

Guidelines|Outdoor Environments

Outdoor Environment - Assessment for Quality Improvement (OE-AQI)

Introduction: Quality in Outdoor Learning Environments for the Early Years

Outdoor learning environments are foundational to high-quality early childhood education. These spaces offer young children rich opportunities to explore, discover, and engage in meaningful play that supports their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. A thoughtfully designed and well-maintained outdoor environment not only promotes healthy development but also fosters a sense of belonging, connection, and curiosity about the natural world.

In early learning settings, Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) for outdoor environments ensure that children's outdoor experiences are safe, inclusive, responsive to the needs of children, and culturally responsive. These measures help educators, operators, and communities uphold standards that reflect best practices and local values, while also making space for creativity, flexibility, and continuous improvement.

The Importance of Outdoor Learning

Research consistently shows that time spent outdoors in early childhood is linked to numerous positive outcomes, including improved physical health, greater self-regulation, enhanced problem-solving skills, and stronger peer relationships. The natural environment stimulates imagination and supports experiential, inquiry-based learning that is deeply engaging for young children.

Outdoor learning is not just a supplement to indoor programming; it is a unique and equally vital learning context. Quality outdoor experiences offer children direct interaction with seasonal changes, living things, natural materials, and weather patterns - all of which contribute to foundational knowledge in science, math, language, and environmental stewardship.

Child Care Centre's are encouraged to develop an Outdoor Program Statement that outlines their philosophy, expectations, and practices for outdoor play and learning. Such a statement can help educators and families clearly understand expectations, guide program planning, and remove barriers to creating rich, meaningful outdoor learning opportunities for all children.

Connection to Land-Based Learning

Outdoor learning is deeply interconnected with land-based learning, which recognizes the land itself as a teacher. Land-based learning emphasizes relationships with place, with all living beings, and with the histories embedded in the land. It invites children and educators to slow down, observe closely, and build respect and reciprocity with the natural world.

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Incorporating land-based learning into early years outdoor environments helps children understand that the land is not just a backdrop for play, but a living system that sustains and teaches us. These experiences cultivate care for the earth, an appreciation for interdependence, and a grounding in local ecology that becomes part of the child's lifelong worldview.

Honouring Indigenous Perspectives

A high-quality outdoor learning environment in early childhood must also reflect and honour Indigenous* ways of knowing, being, and relating to the land. For many Indigenous communities, land is sacred and central to identity, learning, and well-being. Indigenous knowledge systems understand the land as alive - a source of wisdom and guidance that teaches us how to live in respectful relationship with all beings.

Embedding Indigenous perspectives in outdoor learning requires ongoing collaboration with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and communities. It means creating space for Indigenous languages, stories, cultural practices, and ceremonies to be part of children's experiences on the land. It also means acknowledging the land's history, including the impacts of colonization, and affirming Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

**In the context of the Outdoor Environments AQI, the term *Indigenous* is used in its Canadian context and respectfully includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.*

Toward a Culturally and Environmentally Responsive Framework

The development of a quality assurance measure for outdoor learning environments in the early years is an opportunity to ensure that outdoor spaces are not only safe and enriching, but also inclusive, place-based, and culturally grounded. Such a framework should be flexible enough to reflect diverse local geographies and cultural contexts, while providing clear guidance on key principles such as safety, sustainability, equity, and relationality.

Ultimately, high quality outdoor learning environments support children in developing a strong sense of place, identity, and responsibility. They nurture resilient, confident learners who are connected to the land and the community, and who carry forward a respect for the natural world that will shape their actions for years to come.

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to everyone who contributed to the development of the Outdoor Environments AQI. This work was made possible through the collaboration of Indigenous and community partners, colleagues from OISE, and internal City staff. Together, you brought a wealth of knowledge, lived experience, and diverse perspectives that shaped a tool rooted in research, responsive to community needs, and reflective of the vital role outdoor environments play in children's learning and well-being. Thank you for your thoughtful contributions, your time, and your commitment to advancing quality in early learning through outdoor play.

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1. Physical Environment

Intent: The outdoor play space is thoughtfully designed to support a wide range of activities and experiences that foster children's physical, cognitive, and emotional development. It provides a safe and engaging environment where children can explore freely, build confidence, and deepen their connection to the natural world throughout the year. By offering access to diverse surfaces such as grass, sand, mulch, rocks, and water features - as well as nature-inspired elements like trees, shrubs, and natural climbing structures, the space encourages open-ended play and rich sensory experiences. These features not only promote physical development and coordination but also spark curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "The environment was described by Loris Malaguzzi as "the third teacher" and is valued for its power to organize, promote relationships, and educate. It mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of those who use the space" (HDLH, p.20).

Reflective Questions: How do educators ensure the outdoor environment supports the natural curiosity of the children? How do educators ensure the outdoor environment meets the developmental needs of all children in the space? How can you mirror ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures in your outdoor environment?

Physical/Gross motor area: Designated space to promote the development of large muscles through active movement and play. This area encourages experiences that involve the arms, legs and torso supporting coordination, strength, balance, and overall physical development.

Intentional Covered Structure: Securely attached structure or equipment that will provide shade and/or protection from the weather elements.

Note: Learning areas can be multi-purpose. For example, a quiet area can also serve as a language and literacy area.

