



BRINGING CHILDREN OUTSIDE

A Guide for Parents, Families
and Educators



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This guide was developed through my relationships on and with Treaty 1 Land. Treaty 1 is Anishinaabeg Land, Anisininew Land, Ininiwak/Nehethowuk Land, Oceti Sakowin/Dakota Oyate Land, and the Homeland of the Métis Nation. Many other Indigenous Nations know this land as a place of significance, including the Denesuline and the Inuit Peoples, some who have been living here for generations. (1)

Living and growing up here, Treaty 1 Land is the land I am in deepest relationship with and it is land that was stolen from Indigenous Peoples through acts of genocide and colonization. (2) My family has not always been here. Our roots are Russian Mennonite, Dutch and Belgian. My Mennonite ancestors tell stories about Métis neighbours helping them survive when they came here by sharing medicines, knowledge and care. I have continued to learn and benefit from Indigenous teachings. These teachings share that through decolonization, supporting Indigenous Sovereignty and building relationships with the land and each other, we can all experience the care, abundance and gifts the land offers us each season.

“Indigenous cultural revitalization can also enrich Canada’s social mosaic while simultaneously strengthening the identities of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples”⁽³⁾



(1) University of Winnipeg, 2026.

(2) <https://humanrights.ca/news/confronting-genocide-canada>, 2018.

(3) “Anishinaabe Perspectives: A Study of the Cultural Dimensions of Well-Being in Primary and Secondary Education in Manitoba”, Frank Deer, 2016.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was created to support parents, families and educators to bring children outside more often. Many of us have experiences where children develop strong preferences or habits for indoor play and learning, efforts to get outside become increasingly challenging and well-being suffers. Alternatively, children may request time outside but parents, families and educators avoid outdoor play and learning because they lack the skills, tools, confidence or resources to feel safe outside.

This guide uses well-being research to outline evidence-based benefits of outdoor play and learning, as well as practical tools to consider risk and safety, how to choose the right space and what to wear. The hope is that the information provided helps to increase the ease and frequency of children's time spent outdoors with the goal of improving their overall well-being.

Well-being can be cultivated through intentional efforts in awareness, connection, insight and purpose.⁽⁴⁾



(4) "The plasticity of well-being: A training-based Framework for the cultivation of human flourishing" by Cortland J. Dahla, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhalla, and Richard J. Davidsona, October 2020.

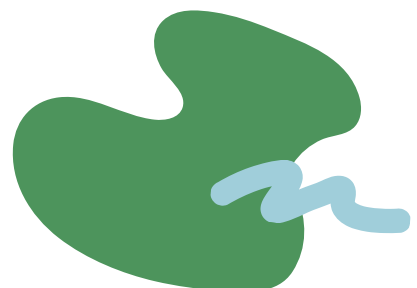




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BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY & LEARNING

DEVELOPING AWARENESS

Awareness can refer to “a heightened and flexible attentiveness to perceptual impressions in one’s environment, as well as internal cues, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions.” (5)

Increased awareness and attention has been linked to improvements in psychological functioning. (6)

Outdoor play and learning encourages children to develop environmental awareness through observation of their surroundings. (7)

They also learn to develop awareness of their bodily sensations and internal cues if they are feeling too hot, too cold or unsafe.

Further, in many Forest School Programs, children are encouraged to develop an awareness of their desires (thoughts and emotions) related to what they would like to play, learn or create outside. (8)



(5) (6) “The plasticity of well-being: A training-based Framework for the cultivation of human flourishing” by Cortland J. Dahla, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhalla, and Richard J. Davidsona, 2020.

(7) “The Forest School impact on children: reviewing two decades of research” by Ziad F. Dabaja, 2021.

(8) Forest and Nature School Pedagogies are “Child-led – children have a choice, in what activities they chose to do, how to do and develop those activities, including questions arising from them.” “Journeys through forest school: a model for understanding diverse educational experiences of children”, Frances Harris, 2026.

SUPPORTING AWARENESS

(6)

Tools & Resources:

Field guides (birds, trees, bugs, animals, plants)

Binoculars and magnifying glasses

Clipboards, paper or field journals, pencils

Extra clothing layer (sweater, jacket, mittens, etc.)



Prompts:

Invite children to watch the river change overtime and ask what they see

Invite children to listen to the noises around them and ask who they hear

When walking, ask: “does anything here look familiar?”

Model environmental observations (ie. “This tree is so wide! I wonder how many arms it would take to give it a hug! Does anyone want to try?”)

If a child says they are cold, ask: “what could you do to warm your body up?”

If they do not know, offer options such as putting another warm layer on* or moving their body. Next time they are cold, ask them the same question.

 A Rinky Ronk a Rosy Ray,
Good Morning, Good Morning
on a _____ day! (9)

(9) Song, Riverview Ashland Forest Nursery Program. Katie Daman, Personal Observations, 2026. The song is sung three times with actions and children are invited to fill in the blank each time.

