

The value and role of outdoor play: Analyzing early learning and childcare websites

Tammie Hachey-Bell

New Brunswick Community College, Canada

Beverlie Dietze

Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada

Deidre Craig

Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Canada

Linda O'Donoghue

Okanagan College, Canada

Submitted September 24, 2024; Accepted December 24, 2025

ABSTRACT

In an era characterized by rapidly advancing technology and an increasingly urbanized lifestyle, the role of outdoor play for and with children, families, and early learning and childcare programs has gained substantial attention. This research is a preliminary investigation into if and how early learning and childcare programs identify outdoor play on their websites. This information provides insight into determining how outdoor play is positioned within early learning and childcare centers (ELCs). Data were collected from 125 Early Learning and Childcare websites across five Canadian provinces. Following Bernard Berelson's (1952) content analysis process, the researchers identified and categorized if and how outdoor play was communicated on ELCs websites. The results suggest three types of communication categories used on websites related to outdoor play: explicit mention of outdoor play, no mention of outdoor play, and general mention of outdoor play. The website reviews suggest that early ELC programs should better highlight the benefits of outdoor play and how they incorporate it into daily activities. Despite the growing evidence on the importance of outdoor play for children's wholistic development, the early learning field needs to communicate and make visible the critical need for children, families, and communities to engage in increased outdoor pedagogy.

Keywords: Outdoor play, public policy, outdoor pedagogy, early childhood education

In an era characterized by rapidly advancing technology and an increasingly urban lifestyle, the role of outdoor play for and with children in early learning and childcare programs has gained substantial attention (Golubovic-Ilic & Mikaric, 2023; Nazir, 2019). Currently, ELCs are lacking sufficient and engaging outdoor play opportunities (Dietze & Cutler, 2020; Sanseter et al. 2021; Yilmaz, 2016). As families and educators navigate a world in which children spend more time indoors and engage with screens, it is crucial to examine how often early learning and childcare program websites highlight outdoor play as a key feature of their programs.

The outdoor environment provides a multifaceted and wholistic setting for children's development, fostering physical, cognitive, spiritual, social, and emotional growth. Lee et al. (2021, 2022) highlights how outdoor settings

foster physical activity, cognitive engagement, emotional resilience, social interaction and spiritual connection with nature. Research demonstrates that outdoor play is the ideal environment in which children can grow and develop to their fullest potential (Dietze & Cutler, 2020; Kiviranta et al., 2023; Sandseter, et al. 2021;). Dietze & Kashin (2019) cited Chawla (2015), who indicated, "When children's play takes place outdoors, it becomes the ultimate environment for learning, play, building relationships and contributing to health and wellness" (p. 13). This study is a preliminary investigation into if and how early learning and childcare programs address outdoor play on their websites, a crucial step in determining how outdoor play is positioned in the centers.

The Importance of Outdoor Play

Imagine what it would be like for children in early learning and childcare programs not to have opportunities to spend time outdoors daily and in various weather conditions (Lee et al., 2021; Dietze & Kashin, 2019). Research identifies that the absence of outdoor play negatively impacts children's development, from physical activity to language, creativity, and mental wellness (Smirnova & Riabkova, 2016). Children are hard-wired to need nature and to have opportunities to engage in exploration and experimentation in all kinds of weather and outdoor spaces and places (Dietze & Culter, 2020; Smirnova & Riabkova, 2016). It is vital for families and early learning professionals – inclusive of a variety of settings such as large centers, home centers, policy makers, and other professionals working in the field, to understand and explicitly communicate and make visible the importance of outdoor play. To advance outdoor play communication with children, families, communities, and government agencies it is necessary to make clear how outdoor play contributes to children's wellness and healthy development. Ideally, the early learning field makes their positions visible on outdoor play by various means, such as in their marketing and program descriptions on websites, employee and family handbooks, and during orientations.

