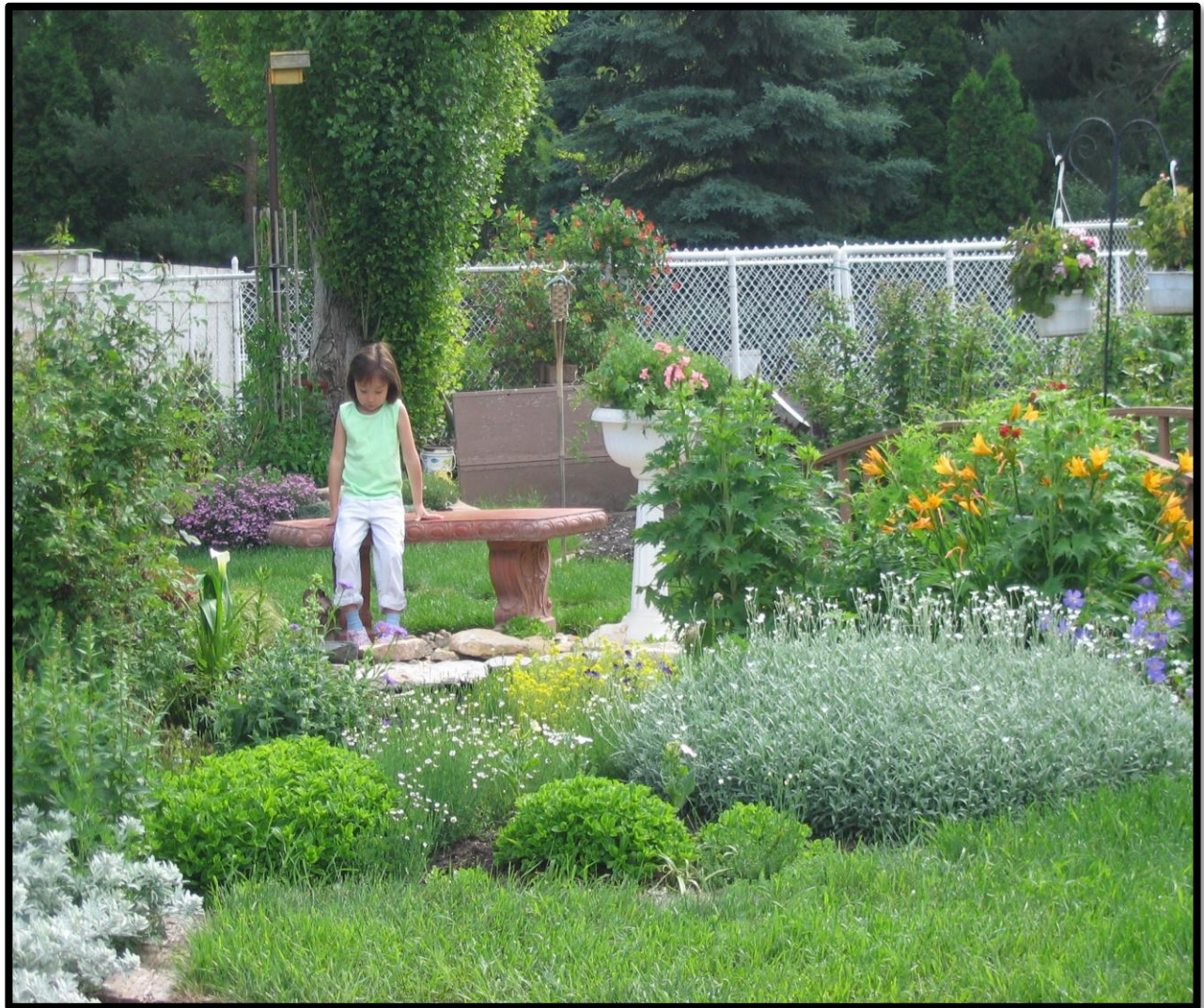




Saskatchewan
Ministry of
Education

**Early Learning and Child Care:
Creating Outdoor Learning Environments
Resource Booklet**



Introduction

Creating Outdoor Learning Environments is an initiative that will offer to the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector support to enhance children’s holistic learning experiences outdoors in environments that are planned in alignment with the vision and principles of *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*.

The objectives of *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments* are to:

- assist with the development of safe and stimulating outdoor learning environments;
- increase awareness of the benefits of outdoor play for children; and
- increase understanding of the educator’s role in supporting outdoor play.

Creating Outdoor Learning Environments

There are three components to *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments*, as illustrated below:



The purpose of this booklet is to describe components of *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments*, and to provide suggestions to the ELCC sector to develop quality outdoor learning environments and facilitate children’s learning outdoors.

