



Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Philanthropic Sector)

SRDC Evaluation and Lessons Learned

LAWSON
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How to cite this document:

Lawson Foundation. Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Philanthropic Sector). December 2020. Available at lawson.ca/OPS-Philanthropic-Report.pdf.

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Acknowledgements

The Lawson Foundation wishes to express its profound gratitude to the leaders and team members of the 14 projects of the Outdoor Play Strategy. Their energy, passion, and commitment inspired every step of the Outdoor Play Strategy, driving significant impacts for children's outdoor play as detailed in this report. It was the Foundation's great pleasure and privilege to support this work. The Foundation thanks SRDC for its insights, support, and dedication to our collective learning through the developmental evaluation that informed this final report. Finally, the Foundation thanks Fuse Consulting for distilling and translating four years of detailed grantee reporting and SRDC evaluation reports into two final reports for publication. Photos were provided courtesy of several grantee organizations as noted throughout the report.

Cover image: *Elementary school children play with loose parts at recess.* | The OPAL project: Modelling outdoor play and learning in school communities, Earth Day Canada, Toronto, ON.

References (for Preface, p. 1)

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PREFACE Why the Lawson Foundation is investing in outdoor play

Children's outdoor play encompasses a wide range of experiences. Building a fort using natural and fabricated loose parts. Climbing a tree and gauging whether it is safe to jump off or wiser to climb back down. Burying their hands in the dirt to craft with mud, grow a garden, or simply experience the sensation. Sliding across ice-packed snow and painting a snowbank with food colouring.

Outdoor play has been associated with improved health, social and cognitive outcomes for children,¹ yet many barriers exist to its widespread implementation, including policy, lack of training and capacity, and societal attitudes toward risk.^{2,3}

“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.”

– Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

In 2013, the Lawson Foundation decided to explore **outdoor play as a lever to reverse the inactivity crisis and as an essential element to support healthy child development, the Foundation’s ultimate goal.**

Following an initial investment in research to develop the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, we launched the Outdoor Play Strategy. The vision of this strategy is to ensure that all children in Canada have access to high-quality and play-rich opportunities outdoors that support risk taking and healthy development. To that end, we committed \$2.7 million in initial funding to 14 projects across Canada that covered a broad spectrum of topics, sectors, and geographic reaches. Projects that received funding ranged in length from 12 to 36 months over 2016–2018, often had strong community connections, and presented clear short- and long-term impacts for children and communities. Over the course of the Strategy, the total investment rose to \$4.5 M including additional granting and programming resources to convene the projects.

This report summarizes the findings of the third-party evaluation of the Strategy as a whole, as conducted by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), including valuable learnings and reflections to help direct the Foundation’s next steps. This report contains the findings most relevant to the philanthropic sector. To learn more about project learnings of interest to the outdoor play sector, we invite you to read the *Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Outdoor Play Sector)* at lawson.ca/OPS-OP-report.pdf.

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Outdoor Play Strategy

The Outdoor Play Strategy (OPS)

In 2016, the Lawson Foundation launched the *Outdoor Play Strategy*: an exploration of community-level action as part of a wider movement to promote outdoor play as a means to promote healthy child development.

Goals of the Outdoor Play Strategy

The ultimate vision of the Strategy is that *all children in Canada have access to high-quality, play-rich opportunities outdoors that support risk taking and healthy development.*

The Strategy breaks this vision into three main goals:

1. **Enhance understanding** of what is needed to normalize and create enabling environments for outdoor play.
2. **Foster use of learning** from the Strategy in communities of funded projects and elsewhere to increase opportunities for children's self-directed play outdoors in all settings.
3. **Support the development of a strong, coordinated, multi-sectoral national coalition** of sector leaders, funders, and policy makers supporting children's outdoor play at multiple levels.

The approach

The Foundation adopted the following four approaches to achieve the goals of the Outdoor Play Strategy.

1. **Fund multiple projects in various sectors and with diverse approaches**
2. **Foster a cohort approach**
3. **Develop collaborative relationships**
4. **Embed evaluation**

The Lawson Foundation contracted the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to develop and conduct a developmental evaluation. The aim of evaluation was to understand the strategic impact of the Lawson Foundation's investment in the Strategy, and how and to what extent its support has added value to individual projects and the emerging movement of outdoor play in Canada. SRDC collected quotes from grantees during interviews and as part of the evaluation process; many of these quotes appear throughout this report to reflect grantee perspectives. Quotes have been left anonymous to maintain confidentiality.

As part of the evaluation, SRDC worked with the Foundation to develop a theory of change (p. 3) that explains the rationale, strengths/challenges, desired long-term results, factors influencing change, strategies/approach, and assumptions of the Outdoor Play Strategy in greater detail.

The components of the Strategy are summarized by a logic model (p. 4) that was developed by SRDC in partnership with the Foundation and the grantees. The logic model provided the framework for the Foundation and grantees to see how projects fit into the larger vision and goals, assess progress to date and look forward to their next steps.

"The strength of the breadth of the cohort helped push forward our understanding of what those different communities look like, and what play advocacy looks like in policy development or early childhood education, that sort of thing." – Grantee

Outdoor Play Strategy theory of change

RATIONALE/NEED

The Lawson Foundation supports healthy child development. As a private national foundation, it seeks to identify areas where funding, convening and thought leadership could help move the needle on an issue.

Children in Canada are not getting enough outdoor play, with its risks, which is essential for healthy development.

Community tools, training, resources and implementation approaches that look beyond playgrounds are required. Designated funding for a coordinated approach to outdoor play that recognizes the importance of risk does not currently exist.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

STRENGTHS

The Foundation's strong track record of identifying and convening promising projects and commitment to the investment needed to support the Strategy.

The cohort's expertise and experience, commitment to share learning with one another and engage with their networks, and contribution to the evaluation of the Strategy.

CHALLENGES

Keeping diverse projects across Canada connected over three years.

Balancing a safe internal learning space with sharing learning and connecting externally.

Gaps in the Strategy (social inclusion, Indigenous peoples, older youth, etc.) prevent it from reaching the full range of outdoor play populations and settings.

Additional partners and funders needed to achieve transformative change.

Some projects will need support to sustain results and continue to work beyond the Foundation's funding.

DESIRED LONG-TERM RESULTS

Enhanced understanding of what is needed to normalize and create enabling environments for outdoor play.

Learning from the Strategy is used within the cohort and more broadly to increase opportunities for children's self-directed play outdoors in all settings.

A strong, coordinated, multi-sectoral national coalition exists of sector leaders, funders and policy-makers supporting children's play at multiple levels.