The importance of positive outdoor play experiences is not new in literature. As cited by Okur-Berberoglu (2021), more than fifty years ago, Carson (1956) noted that when children engage in outdoor play experiences in nature, they engage all their senses and increase their sense of curiosity and wonderment. Outdoor play experiences contribute to children's self-confidence and the development of values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors involving themselves, others, and the environment (Carson et al., 2017). Beaulieu and Beno (2024) and Dietze and Kashin (2019) identified a significant difference between indoor and outdoor environments. They suggested that the outdoors provides more affordances for gross motor play, physical activity, mental health, exploring and experiencing risky play. According to Tunceli and Senoz (2022), early childhood is foundational in setting the stage for lifelong learning, behavior, and health. As Carson et al. (2017) stated, early childhood is a critical developmental stage marked by rapid neurological growth and the formation of fundamental skills. During this critical period, outdoor play serves as a dynamic catalyst for all aspects of a child's growth (Ayaga & Okaya, 2020; Physiother et al., 2022;).

Outdoor play is considered the ideal environment for children's play experiences, learning, and development. (Dietze & Cutler, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2016). Outdoor play provides the ultimate opportunity to contribute to their sense of inquiry, curiosity, and developmental domains. Children who regularly play outdoors develop stronger self-regulatory behaviours, better communication skills, enhanced creativity, and improved attention spans (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024; Nazir, 2019; Yilmaz, 2016;). Outdoor play, such as playing in puddles or experiencing ice and snow melting, further contributes to children's understanding of early foundational concepts in math and science, which improves academic learning of these concepts later (Dewar, 2016). Their play provides fundamental opportunities to develop relationship skills such as building friendships, collaboration, and leadership skills.

Defining Outdoor Play

There is currently a lack of clarity in how outdoor play is defined within early childhood education. To contextualize this issue, it is helpful to explore broader definitions of play. Dannels and Pyle (2018) offered valuable insight into the diverse understandings of play and learning in early childhood education, emphasizing that play-based learning is not a singular concept but a multifaceted pedagogical approach. Their research identified two dominant perspectives: the developmental perspective, which prioritizes free play led by children with educators adopting a passive or observant role; and the academic perspective, which supports teacher-directed learning where educators

actively guide learning toward specific academic outcomes. To reconcile these differing views, Danniels and Pyle (2018) proposed a continuum model of play-based learning that spans from child-led free play to teacher-directed activities. This continuum provides a flexible framework for educators to balance developmental and academic goals, adapting their level of involvement to suit the learning context and needs of the children.

Gray (2008) argued that child-led play is nature's way of educating children's holistic development and characterizes child-led or self-directed play to be inclusive of: self-chosen and self-direction, intrinsically motivated from within the child, structured by children's rules, imaginative and creative and engaging and pleasurable.

In further studies by Kelly et al. (2025), outdoor play and learning is described as experiential, emphasizing embodied, sensory, and hands-on engagement with natural environments. It fosters learning agency through child-led, inquiry-based, and risk-taking play that promote autonomy and creativity. This pedagogy also views teacher-student relationships as creating more equitable dynamics and shared learning experiences. This relational dimension extends beyond human interactions, encouraging learners to build meaningful connections with nature as a co-teacher and to develop environmental awareness.

Together, these perspectives and pedagogical approaches underscore the need for a clearer, more integrated understanding of outdoor play—one that recognizes its developmental, academic, and ecological dimensions, as a vital, child-led learning experience within early childhood education.

Intentional Outdoor Play Experiences

As required by provincial jurisdictions, intentional, child-led outdoor play experiences are critical in the role of the early learning field. As the data demonstrates, if intentional outdoor play experiences are occurring, it is not being explicitly communicated within the websites. All involved in early learning must recognize the places and spaces of outdoor learning within the curriculum and plan accordingly to ensure that all children, families, and communities receive these opportunities to grow and develop to their fullest potential (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p. 26). Dietze and Kashin (2019) recommended that we need to rethink our outdoor practices. Outdoor play is no longer a time of "free play" but an opportunity to increase intentional outdoor programming and environments with children and families (p.102). Visible communication on outdoor play can guide and influence the collaboration of all ideas, actions, and visions in facilitate quality outdoor play opportunities and programming

The importance of outdoor play for children is well-researched and valued by the early learning professionals (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020). Play is an essential element of children's daily lives and learning. In most Canadian jurisdictions, licensing agencies require early learning to offer indoor and outdoor learning opportunities. Based on a review of early childhood education curricula in Canadian provinces and territories, McCuaig and Bertrand (2019) observed that outdoor play is well established as the medium in which children gain lifelong skills, knowledge, and growth in all areas of development.