“Outside is a half of a whole, inside being the other half. If the two environments are viewed together then the planning needs to be viewed as such.” (*Playing Outside*, p.11)

Components of *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments*

Resources for Licensed Child Care Facilities and School Divisions

Licensed child care centres, family child care homes (FCCH), and school divisions with Prekindergarten/Kindergarten programs will receive by mail, three books related to planning, implementing, and supporting children's development in outdoor learning environments:

- *Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul* (Rusty Keeler)
- *Learning Outdoors: Improving the Quality of Young Children's Play Outdoors* (Helen Bilton)
- *Playing Outside: Activities, Ideas and Inspiration for the Early Years* (Helen Bilton)

Professional Learning Opportunity

On Saturday, March 10, 2012, the ELCC sector will have an opportunity to attend a professional learning event delivered in 10 communities across the province through network satellite. Broadcasted from Regina, this event may be accessed simultaneously in several locations. A host will be available at each site to ensure workshop participants across the province have the opportunity to be engaged in the material presented. This professional learning opportunity will provide participants with in-depth understanding related to the objectives of *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments*.

All individuals in the ELCC sector interested in planning and realizing an outdoor learning environment, and supporting children's learning outdoors, are encouraged to attend. Refer to the *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments Event* flyer for registration details.

One-time Grant for Child Care Centres to Plan for an Outdoor Learning Environment

Licensed child care centres will be eligible to apply for a one-time grant to assist with planning and developing an outdoor learning environment. Prekindergarten/Kindergarten programs, FCCHs, and other early learning programs are also encouraged to plan and implement outdoor learning environments through collaboration with administration, the FCCH annual equipment grant, or accessing community and school resources.



A Vision for Outdoor Learning Environments

Creating Outdoor Learning Environments is intended to complement the vision and principles outlined in *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*. The vision of early learning programs is:

Early learning programs are holistic, responsive, and developmentally appropriate. They focus on the healthy development of the whole child – social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development. Children, family members and early childhood educators collaborate in enriching children’s learning and growth. (Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide, pg. 4)

Included in this vision are children and their learning experiences, relationships, and environments. Children’s development is supported in programs that recognize children as competent learners, nurture holistic development and learning, encourage strong and positive relationships, and provide stimulating and dynamic environments.

Outdoor and indoor learning environments collectively support child development. Careful planning of outdoor learning environments considers all aspects of holistic child development:

A high quality indoor and outdoor environment is influenced by the values and views of the planners as well as by choices about the integration of the social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects. The result is a holistic environment, well-prepared and maintained through regular care and attention. Each part of the environment contributes to children’s overall growth and communicates its special purpose to the participants (Creating Early Learning Environments, pg. 11).

Holistically planned environments support all areas of child development: social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual.



Features of an Outdoor Learning Environment

Thoughtfully planning an outdoor learning environment incorporates each aspect of children’s holistic development. Suggestions are offered below for landscape and design elements to incorporate into an outdoor learning environment. Elements within the outdoor learning environment overlap and combine to support children’s holistic development.

Suggestions for Planning an Outdoor Learning Environment		
Aspect of Holistic Development	Areas to Design	Landscape and Design Elements
Social-Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas for dramatic play • Areas that invite communication and collaboration • Spaces for quiet and calm 	Stages Platforms Benches Sand areas Tree stumps, boulders Canopies Teepees Gazebos Outdoor instruments Wind chimes
Physical Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas for digging • Areas for crawling, balancing, running, jumping, and dancing (large muscle growth) • Areas for climbing • Areas for constructing, grasping, manipulating (fine motor) 	Sand, pea gravel, mud Ramps and tunnels Pathways for wheeled vehicles Open grassy spaces Hills Boulders Stumps Beams Logs Stones Sand
Intellectual Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas to encourage symbolic representation • Areas for investigation, discovery, exploration, and observation 	Outdoor easels Chalkboards Pathways for discovery and exploration (stumps, gravel, stone, wood) Boardwalk Bridges Groves of plants and shrubs Water features*
Spiritual Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas to appreciate beauty • Areas that appeal to the senses • Areas to nurture and care for living things 	Soil Plants, flowers, garden Seeds Birdfeeders, birdhouses Stones, wood Trees, shrubs, grass

*For safety reasons, standing water (e.g., ponds, etc) is discouraged within the facility’s outdoor learning environment.