All children in Canada have access to high-quality, play-rich outdoor environments that support risk-taking and healthy development.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGE

Current policies and practices.

Societal attitudes (including negative press).

Increasing awareness and interest.

Funding and funder collaboration.

STRATEGIES/APPROACH

Fund projects in diverse sectors with a common focus on outdoor play.

Form a cohort of diverse but complementary organizations and projects.

Develop collaborative relationships with key stakeholders.

Evaluation is embedded in the Strategy to maximize knowledge-sharing, build capacity and improve implementation.

ASSUMPTIONS

A multi-sector approach will be of greater benefit than a targeted approach.

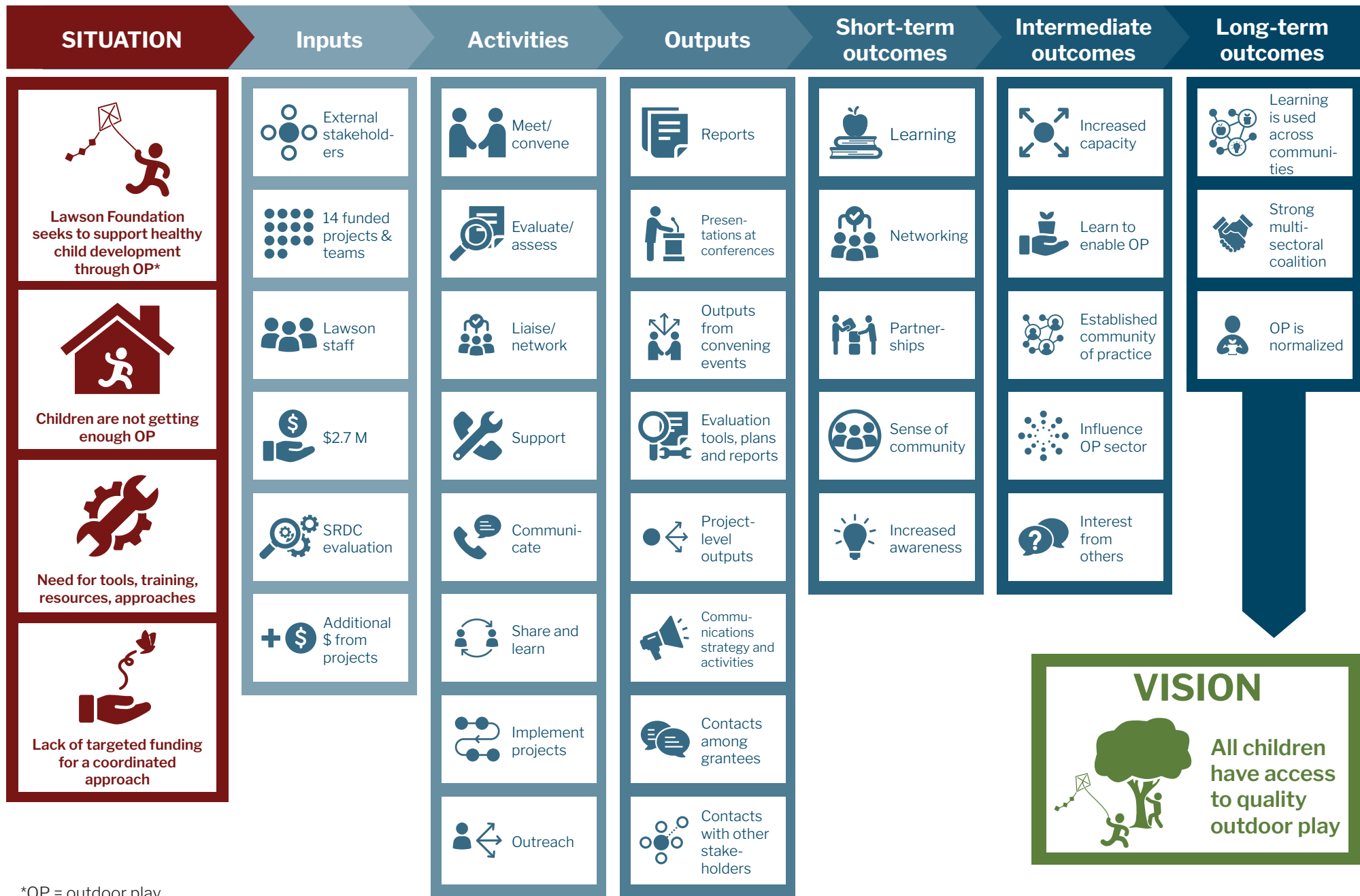
Working as a cohort will enhance each project's work, the Foundation's investment and potential for collective impact.

Evaluation can help the Lawson Foundation improve its grantmaking approach and help grantees enhance the usefulness of their outcomes.

Communities and other stakeholders will adopt the successful resources and implementation models developed under the Strategy, as well as learnings from challenges and failure.

Sharing learning from the Strategy and showcasing successful models will inspire more funders to invest in outdoor play.

Outdoor Play Strategy logic model



*OP = outdoor play

Meet the grantees: The Outdoor Play Strategy cohort

The following 14 grantee organizations and their project leaders formed the “cohort” of the Outdoor Play Strategy. The projects covered a wide range of sectors, interventions and geographic reaches (Fig. 1). To learn more about each project, we invite you to read the *Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy Final Report (Outdoor Play Sector)* at lawson.ca/OPS-OP-report.pdf. The timeline on page 7 provides the start and end dates for each project as well as key events at the Strategy level (e.g., the Foundation’s convening events), Evaluation level (e.g., grant reporting), and within the broader outdoor play sector (e.g., conferences).

Earth Day Canada* | The OPAL project: Modelling outdoor play and learning in school communities

Earth Day Canada provided training and coaching to pilot an established UK model, Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL), in six elementary schools in Toronto.

*Earth Day Canada changed its name to EcoKids.

Vivo for Healthier Generations | Play Ambassadors

Vivo implemented its Play Ambassadors training program in play facilitation for the recreation sector and provided free play opportunities at eight Calgary parks over two summers.

Ecosource | Dig into play!

Ecosource’s Dig into play! program increased opportunities for over 1,000 children 0–12 years old to re-discover outdoor, unstructured play in six community gardens across Ontario’s Peel Region. They also developed design considerations and best practices for other organizations to create nature experiences that incorporate gardening.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) | Children’s outdoor play experiences: Why they play and how they benefit

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health conducted focus groups and a large-scale survey of parents and children 11–13 years of age in London, Ontario schools to identify key barriers and determinants of children’s outdoor play.

