

Licensing Outdoor Child Care in British Columbia

Introducing Outdoor Child Care

Outdoor Child Care encompasses a variety of high-quality, educational, outdoor, preschool-age child care programs. Although Outdoor Child Care is not yet legislated in British Columbia (B.C. Ministry of Attorney General, 2020), there are outdoor programs for preschool-age children in B.C. Outdoor child care is well-established in European countries, including Denmark, Germany, Scotland, and the UK



(Robertson, 2008) and in development as a pilot project in Washington State (WA DCYF, 2019). Research has demonstrated the important role nature plays in supporting healthy development of children, especially within a context of fewer opportunities for outdoor play and more screen time (Forest School Canada, 2014; Zimanyi & Rossovska, 2020). Outdoor Child Care aligns remarkably well with the vision for early learning and care set out in the B.C. Early Learning Framework (British Columbia, 2019) and can address child care shortages by efficiently increasing child care spaces (DCYF, 2019). The Outdoor Child Care model presents a pathway to improve access to licensed child care spaces, while contributing to the health, wellbeing, and safety of children and families in British Columbia.

Benefits of Outdoor Child Care

Cognitive development and learning

As children spend time in nature, they gain environmental knowledge related to place and the more-than-human world through land-based, emergent, and inquiry-based learning (Gill, 2014; Zimanyi, & Rossovska, 2020).

Physical Health

Nature play leads to increased fitness among preschool-age children (Gill, 2014). Children acquire improved motor skills, self-regulation, and awareness of personal boundaries for safe activity (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017; Zimanyi & Rossovska, 2020).

Mental, Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Time in nature promotes mental health for diverse children (Gill, 2014), and is reported to have a “calming affect” (Zimanyi & Rossovska, 2020, p. 8). Children in nature demonstrate more complex and imaginative play, while developing “communities of safety” where children can rely on teachers and other students to care for them physically and emotionally (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017, p. 385).



Nature Connection

Children develop connections to nature that persist into adulthood as pro-environmental attitudes. Children have a stronger sense of place and respect and understanding of the more-than human world (Gill, 2014; Zimanyi & Rossovska, 2020).

Indigenous Approaches

Situated within traditional and likely unceded territories of local Indigenous communities, we recommend Outdoor Child Care programs in British Columbia develop relationships with local Indigenous communities and actively engage in learning about and honouring long histories of local Indigenous pedagogies. Teaching Indigenous histories promotes healthy perspectives about Indigenous people, while contributing to a welcoming environment for Indigenous children and their families (Forest School Canada, 2014). Outdoor programs are enriched through collaboration with local Indigenous communities and the incorporation of “Local Traditional Knowledges” in everyday practices, benefiting all participants (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017, p. 384; James, Dagon-Smith & Lahey, 2019; Lawson Foundation; 2019).

COVID-19 Response

The BC Centre for Disease Control has recommended child care programs “have children outside often” (BC CDC, 2020). Indeed, outdoor environments provide more air circulation, sunlight, and opportunities for social distancing, which all contribute to lower disease transmission. (Ratnesar-Shumate et al., 2020; Qian, 2020) The role of outdoors in COVID-19 responses has driven unprecedented international interest in outdoor programming for all its benefits (Brooks, 2020; Levenson, Parker-Pope, & Gorman, 2020).

Conclusion

The current advice to “have children outside often” is sound, not only to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, but also as a timeless health-promoting intervention and one strategy to address the unplanned mental and emotional tolls that COVID-19 restrictions have had on children and their families. Prior to COVID-19, the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health endorsed the statement: “Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development” and recommended “increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.” (CCMOOH, 2018). Early Childhood Educators currently dedicated to delivering outdoor preschool-age programs in British Columbia have the experience and knowledge to lead the way. However, they do not have a legislative framework to assist in addressing British Columbia’s child care shortage (Province of British Columbia, 2018), nor the support of applicable standards from Child Care Licensing. Outdoor Child Care Standards would guide these outdoor educators and assist licensed early childhood educators in appropriately adapting safety and hygiene policies written for the indoor centre context as they, too, take more of their programming outdoors. Immediate action toward licensing Outdoor Child Care in British Columbia will address both long-term and recent COVID-related challenges.



Discussion Questions

1. What are the next steps towards legislative change that allows Outdoor Child Care and the development of accepted Outdoor Child Care Standards for British Columbia?
2. Who can we engage as partners in this process?
3. What additional information is needed to move forward?

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Appendix

Leading the way: Washington Outdoor Preschool Pilot

In 2017, Washington identified more than 40 outdoor preschool programs operating without a license. Similar to British Columbia, they faced a significant child care shortage and decided these programs could be modified to provide much-needed child care spaces. In 2017, the State of Washington established an Outdoor Preschool Pilot project in order to “expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs, and to further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington’s children and families” (WA DCYF, 2019, p. 2). As of March 2019, Washington had modified legislation, established interim Outdoor Preschool Standards, and provided six provisional Outdoor Preschool licenses. In the pilot model, enhanced educator qualifications and policies replace the need for indoor centres.

A note on terminology:

Unlike British Columbia, Washington does not distinguish between “Preschool” and “Group Child Care” for preschool-aged children. This is why we have decided to use the term “Child Care” to suit B.C.’s language, even though we draw significant inspiration from the project in Washington.

Highlights of Washington’s Outdoor Preschool Standards:

- 1:6 educator-child ratio: as opposed to 1:10 in centre-based preschools
- Required benefit-risk assessments
- Additional ECE training: background required in Outdoor or Environmental Education
- Curriculum elements addressing self-regulation and nature
- Adapted hygiene standards
- Weather-related emergency procedures