Planning an Outdoor Learning Environment

“Creating a Master Plan design starts with your dreams and ends with a drawing.”
(*Natural Playscapes*, p. 95)

Integrating the landscape elements into a plan for an outdoor learning environment considers the environment as a whole. Consider which areas of the outdoor environment will complement each other in design. For example:



- A calm area with a bench within a natural garden in a corner may serve as a cozy space for conversation between two children, or a place for quiet and solitude
- A central, sandy area contained by logs, or an open grassy space with a hill, may be a gathering place for children, where there will be opportunity for collaboration and play
- A pathway of varying textures (gravel, stone, wood) winding around the perimeter of the outdoor yard, through groves of plants and shrubs, allows for discovery
- A central pathway may allow for wheeled vehicles and ramps
- An easel secured to a fence, or a retaining wall to paint, will invite creativity

Design outdoor learning environments that are inclusive of all children in the program. Plan for the developmental ages and abilities of children, ensuring that all children enrolled in the program will benefit from the outdoor learning environment. Consider:

- Gentle inclines for toddlers and infants, and soft paths for crawling, balancing, and walking
- Multi-sensory opportunities: bright plants and flowers of various textures, trickling water, areas for music
- Pathways that are large enough to accommodate children of all abilities



Consider Saskatchewan’s climate and the use of native plants and flowers in designing the outdoor learning environment. The outdoor learning environment will change as the seasons shift, and a thoughtfully planned learning environment will offer new seasonal experiences. For example:

- A grassy hill with a slide becomes a hill for sledding in the winter
- A gazebo to provide shade in the summer provides shelter in the winter
- Native plants and birdfeeders/seed attract butterflies, insects, and birds according to the season
- A green shrub in the summer catches snow and frost for exploration in the winter

Using the skills and talents of educators, volunteers, or a landscape architect or designer, prepare a drawing for the program’s outdoor learning environment. In planning the environment and preparing the drawing, keep in mind “a child’s view”, with small details and spaces providing opportunities for discovery and exploration.

A Child’s View

-From *Natural Playscapes*

“A small cluster of dwarf trees is enough to give a child the experience of being in a “forest”, and a trickle of water through a carved log is a creek. It’s the small things in a child’s environment that create the biggest interest and excitement: a splashing puddle, a delicate butterfly, or a lawn dotted with dandelions ...” (p. 39)

Implementing the Outdoor Learning Environment Design

Engage children, educators, families, community volunteers, administrators and boards in the creation of an outdoor learning environment. Generate enthusiasm by sharing the vision of the outdoor learning environment and benefits of outdoor learning in supporting child development. Consider resources available within the community, program or school to realize the design of the outdoor learning environment. The following chart provides steps and considerations for implementing an outdoor learning environment (a blank chart has been provided in this resource booklet).



Implementing an Outdoor Learning Environment Design

Steps in Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment		How will this step be achieved?	Who will be involved?	Resources Needed
Vision	Develop a Vision	Observe and document outdoor play. Ask children what they would like to experience. Hold a staff meeting to develop a vision with educators	Children Educators Director/FCCH Provider School Division staff	Knowledge of holistic child development (social-emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual) Books to share among staff (<i>Natural Playscapes, Learning Outdoors, Playing Outside</i>)
	Share the Vision with Board/Administrator/School and Seek Approval	Organize a board/administrator/meeting to share the visions and seek approval	Educators Director/FCCH Provider Administrator/Board School Division staff	Knowledge to share concerning holistic child development (social-emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual) Resources to share with the board/administrator (<i>Natural Playscapes, Learning Outdoors, Playing Outside, Creating Outdoor Environments Resource Booklet</i>) Handout describing the program's vision for an outdoor learning environment
	Share the Vision with Families and Community	Share the vision in family newsletters Post the vision on bulletin boards Encourage families/educators/board to network among contacts to share the vision	Educators Director/FCCH Provider Families Administrator/Board	Print materials to produce newsletters, bulletin posts
Design	Create a Drawing	Use the skills/talents of educators, director, families, volunteers, or landscape designer/architects to prepare a professional drawing	Educators/Director/ FCCH Provider/ Families/Volunteers/ Landscape Designer/ Architect	Potential financial investment for drawing
	Share the drawing with the Board/Administrator/School Staff/ELCC Consultant and seek approval	Organize a board/administrator meeting to share the drawing and seek approval for the design	Educators Director/FCCH Provider Administrator/Board	Final drawing to share
	Share the Drawing with Families and the Community	Develop a poster for families showing "before" picture and the drawing that was developed Share the drawing in family newsletters Post the vision on bulletin boards Encourage families/educators/board to network among contacts to share the plan for the design	Educators Director/FCCH Provider Administrator/Board Families	Print materials for poster development, newsletters, etc.

