

# Fireside Chat: Relationship with Play: (February 25, 2021)

Fri, 6/18 2:10PM 1:35:04

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

play, forest, parts, loose, land, breakout rooms, programs, nature, marc, programming, chat, talked, conversations, principles, children, question, prompting, group, snow, discussion

## SPEAKERS

Jason, Natalia, Heather Wilson, Marc, Caitlin, Cameron, Stephanie

**M** Marc 02:04  
The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada is headquartered on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe in what is placed now commonly known as Ottawa, Ontario. Our organization is currently led by white settlers and we have imposed a settler colonial way of being with the land because our programs were not co created with Indigenous people. We are committed to repairing our relationship with Indigenous communities by dismantling harmful practices, changing the way we operate and co creating programs. And of course, the land itself is at the heart of everything that we do at CNAC. So I would like to personally thank this land that I am on, which again is the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe and I just want to thank the land and the Algonquin for giving my family and I have a place to live, play, laugh and learn. My name is Marc St. Denis. I am the Project Lead for Forest School Canada. I've been working with Child and Nature Alliance for about a year now almost and it's my great pleasure to be sort of helping out with this three year community consultation project that we are engaging on as a community of practice. I will just pass this off to my co-host Natalia to introduce herself in a little bit about the project itself.

**N** Natalia 03:53  
Hi, everyone, I'm noticing some familiar names. I am the Program Coordinator here at

CNAC and my role is essentially organizing, planning and doing the logistics of the professional learning opportunities that we offer through the Forest School program. I thought maybe I would share today some ways that I've been playing this past year given that this session is around relationship with play. So there's a park across my street and I've grown to really connect with this one particular tree kind of in the middle of the park and it's been really beautiful to watch it change throughout the seasons and this past year. So in the summer I would kind of lie underneath look at the really bright green leaves and then watch the clouds is that kind of floated by and picked out different shapes and images that I saw in the fall, made lots of leaf piles to jump in and kind of drew some images with the fallen leaves and then this past winter, I've gone out to toss some snowballs, create some snow structures, and yeah, I'm really excited to learn about your relationship with play. I'll kind of go over a little bit about the community consultation project before we jump in. So today's fireside chat is part of a three year community consultation project that we're undertaking with the support of the Lawson foundation and the goal of this project is to meet with Forest Nature school practitioners so that we can articulate as a community what equality Forest and Nature school in Canada looks like sounds like, feels like improve our professional learning courses and also set the stage for representing the Forest and Nature school sector, and discussions around policy and systems change. So this project is kind of, we've decided to undertake it right now because there's kind of been an influx of interest in and attention on the Forest and Nature school approach in Canada. And we've heard from many of you that we need to set some indicators for quality Forest and Nature school practice. And we've heard that folks are looking to CNAC for a higher level of leadership, and in a national voice to kind of represent the sector. Our kind of main hope with this project is that will it'll position us to do just that and that you our community of practice will walk along with us. So that all of the outcomes from this project are truly representative of your needs and your aspirations.

M

Marc 07:18

Thanks Natalia. Yeah, I really, I really liked the story about play. That's a good prompt. Maybe I'll quickly share too, I'm lucky enough to live in a on a cul de sac and so during the winter, the snow plows, they come by and they make this giant pile of snow right in the middle of the street and so my my kids have been outside every day, lately, just sliding around on the hill digging holes and playing with it and the neighborhood kids come up to and I grew up with my dog and we go to the top of the hill just fun all around the all the different adventures you can get up to with just the simplicity of a big snow pile. So this fireside chat series is a virtual space for Forest and Nature school practitioners to meet and share experiences and answer questions related to a specific theme. Last month, some of you may have actually been in attendance, we had our first fireside chat that was in relation to land and so today we are diving into our second theme, which is relationship

with play. And these are based on four principles of Forest and Nature school practice that were developed in 2018 and we're going to look at those principles and then think about how they relate to our relationship with play. So what we want to learn from you is how these principles are, what these principles look like on the ground, and specifically how we can measure these principles and what the measurements actually are and how do we know that a Forest and Nature school program is meeting these principles. And then probably just as importantly, if not more, so is anything missing. So our hope today is to have a lively discussion about quality practice in Forest and Nature school. Just so you all are aware that Child and Nature Alliance of Canada is not here to judge anyone's practice or be critical. We simply want to learn from you so that we know how to best support you in your endeavors. And I hope you can also see that we're all very passionate about what we do in the Forest and Nature school sector and I imagine there's likely many differences between us and what we value as essential, which is actually the reason why we're having this conversation. So it's so that we can find what is common and shared while still preserving what makes our practices unique. So let's remember to be respectful and kind if and when disagreements arise. For today's session, what we're going to do is a little bit different than last time, we are actually going to jump right into breakout rooms for each of the four principles of practice that we will be discussing. So we will have four breakout rooms throughout this session, we hope that we can have some really interesting conversations, there will be of course, be prompts and the rooms will be facilitated. And after each breakout room will come back as a one large group, and we'll do some sharing of reporting back of what we talked about, but you don't have to worry about doing that yourself as your breakout room leads will, will take take the lead on sharing what was spoken about.