KidActive | Active Outdoor Play Position Statement activation and impact

KidActive provided secretariat support for a collaborative leadership model to co-ordinate and gather existing and potential resources, social networks, data, opportunities and insights to further the reach and deepen the impact of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play across Canada. KidActive convened the Canadian Outdoor Play Working Group, which evolved into Outdoor Play Canada.

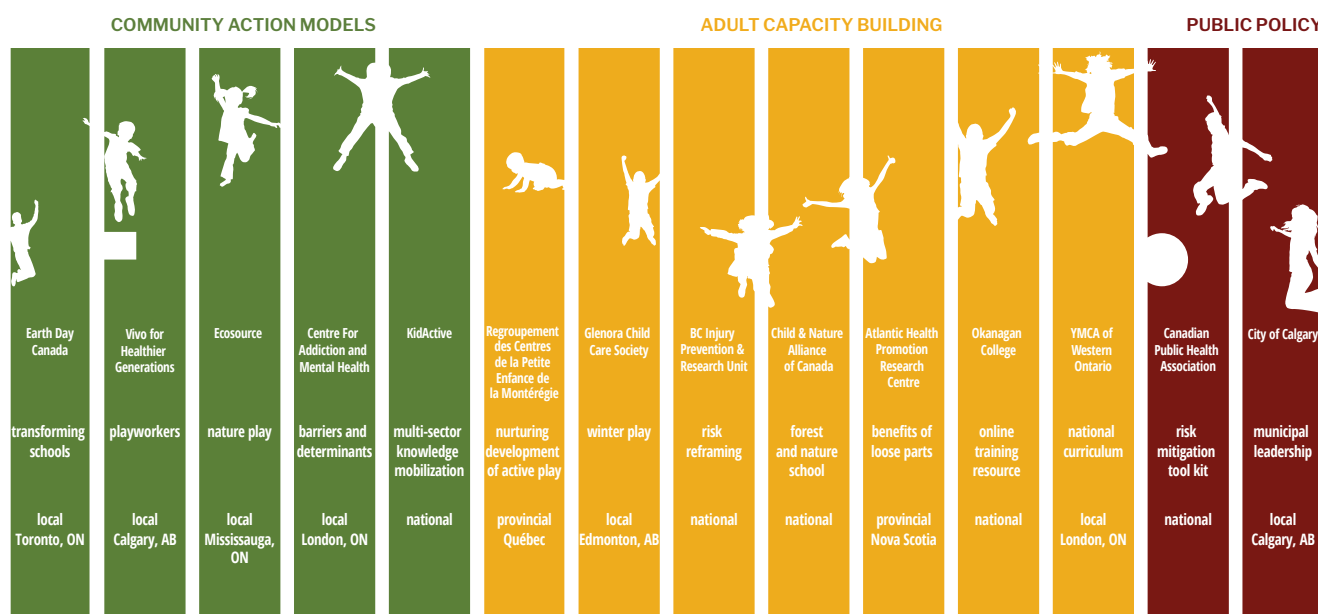


Figure 1. The grantees of the Outdoor Play Strategy, their topics and geographic reach. Note: while colours indicate project categories, these overlapped in some projects.

Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie (RCPEM) | Create nurturing outside environments: Supporting infant and young children's free movement and active play

Regroupement des Centres de la Petite Enfance de la Montérégie provided information and training to six pilot communities to address limitations in outdoor play, outdoor play spaces, and parental attitudes to outdoor play. They developed and tested several French-language training modules, workshops and webinars which are now ready to be deployed across Québec.

Glenora Child Care Society | Embracing our winter city: Extending, enhancing and expanding winter play opportunities for preschoolers

The Glenora Child Care Society worked with staff in their centre to provide specialized training and capacity to facilitate high-quality outdoor free play in winter months in almost any weather for children aged one to five.

University of British Columbia (UBC)—BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit | Go play outside! Reframing risk to promote children's outdoor play

Dr. Mariana Brussoni's lab developed and tested an online risk reframing toolkit (OutsidePlay.ca) to shift attitudes toward outdoor risky play by focusing on changing parents' mindsets about its importance to child development.

Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) | Quality and transformative outdoor play-based learning: Scaling the Forest and Nature School approach in Canada

The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada developed and scaled a practitioners' training course to expand Forest School Canada training and programs across Canada.

Dalhousie University—Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre* | Can loose parts foster unstructured, self-directed, risky outdoor play? A multilevel intervention in early years settings

Dalhousie University implemented and evaluated the effectiveness of the PLEY (Physical Literacy in the Early Years) Project, a trial focused on improving physical literacy, physical activity and active outdoor play in Nova Scotia preschoolers through the integration of loose parts.

*The AHPRC is now called the Healthy Populations Institute at Dalhousie University.

Okanagan College | Building capacity: Creating specialized outdoor play training to empower children's experiences

Okanagan College developed and piloted OutdoorPlayTraining.com, an open access, web-based learning resource, with more than 1,375 early learning and child care professionals trained from across Canada.

YMCA of Western Ontario |** Outdoor classroom specialist

YMCA of Western Ontario expanded the YMCA Playing to Learn curriculum with new training to include a focus on self-directed and unstructured risky play for children, with the goal of filling the gap between research and practice of risky outdoor play.