*Note, sometimes children do not want to add a layer as they are worried about getting cold when taking off their jacket to add a layer. Investigate, be curious, ask questions and problem-solve together.

WHAT TO WEAR

Children are all different – helping your child develop the awareness of their own body’s needs and how to communicate these needs will take time and practice!

Clothing Recommendations

Fall	Winter
Pants base layer (optional)	Top & Bottom base layers (tuck shirt into bottom to retain warmth)
Long pants & shirt	Pants, shirt & warm sweater
Sweater	Snowsuit (jacket & snowpants)
Jacket	Warm socks (wool) & warm boots
Light mittens	Mini mitten layer & warm mittens
Light hat	Neck warmer/scarf & toque
Spring	Summer
Same as Fall except add...	Long pants (safety)
Waterproof rain clothes (pants, jacket, rubber boots)	Hat with brim (sun hat)
Extra dry socks	Long shirt (bugs)

Additional Tips

Polyester pajamas are an affordable base layer option. Closed-toed shoes are the safest option for outdoor play. Thick wool socks are best, if possible, in winter.

Consider children’s sensory needs if they do not want to put on their winter gear and include them in their clothing choices. You can ask, “does this feel comfortable?” or “what part feels uncomfortable?”



BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY & LEARNING

GROWING CONNECTION

Studies show that connection based practices can strengthen the capacity for self-regulation, decrease anxiety and increase positive emotions. (10)

Outdoor play and learning encourages children to grow their connection to the land, particularly when using place-based or Indigenous land-based approaches that encourage children to develop familiarity, consistency and relationship to place. (11)

“Unfortunately, most people today have become displaced with their connection to earth due to modernity”⁽¹²⁾



(10) “The plasticity of well-being: A training-based Framework for the cultivation of human flourishing” by Cortland J. Dahla, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhalla, and Richard J. Davidsons, October 2020.

(11) “Journeys through forest school: a model for understanding diverse educational experiences of children”, Frances Harris, 2026.

(12) “Anishinaabe Perspectives: A Study of the Cultural Dimensions of Well-Being in Primary and Secondary Education in Manitoba”, Frank Deer, 2016, p. 162.

SUPPORTING CONNECTION



Tools & Resources:

Field guides (birds, trees, bugs, animals, plants)

Indigenous place and animal names

Storybooks about land & treaties

Maps (Historic, current, handmade)



Prompts:

Foster relationships with neighbours, community members, Elders

Offer a seasonal scavenger hunts with Indigenous place and animal names

Invite children to create their own place-based map together

Harvest plants and grow food together





FINDING THE RIGHT SPACE

Considerations

- Does the place you're playing support consistency, familiarity and a long-term relationship? An ideal site will allow for regular visits.

Repeated visits help children develop a strong relationship to the site as well as a feeling of empathy towards nature⁽¹³⁾

- An ideal site that you're spending extended time at has shade and sun.
- An ideal site has trees for climbing and attaching ropes or tarps.
- Who is already there that you're sharing space with (humans, plants, animals)? Can you develop a healthy connection to those you're sharing space with? An ideal site allows you to grow positive relationships in the community as well as to the land. This considers environmental impact. (14)

(13) "The Forest School impact on children: reviewing two decades of research" by Ziad F. Dabaja, 2021.

(14) Personal experience, CCA /ECE III In Training, Riverview Ashland FNS, 2024-2026.

BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY & LEARNING

EXPLORING PURPOSE

Purpose can be defined as “clarity concerning personally meaningful aims and values” and is often connected to positively contributing to one’s community. Studies show purpose is “central to healthy psychological functioning”. (15)

In Forest and Nature School pedagogies, children are encouraged to choose what types of activities they would like to do. Outdoor play and learning can include a wide range of activities (including risky play) in multiple domains such as tool use, building with sticks or using ropes, painting, climbing or cooking . (16)

This approach can help children develop an awareness of their current capabilities and desired future capabilities for “what they are able to do and to be”. (17) In this way, inquiry-based, child-led outdoor play and learning can positively contribute to exploring purpose and supporting well-being.



(15) “The plasticity of well-being: A training-based Framework for the cultivation of human flourishing” by Cortland J. Dahla, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhalla, and Richard J. Davidsona, October 2020.

(16) “Journeys through forest school: a model for understanding diverse educational experiences of children”, Frances Harris, 2026.

(17) “Creating Capabilities,” by Martha Craven Nussbalm, 2011.

SUPPORTING PURPOSE



Tools & Resources:

Ropes & shovels

Tools (hammer, hand drill, whittling knives, mallet)

Bowls, spoons, extra water

Sleds, wagon

Prompts:

Offer opportunities for creativity

Invite children to pull sleds or wagons, if desired

Encourage experimentation and failure

Invite children into shared projects (fixing, building, etc.)