Although its value is well recognized, outdoor play is often only associated with physical health and well-being rather than positively affecting wholistic development. However, Lee et al. (2022) demonstrated that outdoor environments contribute far beyond physical benefits. Their research shows that outdoor play, learning, and teaching foster interconnected domains of development—including cognitive, emotional, social, and even spiritual growth—by engaging children outdoor play experiences. According to Golubovic-Ilic and Mikaric (2023), playing outdoors lays the foundation for creating wholistic learning opportunities for our future lifelong learners. Outdoor play must be understood, valued, and intentionally planned for by early learning professionals to provide children, families, communities, and society with ideal opportunities to develop to their fullest potential.

Despite the fact that the early learning and childcare field generally values the importance of outdoor play and learning, Dietze and Cutler's (2020) and Lee et al.(2021) research suggested that children in early learning programs spend less time engaged in outdoor play now than even a decade ago. Often, when children play outdoors in early learning and childcare programs, they experience limited play possibilities and interactions with nature. They may be limited in time to explore, investigate and discover, experiencing intentionally planned play experiences only in

indoor environments. Golubovic-Ilic and Mikaric (2023) identified the need for future teachers, authors of curricula, policymakers, and early learning professionals to change their perceptions to recognize the importance and facilitate outdoor nature-based, child-led, inquiry-based learning.

Family Choices

Families use many tools to determine their children's early learning programs. According to Statistics Canada (2019), families frequently choose early learning programs based on space availability, hours of operation, service provider characteristics, location, cost, and references from others such as family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, while formal sources of information may include childcare resources, referral agencies, and local human service agencies. Advertisements in community locations, newspapers, social media, and websites are also possible sources.

Families are children's first caregivers. They impart values, beliefs, perceptions, and learnings throughout the generations. A study by Tunceli and Senoz (2022) affirmed that many families perceive outdoor play positively and believe it is beneficial and necessary. As one parent stated,

I think that the outdoors provides much of the contribution that the child needs in all areas of development, in accordance with the natural developmental speed of the child. Thus, outdoor play, especially in nature, will contribute to children's motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development (p. 126).

Some research demonstrates parents' positive perspective in valuing outdoor play in learning, while other research demonstrates that parents view outdoor play as being separate from learning that happens indoors. A study conducted by Parsons and Traunter (2019) argued that there is a disconnect between parents' perceptions of outdoor play as learning. This perception could arise from their own experiences and history, impacting on an understanding of the value of outdoor pedagogy. Parsons and Traunter (2019) recommended increased communication "related to the objectives of learning outdoors, the amount of time children should and do spend outdoors and the school policies which guide practice" (pp.708-709), which can contribute to a common understanding of the value and importance of outdoor play.

Communicating the Importance of Outdoor Play

To better understand the importance of the role of the outdoor environment and play, we seek to understand how current research can inform systematic changes in communicating the importance of outdoor play will help in advancement of outdoor play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional association that informs early childhood education providers about program standards and best practices in the field. NAEYC states the importance of communicating a philosophy or position statements visible in early learning programs, to families and communities, as it creates and communicates a shared language and evidence-based frame of reference for early childhood educators, and decision-makers to have a shared understanding of the key issue of the importance of outdoor play in early childhood education and how centers or provincial policies and programming could be acted upon.

