to improved mental health outcomes than access to public natural space.³⁶



Other Provinces

Across Canada, having a play space adjacent to the child care program premises is a best practice.



Discussion Questions

- How can educators effectively link the indoor and outdoor spaces?
- What role does facility design play in connecting the indoor and outdoor environment?



Beyond the Fence

In addition to space adjacent to the centre, children need and benefit from play opportunities within their community. This is one way that children develop a sense of belonging to the wider world. Opportunities to visit nearby nature, parks, gardens and people in the community surrounding the program premises is an important aspect of child development.

Recommendation

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|---|------------------------|
| Day Care, Group Family Care, Out of School Care, Pre-school A licence holder may take a child to an activity off the program premises only where a) the child's parent has been advised of the activity, including the transportation and supervision arrangements with respect to the activity, and b) the child's parent has consented in writing to the child's participation in the activity. | No change recommended. |

Policy and procedure support - Guidance on off-site permissions required from parents would create consistency between programs and give direction on appropriate procedures. There is a wide range of practices among child care providers when it comes to these procedures, and clarification is required on the following questions: Is permission required for community walks? How far can a program go on a community walk? Can parents sign a blanket permission for trips that do not require transportation and are identified nearby locations? Can programs take children on public transit?

Program plan - Currently, license applicants must detail their use of community resources. In the *Alberta Child Care Licensing Handbook*, this is defined as: "local resources that offer recreational, educational or therapeutic services for children in the program."³⁷ A separate section in the program plan asking the applicant to identify nearby nature and parks, along with a plan to access these spaces, would draw attention to the importance and value of these spaces for children.

Support for the Recommendation



Promising Practices

Three of the four promising practice tools mention the importance of getting beyond the fence to explore community connections and resources.

- Walking trips and outdoor field trips are required to obtain best practice level.³⁰
- Educators extend learning about outdoors by taking walking field trips in the community.³¹
- Educators use diverse settings appropriate to different subject matter.³³



Flight views the child as a mighty learner and citizen and, to fully explore this, Early Childhood Educators must move beyond the program premises and into the community with the children. Other connections include:

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Well-Being | Belonging | Children develop a sense of place through making connections between the centre, home and broader community. |
| Diversity and Social Responsibility | Inclusiveness and Equity | Learning about and participating in helping projects - locally and globally |
| | Democratic Practices | Identifying issues and becoming socially active in their local communities |
| | Sustainable Futures | Participating in local restoration and regeneration projects |



Other Provinces

The regulations for off-site excursions vary between provinces. Saskatchewan, for example, provides regulations on supervision ratios for neighbourhood walks and excursions, with more supervision needed on excursions. In other regulations, off-site trips are not mentioned, but practices are outlined in policy supports.



Discussion Questions

- What does a community miss out on when children are kept on the child care premises?
- How do children benefit from engaging with their community 'beyond the fence'?
- What should the role of parents be in supporting 'beyond the fence' experiences?
- How can Early Childhood Educators frame the importance of 'beyond the fence' experiences for parents?



8.2 Materials and Features

Children access the same outdoor space every day while in child care. The features and materials found in these spaces are intended to offer children a full range of learning and play experiences outdoors. If a space is dominated by a static play structure, children’s opportunities for imaginative and creative play is reduced. Such environments would suggest that outdoor play time is solely for physical activity rather than viewing outdoor play as a holistic environment that supports children’s development in all domains. The same amount of care and planning must go into the materials and features found outdoors as indoors. These spaces must become complete learning environments that support individual children’s needs and all different types of play and learning.



Recommendation

This regulation is the same for day care, family group care and out of school care. There is no mention of outdoor equipment for preschool programs since they are not required to have an outdoor space.

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|---|---|
| <p>A licence holder must ensure that outdoor play equipment and play materials are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Safe and maintained in good repair,b. Developmentally appropriate for children, andc. Of sufficient quantity and variety for children. | <p>A licence holder must ensure that outdoor play equipment and play materials are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Safe and maintained in good repair,b. Developmentally appropriate for children,c. Of sufficient quantity and variety for children,d. Address all learning needs of children, ande. Engage children with the natural world. |

Additional regulations - The current regulations only address play equipment and is silent on other features that should be included in an outdoor play space. A variety of surfaces and shade/shelter are two recurring features of play spaces discussed in the promising practices documents, and addressing these in the regulations or policy would ensure they are included in play spaces. As regulations, these would be:

- Two or more natural surfaces are present in the play space.
- One-third of the play space is shaded by trees or other structures.

