

Regulating Outdoor & Land-based Programs as Early Learning and Child Care

Context

As demand for Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) spaces continues to grow, Outdoor and Land-Based programs (OLBs) are not yet regulated or licensed as independent programs due to regulatory frameworks designed around facility-based models. Without regulation, these programs are excluded from public funding and perpetuate inequities of affordability, inclusion, and access to nature.

Opportunity

Provincial and Territorial governments can exercise their jurisdiction over ELCC to develop a distinct regulatory category and licensing process for OLBs, separate from existing centre-based, home-based, and home agency-based care.

What are Outdoor and Land-Based Programs?

OLBs support healthy child development and offer an ideal context for early learning, while also advancing Truth and Reconciliation. They provide a model for ELCC programs that

- **operate primarily outdoors/on the Land** for most of the scheduled day in an unfenced natural space, in all weather and all seasons (except for during extreme weather), and
- **are delivered by specially trained and qualified staff**, guided by a philosophy of *outdoor and Land-based learning*¹, and aligned with the provincial/territorial early learning framework.

To ensure safety and quality, OLBs operate with high educator-to-child ratios and safety standards, adapt health and hygiene practices to the outdoors, and maintain access to shelter for periodic use.

Why regulate Outdoor and Land-Based Programs?

- **Enable and support an outdoor and Land-based model of ELCC:** Regulation enables sustainable growth, formalizes quality standards, and supports educator training and certification.
- **Expand access to high-quality ELCC spaces:** Regulation creates new high-quality ELCC spaces under the CWELCC plan, providing more options for families and communities.
- **Increase equity within ELCC offerings:** Affordable, licensed OLBs remove barriers for children from equity-deserving communities to access outdoor early learning opportunities.
- **Strengthen and diversify the ELCC workforce:** Regulated OLBs foster educator well-being, reduce burnout, and cultivate a broader and more diverse pool of early childhood educators.

How to take action

- Establish a cross-sectoral working group that includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples
- Learn from leading examples
- Develop regulatory frameworks and educator pathways
- Pilot and implement regulations
- Sustain and strengthen the system

1 Outdoor and Land-based learning inclusively embraces both non-Indigenous outdoor play-based and Indigenous Land-based learning approaches, while honoring local Indigenous Lands and Peoples. For a comprehensive exploration of this concept, refer to *More Than a New Course: A Framework for Embedding Outdoor and Land-Based Pedagogies in Post-Secondary ECE Programs*, published by the Lawson Foundation in June 2024. Available at: <https://lawson.ca/MoreThanANewCourse.pdf>