**The YMCA of Western Ontario is now the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario.

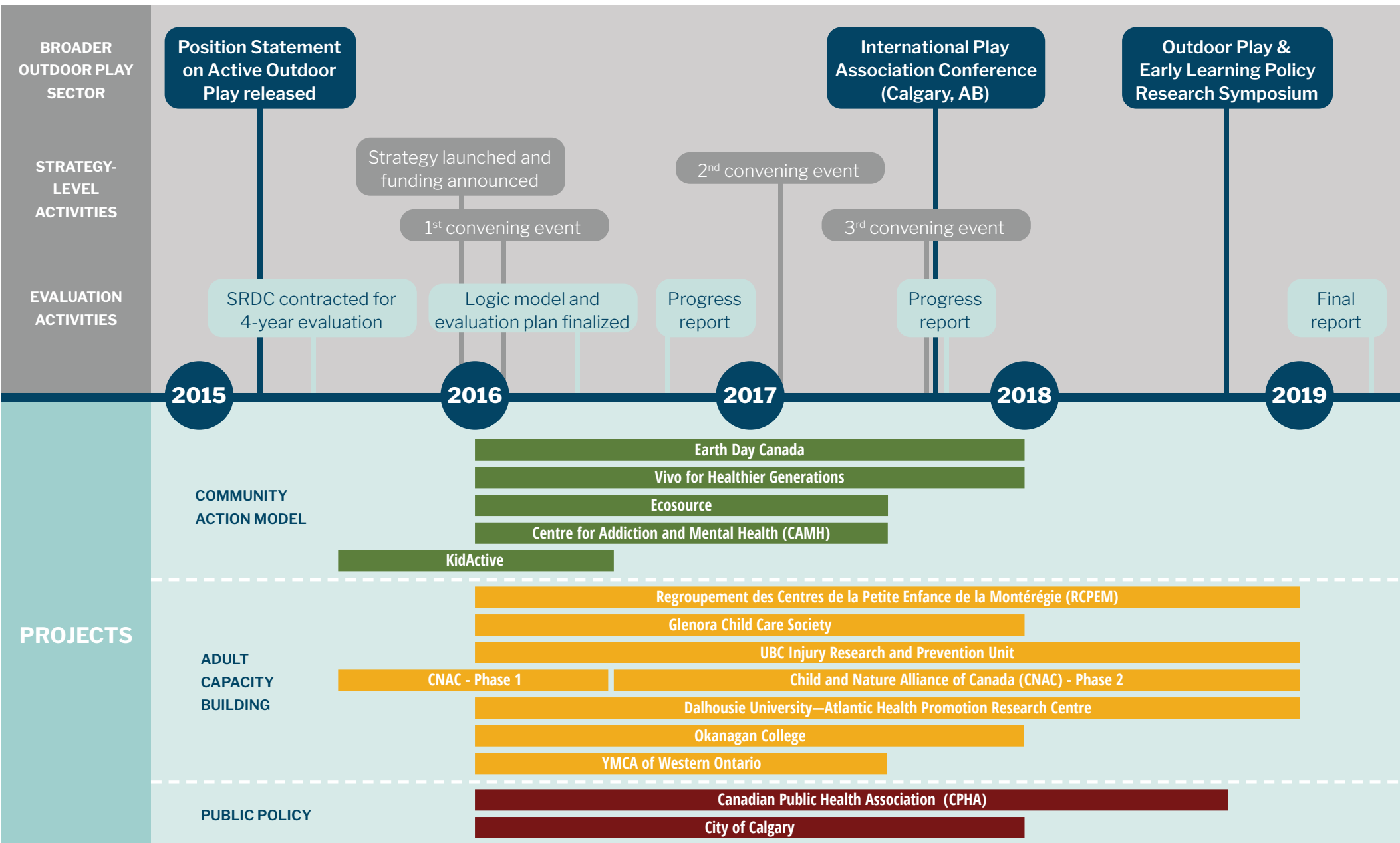
Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) | A child's right to free play: A risk mitigation policy toolkit to support risky play

The Canadian Public Health Association investigated the causes of risk aversion from a social and liability perspective through a series of semi-structured interviews and a parents' attitudes survey. This information was used to develop the Unstructured Play Toolkit with components for the public, municipal and education decision makers, program managers, and researchers and policy decision makers.

The City of Calgary | YYC plays

The City of Calgary provided leadership and worked across multiple departments to better understand parental barriers to outdoor play and pilot mobile adventure playgrounds. Together with local organizations, they created Canada's first municipal Play Charter.

Outdoor Play Strategy timeline of activities



SRDC evaluation

The Lawson Foundation contracted the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to conduct an evaluation of the OPS from 2015 to 2019. The goal of evaluation was to better understand:

- the strategic impact of the Lawson Foundation's investment in the Strategy, and
- how and to what extent the Foundation's support adds value to individual projects/areas of work and the emerging movement on outdoor play in Canada.

Evaluation was embedded within the Strategy, meaning that SRDC evaluated the Strategy as a whole, while grantees were responsible for evaluating their own projects, either directly or by contracting a third-party evaluator. SRDC helped grantees set up their evaluations and provided arms-length monitoring support, and they acted as a “critical friend” to the Foundation by providing advice iteratively throughout implementation of the Strategy.

“It is very useful to have someone with an outside view to our project that allows us to clarify our ideas and write them simply but accurately.” – Grantee

Additionally, SRDC compiled results from several information sources to report on the findings and implications for future funding initiatives. These sources included grantees' evaluation reports, interviews, convening event surveys, ongoing discussions with the Foundation's staff and their activity notes, and evaluator notes from Outdoor Play Strategy events.

Overarching evaluation questions

The evaluation process endeavoured to answer the following questions regarding the design and implementation, outcomes and impact, and overall value and fit of the Strategy.

- 1. Design and implementation:** Have the design and implementation of the Strategy met grantees' needs?
- 2. Outcomes and impact:** What have been the outcomes and early impacts of the Strategy?
- 3. Overall value and fit:** Has the Strategy added value to projects and the broader outdoor play movement, including the grant making process?



Preschool children play in the leaves at child care. | Nurturing development of active play, RCPEM, Saint-Hubert, Québec.



Children playing at the Ottawa Forest and Nature School. | Quality and transformative outdoor play-based learning: Scaling the Forest and Nature School approach in Canada, CNAC, Ottawa, ON.

Key findings and lessons learned

The developmental evaluation of the Outdoor Play Strategy has shown that it has achieved its goals, and learning has taken place in a number of areas.

As implemented, the Strategy has supported grantees well and provided opportunities for them to enhance their capacity to deliver outdoor play projects as well as to learn, share, and connect with each other and with diverse stakeholders. On a broader level, the Strategy has served to shine a spotlight on outdoor play, and the Foundation has garnered further attention to the sector by funding knowledge dissemination opportunities and convening cross-sector stakeholders to move the outdoor play agenda forward. This field-building role has helped to establish the Foundation itself as a leader in the outdoor play sector, though this was not an intentional goal.

Design and implementation

To what extent has the Outdoor Play Strategy been effectively designed and implemented?

To answer this question, SRDC evaluated the four main components of the Outdoor Play Strategy's design: funding multiple projects in various sectors, fostering a cohort approach, developing collaborative relationships, and embedding evaluation.

Overall, the design and implementation of the Strategy was found to have met grantees' needs. The Strategy not only provided financial support, but it also supported capacity-building by convening grantees, connecting grantees with diverse stakeholders, communicating and sharing their work, and providing ongoing feedback by embedding evaluation at the outset.

Fund multiple projects in various sectors and with diverse approaches

The Strategy has achieved the goal of funding diverse approaches to outdoor play. In addition to diversity in the type of intervention, diversity was also evident in each project's level of intervention, level of reach and organizational linkages (Fig. 2).