Policy and procedure support - Detailing type and amount of materials that could engage children with the natural world would give programs direction on this new regulation. Direction on appropriate natural surfaces and structures like awnings and tarps to provide shade would also benefit from policy direction.

Program plan - Adding a question to the program plan asking applicants to detail the range of materials that will be available to children in the outdoor space and how educators will ensure the safety of these materials would enhance the outdoor play spaces.

Support for the Recommendation



From the Research

- In a study of 16 child care centres in Vancouver, it was found that the static play structures were unoccupied 87% of the time.³⁴
- Physical activity was higher in programs with less fixed and more portable playground equipment.³⁸
- Adding natural features and loose parts has positive effects on children's play, social behaviour and mental health.²³
- When play is compared between a natural-oriented play space and a contemporary play structure, children in nature-oriented play spaces develop their play further and longer than children in the contemporary play space.³⁹



Promising Practices

SHADE – All four promising practice tools list shade as an important aspect of an outdoor space

- One-half to three-quarters of the outdoor space is shaded by trees or structure is listed as a best practice.³⁰
- Shade is provided to accommodate the total number of children in the classroom.³¹
- There are more than four different shade zones.³²
- Shade and protection from inclement weather are provided.³³

SURFACES – Three of four promising practice tools acknowledge that a variety of ground surfaces enhance the outdoor space

- A variety of ground surface.³¹
- There are more than four different surfaces.³²
- Use of asphalt is reduced; gardens, woods, natural pathways, and other natural elements are incorporated.³³

MATERIALS – All four promising practice tools give direction on the nature and amount of materials to provide

- Eight or more types of portable play equipment are available.³⁰
- Amount of portable play equipment is not limited; there is always something available for each child.³⁰
- Enough outdoor toys are available for all children.³¹
- At least four manufactured and four natural loose parts are available.³¹
- There are more than 12 types of loose parts that children can always use.³²
- Abundant loose parts are included in the outdoor space.³³

OTHER FEATURES

- There is a garden that provides enough fruit and/or vegetables to provide children meals or snacks during one or more seasons.³⁰
- The outdoor play space provides eight or more play areas.³⁰
- The overall impression of the outdoors is of a natural area and includes at least five of the following: variety of trees, shrubs, flowering plants, vines, topographic variation, variety of ground surfaces, smooth rocks, logs.³¹



Accreditation

Similar to section 8.1.1 Size, the following indicator supports the recommendation:

1.4 Children's development is supported through outdoor environments with active play spaces and opportunities to experience and learn about the natural world.

- Organize and equip the outdoor play space to provide a variety of developmental experiences and physical activities for children in a safe environment.
- Provide opportunities for children to explore and learn in natural settings.
- Provide opportunities for children to learn about how materials in nature are used in everyday life.



Flight

First-hand engagement with the natural world is recognized by Flight as follows:

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Diversity and Social Responsibility | Sustainable Future - Children develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world | Bringing all their senses to exploring nature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking pleasure in natural beauty • Connecting to and respecting the natural world |
| | Sustainable Future - Children learn to recognize and record patterns and relationships in nature | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing regularity, repetition, and changes in nature • Learning to systematically observe, name, and record natural phenomena • Raising questions about changes, connections, and causes, and undertaking first-hand investigations. |
| | Sustainable Future - Children learn environmentally and socially responsible practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in care of plants and domestic animals, and stewardship of local plant, insect, and animal life • Participating in local restoration and regeneration projects |



Other Provinces

Alberta's regulation on outdoor equipment is in line with regulations in other provinces, although the best practices manual provided by licensing in other provinces give more direction on outdoor space design and materials. Manitoba's Best Practices Licensing Manual, for example, recommends natural elements like trees, grass, flowers and water along with different surfaces like blacktop, grass, hills and paths *"to inspire children to engage in creative explorations with nature."*⁴⁰



Discussion Questions

- When outdoor spaces are dominated by rubber surfaces and plastic toys, what experiences are children missing out on?
- What is it like to play on asphalt or a black rubber surface in the blazing sun?
- What types of features or materials could lengthen outdoor play time on a cold, windy day?

8.3 Abundant Time

One of the best ways to ensure children are getting outside is to have the regulations outline a minimum daily outdoor play requirement. Such a change to the regulations may contribute to sparking changes in how program planning occurs, with the outdoor space being viewed as equally important to indoor space. Educators may view the outdoor space as a place where children engage in all types of play and learning instead of only for physical activity. This shift in thinking may support educators in expanding their knowledge and application of the current research to begin to see outdoor spaces as places for children to develop all types of learning.