If a child is working on a project, ask: "Do you need tools or supplies to help you?"



RISKY PLAY

To engage children's capabilities, risky play is often encouraged in Forest and Nature School's pedagogical approach. "Outdoor risky play provides developmental and health benefits for children, such as risk-assessment skills, increased physical activity and well-being and promoting social competencies and resilience." (18)

What is "Risky Play"?

Simply put, **risk-taking involves the possibility for both rewards and costs, with an uncertain outcome.** "Risky play has been defined as thrilling and challenging forms of play with the potential for physical harm". (19)



Commonly Avoided Risks

Falling, scraps & cuts, bruises, sun & cold exposure, and insect bites are commonly avoided risks in Canada. However, Canadian studies show a lack of risky, unstructured play, may be at a cost to healthy child development such as "reduced capacity for judgement, creativity, confidence and potentially increase phobias". (20)

"Children are competent beings... they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage in activities and environments they are exposed to when developmental norms are taken into consideration". (21)

(18) (19) (20) (21) "Articulating outdoor risky play in early childhood education: voices of forest and nature school practitioners," by Nevin J. Harper and Patricia Obee, 2021.

RISK ASSESSMENTS

Supporting Safe and Positive Learning Environments

When parents, families and educators are equipped with the skills and tools to support risky play, risks can be reduced. Risk assessments are one tool in which this is possible. Risk assessments make an effort to identify “all possible scenarios and solutions for risk-mitigation”. (22) This can be done as a written assessment ahead of time in anticipation of the type of play that might occur, or it can be done as a more casual dynamic assessment when a risk is introduced into play. Both types of assessment are most effective when children are involved in the process. (23)

Examples of risk assessments are included in the following pages.



Practicing & Communicating

Learning how to safely assess risk is not difficult, but does take some practice. Communication between educators, parents, families and policy makers is an important part of this process. Successful strategies educators have used to support risky play include: “being firm in the rationale for and practice of risky play, keeping detailed documentation of risk assessment, engaging in constant risk-assessment involving children in the process, being transparent with licensing officers and conveying intent of practice, inviting the parents to risky play activities, engaging in offsite fieldtrips, and looking for ways around unclear policies”. (24)

(22) (23) (24) “Articulating outdoor risky play in early childhood education: voices of forest and nature school practitioners,” by Nevin J. Harper and Patricia Obee, 2021.

EXAMPLES

Experience Benefit and Risk Assessment

Group details: Forest Nursery Program, up to twelve children, 3-5 years old

Assessment carried out by: NAME
Date: X Review date: X

Experience	Benefits	Hazards and Risks	Level of Risk	Control Measures	New Level of Risk
Building Forts	Creative problem solving Heavy work Collaboration Extending dramatic play Relationship with the land Fun, Joy	Being hidden from/ lost to educators, injury from falling branches,	L	Educators maintain accurate attendance lists. Educators work with children to model safe construction, material choice	L
Ropes	Fine motor skills Practical outdoor skill Extending dramatic play Extending building and engineering projects Collaboration Fun, Joy	Risk of strangulation, injury from ropes not properly tied/secured, Injury from tension/release or tripping	M	Children ask to use ropes and return when done. Educators know where all ropes are and supervise play. Educators teach appropriate knots for use.	L
Climbing trees	Large motor skills including coordination, balance, vestibular sense, strength Prediction and planning Extending dramatic play Observation and relationship with the land Building confidence Fun, Joy	Injury from falling to ground or onto things below. Injury from climber falling on someone (concussion, cuts, scrapes, bumps and bruises)	H	Designate climbing area with rope circle. Direct supervision (spotting) for climbing above 4 ft. Assess climbing tree and area below with children.	M

EXAMPLES

Dynamic Risk Assessment

Location/Setting:

Assessment carried out by:

Date:

Child's description of play:	Practitioner observation of play:	
Hazards and Risks identified by practitioner and child:		Risk level:
Changes proposed by practitioner and child to make it safer:		New risk level:
Proceed after changes?:		

RESOURCES

Here are some additional resources to learn more about Outdoor Play and Learning, as well as the Forest and Nature School Approach.

Media & Publications

[Go Climb a Tree \(CBC\)](#)

[Absolutely Canadian: Forest School Episode \(CBC\)](#)

[Forest and Nature School in Canada](#)

Books

[Outdoor Experiential Learning in Canada](#)

[Teaching Where You Are : Weaving Indigenous and Slow Principles and Pedagogies](#)

[Renewal: Indigenous Perspectives on Land-Based Education In and Beyond the Classroom](#)

[Raising a Secure Child](#)

Blogs

[Maps at Forest Nursery](#)

[Our Neighbour Nettle](#)

[Loving our Maples](#)

[The Unspoken Words of Risky Play](#)