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

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| <p>☐ All learning areas are not accessible to all children
The environment limits children from engaging in the space.</p> <p>☐ There is no seating available for children and/or adults in the outdoor environment
No chairs, benches, or wooden stumps are accessible for children and/or adults.</p> <p>☐ There is not adequate storage for outdoor equipment located close to or in the outdoor environment
There is not enough storage for all loose outdoor materials and equipment to be safely stored. Storage is not located close to or in the outdoor environment.</p> | <p>☐ Two or more surfaces are accessible:
There are two or more types of surfaces where children are free to take risks through running, jumping, using adaptative equipment, crawling, walking, and resting. For example, grassy areas, wood chips, outdoor carpets and/or mats, pathways, and rocks/pebbles.</p> <p>☐ Quiet areas are accessible
Children can easily access quiet spaces that are located a distance from high-traffic areas and promote self-regulation.</p> <p>☐ When not in use, outdoor storage is securely locked
Storage is locked when not in use in the outdoor environment. This helps to prevent theft, vandalism, and other hazards.</p> | <p>☐ Educators are given time to set up materials before children enter the outdoor environment
There is documentation that educators have dedicated time to thoughtfully set up the outdoor environment.</p> <p>☐ Two or more outdoor seats are accessible to children and/or adults
At least two intentional seats are accessible in the outdoor environment that provide elevated seating. For example, tree stumps, boulders, chairs, and above ground/raised surfaces to sit on.</p> <p>☐ Each age group has a designated outdoor space
There is designated space that is responsive to the developmental needs of each age group.</p> |
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Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **Storage is not organized**

Outdoor toys and equipment are stacked on top of each other, making it unsafe for educators and children to access.

☐ **Materials do not foster child-to-child interactions**

There are less than two items that foster child-to-child interactions. For example, benches can only seat one child at a time, or there are only enough play materials for one child to use

☐ **Storage is labelled**

More than 50% of play materials are labelled, allowing educators to easily access and organize equipment. Labels can be words and/or pictures.

☐ **There is a balance of shade and sunny areas in the outdoor environment throughout the day**

The outdoor environment includes areas where children can play in direct sunlight, as well as comfortable, shaded spaces for rest or play. Shade may be provided through non-permanent features such as awnings, tied structures, or large umbrellas.

☐ **Each age group has their own designated outdoor time**

One age group has access to the outdoor environment at a time; mixed age groups do not share the outdoor environment at the same time. This allows for more meaningful opportunities for play and learning experiences that are responsive to developmental needs of the children.

☐ **One or more covered structures are accessible**

The outdoor environment includes accessible structures such as a playhouse, tent, play structure or large trees.

☐ **Intentional covered structures provide shade and/or protection from the rain, snow, and other weather conditions**

The outdoor environment includes intentional structures such as canopies, gazebos, pergolas, and huts that are easily accessible. These provide shade and shelter, allowing children and educators to engage in outdoor play during various weather conditions.

☐ **There is at least one clearly identified walking path in the outdoor environment**

Walking paths can create a flow between learning areas and experiences in the outdoor environment. There are many ways that outdoor environments may define a walking path, for example, by creating an outline using pylons and/or paint, or by arranging experiences in a way that creates a path.

2. Physical and Risky Play

Intent: Risky play is an essential component of early childhood development, as it supports children in building independence, confidence, and resilience through carefully considered and intentional challenges. This type of play allows children to test their limits, make decisions, assess potential outcomes, and develop problem-solving skills in real time. Through experiences involving height, speed, rough-and-tumble interactions, the use of real tools, and elements that spark curiosity, children can explore and extend their abilities in meaningful ways. These forms of play not only satisfy children's natural drive for adventure and exploration but also nurture their physical, social, and emotional growth. Educators play a crucial role in supporting risky play by creating environments that balance safety with opportunities for challenge. This includes removing unnecessary barriers, trusting children's capabilities, and encouraging them to follow through with their natural curiosities. By providing a variety of open-ended materials, such as real tools, large rocks, crates, ropes, water elements, and swings, that are responsive to the developmental needs of children, educators can enrich the learning environment and support deeper engagement. When supported thoughtfully, risky play becomes a powerful tool for learning, helping children to develop courage, persistence, and a strong sense of self.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "Creating safe and stimulating outdoor spaces for intentional active play that is individualized and adapted as needed to support children's varied abilities..." support children's health and well-being (HDLH, p.32).

Reflective Questions: How do educators promote the use of physical play materials in a meaningful way? (Playground Guidelines AQL, 2017, p.10). How do educators encourage children to be active in the outdoor environment?

Responsive to the developmental needs of the children: Meets the individual physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of a child.

Play materials: push/pull toys, balls, tunnels for crawling through, tree trunks/stumps, natural inclines (hills), large wheeled toys, stepping stones, balance beams, planks.

Active equipment: Tricycles, sleds, skipping ropes, canoes, trees, rocks, boulders, rope swings, rocky pathways.

Physical/gross motor opportunities: Fishing, canoeing, hunting, obstacle course, relay race, climbing rock wall, parachute play.

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

- ❑ **Outdoor physical/gross motor opportunities are not accessible for the entire time that children are outdoors**

Physical/gross motor equipment is not accessible to children during their time in the outdoor environment. During outdoor time, physical/gross motor play materials such as tricycles and sleds are left in bins and/or storage containers.

- ❑ **Three or more types of equipment that will promote physical/gross motor learning are accessible to children**

There are three or more types of accessible equipment that are responsive to the development needs of the children. For example, spinning structure, climbing wall, balancing and/or jumping structure, large rocks, hills and educator and/or child-designed obstacle courses.

- ❑ **Four or more types of active equipment that are responsive to the developmental needs of the children are accessible**

There are four or more types of equipment accessible that are responsive to the developmental needs of the children. For example, spinning structures, climbing walls, balancing and/or jumping structures, large rocks, hills and educator and/or child-designed obstacle courses.