Recommendations

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|--|---|
| Day care and Group Family Care There is no mention of an amount of time. | Full-time programs Children will be outside at least twice a day for a minimum of: 60 minutes/day for children ages 12 months-<3 years. 90 minutes/day for children ages 3-5 years. Part-time programs Children will be outside once a day for a minimum: 30 minutes/day for children ages 12 months-<3 years. 45 minutes/day for children ages 3-5 years. |
| Out of School Care There is no mention of an amount of time. | Full day programs (vacation, professional development days, etc.) Children will be outside at least twice a day for a minimum of 90 minutes/day. Part day programs Children will be outside at least once a day for a minimum total of 45 minutes/day. |
| Pre-school There is no mention of an amount of time. | Children will be outside at least twice a week for a total of 60 minutes/week. |

Support for the Recommendation



From the research

- Childcare centres have been found to be largely sedentary settings.^{41,42}
- Children move more and sit less when they play outside.^{16,17}
- The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines offer the following guidelines for physical activity:
- Toddlers get 180 minutes of physical activity at any level (light/moderate/ vigorous) spread throughout the day.⁴³
- Preschoolers get 180 minutes of physical activity throughout the day with at least 60 minutes of energetic play.⁴³
- Children ages 5-12 years need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day.⁴⁴



Promising Practice

Two of the four promising practice tools list an amount of time children should spend outdoors.

- At least twice a day for at least 30 minutes each period.³¹
- Children ages 2-5 years should be outside three times a day for a total of 90 minutes, or 45 minutes for half-day programs.³⁰
- 13-24 month olds should be outside three times a day for a total of 60 minutes, or 30 minutes for half-day programs.³⁰
- 0-12 month olds should get outside two times a day, once a day for half-day programs.³⁰



Accreditation

The following indicator supports the recommendation:

2.2 Child care programs promote physical wellness in all children and incorporate physical literacy in everyday programming.

- *Provide a variety of recreational resources to support physical activities appropriate for the season.*
- *Intentionally plan for a variety of indoor and outdoor physical experiences each day.*



Other Provinces

British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have regulations or directives for outdoor play time spanning from 60 minutes (British Columbia, Nova Scotia) to 120 minutes (Ontario, New Brunswick). Nova Scotia breaks the time down into 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon. Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador do not list a specific amount of time, but children must go outside every day. The regulations add conditions such as 'weather permitting' or 'advised not to go outside', the latter in writing by a physician or parent. The regulations also vary depending on the length of the program with full day programs requiring more outdoor time than half-day programs.



Discussion Questions

- How would educators need to change how they use the outdoor time and their programming processes if they were required to be outside every day?
- What changes to daily program routines would need to happen to accommodate this regulation change?
- How might the attitudes of the children, families and educators shift about the outdoor with this regulation change?

8.4 Temperature and Weather Conditions

Temperature and weather conditions must be addressed if regulations are requiring a specific amount of time outdoors every day. Programs need guidance, either as a regulation change or policy and procedure statement, on this, as it is a frequent topic of questions to Alberta Health Services and Alberta Child Care Licensing. Currently, each program determines their own temperature and weather limits.



Recommendation

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|---|--|
| There is no mention of temperature limitations. | If children and educators have appropriate clothing and no other extreme weather conditions are present, children will go outside unless: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The temperature is -25°C or below with or without the wind-chill• The temperature is +33°C or above |

Policy support - If temperature cannot be added to the regulations, policy would be a place to outline what are appropriate weather conditions or how programs can determine an appropriate temperature/weather policy for their specific program.

Support for the Recommendation



From the Research

- -25°C with or without a windchill factor, or when the windchill factor is -28°C OR lower.³⁵

Other Provinces

Three provinces list the temperature limits in their regulations:



- Manitoba: -25°C with or without windchill
- Nova Scotia: -25°C with or without a windchill factor, or when the windchill factor is -28°C OR lower
- New Brunswick: -20°C with windchill; (ii) the temperature is below -20°C; (iii) the temperature is +33°C with humidity or above



Discussion Questions

- What life skills do children miss out on when outdoor play is limited to 'nice' weather?
- What programming strategies or elements can be added to outdoor spaces to support play in all weather?
- How would educator planning and practice need to adjust for outdoor play in all kinds of weather such as cold, rain, heat and snow?

