

Description and Rationale

The New Brunswick Outdoor Learning Risk Guidelines document is designed for K-12 educators to support the implementation of outdoor learning at their school(s) regardless of their years of teaching, training, or experience.

As New Brunswick embraces a holistic curriculum and encourages outdoor learning, educators are increasingly taking learning beyond the classroom. However, a culture of risk aversion continues to limit these opportunities. This document was created to support a shift toward *risk awareness*—helping educators recognize and manage risk rather than avoid it—so outdoor learning can thrive. It is important for educators to use their professional judgment, as managing risk is the responsibility of educators in educational environments.

The New Brunswick Outdoor Learning Risk Guidelines in tandem with the **Outdoor Learning Companion Document**, which can be found on each curriculum page, provide practical, easy-to-use tools to help educators balance safety with meaningful outdoor experiences. By promoting a shared understanding of both the risks and benefits, this resource supports safe, engaging learning environments that meet legal responsibilities and enhance learner well-being. A list of frequently asked questions can be found in Appendix A.

Benefits of Risky Play and Learning

| Benefits of Risky Play and Learning | |
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| Promotes resiliency, autonomy, and independence. | Improved physical health and development. |
| Helps learners develop risk identification and management skills (risk competence). | Improved balance, sensory integration, and coordination. |
| Teaches decision making, self-regulation, problem solving, emotional management. | Stimulates curiosity and exploration. |
| Develops people skills (e.g., cooperation, negotiation, communication). | Reduces anxiety and stress. |
| Increased attention and focus. | Reduced chance of injury. |

On-site and Off-site Considerations

| | Considerations | Examples |
|----------|--|--|
| On-Site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking distance. • Support from school can be quickly dispatched. • Walkie-talkie communication. • Outdoor kitbag contains appropriate equipment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor space on school property. • Private property near the school with permissions granted for use. • Public property near the school (e.g., playground, fields, forested space). |
| Off-Site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond walking distance. • Bus transportation needed. • Not directly supported by the school. • Beyond walkie-talkie range. • More specialized equipment required in the outdoor kitbag. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local hiking trail. • Provincial or National Park. • Off school grounds. |

ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

To provide curriculum connected activities, educators and administrators must collaborate to establish, maintain, and improve best practices using safety documents and templates modified to support individual school and learner needs.

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| At-a-glance checklist | At-a-glance checklist Before you go outside poster |
| District guidelines and policies (e.g. weather, land-use, facilities) | Appendix C- Appropriate Clothing for Outdoor Learning Activities |
| Informed Consent and Emergency Action Plan/Procedures (EAP) | Informed Consent and Emergency Action Plan (EAP) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed Consent Form • Photo/Video Consent • Incident Report Template • Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form • Site Risk Assessment Form |
| Physical Education Safety Guidelines | Elementary/Middle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular • Intramural • Athletics High School |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular • Intramural • Athletics |
| Outdoor Kitbag | Outdoor Kitbag |
| Muster Point, Call Back Signal, Boundaries | Muster Point Grab and Go Call Back Signal Grab and Go Boundaries Grab and Go |
| Behaviour Expectations | Expectations K-2 Expectations 3-5 Expectations 6-8 Expectations 9-12 |
| Risk Benefit Assessments | Risk Benefit Assessments and Template <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campfire and Campfire Cooking • Cold Weather • Outdoor Classroom Loose Parts • Playing at Heights • Rough and Tumble Play • Template • Tool Use |

OFF-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

Off-site activities require additional planning time and consideration. Educators, administrators, districts, and external partners must communicate and collaborate to ensure best practices using safety documents and templates, modified to support individual school and learner needs. All outdoor learning excursions must be approved by the principal or designate. A school district official must sign a detailed application form for all overnight excursions. Please refer to the [policies website](#) for additional information on transportation and overnight excursions.