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Does Not Meet Expectations

- ☐ **Physical/gross motor play materials and equipment are not appropriate**
Educators do not consider children's individual abilities when setting up and/or facilitating physical/gross motor learning experiences. For example, only wheeled toys are available for preschoolers even though some children in the group are not physically capable of pedaling or steering.
- ☐ **Only one type of outdoor physical/gross motor play equipment is accessible**
There are no choices available for physical/gross motor play equipment. Play structures cannot be counted for this sub-item.
- ☐ **Educators direct all aspects of the outdoor learning**
Educators stop and/or redirect children from engaging in play and following their own interests.

Meets Expectations

- ☐ **Educators are actively engaged in outdoor physical/gross motor learning experiences with the children**
Educators are observed actively engaged with the children in outdoor physical/gross motor play learning experiences.
- ☐ **Designated safe space for outdoor physical/gross motor learning experiences is accessible**
- ☐ **Three or more types of equipment are accessible to foster balance, coordination, and climbing skills**
For example, hollow logs, balance beams, large wooden circles, large rocks. Play structures can be counted for one type of equipment for this sub-item.
- ☐ **Educators allow children to follow their own natural curiosity and inquiry**
Children are encouraged to follow their natural curiosity. For example, allowing children to climb and jump from various heights.

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **Educators enrich and encourage risky play by providing materials and/or supports**
Educators enhance spontaneous risky play experiences by introducing additional materials that support active exploration and engagement. Examples include building tools, large spools, gardening accessories, and encouraging safe, supervised risk-taking such as running up the slide.
- ☐ **Educators provide opportunities for intentional risk by including play materials that build resilience and confidence**
Educators support children's natural curiosity by removing barriers, enabling them to explore new experiences and build on previous ones. For example, children may rearrange heavy rocks in the planting area or use real woodworking tools in the outdoor environment.

3. Supporting Natural Environments & Learning Materials

Intent: Children develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural world through the integration of nature-based furnishings and outdoor learning environments. These elements foster a strong connection to the environment while encouraging imaginative play, creativity, and sensory exploration. Natural materials such as wooden seating, log pathways, stone structures, and other organically designed furnishings, invite children to engage with their surroundings in meaningful and purposeful ways. Access to gardening tools and well-maintained nature areas, including fruit, vegetable, and flower gardens, provides rich, hands-on learning experiences. Through planting, harvesting, watering, and observing growth cycles, children become active participants in their learning and gain firsthand insight into the processes of nature. These experiences nurture responsibility, patience, and curiosity, while also supporting fine motor development and scientific thinking. Educators play a key role in extending these learning opportunities by intentionally guiding children’s observations of weather, seasonal changes, and climate patterns. Regular reflection and dialogue around environmental changes help children build a foundational understanding of the land, the natural cycles of the earth, and their role as caretakers of the environment. By embedding nature into daily practice and learning, educators support children in developing a sense of wonder, environmental stewardship, and a lifelong connection to the natural world.

Inspiring Pedagogy: “A growing body of research links our mental, physical and spiritual health to our association with nature” (Louv, 2005). Outdoor environments should make the most of the natural resources that are available to them. Natural and repurposed elements, and random found objects should be included in children’s play. Educators should consider the relationships between the weather, seasons, climate, and other phenomena when planning experiences that use natural and repurposed elements (The Scottish Government, 2018, “Out to Play”, section 5.9).

Reflective Questions: How are natural and repurposed elements being used to stimulate children’s learning? Are natural and repurposed elements thoughtfully incorporated into the outdoor environment? Are there a variety of natural and repurposed elements in the outdoor environment?

Natural and repurposed elements: Accessible parts of the outdoor environment that include natural items (such as trees and stones), objects created using natural materials (such as wooden benches), and repurposed materials (such as pool noodles and water bottles being used for water play, boxes repurposed into a sheltered quiet area or pretend play area, and/or a canoe being used as a sandbox).

Loose parts: Open-ended, movable play materials that children can interact with, manipulate, and use in a variety of ways. Examples of loose parts that are in and/or come from the natural environment include:

- Natural resources, such as straw, smooth sticks, mulch, mud, leaves, shells, and stones.
- Repurposed materials, such as old tires, wooden spools, wooden logs, fabric scraps, and metal containers.
- Random found objects, such as shiny stones, driftwood, acorns, pinecones, feathers, bottle caps, and cardboard tubes

Building materials: Dirt, sand, soil, wood, nails, hammers, and planks.

Water source: Water that is for playing, including a bucket, tap, or hose.

Plant life: Where flowers, vegetables, fruits, and native plants are planted, grown, and tended to by children and educators in the environment.

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **Children do not have access to natural elements**
Natural elements are not accessible to the children in the outdoor environment. For example, plants, water, stones, and vegetables.
- ☐ **Two or more types of natural elements are accessible to children**
Children can easily access and engage with the natural elements in the outdoor environment. For example, plant life, water, stones, and rocks.
- ☐ **Three or more types of natural elements are permanently accessible in the outdoor environment to children**
Children can easily access and engage with the natural elements in the outdoor environment. For example, grass, trees, rocks, and plant life.

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Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **There are not enough learning materials accessible in the outdoor environment**

There are not enough learning materials accessible in the outdoor environment for the number of children who want to use them.

☐ **Educators do not set up learning materials to facilitate participation, teamwork, and partnership among groups of children**

The quantity, variety, and type of learning materials that are accessible do not promote engagement among children. For example, only one piece of chalk is accessible for a group of children, potentially limiting participation within the group.