8.5 Educators

Educators are the gatekeepers of children's outdoor experiences in childcare settings. If they are not trained in outdoor play pedagogy or do not value the outdoors as a complete learning environment, it is less likely that children in their care will have access to these spaces and experiences.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) recently released *Qualified Educators, Quality Care* outlining a 10-year plan to professionalize the workforce. Step one of this plan is raising the minimum qualification for early childhood educators in the regulations to a two-year diploma.⁴⁵ The level of qualifications of early childhood educators is a key predictor of quality in early learning and childcare programs.⁴⁵

Outdoor play is a key element of quality early learning environments and, as such, increasing the minimum standard to a two-year diploma will increase educators' skills and knowledge and could lead to more outdoor play for children if explicit outdoor play pedagogy is a requirement in the diploma program.¹ Supporting this regulation change is foundational to increasing outdoor play experiences for children.



Recommendation

| Current Regulation | Proposed Change |
|---|--|
| Child Development Assistant minimum standard (54-hour course) | Two-year diploma is the minimum standard |

Support for the Recommendation



From the Research

- In a survey of 896 early childhood educators who signed up for an online outdoor play course, 72% indicated they had limited knowledge about outdoor play theory before beginning the course, and 89% indicated that the online course was their first exposure to outdoor play pedagogy.⁴⁶
- 70% of participants in the online course indicated they were not familiar with the process of conducting a risk-benefit assessment.⁴⁷



Promising Practices

Although none of the promising practice tools specifically mention the level of education required, all four of the tools describe the professional learning required by educators to support quality outdoor play spaces and experiences. This supports the importance of specialized training in outdoor play pedagogy.

- Educators receive professional development on outdoor play and learning two or more times a year.³⁰
- Educators seek professional development opportunities to enhance play and learning.³¹
- Educators are involved in professional development focused on outdoor play more than three times a month.³²
- Educators seek out opportunities to reflect, individually and with colleagues, on their professional practice.³³

Flight acknowledges the important role educators have in nurturing children's disposition to learn and their role as co-learner, co-researcher, co-imager of possibilities working in relationship with children, families and community.



Discussion Questions

- What skills and knowledge do educators need to create engaging outdoor play spaces and experiences?
- How is working with children different outdoors than indoors?
- What are the benefits to the educator when they take children's learning outdoors?



9. Immersive Outdoor and Nature Programs

The recommendations above are focused on the more conventional settings that make up the majority of child care provision in Alberta. Currently, most outdoor and nature programs based on an outdoor play pedagogy philosophy operate as recreation programs avoiding the licensing process. These programs are not eligible for subsidy and cannot provide full day child care.

If a program is interested in providing an immersive outdoor and nature program, there are regulations that may hinder the licensing process and having to comply with these regulations would make licensing for these programs prohibitive.⁴⁸ This could be addressed in a couple of different ways. First, there is a category in the Alberta regulations called “Innovative child care program” that could be applied to these types of programs. Currently, there are no outdoor/nature programs licensed under this category. A second option would be to create a new schedule within the regulations to support outdoor/nature programming.

Below are some of the regulations that currently need adjustment to accommodate this type of programming.

9.1 Indoor Space

If children enrolled in a nature-based outdoor program are spending the majority of the time outdoors in a large natural environment, they would rarely be inside. Having to provide an indoor space that meets regulations (3m²/child) and is close to an engaging outdoor learning space like a forest or park is challenging for these programs. Allowing a space like a tent or yurt may accommodate program needs and safety concerns.

9.2 Layout of Premises

Under this regulation, washroom fixtures must be conveniently located and accessible to children, areas for child care must have a layout that is conducive to effective supervision and adequate space must be designated for administrative and staff needs. These requirements may be challenging to meet in an outdoor program. Safe alternatives can be found that would meet the needs of children and staff.



10. Next Steps

The recommendations in this document are based on the best available research and feedback from experts in the field--it is a living document open to changes as new research and ideas come forward.

Changing regulations is only one piece of the puzzle, but it is an important piece. Changing regulations to support more quality outdoor play sends a signal to program directors and educators that this is fundamentally important to children's well-being. All children deserve highly qualified educators, engaging spaces and abundant time outside.

Ultimately, the goal of this work is to inform changes to child care licensing regulations in Alberta. Regulations are due to be opened for renewal in 2020, and this document can be a source of information and ideas for policy makers and organizations included in the consultation process. This document is meant to be used for precisely this purpose.



This document is intended to be shared widely with Early Childhood Educators, post-secondary institutions, professional associations and government leaders. Anyone can take this document and the communication pieces and share it.

Do we need to wait for regulations to change before implementing more outdoor play? No! The recommendations made in this document *can* be implemented in programs and are an excellent starting point. Lead the way, and show your colleagues what is possible! Get Outside and Play!

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