N

Natalia 10:53

Thanks, Marc. So before jumping into the first breakout room, just some housekeeping things. If you have any questions or thoughts that come out of this after our chat, please feel welcome to share them in whatever way feels best for you, whether it's video audio or written and you can send them to [community@childnature.ca](mailto:community@childnature.ca). I think Heather's just pop that in the chat there. And then you can also complete the survey for this session which will be linked in the chat and also available on our website on the community consultation project page.

M

Marc 11:38

Thank you Natalia. So yeah, we're gonna jump jump right into our first breakout room. And we are going to discuss principle number five of Forest and Nature school practice, which is Forest and Nature school values children's play, which is self directed, freely

chosen, intrinsically motivated, in and of itself. Forest and Nature school programs provide adequate time and space for children and youth to dive deeply into their play. So we're looking at that principle. And the questions we're going to ask and you will have these available to you in the breakout room as a as a floating text is what is unique about play at a Forest and Nature school in Canada and does it differ from play elsewhere? And then the other question we're asking is who might be excluded from this understanding of play? So like I said, you each have you'll be broken up into breakout rooms, and there will be a facilitated leader for each of those rooms. And after the breakout, we'll come back, share some of our conversations. And yeah, we'll go from there. So the breakout rooms will last for about 15 minutes. So, Charlene whenever you're ready to throw us into the void. Go ahead. Welcome back everyone, I'm not sure about you but I always feel like these breakout rooms there's never enough time to really dive into it as such as such as it is, but this is only the introduction of us being able to speak with each other, there's going to be various many more opportunities to dive even deeper into these questions. And if you do have more that you feel like you haven't had a chance to share, feel free to use the survey that we've put in the chat. That's also available on our website. Although I think now I am taking up Natalia's time so I will pass it over to you Natalia

N

Natalia 24:41

Not at all. Yeah, I'm really interested to hear what other groups chatted about. Um, am I able to call Caitlin to share what was what the conversation was like in the group.

C

Caitlin 24:58

Absolutely. Yeah, I think there was a, there's a few different things that came up. And as always, I mean, yeah, we could spend, like hours talking about this. But a couple of things that were said were time and space. So really, what is unique about playing for us is creating more time and more space for open ended play and kind of moving back on some of the restrictions that sometimes are placed on site. Also, just that there's been this, like kind of observation that loose parts that are just in the fourth that are naturally there can really open up playing really wonderful ways. And along with that, as a lack of like, specific, I don't know, toys that you might have indoors, also opens up through play and really cool ways. We're also having a conversation about, like, who might be excluded from this understanding of play, and that was kind of location specific. So some people noting that being connected to formal like kind of educational program or programs in schools, there's a few more restrictions. So other teachers might not really understand it's learning to play, pedagogical approach, administrators may not really understand it, especially in terms of playing outside that sometimes playing out is like, you just do it so that they can grow off steam and get some energy out. It's not necessarily seen as a

valuable part of learning. So those were, yeah, so quick kind of notes of what we said if I anyone in my group if I have forgotten please type out in the chat

N

Natalia 26:42

Thanks, Caitlin. Yeah, we just got some similar themes in our group. Cameron, would you like to share what was discussed in your group? Yeah,

C

Cameron 26:56

Sure. I mean, we had a great discussion it it not always just got cut, I felt went by too soon. I think. If you prematurely cut it off there, right at that the end there on my ends, but I don't know. Anyways, it was vibrant. So we actually had a chance, we sort of ended up getting the first I guess you could say that the second question as well. I mean, some of the things that we that we felt were unique about this kind of play was the fact is that is it's a lot less controlled, it's a lot less about having, it's more about letting kids figure it out. It's allowing them to take take some risks. So it's a bit more about risky play. It's child led, that's the other thing and you know, one of the themes that was talked about among our group was the idea of it really the adults getting out of the way. That's one of the bigger things. Um, there was a little bit of a discussion around whether those educators particularly ECE's are prepared enough for that trained enough for allowing that, that that play to take place, you know that that's open, but but that was definitely one of the things, one of the quotes that I really liked, was this idea. And it was, it was I forgive me, I didn't write down the the person who had said it, it was a quote of a quote, someone quoting a quote, but the idea about being on tap, not on top. So the idea is being there as a practitioner being ready, but not necessarily being on top of kids like in a more traditional setting. So those are some of the big ones that I think that we talked about, that that really made things quite distinct.