☐ **All materials are not well maintained and are in poor working condition**

More than 25% of materials are not in a state of good repair.

☐ **Loose parts are not accessible in the outdoor environment**

Loose parts in the form of natural resources, repurposed materials, and random found objects are not accessible in the outdoor environment.

☐ **Natural and/or repurposed elements are observed in at least two learning experiences**

Evidence that natural and repurposed elements, including loose parts, are included in outdoor learning experiences.

☐ **Educators adapt learning experiences based on the children's emerging interests**

Educators modify learning experiences by changing and/or adding play materials to enhance the children's emerging interests and curiosity.

☐ **Plant life appears to be thriving and/or well cared for**

Any trees, bushes, gardens, and/or flowers in the outdoor environment appear to be well maintained and thriving.
(Item potentially not applicable during winter months)

☐ **Nature built furnishings and equipment enhances children's experience of nature**

Rocks or tree stumps to sit on or use as a table, stepping stones, logs to walk along, or driftwood.

☐ **Educators create opportunities for nature related learning**

Educators create and extend nature related learning experiences in outdoor gardens and/or nature areas.

☐ **Children take part in maintaining a vegetable and/or flower garden and learning about plant life cycles**

There is evidence that children are invited to take part in the maintenance of the garden. During winter months, evidence of the garden can be presented in a homemade book, photo album, or poster display.

☐ **Evidence educators encourage children to build relationships with the land and demonstrate gratitude**

Educators develop an understanding of the land, which is shared with children and woven into daily experiences. For example, when children notice insects, the educator builds on their interest by encouraging respect for the insects and discussing their role in the environment and preservation.

☐ **Repurposed materials are accessible in the outdoor environment**

For example, car tires used as garden beds, a repurposed wooden barrel for play or planting, wooden pallets as climbing structures, or crates used for building and imaginative play.

4. Health and Safety

Intent: A safe, clean, and well-maintained environment is essential for supporting children's well-being and learning. All areas of the outdoor environment including materials, play equipment, and furnishings are regularly maintained in a hygienic condition to ensure the health and safety of all children and educators. The outdoor play space is kept free from debris, hazardous materials, or potential risks, providing children with a secure area in which to explore and play. Routine checks of the outdoor environment including fences, surfaces, trees, and fixed play structures, help to ensure that equipment is in good condition and does not pose any danger. Storage areas for outdoor materials are kept locked when not in use and are organized to promote both safety and efficiency. Items such as toys, bins, and loose parts are stored at appropriate heights and in a manner that prevents tipping or obstruction. Wheeled equipment, including bikes and scooters, is stored securely to prevent accidents. Educators ensure that a well-stocked first aid kit is both available in the outdoor environment and accessible to educators in case of emergencies. By maintaining an organized and hazard-free environment, educators create a space where children can engage in active, creative, and safe play experiences every day.

Inspiring Pedagogy: Programs must take reasonable steps to “manage and balance risks, while at the same time allowing children to play freely” (Gill, Power, Brussoni, 2019, p.43).

Reflective Questions: Are any hazards visible in the environment? Are children aware of the rules for the outdoor environment?

Visible hazards: Anything that is potentially dangerous to children. For example, equipment that is unsafely stacked, and unsteady furniture that infants cannot safely pull up on.

Good surface drainage: Evident when there is no standing water.

Hygienic: Anything done to maintain cleanliness. For example, handwashing practices and the maintenance of outdoor equipment.

Regularly: Defined according to local ministry guidelines and program expectations.

Water source: Water that is for playing, including a bucket, tap, or hose.

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **The outdoor environment is not in a state of good repair**
One or more areas of the outdoor environment are broken and potentially pose a hazard to the children and/or educators. For example, damage to protective surfacing, tripping hazards, rust, exposed bolts, wood splintering, and vandalism.
- ☐ **Hazardous natural and/or non-natural materials are present in the outdoor environment**
There is garbage, glass, animal waste, poison ivy, ticks, or other hazardous materials in the outdoor environment.

- ☐ **There is at least one type of sanitation area in the outdoor environment for children to clean their hands**
For example, an area that is equipped with soap and clean water, baby wipes, water hose, and/or hand sanitizer.
- ☐ **Evidence the sandbox is covered when not in use**
The sandbox is covered when it is not being used to prevent animals from accessing the area. If covering the sandbox is not possible, educators are raking the sand before the children access the area. **(Sub-item potentially not applicable)**

- ☐ **Program provides children with seasonal clothing, essential for outdoor participation in all weather**
Essential clothing items are available to be worn by children in the outdoor environment. Essential items vary by season and location:
 - Fall (light coats)
 - Summer (hats)
 - Spring (rain boots)

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Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **A water source is not available for drinking in the outdoor environment**

For example, children do not have their own individual drinking cups, or a jug of water is not available in the outdoor environment.

☐ **First aid kit is stocked and available in the outdoor environment**

Evidence that the first aid kit is regularly checked and re-stocked.

☐ **Program provides children with winter clothing essential for outdoor participation**

Essential clothing items are available for children to wear in the outdoor environment. For example, gloves, snowpants, and coats.

☐ **If bicycles and/or wheeled toys are used, they are used within a designated area that does not cross high traffic walking areas**

Bicycle paths do not pass in front of doors or busy walking areas.

(Sub-item potentially not applicable)

☐ **Pathways in the outdoor environment are safely maintained in all seasons**

For example, during winter months ice covered pathways are easily accessible by foot or wheelchair.

