

In this together
Rediscovering the potential of play in natural spaces



"Children cannot bounce off the walls if you take away the walls."

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Introduction.

This document is a summary of an 18-month project that was carried out as a result of a partnership between the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association and research partners in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta. Rather than outline each stage of the research, the information in the document is a collective presentation of the discoveries made throughout the duration of the project.

The title, "In this together", reflects a need for us all – practitioners, researchers, parents, planners, decision makers – to challenge the culture of risk aversion we reproduce in and through our interactions with children. "In this together" also reflects a need to put children back into the centre of our programming, to learn with and from them about the potential of nature for play.

The purpose.

The project aimed to explore the provision of nature play opportunities for children in Alberta during the after school hours.

The research.

Qualitative research was done to understand the issue in more depth and complement an initial quantitative survey. The information in this report is an amalgamation of the learning that derived from the conversation café at the ARPA Pre-Conference in 2013, the survey (94 respondents), 21 individual interviews, and various articles, reports and resources that have been discovered during the process.

What is nature play?

We defined nature play in the survey as “play that is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and personally directed that occurs in natural environments.” Further to this definition, we explored what nature play personally meant to the practitioners we interviewed. Some of these descriptions are displayed below.

you could just do your **own thing**

we probably did things that we
shouldn't have done

a **magical** place where they're
completely absorbed

loved to be outside

they'll play for hours if **you let them.**

pick up that rock and there's a **bunch of bugs** under it

amazement and wonder

you're **touching** and you're **smelling**, and you're **tasting**

we'd each have one as our house

peace and restfulness

The story.

"We tend to do the indoor snowball game where we have these bundles of socks and play indoor snowball games to actually play it where you have the right conditions and where you don't want people getting hurt."

Play has lost out. To structured time, dictated by adults. Adults who fear what might happen if they let go. Adults who remember childhood differently.

Nature has lost out. To manicured and sterile spaces. Spaces that invite you in but cannot hold your attention. Spaces without hidden secrets to explore. Spaces that remember childhood differently.

Stories about the loss of play and natural spaces were communicated often in conversations with practitioners and in the documents we came across throughout the project. Not only common to Alberta, these stories appear to transgress the boundaries of Canada and reflect similar struggles in the US and some European countries.

Three main points were highlighted that relate to our current culture and the demise of opportunities for nature play. There exists,

- An avoidance of risk to protect the children in our care (and protect ourselves from liability).
- A preference for aesthetically appealing (and seemingly safer, more controlled) spaces.
- A pressure to cultivate children and prepare them with the skills they need for adulthood, leading to the structuring of children's time to justify the instrumental value of everything they do.



Photos of The Land, an adventure playground in Wales, UK. Taken from "The Overprotected Kid" by Rosin (2010), The Atlantic.

Rejuvenating nature play.

Rather than delve further into the 'issues' preventing nature play opportunities, the remainder of the document will focus on what is being done in Alberta and beyond to navigate these cultural realities while at the same time working to shift them.

Reimagining 'nature'

Practitioners often did not have access to forests, rivers, and other features we often associate with nature. To work past this, some of them broadened their views of what nature could be. They did this by making use of loose parts (natural 'equipment') and by taking advantage of the weather and changing seasons we experience in Canada. Snow and ice, for example, were viewed as useful play resources rather than hindrances.

If you look at the world from the scale of a child, you don't need a lot of natural space. People think, I need a forest. No, you need three trees. You need three trees and some dirt and some rocks. You need a puddle that shows up on a field every time it rains... The opportunities are there. Sometimes you've got to reduce your scale a little bit to find them."

Learning from children

Some practitioners feared that they did not have enough knowledge about nature to do nature-based play. The advice provided was to start with what we do know – such as the reason for falling leaves – and use play as an opportunity to learn *with* children. Practitioners spoke about researching particular aspects of nature together, taking photos of natural elements and recruiting children as explorers.

I've really learned that you just have to learn alongside the children and be a researcher with them, and if they ask you questions like what is this, and you don't know, then you can say I'm not sure but let's look it up.

Letting go

With pressure to achieve particular outcomes and justify funding for programs, opportunities for play have largely been replaced by structured activities.

Practitioners challenged this culture by relocating **children** (rather than parents) as the central motivation for their programs. The attitudes of parents and other leaders gradually changed due to the positive experiences created for children.

"I think partly what dictates the response of the parent is the response of the child."

Fruitful and exciting environments were provided that offered an abundance of play potential. In these environments children were trusted to explore, challenge themselves, interact, and be the masters of their own experience. Practitioners were there to oversee, provide stimuli, and support exploration, without determining the direction or forms of play. As with nature, they learned about play *with* and *from* the children in their care.

"We could have a whole day of free play depending on what happens with where the kids are at.... maybe they know that they're safe and comfortable because somebody is hanging out in the background.... sometimes if you're just busy with your hands the kids will sink easier into their play."

Strategic alignment

Some of the practitioners spoke about not having nature play in their mandates. Others managed to provide nature play opportunities by creatively aligning with pre-existing evaluation indicators rather than waiting for new measures to be developed. For example, nature play was deemed to be an inclusive activity because children could make decisions about the ways they were involved and play spanned a range of ages.