PROJECT	LEVEL OF INTERVENTION			LEVEL OF REACH			BROADER LINKAGES	
	Policy/ Systems	Intervention/ Program	Research	Local	Provincial	National	Larger Network	Primarily Standalone
Earth Day Canada		●		●			●	
Vivo		●		●				●
Ecosource		●		●				●
CAMH			●	●				●
KidActive	●					●	●	
RCPEM		●			●		●	
Glenora		●		●				●
UBC		●	●			●		●
CNAC	●	●				●	●	
Dalhousie		●	●		●		●	
Okanagan College		●				●	●	
YMCA of W. ON.		●		●			●	
CPHA	●					●	●	
City of Calgary	●	●		●				●

Figure 2. Level of intervention, reach and broader linkages of each project of the Outdoor Play Strategy. (Green indicates a community action model, yellow indicates adult capacity building and red indicates public policy, although these categories overlapped in some projects.)

The diversity of projects funded through the Strategy lent a richness and excitement to the dialogue on outdoor play. Grantees saw the diversity of projects as a strength of the Strategy, as it exposed them to new learning opportunities from individuals and groups with different perspectives and expertise. The additional events and knowledge-sharing supported by the Foundation provided further opportunities for grantees to share their work more broadly and to connect with key players in the field of outdoor play.

“So to me, you always want to have diversity, because diversity offers an opportunity for us then to look at the various levels of knowledge and skills and to learn from that diversity. We don’t want like-minded people always working together because then what we have is like-minded experiences and processes. So the more diversity that you can have, the much better it is to cause that disequilibrium, which then informs advancing knowledge and knowledge dissemination.” – Grantee

Conversely, the focus on diversity introduced some challenges in forming connections. As grantees made progress on implementing their projects, their differences became more apparent than their similarities. SRDC recommended that the Foundation reinforce connections among grantees by prioritizing commonalities among them (e.g., with webinar and convening event topics) and maximize opportunities for grantees to work together.

Despite the diverse selection of projects, some important gaps remained in the multi-sector approach. For example, projects within urban planning and occupational therapy sectors, by Indigenous organizations, focusing on street play, and explicitly examining cultural considerations for outdoor play were not represented within the Strategy.

Ultimately, the diversity of projects is seen as an important strength of the Outdoor Play Strategy, and it is a unique model that has piqued the interest of other stakeholders.

Lessons learned... about funding diverse projects

- The Foundation played an important role in helping grantees build on commonalities among projects and engage each other as they encountered project implementation challenges or broader barriers.
 - Opportunities to build commonalities included webinars, convening event topics and activities, and a platform for ongoing communications.
- While funding diverse projects allowed for a broad reach across sectors, topics and project categories, an inherent trade-off of this approach was a broadly dispersed, and arguably diluted, impact in any one area. Future strategies that focus on a more specific sector or topic may be able to achieve greater change through concentrated effort.

Foster a cohort approach

The Strategy has achieved its goal of fostering a cohort approach and supporting a sense of community among grantees by providing opportunities to convene and communicate.

Grantees valued the cohort approach and benefited from it in various ways, while also suggesting ways to bolster it even further. Several key benefits to the cohort approach were identified:

- Building networks and a community of practice: The cohort approach was designed to foster relationship building, which resonated with grantees.
- Credibility for projects: Being part of a larger cohort has given more visibility and credibility to projects than if they had been funded individually.
- Support for project development: Without access to others' knowledge, some grantees would have had to find or discover information on their own, thereby slowing the process.

"The cohort approach is absolutely the way to go. For us, being the lonely fish of outdoor play in this region, it was helpful to have the support of the cohort and to know what early stages could look like and what kind of tools are out there for sharing with the community." – Grantee

Grantees saw face-to-face convening as the single most valuable aspect of the cohort approach. Convening events, including the 2017 International Play Association (IPA) Conference, provided opportunities for grantees to step away from ongoing project management to focus intentionally on outdoor play as an issue, concept, and practice. These events promoted relationship-building, networking, and a sense of community and vision among grantees.

Further communication outside of events was supported and encouraged using the Basecamp communications platform. Perspectives on Basecamp's value were mixed: some grantees used the platform more than others, and its use decreased in the latter months of the Strategy. In general, it was viewed as an important way to keep the cohort connected, and it was used by many grantees to share updates, resources and inspiration, and to seek input or advice from their peers. However, given decreasing participation in Basecamp, there may be value in approaching another party (e.g., Outdoor Play Canada) to host such a forum with a broader range of stakeholders across the play sector, with the aim of supporting a growing community of practice in outdoor play.

Lessons learned... about fostering a cohort approach

- Providing grantees with a clear description of expectations and goals about the cohort approach prior to funding is critical to ensuring grantees understand what is involved as part of their funding.
- Convening events should be shaped by both grantees and Foundation staff to ensure they meet the needs of all groups. Having a working group of grantees involved in the planning worked well.
- Communication around expectations is key. The Foundation must communicate to grantees the level of participation required, including deciding who from their project should attend and ensuring attendees have been oriented to the Strategy prior to the events. While not a guarantee, this will help ensure attendees have a common base on which to build.
- Opportunities to connect between convening events (e.g., via Basecamp, webinars, facilitated discussions, etc.) are important to facilitate ongoing learning, networking, and partnerships. However, the Foundation's capacity to support these needs to be carefully considered.
- A term such as "community of practice" may be more appropriate and meaningful than "cohort" in the future, as it better reflects collective ownership and responsibility.

Develop collaborative relationships

A critical component of the Outdoor Play Strategy's design was the Foundation's focus on developing collaborative relationships, including relationships between the Foundation and grantees, among the grantees themselves, and between grantees and external stakeholders.

As part of its support to grantees, the Foundation maintained regular contact via email, telephone, and in-person site visits. Ongoing support included project monitoring, providing news and information, responding to grantees' questions, and connecting them to resources or other stakeholders. At the end of their projects, all grantees described their relationship with the Foundation in a positive light, with several mentioning that their relationship was different—in a good way—from what they had experienced with other funders.

The Foundation played a key role brokering connections among grantees. Grantees consistently indicated throughout evaluation that they greatly valued these connections, particularly since opportunities for linkages were not always obvious to them. Many of these relationships among grantees resulted in collaboration among them (see Short-term outcomes) and ultimately led to the development of a community of practice and partnerships (see Intermediate outcomes).