☐ **Power outlets and other power sources are not accessible to children**

For example, power outlets are covered when not in use, and solar panels/power banks are kept out of children's reach.

(Sub-item potentially not applicable)

☐ **Program provides specialized seasonal clothing for children**

Specialized clothing items are available so that children can engage in play. Examples of specialized items are raincoats, umbrellas, ponchos, splash pants, mud suits, snowshoes, ice cleats, and sunglasses.

Note: specialized items may vary by season and the location of the outdoor environment.

☐ **Ground surface drainage in the outdoor environment appears adequate**

There is no standing water in the outdoor environment.

☐ **There is evidence that resources related to outdoor play and learning experiences are accessible to families**

Educators provide resources to families that extend current learning opportunities. For example, printed copies of recipes to accompany outdoor gardening projects are made accessible to families. Evidence that resources have been provided to families at least every four months is acceptable.

5. Documentation and Program Plan

Intent: This domain focuses on the intentional use of documentation to capture and reflect the quality and richness of the outdoor environment. It highlights the extent to which educators observe, record, and respond to children's individual interests, strengths, and developmental needs within outdoor settings. Through thoughtful observation and documentation, educators gain valuable insights into how children interact with nature, materials, peers, and space. Educators use this information to plan purposeful and responsive outdoor learning experiences that support each child's learning and well-being. By documenting children's engagement, such as their exploration of natural elements, use of loose parts, social interactions, and risk-taking behaviours, educators can design environments and activities that are both meaningful and responsive to the developmental needs of children. This process ensures that the outdoor curriculum is dynamic and child centred. It allows educators to build on children's curiosities, extend their thinking, and foster a deeper connection to their environment. Ongoing reflection and documentation also support collaborative conversations among educators, families, and children, strengthening the intentionality behind outdoor learning experiences. Ultimately, this domain underscores the importance of using documentation not just as a record-keeping tool, but as a lens through which educators can continuously improve the quality and relevance of outdoor play and learning.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "As defined in ELECT, early years curriculum is the sum total of experiences, activities, and events that occur within an inclusive environment designed to foster children's well-being, learning, and development and ensure meaningful participation for every child. It begins with an informed understanding of what children are capable of learning and how they learn effectively; it sets out goals for children's learning and development, health, and well-being; and it provides direction for educators." (HDLH, pg. 15).

Reflective Questions: How is the Program Plan inclusive and responsive to meet the needs of all the children in the outdoor environment?

Documentation: Evidence that is not easily observed in the outdoor environment, including bulletin board messaging, photographs, and program plans themselves.

Family resources: Supports families to understand the importance of the participation in outdoor learning environments.

Sociocultural Identities: Experiences that represent Indigenous peoples and cultures, different ethnicities, races, languages, sexual orientations, and diverse gender identities.

Language and literacy: Learning that is focused on developing children's language and literacy skills.

Science and nature: Learning that is focused on promoting children's exploration of nature through science and experimentation. This includes sensory play using loose parts.

Math: Learning that is focused on promoting children's numerical and math skills.

Art/Creativity: Materials such as chalk, water spray bottles, and paintbrushes that support creative expression.

Pretend/Social play: Materials such as dolls reflecting sociocultural identities, and dishes which support pretend play between multiple children.

Blocks/Construction: Materials such as blocks, wooden mallets, buckets, pulleys, trowels, and tarps that allow children to build, stack, and knock down.

Exploration/Sensory: Materials that allow children to explore nature and other materials through the senses, such as a magnifying glasses, bug views, and binoculars.

Self-regulation/Quiet: Materials in spaces that are a distance from high-traffic areas and promote self-regulation, including pillows, blankets, and a tent.

Music and movement: Materials that allow children to explore music and sounds, such as instruments, windchimes, rain sticks, and music walls.

Physical/Gross motor play materials: Materials that promote gross motor activity, including tricycles, balance stepping stones and sleds.

Note: There should be a section on the indoor program plan for the documentation and planning of outdoor learning experiences. If the program operates for 6 hours or more in the outdoors, then the Program AQI will not be administered, instead it will only be the OE-AQI.

Note: Child care programs are reminded to check current weather conditions, including air quality and heat or cold advisories, through Environment Canada and local public health before taking children outdoors. Air quality concerns (such as smoke, smog, or high pollutant levels) and extreme weather events can pose health risks, particularly for young children.

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Does Not Meet Expectations

- ☐ **Documented observations of children are not used in the planning of learning experiences**
Observations of children's play behaviour and conversations are not recorded or used to plan interest-based experiences from week-to-week.
- ☐ **Program plan does not cover the entire time that children are outdoors**
The program plan does not provide for learning experiences throughout the day.
- ☐ **Individualized goals developed for children are not incorporated into the program plan**
Children's individual goals are not reflected on the program plan.
- ☐ **Children are not given a choice in their learning experiences**
Not enough learning experiences are planned daily, and this limits the children's ability to choose what they would like to engage with.
- ☐ **Less than two physical/gross motor learning experiences are planned and/or documented daily**
There is no documentation of physical/gross motor learning experiences.

Meets Expectations

- ☐ **Two or more physical/gross motor learning experiences are planned and/or documented daily**
- ☐ **Children have opportunities to spend time outdoors regardless of the weather**
Educators follow Environment Canada, local public health guidelines and ministry requirements regarding how long children should spend in the outdoors. For example, educators adjust time outdoors as needed when there are air quality and/or extreme heat or cold warnings.
- ☐ **The program plan and/or the outdoor environment reflects sociocultural identities**
The outdoor environment reflects and respects the sociocultural identities of the children, families, and communities it serves. This intentional inclusion fosters a sense of belonging, cultural pride, and connection to place. For example, program plans and/or materials may incorporate practices such as traditional hunting and fishing, music, storytelling, or meaningful play materials reflecting sociocultural identities.
- ☐ **Outdoor learning experiences are adapted to meet each child's individual needs**
There is evidence that educators make adaptations to programming to meet the individual needs of children. This can be observed through documentation within the program plan.