“With nature play, it looks whatever way you want [it] to look. It can look one way to one kid and look completely differently to another child.... It's a very inclusive way of doing childcare.... When you buy a toy from a store, it comes with an instruction manual and it has got to be played a certain way... nature play doesn't do that.”

Nature play was consequently a good way to help achieve numerous quality indicators outlined by evaluation tools. It is therefore recommended that practitioners find ways to align nature play into their existing curriculum.

“When I look at my six or seven intermediate goals that I want to meet, nature play meets every single one of those goals, every single time.”

Collaboration

To offset a lack of resources, knowledge and expertise, a community development approach to nature play was recommended. When practitioners did not have the nature-based knowledge they felt they needed to provide opportunities for play, some of them sought resources and advice from others who had more expertise in this area. Mutually beneficial partnerships consequently increased the availability and quality of nature play opportunities.

“When you don't know what to do find somebody who does.”

Creating rich environments

"We need something that **keeps the magic alive**, that keeps the curiosity alive and that builds the sense of connection because it's not being built elsewhere."

"You have to have something **exciting enough** to get them to go out there."

Nature can help us to create play-rich environments, whether it is readily accessible or natural elements are brought into a play space. Nature provides opportunities for risk, challenge, exploration, discovery and interaction. The following is a list of potential play resources that can provide exciting environments in which to play. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list but instead provides a few possible suggestions for stimulating play.

"Instead of children playing with stacking blocks you would buy from the store, they're blocks that we've gone out and cut ourselves."

Type	Resource	Potential for play
Natural	Logs	Sitting, rolling, jumping, climbing, stacking
	Sticks	Building fires, sculpting, making instruments.
	Rocks, pebbles, shells	Throwing, sorting, creating
	Boulders	Climbing, jumping
	Sand	Sorting, building, digging
	Dirt, mud	Creating, jumping, digging, painting
	Puddles, streams, rivers	Wading, jumping, stomping, filling
	Ice	Crushing, sliding, testing
	Snow	Sculpting, shelter, melting, jumping, throwing, kicking, sliding, rolling
	Leaves	Building, sculpting, throwing
	Trees, bushes, shrubs, plants, weeds	Climbing, hiding, exploring, shelter
	Hills	Running, rolling, sliding, hiding
	Long and short grass	Hiding, discovering, shelter
	Straw	Creating, jumping, hiding
	Bugs, wildlife	'Tracking', discovering, seeking, examining
Unnatural	Kitchen Utensils	Filling, making noise, creating
	Food dye	Painting
	Tools – household, gardening – e.g. spades, saws, knives	Building, creating, cutting
	Ropes, string	Walking, tying, creating
	Matches, lighters	Burning, creating

Additional play-leader tips

Self-exploration

“We let the child, for the most part, come to it on their own.... There's never any push from us to have to do an activity so we just let them do what they feel comfortable doing.”

Preparing parents

“Parents are all fully armed ahead of time with the knowledge that your kids are going to come home some combination of wet, dirty, and exhausted...”

Setting boundaries with children

“On the first day I get them to help me set their boundaries of their main camp. And then if they need to leave main camp they need to tell an adult.”

Resources

Resource	Description
http://www.childrenandnature.org/naturestory/	Ideas for play
https://www.50things.org.uk	50 things to do before you're 11 ³ / ₄
http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/links-we-like.aspx	Link to other approved resources
http://www.naturerocks.org/activities/index.htm	Really good section that allows you to customize by selecting weather, age group, duration, etc.
http://www.greenheartsinc.org/Nature_Play.html	What is nature play with a load of resources at the bottom of the page including 101 ideas for what a child can do in nature.
http://www.wild-zone.net/www.wild-zone.net/Toolkit.html	Tool kit for creating "wild zones"
http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/GG2011/PlayinAK_CarmenField.pdf	Mud games
http://www.childrenandnature.org/downloads/GG2011/NaturePlay_byMaryHardcastle.pdf	General ideas
http://www.get-to-know.org/bioblitz/species-guide/	Species guide
http://www.get-to-know.org/education/	Education and some play ideas
http://www.natureexplore.org/NaturalProducts/	Creating natural play spaces
http://www.wrha.mb.ca/wave/2014/07/go-for-it.php	Article about risk
http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/	Another article about risk (really good).
http://vimeo.com/89009302?from=outr-embed http://vimeo.com/89009798?from=outr-embed http://vimeo.com/89715425?from=outr-embed	Short videos about The Land in North Wales – an adventure playground (upcoming documentary)
http://www.urbanforestschoo.co.uk/routine_gallery.html	Examples in an urban setting
http://www.muddyfaces.co.uk	Site for ordering equipment in UK but also useful ideas.
http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/training-resources/i-made-a-unicorn	Resource about play

Summary

There has been a definite surge in the interest shown for rejuvenating opportunities for nature play, reflected in our desire to do this project and the discoveries that were made throughout the research. The will for nature play is around us, but we are finding that the culture is not yet there to support it.

Rather than feel as though we cannot change these circumstances, we instead need to realize that we all have a role to play in shifting this culture. We are all implicated in this.

As a starting point, we need to challenge our fear of and aversion to risk. We need to find opportunities for unstructured play within a highly structured world. And we need to realize the beauty and potential in natural environments we might initially view as unappealing.

We can all help to create spaces that hold hidden secrets, spaces that hold our attention. Spaces in which we can let children be children and teach *us* how to play in nature again.

We are in this together.

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