A final role the Foundation played, and one which will have lasting benefits for grantees and the outdoor play sector in general, was brokering connections between grantees and external stakeholders in outdoor play including funders. They did this through direct introductions to connect related work in outdoor play, as well as by supporting events such as conferences and hosting networking events at them. The following activities—either hosted or supported by the Foundation—contributed to collaboration beyond the activities of the Outdoor Play Strategy, including:

- strategic planning with Outdoor Play Canada leaders and other key stakeholders,
- supporting several conferences,
- convening influencers and grantees, and
- inviting external projects (e.g., Inspiring Scotland) to present their work to outdoor play stakeholders including funders.

These activities contributed not only to the reach and capacity-building of grantees, but also helped further raise the profile of outdoor play among important stakeholders (including policy makers) and funders.

“There has been tremendous opportunity through the cohort to be connected to resources and wonderful experts across the world. You know, the cohort being across Canada, but of course the Lawson Foundation went out of their way to bring in experts from the US, the UK, and other countries to support us and to add background to what it is that all of us are doing. So I think that the connectivity is the big piece of it.” – Grantee

Case study: Making connections

The Foundation brokered connections among projects and external stakeholders, helping grantees see themselves as part of a larger outdoor play sector rather than operating in a vacuum.

- The Foundation introduced the City of Calgary to a Calgary program based on British playwork principles, Earth Day Canada to the Recess Project at Ryerson University, and Ecosource to the Ithaca Children's Garden.
- They invited Canadian and international thought leaders to participate in the first convening event, which inspired and sparked dialogue on key conceptual issues, particularly on risk.
- They are engaged with an overlapping but broader set of stakeholders in Outdoor Play Canada, including funding colleagues, in an effort to build a larger investment pool and funder engagement as the movement grows.

Lessons learned... about collaboration and knowledge-sharing

- In deliberately engaging in co-learning with grantees, the Foundation assumed a hands-on role atypical of many funders. This created a dynamic tension: although grantees valued the support overall, for several the commitment (especially for evaluation and reporting requirements) was more rigorous than they expected or had experienced with other grants.
- Broadening the scope of Foundation-supported activities beyond Outdoor Play Strategy projects helped emphasize the 'Big Picture' and common vision within the cohort. The relationships developed among grantees and with external stakeholders have proven valuable to both the Strategy and grantees.
- A knowledge mobilization and communications strategy will be critical to ensuring that knowledge generated by the first Outdoor Play Strategy cohort has maximum reach, influence and impact, and that future work builds on that knowledge.
- There is also an important role for the Foundation to play in synthesizing evidence and lessons learned from projects and sharing learning more broadly.

Embedding evaluation in the Outdoor Play Strategy

The main role of SRDC was to evaluate the Strategy's design and implementation, outcomes, and overall value and fit. Although the developmental evaluation approach was resource intensive, embedding evaluation at the Strategy level helped enhance the Strategy's implementation and development. The evaluation partnership was viewed as overwhelmingly positive by Foundation staff, who felt supported and valued the outside perspective and insights that SRDC provided.

A secondary role of SRDC was to build evaluation capacity within the Foundation and among grantees. Over the course of the Strategy's implementation, the Foundation demonstrated increased evaluation capacity in terms of its approach to articulating and reinforcing Strategy goals, reinforcing expectations with grantees, and planning the strategic direction of future funding.

Most grantees saw value in embedding evaluation in the Strategy. For example, collecting and analyzing data on various aspects of their projects allowed grantees to have a better understanding of what they were delivering and what worked or did not work. This process allowed grantees to adjust their interventions to better meet the needs and realities of their stakeholders. At a higher level, the focus of evaluation pushed grantees to think further about the implications of their findings, and to identify next steps for their projects or other areas of need.

Case study: Okanagan College

Okanagan College engaged a third party to collect data for the evaluation, but they remained responsible for evaluation overall, including developing their evaluation plan and logic model. They used emerging findings from their evaluation process (i.e., feedback from participants) to adjust their training modules—i.e., *they used evaluation to improve their approach mid-project.*

However, challenges encountered over the grant period revealed a need to further enhance expectations and support for grantees earlier and throughout the evaluation process. It became evident early in the Strategy that grantees' evaluation support needs were more extensive than originally planned or resourced. As is common in the non-profit sector, some projects had limited capacity for evaluation, and these deeper evaluation issues could not be solved through “Band-Aid” solutions or a little extra time with projects. Some projects felt, in hindsight, that additional staffing and improved succession management would have been beneficial and may have mitigated some of these challenges.

These capacity issues mean that knowledge gaps remain, and solid evidence is in some cases lacking on the effectiveness of the models implemented by grantees. The importance of helping grantees build capacity for effective data collection and evaluation has been a valuable learning and will be a focus of future efforts.

“I think it would have been very helpful for there to be defined outcomes that were measurable, and that those defined outcomes were then threaded through the projects and then became part of the evaluation process.” – Grantee

Lessons learned... about the evaluation approach

- Project logic models developed in the first year were useful tools for reporting, as the logic model structure was embedded in report templates. Project logic models also helped grantees articulate the essence of their project and focus on progress toward outcomes, and they helped build the cohort by having each project contribute to the Strategy-level logic model.
- Third-party evaluations can be a mixed blessing for grantees. While most of the actual work is delegated to an external evaluator, engagement from grantees is required to ensure its usefulness. Helping grantees manage third-party evaluations is a potential area for support provided by the Foundation.
- Project-level evaluation capacity is an important area of need. Projects often need help identifying what kind of learning, information or evidence they are trying to build, the extent to which they have achieved their goals, and how to make their learning as applicable to others as possible. In the future, evaluations should be planned with these considerations front and centre.

Outcomes

What have been the outcomes and early impacts of the Strategy?

There is convincing evidence the OPS has achieved its short- and intermediate-term outcomes and has made progress towards its long-term outcome goals. Notably, progress on some short-term objectives (e.g., collaboration) provided strong stepping-stones to achieve intermediate and long-term goals (e.g., a community of practice).

Short-term outcomes

The Strategy's short-term objectives were *learning and knowledge-sharing, networking, collaboration, a sense of community and increased awareness of the importance of supporting outdoor play*.

These short-term outcomes were all achieved:

- Grantees described considerable *learning* about implementing their outdoor play projects, and they *shared this knowledge* with internal and external stakeholders. Convening events played an important role in grantee learning.
- All grantees increased *networking* within the cohort (convening events, Basecamp, etc.) and with external stakeholders. Some grantees became “go-to” sources for information and all grantees agreed or strongly agreed that they had a wider network of contacts and relationships to support their work after the first convening event.
- *Collaboration* among grantees went beyond networking by involving elements of coordination, partnership or joint work. Several grantees collaborated to coordinate work on an issue or take advantage of the resources or knowledge of other grantees.
- A *sense of community* among grantees developed, particularly at convening events, as they got to know each other and learned about the other projects. Grantees described being inspired by grantees' passion, diversity of experiences, and commitment.
- The Strategy's contribution to *increasing awareness of the importance of supporting outdoor play* was twofold: grantees discussed their projects with external stakeholders, and the Foundation worked to rally funders behind the outdoor play movement. Some grantees experienced increased requests for information and/or workshops from external stakeholders, while others leveraged their participation in the Strategy to obtain additional funding.