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| At-a-glance checklist | At-a-glance checklist Before you go outside poster |
| Additional training and certifications | Examples of potential required trainings (First aid/CPR, canoe certification, archery, ropes, kayaking). |
| Consent/ Permission Forms | Consent/ Permission Forms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor Consent Form • Forest Classroom Parent/Guardian Letter • NB Land Use Permission Form |
| Accessibility | Examples may include - |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that the physical environment, and the path or road to the environment, is universally accessible (e.g., smooth flat surface). Avoid uneven terrain, steep slopes, or loose materials like sand or mulch. • Provide additional space for assistive and specialized equipment. • Ensure flexible seating arrangements so learners can join group activities comfortably. • Provide elevated and stable work surfaces. |
| District guidelines and policies (e.g. weather, land-use, facilities) | <p>Transportation- contact district Facilities, pupil transportation and infrastructure</p> <p>Appendix C- Appropriate Clothing for Outdoor Learning Activities</p> |
| Informed Consent and Emergency Action Plan/Procedures (EAP) | <p>Informed Consent and Emergency Action Plan (EAP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed Consent Form • Photo/Video Consent • Incident Report Policy 129 Purpose • Incident Report Policy 129 Accident Report Forms • Program/Experience Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form • Site Risk Assessment Form |
| Physical Education Safety Guidelines | <p>Elementary/Middle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular • Intramural • Athletics <p>High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular • Intramural • Athletics |
| Outdoor Kitbag | Outdoor Kitbag |
| Muster Point, Call Back Signal, Boundaries | <p>Muster Point Grab and Go</p> <p>Call Back Signal Grab and Go</p> <p>Boundaries Grab and Go</p> |
| Behaviour expectations | <p>Expectations K-2</p> <p>Expectations 3-5</p> <p>Expectations 6-8</p> |

| | Expectations 9-12 |
|--------------------------|---|
| Risk Benefit Assessments | Risk Benefit Assessments and Template <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campfire and Campfire Cooking • Cold Weather • Outdoor Classroom Loose Parts • Playing at Heights • Rough and Tumble Play • Template • Tool Use |

Risk Assessments

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS

A risk benefit assessment involves potential hazards being balanced with the benefits learners can experience through engaging in the activity. The RBA process follows these steps:

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| 1. Benefits of the risky activity are explained. |
| 2. Hazards associated with the activity are identified. |
| 3. Each hazard is assigned a risk level from low to high. (CNAC) |
| 4. Control measures are outlined. |
| 5. Through implementing the control measures, a new risk level is assigned. |

The idea is to minimize, not eliminate, the risks. The control measures lower the risk to an acceptable level, meaning the activity can be conducted provided the control measures are implemented. A risk mitigation flowchart can be found in Appendix B.

CATEGORIES OF RISKY PLAY ELEMENTS

| Categories | Risk | Sub-categories |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| A: Great heights | Danger of injury from falling. | Climbing/jumping from still or flexible surfaces, balancing on high objects, hanging/swinging at great heights. |
| B: High speed | Uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to a collision. | Swinging, sledding, running uncontrollably, bicycling, skating and skiing at high speed. |
| C: Dangerous tools | Can lead to injuries and wounds. | Cutting tools: Knives, saws, axes. Strangling tools: Ropes. |
| D: Dangerous elements | Where learners can fall into or from something. | Play structures, cliffs, deep water or icy water, fire pits. |

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|--------------------------------|--|---|
| E: Rough-and-tumble play | Where learners can harm each other. | Wrestling, fencing with sticks, play fighting. |
| F: Disappearing & getting lost | Where learners can disappear from the supervision of adults. | Exploring alone, sit spots, playing alone in unfamiliar places. |

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Risk Benefit Assessments | Risk Benefit Assessments and Template <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campfire and Campfire Cooking • Cold Weather • Outdoor Classroom Loose Parts • Playing at Heights • Rough and Tumble Play • Template • Tool Use |
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SITE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

When choosing sites for outdoor learning, a Site Risk Assessment (SRA) must be performed. Through this assessment, hazards at the site are identified and control measures are implemented to reduce the risks. It is best practice to create an SRA for any space that will be used for outdoor learning. It is recommended that the site be checked on the day it is being used, after a storm, and when the seasons change. The change mitigation flowchart in Appendix B can be used to help devise control measures. The SRA can be used to co-manage risk with learners – valuable skills they can transfer to their lives at home and in the community. SRA's are detailed and require time for careful consideration. Once they are created, they will only require yearly updates or when determined by the school or school district.

| | |
|---|---|
| Site Risk Assessment Exemplar | Site Risk Assessment Template |
|---|---|

