

# Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education: A Discussion Paper

## Executive Summary

Outdoor play as a means of fostering healthy child development and high-quality early learning experiences is attracting increasing attention. Implementation efforts in early childhood education programs are on the rise despite a number of barriers to progress. Post-secondary education and training do not tend to prepare early childhood educators for outdoor play. While professional development is emerging to fill the gap, demand is increasing quickly: multiple sectors require various levels of education and training to support early childhood education, particularly in regards to understanding and managing risk. At the same time, early childhood education policies and practices governing children's outdoor play are not well developed, resulting in gaps and barriers to outdoor play. Given the critical importance of both early childhood education and outdoor play to healthy child development,<sup>1,2,3</sup> it is imperative that multiple sectors work together to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for outdoor play in early childhood education programs.

In October 2018, the Lawson Foundation convened leaders from multiple sectors at the Outdoor Play and Early Learning Policy Research Symposium at the Kingbridge Centre, King City, Ontario, to explore how to advance outdoor play and early childhood education across policy, practice, and research. The discussion paper summarizes the six major themes that emerged from the Symposium presentations and discussions.

## Major Themes

1. The importance of adopting a multi-sector ecosystem lens to address outdoor play
2. Approaches to integrating Indigenous curriculum and ways of knowing about outdoor play into Western early childhood education
3. Building support for, and enabling, risk in outdoor play
4. The need to make outdoor play pedagogy explicit in post-secondary early childhood education training and to support ongoing professional learning needs
5. The multiple gaps and barriers to outdoor play in policies and standards, and the inconsistent implementation of such policies by stakeholders
6. The need to develop a robust Canadian research and knowledge mobilization strategy to support evidence-informed policy and practice

The paper also presents discussion questions and proposed actions related to each theme. The paper is intended to raise awareness and spur discussion about outdoor play in local communities of practice, and to catalyze ongoing work across sectors to advance outdoor play and early childhood education.

**Complete discussion paper available at: <http://lawson.ca/advancing-op-ece.pdf>.**

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<sup>1</sup> H. Yoshikawa, C. Weiland, J. Brooks-Gunn, M. R. Burchinal, L. M. Espinosa, W. T. Gormley, J. Ludwig, K. Magnuson, D. Phillips, and M. Zaslow, *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education* (Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development; New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2013), <https://www.fcd-us.org/the-evidence-base-on-preschool/>.

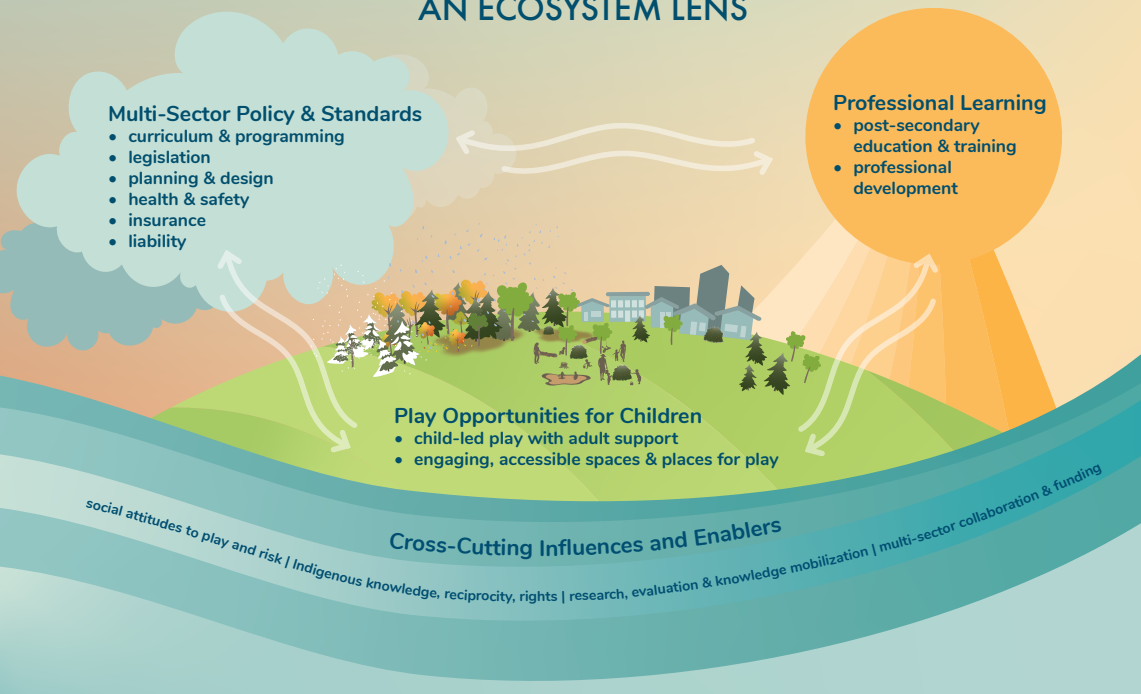
<sup>2</sup> M. S. Tremblay, C. Gray, S. Babcock, J. Barnes, C. C. Bradstreet, D. Carr, G. Chabot, et al., "Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 6 (2015):6475–6505.

<sup>3</sup> M. Brussoni, topic ed., "Outdoor Play," in *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online], eds. R.E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, and R.DeV. Peters, May 2019, <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/outdoor-play/>.

This diagram identifies multiple key sectors (in white capital text) and roles (in blue text) that are relevant to supporting children's access to and opportunities for outdoor play.



## OUTDOOR PLAY AN ECOSYSTEM LENS



An ecosystem lens highlights the complexity of context for outdoor play: multiple sectors, core components, and cross-cutting influences must work together in order to realize high-quality opportunities for children's outdoor play.

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Outdoor Play Strategy