Outdoor play statements can help communicate and create a shared learning environment. According to Grimwood, Gordon, and Stevens (2018), sharing a common vision and philosophy of outdoor play allows a cultural shift of being with and in nature, building relationships to support a deep level of engagement, support, shaping practices and programming, and knowledge in nature's play. By communicating and making visible outdoor play visions/philosophies, a common expectation and experiences can be created.

Lee et al. (2022) presented the outcome that outdoor environments offer multifaceted and holistic settings for human development. Through the scope of this review, it has been identified that standardized terminology and conceptual clarity are essential for advancing outdoor play research, policy and practices in outdoor education and play. "For many early learning programs across Canada, having a philosophy statement is required as part of the provincial or territorial licensing requirement" (Dietze & Kashin, 2019, p.39). Dietze and Kim (2021) suggested that

an outdoor pedagogy philosophy guides how outdoor spaces and places are prepared for and with children and how the freedom to experiment, experience and play in the space is extended to children. Communicating about outdoor play must be made visible to help inform and guide educators, directors and families in their role in shaping our generations of tomorrow.

To understand the extent to which early learning and childcare programs prioritize these developmental benefits through outdoor play, 125 Canadian Early Learning and Childcare Center (ELC) websites from five Canadian provinces were examined to determine what was communicated about outdoor play on the site.

The background review highlights the importance of outdoor play for children and, therefore, needs to be part of the information offered to families choosing childcare. To assess how much early learning and childcare programs prioritize outdoor play, examining if and how they communicate this on their public websites became essential.

Methodology

This research project is part of a larger applied research project. The research informing this article was conducted over a six-month period in 2023, during which time five researchers in five Canadian provinces examined 125 early learning centers' websites (n=25 centers per province) to identify if and how outdoor play was communicated on early learning and childcare websites.

There are many perspectives and definitions of content analysis. For this article, the researchers were drawn to content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Essentially, it is a structured method for condensing large amounts of text into fewer content categories, guided by clear coding rules (Krippendorff, 1980). In this instance, using a content analysis methodology is well suited for this study, particularly because of the relatively small-scale study and because it is commonly used with text-based data, such as the text written on early learning centres' websites, which have been written for non-research purposes.

This method enabled the researchers to systematically examine how outdoor play and pedagogy are represented—or omitted—on the websites of early learning programs. By identifying key themes, language, and the frequency of references to outdoor play, the analysis provides insight into how programs publicly communicate their values and practices around outdoor learning. Content analysis is particularly effective for this type of inquiry because it allows for the objective interpretation of textual data that is not originally intended for research purposes, making it possible to uncover implicit messages, priorities, and potential gaps in how outdoor pedagogy is shared with families and the broader public.

Moreover, content analysis supports the study's aim of exploring patterns across programs in a consistent and replicable way, enabling the identification of commonalities or variations in how outdoor experiences are described, prioritized, or linked to programs. It is a valuable method for making sense of naturally occurring text in a way that bridges qualitative insight with quantitative analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of how outdoor play is positioned within early learning environments.

Prior to the website review, the researchers participated in discussions to determine the process for identifying early learning programs and examining and collecting data from the websites. The researchers identified that they would collect the data via provincial portals and health authorities, from their respective provinces, thus sampling would be collected from five provinces. The researchers determined that they would seek the names of twenty-five randomized centers discovered through provincial portals and then conduct an internet search to identify if a center website existed. The researchers identified keywords or phrases (e.g., outdoors, outdoor play, outdoor programming, outdoor spaces for play, nature play, outdoor learning) that would be searched to seek information on outdoor play.