Outdoor Learning Inclusionary Practices

SUPERVISION

Educators utilize a variety of supervision techniques when engaging in (structured/unstructured) outdoor play and learning. Restricting and constraining strategies can limit the engagement learners have with activities, especially with persistent interventions. A balanced approach is key – having the ability to transition between the four strategies listed below as needed. Appendix D can support educators in

developing a vocabulary that positively supports risky play and learning. Educators are encouraged to use their professional judgement in determining a balanced approach towards supervision.

| Supervision Strategy | Basic Description | Examples |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Restricting and constraining | Monitoring learners closely during higher-risk activities. | Telling learners to stop doing an activity to reduce risk. |
| Keeping a close eye | Monitoring learners closely but not directly intervening. | The educator intervenes only when asked by a learner; guidance is verbal. |
| Supervising from a distance | Maintaining distance, allowing learners to independently explore risks. | The educator only intervenes if there was imminent danger. |
| Contributing and taking initiative | Educators actively participating in the risky play. | The educator joins in and encourages risky play. |

INVOLVING LEARNERS IN RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Co-managing risk with learners during risky play and learning is the ultimate opportunity to experientially develop risk confidence – the ability to see opportunities in a risky situation and either choosing to engage, make the activity more manageable, or choosing not to participate. Regardless of the strategy, it is important that educators and learners identify, assess, and manage potential risks together. This will promote responsibility, safety awareness, and deeper learning for both learners and educators. Exemplars of co-creating risk assessment and management expectations can be found in the [outdoor learning companion document](#).

Glossary



A

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B

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Boundaries

Refers to both physical limits and established guidelines that define the learning environment and ensures safety. It can be a physical barrier like a fence or a set of rules about where learners can go and how they should behave and can be man-made or natural.

C

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Call-Back Signal

A pre-determined noise or sound used to bring learners and educators back to a designated space (i.e., whistle, bird call, horn).

Control Measures

Strategies that can be implemented to lower the risk associated with any given activity or site.

Canopy Layer

The layer formed by the crowns (tops) of the tallest trees, creating a dense, leafy roof.

D

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E

Emergency Action Plan

A pre-determined plan for activities that outlines roles, responsibilities, and actions to be taken in case of emergency. This plan includes medical information, escalation of care, communications, and reporting.

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F

Field Layer

One of the vegetation layers in an ecosystem, specifically the layer of herbaceous plants, including flowering plants and ferns, that grow close to the ground.

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G

Ground Layer

The lowest stratum of vegetation in an ecosystem, typically characterized by mosses, lichens, fungi, and low-growing plants that thrive close to the soil.

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H

Hazards

A potential source of harm or danger. Hazards can be mitigated or avoided. They are a source of harm that is

obvious (e.g.: walking on the railing of a bridge) or not obvious, such that the potential for injury is hidden, or where the individual does not have the competence to manage the hazard, or where there is no obvious benefit to the individual in experiencing the hazard (e.g.: broken railing, fast moving current in a river).

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Indigenous-led Land-Based Learning

Indigenous-led learning that emphasizes the deep relationship between spirit, land and cultural identity centered around respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility, and humility. It integrates relationships, traditional teachings, environmental stewardship, and community values, providing learners with a comprehensive understanding of the land's significance through Indigenous knowledge, ceremonies, and storytelling. As this learning is sacred, Indigenous community members must be involved throughout.

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K

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M

Muster Point

A designated gathering spot for direct instruction, safety, and collaboration opportunities, marked clearly by an object or flag.

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O

Outdoor Education

Learning, in, with, for, or about the outdoors. Learners have direct interaction with nature focusing on environmental stewardship, teamwork, and personal development, including tool use, wilderness survival, adventure training, and developing an appreciation of the natural world.

Outdoor Kitbag

A dedicated container that holds items commonly needed during outdoor activities.

Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning is an intentional instructional method that occurs outside the traditional classroom and is used to enhance the holistic curriculum. It should utilize open-air, wild, natural, or human-made environments to promote learner engagement, connection with our natural world, and can be assessed using skill descriptors.

Place-Based Learning

A learning approach in which the location is intentional and relevant to the topic and learners being taught. It immerses learners in their local ecosystems through hands-on and experiential opportunities. With environment and community as a foundation, educators can support the development of connection between learner and place.



Risk

Challenges and uncertainties within the environment that an individual can recognize and learn to manage by choosing to encounter them while determining their own limits.