“There is a growing awareness of the importance of children's connection to nature and the outdoors, with no shortage of requests, emails, and opportunities.” – Grantee

Examples of *collaboration* in action:

- Multiple grantees (e.g., Vivo, YMCA, Outdoor Play Canada) embedded UBC's risk reframing tool in their training manuals and/or projects.
- City of Calgary partnered with Vivo to offer Play Ambassador training for their mobile adventure playground staff.
- Outdoor Play Strategy grantees collaborated with KidActive to provide feedback on drafts of the Outdoor Play Glossary of Terms published by Outdoor Play Canada.
- At the final cohort meeting of the Outdoor Play Strategy, the City of Calgary and Earth Day Canada co-delivered a panel presentation about their efforts to influence policy.

Intermediate outcomes

The Strategy's intermediate objectives were *increased capacity, enhanced learning of how to enable outdoor play, empowerment and influence of stakeholders, an established community of practice, and interest from others.*

These intermediate outcomes were all achieved:

- Funding allowed grantees to *increase capacity* to deliver on project-level goals and participate in the cohort. The cohort model allowed grantees to learn from and share ideas with each other, which bolstered their capacity to reach project goals. Grantees indicated they had learned a great deal about implementing their projects, though capacity gaps remained in some cases with respect to project management and evaluation.
- Grantees *enhanced their learning of how to enable outdoor play*—namely, what it takes to change attitudes and practice, what works in terms of community implementation models, and how to work within existing systems. Several grantees indicated that the Strategy helped them understand how their organizations fit within the larger field of outdoor play and gain a better understanding of how to foster children's opportunities for outdoor play.

“The strength of the breadth of the cohort helped push forward our understanding of what those different communities look like, and what play advocacy looks like in policy development or early childhood education, that sort of thing.” – Grantee

- A significant outcome of the 14 projects of the Outdoor Play Strategy was their wide reach despite the fact that scale was not a primary objective of the Strategy: they have collectively *empowered and influenced* a wide range of stakeholders through project participation, training and knowledge sharing. The projects are estimated to have directly reached over 15,000 children; over 3,800 parents; over 30 communities or municipalities; over 50 programs including schools, child care, and recreation; and over 3,500 educators or other professionals working directly with children (Fig. 3). Grantees collectively participated in over 340 knowledge sharing opportunities over the course of the Outdoor Play Strategy.

The Outdoor Play Strategy reached over...

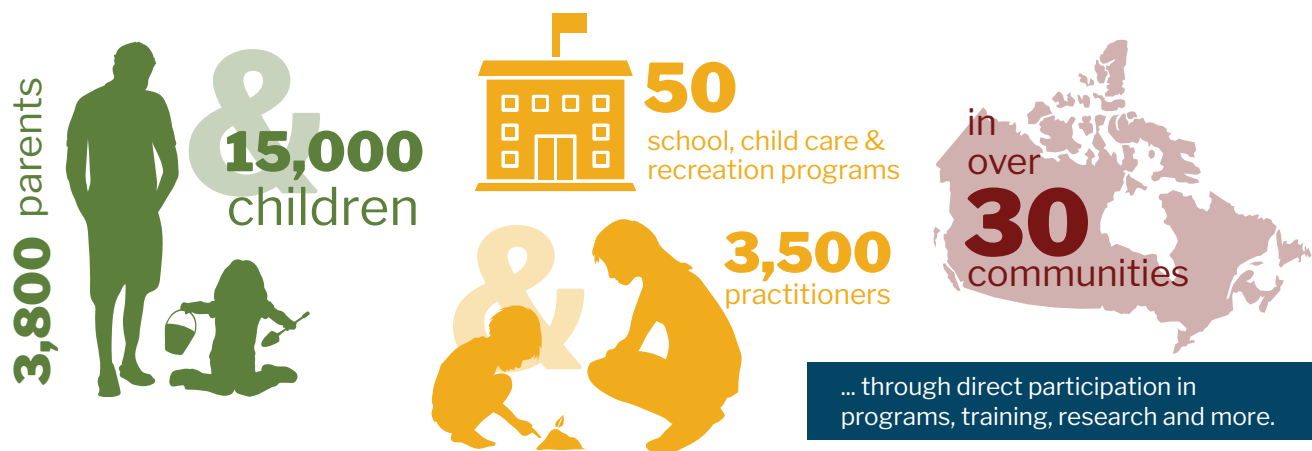


Figure 3. The wide reach of the Outdoor Play Strategy.

- A *community of practice* was established as intended by the cohort approach to the Outdoor Play Strategy: a core group of grantees with an interest in learning and sharing with others. However, connections among grantees tended to wane over time as projects closed, and some grantees felt less certain that a community of practice had developed. Nevertheless, several of the grantees have continued to work together or have partnered to generate ideas for new projects.
- Through many formal and informal knowledge sharing opportunities, projects have garnered *interest from stakeholders* from within and outside the outdoor play sector. School boards and staff, child care centres and associations, postsecondary institutions, play and active living organizations, health organizations, municipalities, provincial governments and federal departments have approached grantees, wanting to learn about their projects and ways they can build on the work that has been done.

Examples of a *community of practice* in action:

Several of the grantees have continued to work together and have generated new partnerships since participating in the Strategy:

- Okanagan College organized and invited a number of cohort members to an outdoor play study tour of Scotland to learn from their outdoor child care experiences and reflect on how to transfer research and learning into a Canadian context.
- CPHA, UBC, CNAC and the City of Calgary were involved with the steering committee for Outdoor Play Canada, while CNAC and UBC also sat on CPHA's advisory committee.
- Earth Day Canada and Dalhousie University had dialogue with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage to learn from the implementation of OPAL and to discuss potential for future collaborations to scale up outdoor loose parts in Nova Scotia school environments.
- The City of Calgary shared its municipal play experience with CNAC to develop a proposal for Parks Canada.
- CNAC collaborated with UBC, CPHA, and Earth Day Canada, among others, to develop a risk benefit assessment framework.
- Vivo and City of Calgary worked together to develop a loose parts play box program in Calgary.