The results were compiled according to three categories:

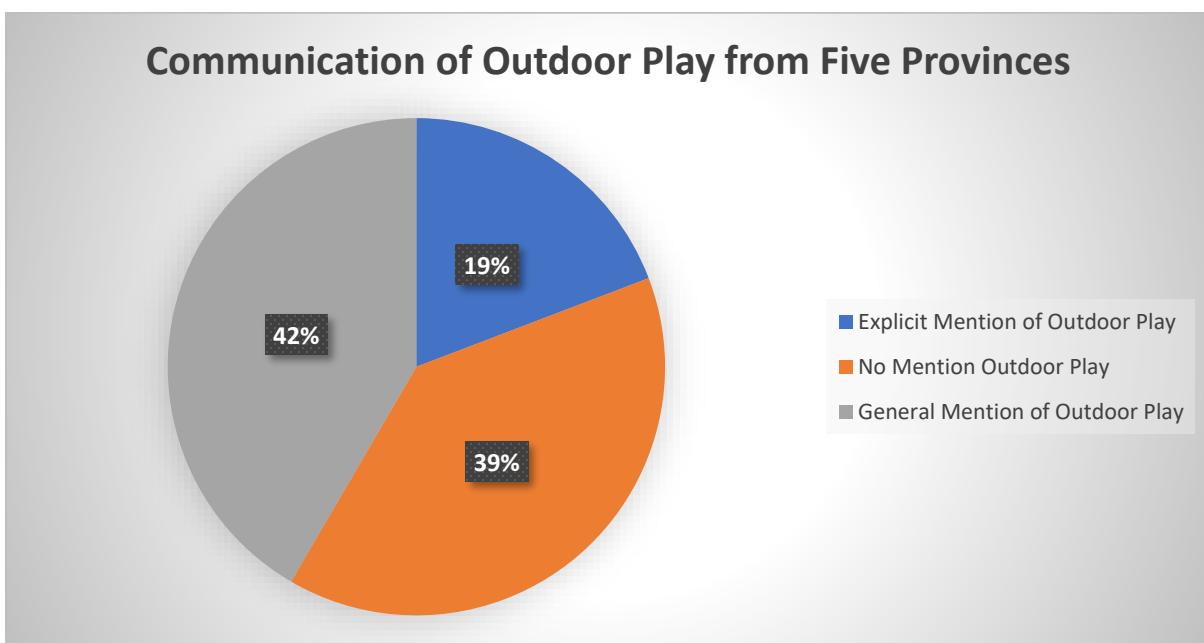
1. An explicit mention of outdoor play would fall under “yes.” For our research, “explicit outdoor play” was deemed to include communication that guides perceptions, attitudes, and actions for intentional outdoor play experiences.
2. If the website did not include any information about outdoor experiences, it would fall under the “no” category.
3. The last category accounted for general information about outdoor play listed on the website, such as daily routines, play spaces, general activities, weather permitting statements, or safety equipment checks. While “outdoor play” was mentioned in the general sense, these websites did not provide explicit information on outdoor play in relation to the terms of perceptions, attitudes, or actions involving “outdoor play.”

Analysis

Overview

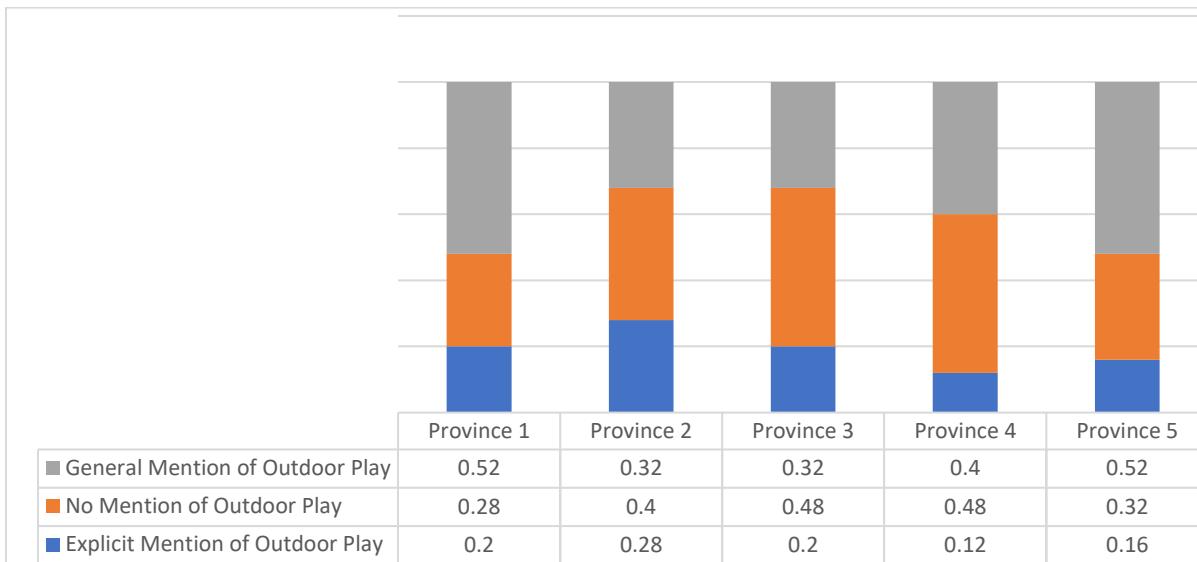
At the time of the data collection (spring 2023), 19.2% (n=24 centers) had explicit communications involving outdoor play visible on their websites, 39.2% (n=49 centers) had no mention of outdoor play, and 41.6 % (n=52 centers) had general mentions of outdoor play on their websites. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown via the three categories. Table 2 illustrates the results by province.