Risk Aversion

Human behaviours or actions that aim to avoid or reduce risk when exposed to unknown environments.

Risk Awareness

The ability to identify potential threats or dangers that could negatively impact an individual, organization, or project. It's about understanding the various risks that exist, their potential impacts, and how they can be managed.



Risk Benefit Assessment (RBA)

An approach to risk assessment in which risks and benefits are considered alongside each other. It allows providers to satisfy their legal obligations, while promoting a reasonable, balanced approach. practical process and tool for making judgements about the risks and benefits associated with an activity and play space.

Risk Competence

The ability to appropriately assess and manage risks and hazards in different environments.

Risk Identification

The first step in risk management, it is the process of recognizing and documenting potential hazards and dangers that could occur during outdoor activities.

Risk Level

A combination of the likelihood of a negative event occurring and the severity of its potential impact. Interventions are based on the situation and the child's needs. Levels are categorized in three stages:

- **Low (Open attention):** Minimal intervention, allowing children to explore and learn independently.
- **Medium (Focused attention):** More direct observation and guidance to support children in managing risks.
- **High (Active intervention):** When necessary, educators intervene to ensure safety but aim to minimize this as much as possible.

Risk Mitigation

An overall approach to reduce the impact, severity, and/or probability of undue risk.

Risky Play

A form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking. It typically falls into one of Sandseter's six categories.

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S

Shrub Layer

A stratum or level within a forest or other plant community characterized by woody plants, typically shrubs and young trees, that are shorter than the canopy trees.

Sit Risk Assessment

A documented process to evaluate the risks and benefits of a defined play space.

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Appendix

APPENDIX A

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS- OUTDOOR PLAY AND LEARNING

1. How do we practice safe hand hygiene outside?
 - a. Have hand sanitizer in your kitbag.
 - b. Develop a routine for everyone to wash hands with soap and water once inside.
2. How do I support learners with disabilities/exceptionalities outside?
 - a. Starting small (small groups can build confidence).
 - b. Move your indoor routines outside.
 - c. Focus on the wins! Exploration is valuable.
 - d. Use the learners' experiences and expertise; know your learners and their specific considerations for diagnoses, disabilities, and exceptionalities.
3. What about learners who "don't know how" or "don't know what to do"?
 - a. Allow them time to be unsure, or bored.
 - b. Try to let go of the need to "fix it".
 - c. Model and play with learners- "What are you doing? Oh, you're trying to balance on that log? Can I try it?"
 - d. Begin playing yourself- look under rocks for bugs and creatures.

4. What about ticks?
 - a. Consult your local public health authority (regional office) for up-to-date protocols and recommendations.
 - b. Contact local pharmacists for information and assessment on tick-borne diseases.
5. What about hazardous animals/insects/plants/mushrooms?
 - a. Check with local municipal authorities (Department of Natural Resources).
 - b. Ensure you have insect repellent in your first aid kit, and dawn dish soap to remove poison ivy oils.
 - c. Suggest only touching mushrooms with sticks to avoid physical contact.
6. What if there are no physical boundaries in the area we are going to explore?
 - a. See the "Muster point, Call-back, and Boundary" grab and go resources in the outdoor learning companion document for information on boundaries in the outdoors.
7. What if a learner runs away?
 - a. Before heading out, have a protocol in place as part of your EAP. Know your space and know your learners before venturing too far.
 - b. Practice de-escalation strategies if you notice stress mounting.
8. How do I convince parents/colleagues/administrators about the values of risky play?
 - a. Meet people where they are at! Begin a dialogue about what worries those involved.
 - b. Share your RBA process.
 - c. Example: "I can see you are really worried with that learner climbing the tree. Would you be willing to share why? I'll move closer to spot them to reassure you of their capability. I really value the sense of accomplishment they feel when they get to a height they are comfortable with"
9. How do I manage difficult behaviours outside?
 - a. Prevention is key! This means anticipating what kinds of play and learning you will want to redirect and thinking through how you'll afford learners opportunity to channel their energy constructively.
10. What if I'm dealing with learning in an environmentally challenging space?
 - a. Be prepared for all elements. Lack of shade? Plan on extra water and less movement. Bring tarps to set up a shade space and encourage hats.
 - b. High winds? Set up a tarp shelter, check for times of day where it is less windy, or seek a more sheltered area.
11. What if the families I work with cannot properly equip their children to be outside safely in challenging conditions?
 - a. Have a supply of gear on hand donated or purchased. Put feelers out to the community for donations from family or businesses.
 - b. Bring outdoor learning indoors with nature baskets and other activities.
12. How are we going to play and learn outside when it's -40 degrees?
 - a. Follow the recommended district policy and guidelines for inclement weather.