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **Four or more physical/gross motor learning experiences are planned and/or documented daily**
- ☐ **Evidence of formal programming time given to educators, particularly programming for the outdoors**
Time is provided monthly for educators to complete program plans and record observations of children's play. Educators are paid for this time and are not counted in ratios.
- ☐ **There is photo documentation of outdoor learning experiences**
Educators use photographs of children participating in outdoor activities and learning experiences to share what the child is learning during the day. Written descriptions of the outdoor learning experiences must accompany the photographs. Evidence of photo documentation includes books, picture frames, on a display wall, or on communication apps.

Note: Photo documentation can be available indoors.
- ☐ **There is evidence that families participate in the outdoor environment**
There is documented evidence of family involvement in the outdoor environment. Evidence of family involvement can be in the form of documentation, photos, and monthly enrichment. For example, families participate in outdoor events organized by the centre, contribute to children's learning experiences, or participate in a community garden.

Note: Photo documentation can be available indoors.

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Does Not Meet Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
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- ☐ **There is evidence that educators have completed some type of professional learning related to outdoor programming**
There is documentation confirming that at least one educator in the program has completed professional learning within the last 12 months. For example, Indigenous learning, risky play, nature-based inquiry, or strategies for removing barriers to outdoor play.

6. Promoting Positive Interactions

Intent: Positive interactions and respectful relationships among educators, children, families, colleagues, and visitors form the foundation of a strong sense of belonging within the early learning environment. These relationships are especially important in outdoor settings, where collaboration, communication, and shared experiences naturally unfold through play and exploration. Educators play a vital role in fostering a warm, inclusive, and respectful atmosphere by consistently role-modeling positive social behaviours throughout the day. By demonstrating empathy, kindness, active listening, and cooperation, educators help children internalize appropriate ways to engage with peers and adults. This ongoing modeling supports the development of essential interpersonal skills such as sharing, turn-taking, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. In a nurturing outdoor environment, children are given space to build connections not only with others but also with the world around them. When educators approach their interactions with positivity, patience, and encouragement, children feel safe, valued, and empowered to express themselves, take risks, and form meaningful relationships. Educators are expected to maintain a supportive and professional demeanour with all individuals in the outdoor space - children, colleagues, and families alike, ensuring that the environment remains welcoming and emotionally secure. This culture of respect and mutual support enhances the overall quality of the learning environment and strengthens the community.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "When educators believe that all children have the right to participate and when they use inclusive approaches, they are more likely to find ways to reduce barriers, understand how each child learns, and create environments and experiences that are meaningful and engaging" (HDLH, pg. 36). Educators can create contexts in which all children can develop a sense of belonging by "being attuned to the physical and emotional states of each child and responding in a warm and sensitive manner [and] connecting with each child and recognizing [their] unique spirit, individuality, and presence" (HDLH, p.26).

Reflective Questions: "How are positive social interactions modelled for the children? How are all people who enter the space treated with respect? How is a positive atmosphere nurtured with all children in the space?" (Preschool Guidelines AQI, 2017, p.41).

Responsive to the developmental needs of children: Meets the individual physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of each child.

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **Educators have a negative tone with others**
Any educator is observed shouting and/or being hostile towards any individuals, this includes children, colleagues, families and guests within the environment.
- ☐ **Educators repeatedly do not use re-direction strategies that are responsive to the needs of the children**
Any educators are repeatedly observed re-directing children in a way that the child does not understand.

- ☐ **All educators greet everyone in a welcoming manner**
Educators are observed using a friendly tone of voice with all individuals in the outdoor environment. Educators interact with children, families, guests and other educators in a supportive and encouraging manner.
- ☐ **All educators direct positive attention to all children**
All children receive an equitable amount of attention, and there is no observed favouritism. All educators are observed speaking and interacting with children in a positive and supportive manner.

- ☐ **All educators use teachable moments to further develop positive social interactions with others**
All educators are observed reinforcing positive social interactions by encouraging the children in the moment. For example, when they support children with turn-taking and waiting for their turn.

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Does Not Meet Expectations

- **Educators repeatedly do not encourage positive interactions with others**
Any educators repeatedly do not reinforce positive behaviours in children. Any educators do not acknowledge or support the positive behaviours exhibited by the children. For example, educators do not recognize children for tidying up materials, helping another child, or being kind to others.

Meets Expectations

- **All educators are observed facilitating positive discussions among children**
Educators are observed encouraging interactions between children. For example, children are playing a game, and the educators encourage the children to discuss the rules and/or expectations with each other.
- **All educators consistently follow the children's cues**
Educators are observed following the children's cues. Educators are aware of the children's individual needs and personalities. For example, educators recognize when a child needs to use the washroom, or they provide a child with water when they say they are thirsty.
- **All educators encourage positive problem-solving opportunities with children**
Children are encouraged to resolve conflict situations with one another and express why they are upset so that they may come to a resolution with the support of educators.