Table 1 –Early Learning and Childcare Programs with Explicit Outdoor Play Communications



Consistent with Table 1: Explicit mention of outdoor play remains the lowest when analyzing the data in the individual provinces.

The data collected in spring 2023 reveals a significant variation in how early learning and childcare programs communicate the importance of outdoor play on their websites. Only 19.2% of centers explicitly emphasized outdoor play, while 39.2% made no mention of it at all. The remaining 41.6% provided only general references to outdoor play. This suggests a need for clearer communication regarding outdoor play across many programs.

Table 2 – Explicit Outdoor Play Communications per Provincial Jurisdiction

Findings

Valuing the Importance of Outdoor Play

This study examined the visibility of communicating information about outdoor play on the websites of 125 Canadian early learning centers. Nineteen percent (n= 24 centers) of the early learning and childcare websites explicitly identified outdoor play as a core program component. Per provincial jurisdictions, Province 2 has the highest percentage (28%) of centers identifying information about outdoor play on their websites (n= 7 centers), while Province 4 has the lowest percentage (12%) of centers highlighting outdoor play on their websites (n=3 centers).

The literature review clearly describes the importance of outdoor play for children's healthy and holistic learning and development. According to Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot (2011), Lee et al. (2021), and Kelly et al. (2025), despite evidence of the benefits of play outdoors, most early childhood educational training focuses on the indoor environment. (p.758-759) Despite the growing evidence and emphasis on this importance, the early learning field, policymakers, and provincial jurisdictions need to take action to communicate and make visible the critical need for increased outdoor play with children, families, and communities. Canada has a ways to go.

Despite the growing evidence of the importance of outdoor play (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024; Kiviranta et al., 2023), this research suggests that if outdoor play is part of early learning programs, it is not clearly articulated. This aligns with Dietze and Kashin's (2019), Kelly et al. (2025), and Grimwood et al.'s (2018) studies, which highlighted several factors influencing the advancement of quality outdoor play, including the importance of communicating and visibly presenting outdoor play statements or policies to guide practices and programming.

Intentional outdoor play experiences are critical in early learning and childcare centers. Dietze and Kashin (2019) recommended that early learning field need to rethink our outdoor practices. Outdoor play is no longer a time of "free play" but an opportunity to increase intentional outdoor programming and learning with children and families. Why is outdoor play not being communicated as an essential program component? According to Kelly et al. (2025), a systematic policy shift is required to clearly articulate outdoor play, enabling the effective enactment of a curriculum vision that embraces outdoor learning. Taken together, these perspectives highlight the importance of developing clear communication on outdoor play—one that integrates child-led principles, supports diverse learning needs, and aligns with broader curriculum and policy goals on outdoor play and learning in early childhood education.