- b. Follow the clothing guide in Appendix C- Appropriate Clothing for Outdoor Learning Activities.

13. How can we stay safe in extreme heat?

- a. Properly monitor learners and yourself often for signs of overheating. Take frequent breaks.
- b. Stay hydrated, have extra water for all individuals.
- c. Spray bottles and watering cans can help keep you cool.
- d. Seek out shady spaces, wear a hat and loose clothing as per Appendix C- Appropriate Clothing for Outdoor Learning Activities







14. When is it too hot or too cold to go outside?

- a. Follow the recommended district policy and guidelines for inclement weather.

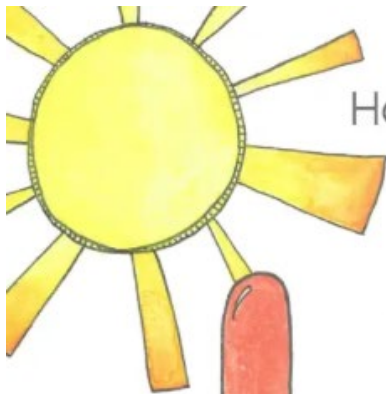
For additional FAQs, please refer to the list of FAQs about outdoor play and learning located at www.childnature.ca.

APPENDIX B

RISK MITIGATION FLOWCHART

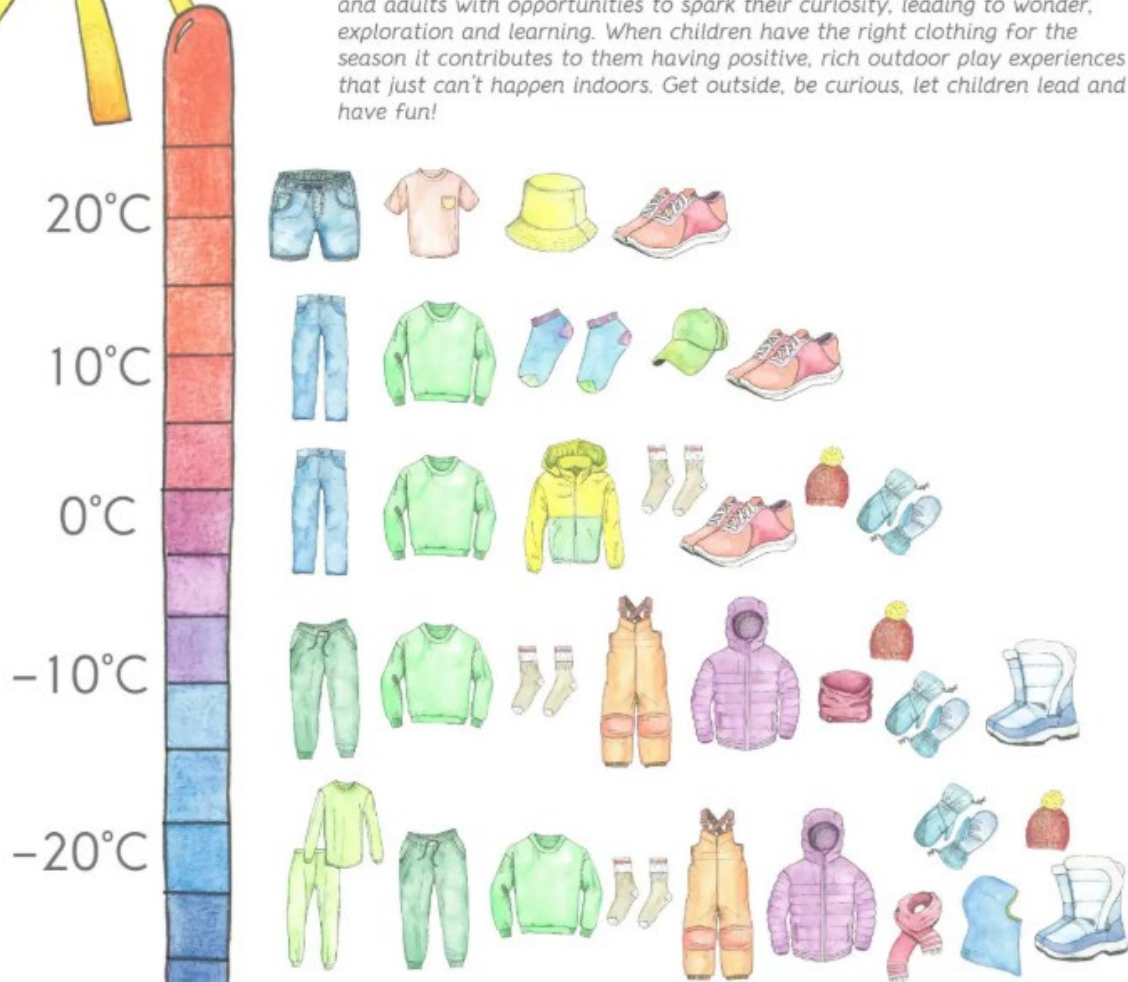
| | |
|---|--|
| Eliminate the hazard | Examples: ➤ Repair/replace damaged tools. ➤ Remove standing dead trees/limbs. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Substitute the hazard | Examples: ➤ Peanut ban for severe allergies. ➤ Move to a different area for activities. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Isolate the hazard | Examples: ➤ Use flagging tape to mark hazards/boundaries. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Use equipment to help | Examples: ➤ Use a wheelbarrow or sled to move heavy objects. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Use paperwork process to help | Examples: ➤ Tool maintenance log. ➤ Daily site check. ➤ Risk assessments created and maintained. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Use personal protective equipment and clothing | Examples: ➤ Long sleeves and pants to protect from scratches and bug bites. ➤ Appropriate clothing for the weather. ➤ Safety glasses when using tools. |
| <i>If not practical, then...</i> | |
|  | |
| Avoid activity until the risk can be mitigated. | Examples: ➤ Avoiding rain-swollen rivers until they settle down. ➤ Staying out of the forest on very windy days. ➤ Having minimum and maximum temperatures for going outside. ➤ Making sure certain high-risk activities are age appropriate. |

