

# Report Summary

## Outdoor Play in Child Care Settings

Recommendations for Child Care Licensing in Alberta

*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.*



**Get Outside  
& Play**

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 in Alberta 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 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.

*Continue reading this summary for a quick glance at the regulation recommendations or view the full paper for all the details at: [getoutsideandplay.ca/regulations](http://getoutsideandplay.ca/regulations).*

# Space to Play

Running, jumping, hiding, creating, building, contemplating – children need space for all these activities and so much more when they are outdoors. 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.



## Regulation Recommendation

Increase the amount of outdoor space required per child in all licensed child care programs to 7m<sup>2</sup> per child.

### Get Active

At a time when we are very sedentary and our children are struggling to get enough physical activity to be healthy, providing our children with sufficient space to run, jump and explore is essential to their well-being. The research suggests that children are more active in larger play spaces.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Complete Learning Environments

Outdoor spaces are complete learning environments where curiosity is sparked and learning flourishes. Children need access to a variety of experiences when outdoors, and this requires space. The promising practice tools that have taken the research and created practical suggestions for child care programs recommend the following:

- The space includes 8 or more play areas.<sup>3</sup>
- The outdoor space provides more than six green zones and six quiet learning zones.<sup>4</sup>
- Individual and group gathering areas, nooks and crannies, areas designed to encourage adventure and exploration.<sup>5</sup>

These tools do not list a specific amount of space, but in order to incorporate all the different types of learning and play outdoors, more space is needed.

### 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 7m<sup>2</sup>. Saskatchewan Child Care Regulations also recommend 7m<sup>2</sup>, 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 25m<sup>2</sup>, where currently only 4.5m<sup>2</sup> per child 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.



## Regulation Recommendations

Ensure all programs have an outdoor space on-site or one that is easily accessible. Provide guidance through policy and procedures for off-site experiences.

### In the Fence

Children in full day programs need easy access to outdoor space, ideally adjacent to the indoor space.<sup>6</sup> 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.

### Beyond the Fence

In addition to space adjacent to the centre, children need and benefit from play opportunities within their community. Opportunities to visit nearby nature, parks, gardens and people in the community surrounding the program premises is an important aspect of child development, supporting the development of a sense of belonging to the wider world. Promising practice tools highlight the importance of getting beyond the fence to explore community connections and resources.<sup>3,5,7</sup>

### Other Provinces

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

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

- How can educators effectively link the indoor and outdoor spaces?
- What role does facility design play in connecting the indoor and outdoor environment?
- What does a community miss out on when children are kept on the child care premises?

# Materials and Features

Children access the same outdoor space every day while in child care. The features and materials found in these spaces need to offer children a full range of learning and play experiences. These spaces must become complete learning environments that support individual children's needs and all different types of play and learning.



## Regulation Recommendations

Enhance the materials in the outdoor space to include natural items.

Add two or more natural surfaces and sufficient shade as features of the play space.

### Engaging Materials, Focus on Nature

Many play spaces in child care settings are dominated by a static play structure and plastic toys, sometimes with rubber or artificial turf as the surface. Nature is hard to find, yet there is evidence that natural features and loose parts have positive effects on children's play, social behaviour and mental health.<sup>8</sup> When play is compared between a natural-oriented play space and a contemporary play structure, children develop their play further and longer in the natural play space.<sup>9</sup> Child care spaces need nature.

In addition to increasing access to natural features and materials, loose parts and portable equipment enhance play opportunities and have been found to increase physical activity.<sup>10</sup> The promising practice tools, that have taken the research and created practical suggestions for child care programs, recommend the following:

- Eight or more types of portable play equipment are available.<sup>3</sup>
- At least four manufactured and four natural loose parts are available.<sup>7</sup>
- There are more than 12 types of loose parts that children can always use.<sup>4</sup>

### Other Provinces

Alberta's regulation on outdoor equipment is in line with regulations in other provinces, although the best practices manuals 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."<sup>11</sup>

### 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?



# 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, resulting in more engaging spaces and experiences for children outdoors.



## Regulation Recommendation

Institute a minimum daily outdoor play time requirement based on age and type of program.

### Children Are More Active Outside

Child care centres have been found to be largely sedentary settings,<sup>12,13</sup> and we know children need to move more. The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines offer clear recommendations for physical activity:

- Toddlers get 180 minutes of physical activity at any level spread throughout the day.<sup>14</sup>
- Preschoolers get 180 minutes of physical activity throughout the day with at least 60 minutes of energetic play.<sup>14</sup>
- Children ages 5-12 years need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day.<sup>15</sup>

Research shows that children move more and sit less when they play outside.<sup>16,17</sup> Increasing outdoor time will increase physical activity.

The promising practice tools that have taken the research and created practical suggestions for child care programs recommend the following amount of time outdoors:

- At least twice a day for at least 30 minutes each period.<sup>7</sup>
- 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.<sup>3</sup>
- 13-24 month olds should be outside three times a day for a total of 60 minutes, or 30 minutes for half-day programs.<sup>3</sup>
- 0-12 month olds should get outside two times a day, once a day for half-day programs.<sup>3</sup>

### Other Provinces

British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have regulations or directives for outdoor play time spanning from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. 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.

### 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?
- How might the attitudes of the children, families and educators shift about the outdoor with this regulation change?

# 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.



## Regulation Recommendation

Specify a temperature range for outdoor play to be included in the regulations.

### Other Provinces

Three provinces list the temperature limits in their regulations:

- Manitoba:  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$  with or without windchill
- Nova Scotia:  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$  with or without a windchill factor, or when the windchill factor is  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$  OR lower
- New Brunswick:  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  with windchill; (ii) the temperature is below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; (iii) the temperature is  $+33^{\circ}\text{C}$  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?

# Educators

Educators require training in outdoor play pedagogy to fully embrace the outdoors as a complete learning environment. One way to accomplish this is to increase the minimum education standard for early childhood educators.

## Regulation Recommendation

Propose a two-year diploma as the minimum standard for early childhood educators.

### 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





## Conclusion

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.



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!

See the full paper for all the details at: [getoutsideandplay.ca/regulations](https://getoutsideandplay.ca/regulations).

**Get Outside  
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