Long-term outcomes

The Strategy's long-term objectives were for *learning to be used across communities, a strong multi-sectoral coalition, and normalization of outdoor play*.

The Strategy-level evaluation found evidence that the Strategy has achieved progress toward these long-term outcomes:

- About half of grantees witnessed examples of *communities (and others) using the learning from their projects to create enabling environments for outdoor play* for children, although at the time of the SRDC evaluation report it was not possible to determine the full reach of project learnings. Projects that ended and reported earlier were less able to answer this question, highlighting the need to account for the time necessary to roll up the findings of a project and share them broadly.
- The original vision of Outdoor Play Canada functioning as a *strong, national coalition* had not yet come to full fruition at the end of this phase of the Outdoor Play Strategy. This long-term goal remains a work in progress as champions continue to develop a leadership structure, strategic direction, and sustainability plan.
- While it appears that outdoor play is more broadly *accepted, normalized, and supported* in Canada, there remains much to be done to make this goal a reality, especially for all children. Grantees have noted signs of progress, including increased public interest, changes to the norm such as more child care centres bringing children outside in all weather, outdoor play being discussed in mainstream media, and the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health endorsing the Canadian Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play. However, persistent challenges hindering progress include government policy, lack of post-secondary training in outdoor play pedagogy for educators, and gaps in understanding how outdoor play supports children's overall development. Further investments, coordination, and culture shifts were identified as requirements to move this area forward.

"We are currently creating the environment for outdoor play to be normalized." – Grantee

"It will take a while to have this impact." – Grantee

Value and fit

How has the Outdoor Play Strategy added value to projects and the broader outdoor play movement?

As highlighted in the **Design and Implementation** section of this report, the design of the Outdoor Play Strategy has been intentional, well-planned, and has incorporated multiple elements. This section explores the ways in which the Strategy, and intrinsically, the Foundation, have added value to grantees and beyond.

Contributions of the Strategy to grantees

There has been abundant evidence of inherent, demonstrated, and potential value of the Strategy.

At a practical level, the financial contributions of the grants enabled grantees to move forward with projects that may not have otherwise been possible. However, the collaborative and capacity-building approach of the Strategy has led to outcomes beyond project implementation, as demonstrated by the short-, intermediate and long-term successes summarized above (see **Outcomes**).

For example, opportunities to *convene* and *collaborate* have been among the most successful and rewarding components of the Strategy's design and have contributed to the long-term impacts of projects and grantees. Although it was resource intensive, SRDC has encouraged the Foundation to consider putting even greater emphasis on *connecting* (both among grantees and with external stakeholders) as part of future initiatives.

However, much more remains to be done to distill findings, understand their implications for the outdoor play sector, and share these broadly. Strengthening project-level evaluation, including helping projects gather solid evidence of the effects of their interventions, will be an important focus moving forward.

Contributions of the Strategy to the broader outdoor play landscape

The Outdoor Play Strategy has added (and continues to add) considerable value to Canada's outdoor play field in several ways.

The cohort as a whole has developed a number of intervention/program models for community delivery (for both play and training), produced a wide range of tools and resources (e.g., a glossary of terms, a municipal Play Charter, web-based risk perception tool, policy briefs), and in many cases, is using research and evaluation to assess these approaches.

In addition to funding 14 projects as part of the OPS, the Foundation has been playing a key field-building role in outdoor play by supporting dissemination of evidence through a variety of channels (e.g., grants to The Conversation (Canada), the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education and the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development). The Foundation convened diverse stakeholders at a symposium on outdoor play and early learning in October 2018 to explore the next phase of the Outdoor Play Strategy; the symposium provided opportunities for several grantees in the first cohort to share their work and connect with these key stakeholders.

“There is huge interest right now in outdoor play in general. I mean, I meet with so many people that are interested. So I think using our Outdoor Play Strategy involvement as leverage to sort of get the message out to the larger public, I think is going to be something we’d probably want to look at [...] and hope just to inspire people to give them some tools for the job as well.” – Grantee

To access the many publicly available resources and publications developed by Outdoor Play Strategy projects, visit lawson.ca/op-training-tools-research.

The success of the Outdoor Play Strategy

The Outdoor Play Strategy has been successful in many ways: it achieved the Lawson Foundation's short- and intermediate term goals, made important progress toward its long-term goals, and revealed many important learnings along the way—both for funders (this report) and for the outdoor play sector (lawson.ca/OPS-OP-report.pdf). While resource-intensive, the developmental evaluation approach adopted by SRDC made it possible for the Foundation and grantees to identify many challenges early enough to address them. The need to support evaluation capacity further was an important learning for all parties. The success of the grantees in fostering outdoor play opportunities for children in Canada is impressive, and the wide reach of their influence—including increased interest by media, stakeholders and decision makers—demonstrates the power of organizations and collaborative initiatives to shift attitudes, build capacity and move the needle on policy to enable outdoor play.

Final thoughts and next steps for the Lawson Foundation

Across Canada, more children are getting their feet wet, their hands dirty and their bodies and minds moving thanks to the efforts of the grantee organizations of the Outdoor Play Strategy, whether directly through interventions or indirectly by reaching the minds and hearts of adults with the power to enable outdoor play.

Through the efforts and successes of the grantee organizations of the Outdoor Play Strategy, and the support and evaluation by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, we believe we have made important strides toward ensuring all children in Canada have access to high-quality opportunities for outdoor play that support risk taking and healthy development.

We believe the success of the Outdoor Play Strategy can be attributed to three main factors:

- focusing on a timely issue,
- working intentionally with a committed cohort to build a community of practice and share learning, and
- the support of the SRDC developmental evaluation to fine-tune our strategy in real time and gather the learning.

As we move forward, we will take these successful elements of the Strategy and build on them further, including but not limited to:

- Providing multi-year funding to grantee organizations.
- Providing technical and strategic support including strategic clarity, evaluation, communications and knowledge mobilization to further build capacity and expand the credibility and impact of each project's results.
- Adopting a cohort approach for grantees and supporting a community of practice among the participants.
- Leveraging the collective knowledge and contributions of the cohort into thought leadership for the sector.
- Focusing on demonstrating what is possible and building evidence through demonstration, research and evaluation. An important future step identified by the Foundation is the need to support more robust project-level evaluations, develop common metrics, and monitor longitudinal results.
- Mobilizing evidence to share learning and communicate with stakeholders to ensure this work contributes to advancing the field and benefits a wide audience.

For information about the Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0, launching in 2021, visit lawson.ca/our-work/outdoor-play/.

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