Across Canada, early childhood education nature-based programs have gained popularity with many new programs being implemented each year. Programs tend to vary in size, offerings, locales, context, philosophies, and children served. Once considered an alternative educational approach, the growing popularity of outdoor and nature-based learning experiences & programs indicate a need for greater understanding of the Canadian context. In April 2019, a research team from 3 universities in the Child & Nature Alliance of Canada launched a national survey of 27 questions through various nature networks’ distribution lists and social media sites. The survey included questions that were both open and closed-ended, asking participants to share their thoughts and experiences of outdoor and nature-based learning. The survey was completed by 200 respondents and approximately 165 programs (not all respondents identified a program).

Across Canada, many parents/guardians have decided to enroll their children in outdoor nature-based programs. With programs operating from coast to coast, approximately 40,000 to 65,000 Canadian children appeared to have attended these programs in the year 2018–2019 (as reported by the participants of the survey).

Curriculum Frameworks in Outdoor & Nature-Based Programs

Emergent Curriculum: 66%
Curriculum Adapted for outdoors: 8.7%
Established curriculum (Kindergarten): 6.8%
Entirely Exploratory: 6.8%
Self-Developed curriculum: 10.68%

Educators play a crucial role when creating a program (i.e., curriculum) to foster children’s physical, emotional, social, communicative, and cognitive skills. A large proportion of the respondents (66%) reported using an emergent curriculum design which means following the child’s lead in designing experiences is a priority.

How do Children Benefit from Nature-Based Programs?

Educators Proposed Several Benefits for Children Attending these Programs, Including:
- Enhanced Environmental Stewardship
- Increased Risk-Taking Skills
- Better Self-Regulation Skills
- Improved Mental Health
- Increased Confidence
- Advanced Gross Motor Skills
- Increased Imaginative Play
- Greater Resilience

The Number of Participating Programs by Canadian Province/Territory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province/Territory</th>
<th>Number of Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ON</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
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</table>

Who Responded to the Survey?

50.5% Of participants stated that they have a Diploma in ECE or a provincial ECE certification
34.5% Of participants stated that they have a Bachelor of Education degree or a provincial teaching certification
35.7% Of participants who stated they have or were completing the Forest School Canada practitioner certification

Curriculum for Outdoor & Nature-Based Learning: Overview

A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE OF OUTDOOR AND NATURE-BASED LEARNING
A TOTAL OF 200 EDUCATORS RESPONDED TO THIS SURVEY
We defined outdoor and nature-based learning as child-directed, play and inquiry-based learning that happens in the outdoors, whereby children (0-12 years) go outdoors on a regular and repeated basis over an extended period of time. These programs might be called Nature Kindergarten, Forest and Nature School, Nature Preschool, Beach Academy, Field and Forest, Open Air program, Forest Fridays, etc. and can include multiple and varied formats. This study was intended as a preliminary step in identifying the number of programs across Canada, as well as gain insight into the varied contexts and experiences offered for young children.

The infographic was authored by: Elizabeth Boileau, Ziad Dabaja, Michelle Galijet, and Debra Harwood in collaboration with Child & Nature Alliance of Canada

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All photos are courtesy of Child & Nature Alliance of Canada

Want to learn more? Please contact the lead researcher:

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CANADIAN STUDY OF OUTDOOR AND NATURE-BASED LEARNING – PAGE 2

What is outdoor and nature-based learning?