APPENDIX C: APPROPRIATE CLOTHING FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING ACTIVITIES



How to Dress for the Weather Guide

Outdoor play is a great way to support healthy growth and development. Opening the doors to outdoor play in all kinds of weather provides children and adults with opportunities to spark their curiosity, leading to wonder, exploration and learning. When children have the right clothing for the season it contributes to them having positive, rich outdoor play experiences that just can't happen indoors. Get outside, be curious, let children lead and have fun!



Supporting Outdoor Play Year Round



www.getoutsideandplay.ca



www.befitforlife.ca

APPENDIX D: WHEN YOU WANT TO SAY “BE CAREFUL”

When You Want to Say "BE CAREFUL"



Play with Great Heights

- Stay focused on what you're doing.
- What's your next move?
- Do you feel safe there?
- Take your time.
- Does that branch feel strong and stable?
- I'm here if you need me.

Play Near Dangerous Elements

- Please move slowly and carefully near the...
- Please give each other lots of space so that no one feels like they need to push, and no one gets knocked over by accident.
- Do you feel stable/balanced?
- Do you need more space?

Rough and Tumble Play

- Make eye contact before you tackle someone. Make sure they know you are coming so that they can get their body ready.
- Check in with each other. Make sure everyone is still having a good time.
- Ask them if they're ok.
- Ask them if they're still having fun.
- Did you like that? Make sure you tell them if you didn't like that.

Play Where Children can Get Lost

- If you need to run, meet me at the next trail marker!
- Let's check this cave/fort to make sure it's safe to hide in.

Play with Great Speeds

- Please find a safe spot for your stick while you're running.
- I've noticed that this is a really busy area and I'm worried that someone not playing this game might get knocked over. Watch out for other people and give them lots of space.
- Should we move this game to a more open area?

Play with Harmful Tools

- Sticks need space. Look around you – do you have enough space to swing that big stick?
- Please keep one end of your stick on the ground!
- What's your plan with that big stick?
- Rocks need space!
- Before you throw that rock, what do you need to look for?
- That rock looks really heavy! Can you manage it?



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