Exceeds Expectations

- **All educators display empathy**
Empathy is the ability to take another person's perspective and understand that individual's feelings about the situation. Empathetic educators acknowledge the experiences, or the messages given by others. All educators acknowledge the situation by rephrasing what has been said or what has happened, and they adjust their tone of voice and body language to reflect the emotions of the individual. For example, an educator sitting with a child who has scraped their knee while running might say, "I see that you've scraped your knee, and I know that it hurts. When something hurts our body, it's okay to cry and feel sad". Educators may also comfort children by giving them a hug, if the child welcomes it.
- **All educators consistently provide opportunities for children to practice self-regulation skills**
All educators help children notice how they feel and use strategies to manage their emotions and actions. For example, breathing exercises, modeling self-regulation, or choice-making.
- **All educators encourage children to identify the emotions of others**
All educators are observed encouraging empathy in the children. Educators label emotions as well as role model support for the children. For example, educators explain to an inquiring child why another is crying, or why a child is jumping up and down with excitement.

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Does Not Meet Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
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- ☐ **All educators assist children in processing/expressing their own emotions**
All educators are observed supporting children in understanding their emotions. For example, educators comfort and acknowledge the emotions of a child who lost a toy and discuss the different feelings such as sadness and anger, or they identify joy and pride when a child has mastered the skill of riding a tricycle.

7. Fostering Autonomy

Intent: Educators play a critical role in fostering children's autonomy and independence by being attentive to their cues, encouraging choice, and creating opportunities for meaningful decision-making. By following children's lead and responding to their interests and capabilities, educators empower children to take initiative, make choices, and develop confidence in their abilities. Supporting autonomy involves intentional teaching strategies such as modeling tasks, allowing additional time for children to complete activities at their own pace, offering words of encouragement, and gradually increasing expectations based on each child's readiness. These practices help build children's problem-solving skills, persistence, and a sense of personal responsibility. For example, educators might encourage children to try zipping their own coats, putting on their boots, or attempting a new skill during outdoor play such as climbing a structure, balancing on a log, or gardening independently. Even small moments of encouragement and trust in children's abilities contribute significantly to their growing self-esteem and willingness to take on new challenges. By creating an environment where children feel supported, capable, and trusted, educators lay the foundation for lifelong learning skills and a strong sense of agency. This approach not only supports individual development but also promotes a positive and respectful learning community where every child is seen as competent and capable.

Inspiring Pedagogy: A safe environment that offers consistency and continuity, as well as graduated support for children's growing independence and capacity for self-care, enables children to tackle challenges, learn to persevere, and explore ways to cope with manageable levels of positive stress" (HDLH, p.30).

Reflective Questions: Are children regularly provided with opportunities to explore and complete tasks on their own? How do educators communicate to children that they are viewed as competent and capable?

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Educators repeatedly do not demonstrate inclusive practice
Any educators are repeatedly observed not demonstrating inclusive practice and are observed speaking and/or behaving in a demeaning way to an individual. ☐ Educators repeatedly do not ensure that all children are included in experiences
Any educators are repeatedly observed segregating or excluding children from the group. For example, children are excluded from learning experiences based on their physical needs. ☐ Educators repeatedly do not allow children to try activities and/or problem solve for themselves
Any educators are repeatedly observed not allowing the children to try problem solving for themselves or making tasks too difficult for children to follow. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Children are provided with choices
All educators are observed providing appropriate choices for the children. For example, the choice of learning experiences or the sequence of tasks. ☐ All educators provide children time to complete learning experiences and other tasks at their own pace
All educators are observed allowing children the time to complete tasks and learning experiences. Children are not rushed through any routines and are allowed to complete learning experiences at their own pace. ☐ All educators create opportunities for enhancing children's independence
Educators are observed allowing children to try for themselves. For example, educators encourage children to dress themselves. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ All educators encourage and/or prompt children to take the lead in outdoor experiences
For example, an educator might say to a child, "When you climbed up the tree just now, you did a great job of making sure your feet and hands went into the right spot! Why don't you help Azami? She is trying it for the first time." ☐ All educators provide spontaneous resources to encourage children to follow their own learning path
All educators are observed providing resources, such as play materials, to extend the children's learning and inquiry. For example, if a child shows an interest in birds, educators may offer books, pictures, and feathers. Or, if a child is observed collecting leaves, an educator may begin a nature walk or scavenger hunt. |
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Does Not Meet Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
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- ☐ **All educators’ interactions reflect and incorporate the children’s preferred language**
For example, educators are observed using key words in the children's preferred language or singing songs in different languages.

8. Extending Children's Language and Learning

Intent: Educators play a vital role in supporting and extending children's language development and overall learning by engaging them in meaningful, play-based experiences rooted in their individual interests and natural curiosity. By being attuned to children's verbal and non-verbal cues, educators can create rich opportunities for conversation, exploration, and discovery that build vocabulary, critical thinking, and expressive language skills. Through a co-learning approach, educators and children engage in shared inquiry, investigating questions together, exchanging ideas, and constructing knowledge collaboratively. This dynamic relationship positions both the educator and the child as active participants in the learning process, fostering mutual respect and a deeper understanding of the world. Educators extend learning by offering open-ended activities and spontaneous learning materials that invite children to explore, question, and experiment. Whether it's through natural materials, storytelling, pretend play, or hands-on science experiences, these interactions are intentionally designed to provoke thought and encourage communication. For example, a child's interest in insects may lead to a collaborative exploration involving books, magnifying glasses, and an outdoor bug hunt, where new vocabulary and concepts are introduced naturally through conversation and engagement. These experiences not only support language development but also enhance children's confidence, curiosity, and love of learning. By being present, responsive, and reflective, educators create a language-rich environment where every moment holds the potential for meaningful connection and growth.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "Support children's language and literacy development throughout the environment (for example, recall and retell past events; revisit documentation with children; place familiar print materials and books in different areas to spark ideas for play and exploration)" (HDLH, p. 44).