Implementing an Outdoor Learning Environment Design

Steps in Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment	How will this step be achieved?	Who will be involved?	Resources Needed
Action	Determine Roles Hold a staff meeting and board meeting to determine roles. Hold meetings with families/community members to form committees	Educators Director Administrator/Board Parents/Community members	Knowledge of individual strengths and skill sets for the following roles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Coordinator • Fundraising Committee • Community Engagement Committee • Material Collection and Storage Committee • Work Organization Committee • Food/Nutrition Committee Knowledge of local community resources and volunteer sources (builders/trades people, local businesses, gardeners, artisans, greenhouses, families, high school students, family/board/educator contacts)
	Make a List Compile a list of items required for the outdoor learning environment. Post in the facility Network to access materials	Project coordinator/FCCH Provider will compile a list Individuals will donate items to the list.	All landscaping and design elements (i.e., soil for hills, boulders, sand, logs, etc.), volunteers for labour, etc.
	Set Timelines for Required Materials/Construction Establish timelines throughout the year Plan for construction seasonally Organize “working bees” or contracting of labour Develop a long-term plan and budget accordingly	Project Coordinator and Committees Educators Director Administrator/Boards Families/Community members Volunteers	Schedules of volunteers. Poster calendar for communication of work days

Supporting Children’s Development in Outdoor Learning Environments: the Educator’s Role

“Educators ensure that the environment complements the interests, suggestions and activities of the learners. Using their combined ideas, children and adults construct holistic environments that provoke questions, capture the imagination and stimulate curiosity to learn more.” (*Creating Early Learning Environments*, p. 14)

The educator’s role is to support children’s development in thoughtfully planned environments. In the outdoor learning environment, the educator observes and reflects upon children’s interests and extends children’s learning. Central to expanding children’s learning is the educator’s relationship with the children: engaged, sensitive, and responsive. Consider the following to extend children’s learning outdoors:

Observe and Document Children Outdoors

Observation, reflection, and documentation of children’s activities, interests, and interactions outdoors will assist educators to support outdoor learning experiences. Observation indoors can also extend learning to outdoor activities.



Creating Outdoor Invitations

Provide invitations to children outdoors to expand interests and stimulate new learning. For example, a basket with strips of fabric of various textures and colours, a chain-link fence, and photographs of tapestries may serve as a weaving invitation outdoors (Bilton, 2005).

Creating Outdoor Learning Experiences

Bring elements of the indoors to the outdoor learning environment to enrich children’s learning in outdoor experiential areas. Rotate materials available to children outdoors often. Consider modifying the outdoor learning environment to include:

- A creative area where children can paint with outdoor paint on walls or easels. Have paper, drawing materials, and clipboards available for children.
- Laminated photographs in the sand area of natural sand forms and sculptures. Include moulds of various shapes and sizes, stones, seashells.
- Blocks to support construction activities outdoors
- Props to encourage dramatic play outdoors
- Books relating to what children experience outdoors: insects, climate, trees, seasons, etc.

Observing and reflecting on children's interests indoors and outdoors will provide educators with further knowledge on what to include outdoors, according to the interests of children.

Project Development: Extending the Indoors Outdoors ... Extending the Outdoors Indoors

Collaborating with children in the development of projects may be a further opportunity for carrying learning indoors to outdoors. In children's learning and development, there is no boundary between outdoors and indoors. A project responding to children's interest in birds may lead to: bird watching outdoors, recording their features in drawings, identification of birds and their habitats in books, small group collaboration to make a bird house to place in the bird's preferred habitat outdoors, and watching the bird house outdoors for signs of nesting throughout the spring.

Additional Information: Outdoor Learning Environment Online Site

The early learning and child care sector will have access to additional resources throughout the year online through a "Creating Outdoor Learning Environments" site. Supports and links to online resources to assist the early learning and child care sector to develop quality outdoor learning environments will be available through this site. Additional information concerning this site, and how it can be accessed, will be distributed to the ELCC sector in the coming weeks.

References

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Implementing an Outdoor Learning Environment Design

Steps in Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment		How will this step be achieved?	Who will be involved?	Resources Needed
Vision	Develop a Vision			
	Share the Vision with Board/Administrator/School and Seek Approval			
	Share the Vision with Families and Community			
Design	Create a Drawing			
	Share the drawing with the Board/Administrator/School Staff/ELCC Consultant and seek approval			
	Share the Drawing with Families and the Community			

Implementing an Outdoor Learning Environment Design

Steps in Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment		How will this step be achieved?	Who will be involved?	Resources Needed
Action	Determine Roles			
	Make a List			
	Set Timelines for Required Materials/Construction			