Summary

This study may be the first in Canada to explore how often outdoor play is communicated as part of the information on early learning and childcare center websites. Our preliminary study suggests that early learning and childcare centers would benefit from examining content on their site to determine if there is information on outdoor play that they wish to make visible, and if so, why this would be important for current and potential families. As families, the child's first caregivers, and educators navigate a world where children spend increasing amounts of time indoors and on screens, it becomes essential to consider how frequently early learning and childcare program websites emphasize outdoor play as a central component of their programs.

While this study is a preliminary review of how early learning and childcare centers communicate about outdoor play on their websites, it does not provide insight into the complex issue of why early learning field does not specifically mention outdoor play as part of their programming and learning. Results from the data collection can only be generalized from the core question, "How do early learning and childcare programs communicate outdoor play as a programming component on their websites?" Nevertheless, this study highlights how outdoor play and learning is represented on early learning and childcare websites.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First, the sample of early learning centers was small (n=125). This study was designed to identify if and how early learning and childcare programs communicated information on outdoor play on their websites rather than serve as a comprehensive examination of all early learning and childcare programs' websites.

Second, the study depended on the content available on websites. Researchers used their provincial early-learning tools to identify early learning and childcare centers within the provinces. Based on the results generated by the tools, the researchers randomly selected early learning and childcare centers on the Internet to identify if the early learning and childcare center had a website. The search for early learning and childcare programs concluded only when a researcher was able to reach a total of 25 centers in the designated province.

Third, the timing of the data collection (February 2023 to July 2023) cannot reflect later changes to websites or the creation of new websites for existing early learning and childcare centers. The percentage of licensed childcare centers using websites to communicate their services is also undetermined, and, as seen in the literature review, websites are only one of many modes of communication.

Recommendations

Detailing the importance of outdoor play helps build a shared understanding of the expectations and actions needed to promote outdoor play with children, families, and the community. This research demonstrates a lack of explicit communication involving outdoor play. Researchers Legget and Newman (2017) and Kelly et al. (2025) identified the need for a systematic and sociocultural shift to advance outdoor play. Provincial jurisdictions must go above and beyond minimal standards in licensing. Collaboratively with administrators, educators, and outdoor play organizations, it is recommended to increase licensing recommendations of outdoor play and learning to be visible and explicitly communication for curricular expectations. Our children, families, and communities deserve more than the minimum standard.

The early learning field and outdoor play organizations need to work together to continue to support, educate and increase awareness of the importance of outdoor play for all children, families and communities. Through leadership support, and outdoor experiential professional development, the early learning field can gain confidence and feel supported to evolve outdoor play practices and change perceptions when working with children outdoors. (Dietze & Kashin, 2019; Kelly et al., 2025; Golubovic-Ilic & Mikaric, 2023), thus providing opportunities to communicate the

importance of outdoor play for children, families, educators, policymakers, administrators. to all current and future early learning professionals.

Creating provincial, municipal, and early learning outdoor play communications will impact attitudes and perceptions for high-quality outdoor play today and tomorrow. Outdoor play must be visible in marketing tools, parent handbooks, and employee handbooks to guide outdoor curricula expectations, continuously improve outdoor practices, and provide the opportunity to take actions that increase outdoor play.

The authors wish to express special thanks to the Lawson Foundation for the research funding provided that made this study possible.

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Tammie Hachey-Bell is an Early Childhood Education instructor at New Brunswick Community College, Woodstock, NB., Canada. She can be contacted at tammie.hachey@nbcc.ca

Beverlie Dietze is a part-time faculty at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Canada. She can be contacted at bpdietze@gmail.com

Deidre Craig is a full-time Instructor at Saskatchewan Polytechnic in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. She can be contacted at Deidre.Craig@saskpolytech.ca

Linda O'Donoghue is a teaching and learning advisor, with the Department of Teaching and Learning Innovations, at Okanagan College, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. She can be reached at lodonoghue@okanagan.bc.ca.