Reflective Questions: Are non-verbal interactions as invited as verbal interactions? Do educators facilitate engaging opportunities for word play and language games? Do educators share facts about themselves with the children? Do children clearly communicate their wants, needs, likes, and dislikes?

Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **Educators repeatedly do not initiate verbal/non-verbal interactions**

Any educators are repeatedly observed not initiating or responding to verbal/non-verbal interactions with the children.

☐ **Educators repeatedly do not ask open-ended questions**

Any educators are repeatedly observed asking children questions that require only a "yes" or "no" response.

☐ **Educators repeatedly miss opportunities to build on and extend all children's knowledge**

Any educators repeatedly miss opportunities to scaffold children's learning.

☐ **Verbal/non-verbal interactions are a balance of educator and child initiated**

All educators are observed balancing their interactions with those of the child. Educators allow children to respond by using language, sign language, PECS, gestures or responding to gestures initiated by a child.

☐ **All educators engage children with active listening skills**

All educators are observed using active listening skills with children, such as maintaining eye contact with the child, repeating and/or re-phrasing the child's comments, and responding appropriately.

☐ **All educators extend verbal/non-verbal interactions by recalling past experiences**

All educators have discussions with children that reflect on past experiences. For example, "You built a very tall tower out of stones! Do you remember when we read a book last week about the CN Tower?"

☐ **All educators consistently find opportunities to extend all children's knowledge**

All educators are often observed extending children's knowledge beyond structured learning experiences. Educators are always making connections between children's expressed interests and opportunities for learning.

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Does Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **All educators are responsive to learning opportunities with all children**

All educators are responsive to children's inquiries, learning opportunities, and cues. They take advantage of these learning opportunities by using language, materials, and children's natural curiosity to enhance the children's play experiences.

☐ **All educators encourage conversation between children**

All educators encourage children to ask each other questions and facilitate discussions. For example, "Oh wow, Fujin went to the zoo yesterday! Fujin, can you tell Mohan what animals were at the zoo?"

9. Supervision of Children

Intent: Maintaining active supervision is a fundamental responsibility of educators in outdoor environments to ensure the safety and well-being of all children. Educators must remain aware at all times of the location and activities of every child in their care. This is achieved through continuous scanning of the play area, frequent head counts, and intentional positioning that allows for clear sightlines across the entire outdoor space. Effective supervision is a team effort. Educators communicate regularly and clearly with one another about the movement and whereabouts of children, especially when they transition between areas or engage in more mobile or exploratory play. This collaborative approach ensures that supervision is consistent, so that no child is left unsupervised at any time. By working together and sharing responsibilities, educators can equitably balance active engagement with children, such as supporting play, facilitating learning, or resolving conflicts, while still maintaining vigilant oversight of the environment. This balance supports both the children's safety and their right to meaningful, uninterrupted play. Intentional supervision practices, combined with strong teamwork and open communication, create a safe, responsive, and nurturing outdoor environment where children can confidently explore, take risks, and engage in rich learning experiences.

Inspiring Pedagogy: "Knowledgeable educators get involved in play with children to support development, challenge thinking, and extend learning [...] [As part of reflective practice, educators also] observe and listen to learn how children make meaning through their experiences in the world around them" (HDLH, p.19).

Reflective Questions: How do educators work as a team to position themselves for optimal supervision while still engaging with the children? How are educators able to balance supervision with interactions? (Playground AQI, 2017, p.2).

Does Not Meet Expectations

- ☐ **Educators are unaware of the number of children in the outdoor environment**
- ☐ **Educators are unaware of each child's location**
Any educators are unaware of what the children are doing. For example, educators have not noticed that a child has wandered beyond the outdoor boundary, or that a child is hiding in the shed.
- ☐ **Educators repeatedly do not scan the outdoor environment**
Any educators are repeatedly observed not scanning the entire outdoor environment. For example, educators are busy interacting with only a few children and unaware of what the other children are doing.

Meets Expectations

- ☐ **There is sufficient staffing to enable educators to both interact with and supervise children appropriately**
There are enough educators in the outdoor environment to adequately supervise all learning areas.
- ☐ **Educators are verbally verifying the location of children within the outdoor environment**
Educators are communicating the location of children with one another while outdoors. (Sub-item potentially not applicable)
- ☐ **All educators are positioned to ensure a clear view of all outdoor play areas**
All educators position themselves throughout the outdoor environment to ensure they can see all the children.

Exceeds Expectations

- ☐ **Communication tools are working and charged**
There is a system in place to ensure that the communication tools are in good repair and are always charged.
- ☐ **Communication tools are accessible to educators**
All educators have access to a walkie-talkie, intercom, or cell phone. These devices are always accessible to educators.
- ☐ **All educators are seamlessly weaving from one learning experience to another.**
All educators are observed interacting with the children throughout the outdoor environment, monitoring the needs of the children and engaging with them.

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Not Meet Expectations

Meets Expectations

Exceeds Expectations

☐ **Supervision is repeatedly conducted in a disruptive manner**

Any educators are repeatedly observed interrupting children to perform supervision-related tasks. For example, educators are not able to escort children to the washroom, without negatively impacting the ratios in the outdoor environment.

☐ **Educators are repeatedly observed engaging in conversations with other educators most of the time while outdoors**

Educators are observed speaking with other educators more often than engaging with children.