N

Natalia 28:36

Thanks so much, Cameron, I am hearing so many things from these discussions and I wish I could be a fly on the wall for all of the breakout rooms. So now we're gonna jump into our second breakout room. And so this one is where we'll get to explore principle number seven of Forest and Nature School, which is that Forest and Nature school relies on loose natural materials to support open ended, open ended creative play and learning. So some of the things we want to know from your discussions is: Is play with loose parts, an essential element of Forest and Nature school in Canada, and how do you use those parts in your own programming? So I think Charlene will send us off back into our breakout rooms now.

M

Marc 44:21

So that was great conversations about about loose parts it was it was kind of fascinating to me to hear from my group. But maybe I will instead of sharing what I heard, I will call on some other folks to share. So, Heather, in your group what were some highlights?

H

Heather Wilson 44:39

Yeah, I'll have to be quite careful not to talk for too long because this is a this is a part of this work that I find really inspiring. And I always learned so so much about what other people are doing. It's fascinating. Yeah, so we started kind of talking about the age groups of children and usually it's the younger age groups that play with, with the loose parts. And that older children, perhaps, as the younger children play alongside each other with the loose parts, and there's some exchange there. But older children are perhaps more socially focused. So it's the loose parts are less of a focus for those children. An interesting piece too, was what the experience of the child is coming into a Forest school program. If they've been regularly part of a more structured or directed program, then the approach to loose parts looks different. And there's perhaps some unlearning to do there with those children and working with them, so they're inspired by and the question surfaces, what are these for? Or what do I do with these, so to kind of tap into the child's creativity? Yeah, I learned lots about what people are using for loose parts shells and corks and tree cookies and snow came up as a loose part Marc to reflect back to your story with them, your children in your neighborhood. And also, what I loved noticing the texture of the snow is a loose part. That's something that hadn't come up for me before. That loose parts were helpful in large group contexts and also another tactic I learned in conversation with the group I was part of, is to introduce just one loose part at a time as a way to help manage conflict, I thought that was super smart. And that also helps to kind of reduce any stress that might be present in the play. Yeah, lots are known. Really, lots that surface one more thing, that to keep favorite loose parts, you know, and bring those out at a time where the play, there may be a lull in the play, or a lull in the kind of mood of the children depending on what's going on that day, too, I thought was, was great. And sorry, I did say that was my last thing. But one more thing, because I thought this hadn't come up for me for a while. And it's worth repeating. I think that sometimes loose parts aren't used because it can restrict movement in the day, particularly, you know, in the in the winter times and so they're sometimes not used as, as regularly in a program. Because if you want to move from place to place, and loose parts don't really allow for that to happen. So that was an interesting point, too.

M

Marc 48:18

Thank you Heather. So much in 15 minutes. Steph what was some highlights from your

group?

S

Stephanie 48:29

Yeah, so my group also felt that loose parts were an extremely essential element of Forest school in Canada and that by just being outside, there are loose parts everywhere. So if you're in if you're if you're running your program in nature, there are loose parts, even if you don't bring in external ones, and that it almost defines Forest school and because you're not using toys that are produced with a certain outcome in mind and that, you know, kids will always find something to play with. And, yeah, kind of thinking about, you know, you can bring loose parts anywhere, so you can potentially run Forest school in an abandoned parking lot, which kind of goes back to our, the first fireside chat and like where it can take place. Yeah, we talked about how, in some programs it takes, it takes children a while to get comfortable. But there's always loose parts for them to sort of fiddle with, or hold on to, oh, here's a rock I can hold on to. And then when they get more comfortable, and they start, you know, making friends and whatnot. They'll start collaborating on bigger projects, and you know, they'll create a tiny society, and they'll be cooking with loose parts and whatnot. Yeah, we also talked about how once kids get used to the idea of loose parts, it's almost like their creativity changes, and it must, in a way change the way like their and everyone's brain works. Michelle shared a story of grandparents being concerned that there are no toys to play with, like, you know, the grandkids were coming over, but there are no toys to play with. And the parents were like, they're going to be fine because now that they're in Forest school, they can play for hours with a salt shaker. So yeah, so what else? I'm also like, seeing how, you know, even if kids are like building, you know, a roadway or something and there, there are no play toy cars, or no car toys to play with. They will use rocks, or they'll use sticks, or they'll make they'll make a car. And yeah, we talked a bit about, like, how you use them in programs. And everyone seemed to agree that usually at the beginning of programs, you sort of lay them out as like a, you know, a provocation or whatnot. And then you might offer some suggestions on what they could use them for. And then once they sort of get, oh, I can, I can just do what I want with these they start to that's when their creativity explodes. And they'll take, you know, they'll manipulate the loose parts in whatever way they want. So, yeah, I have a lot, but I'll stop there.

M

Marc 51:29

Thank you, Steph. Yeah, it's interesting to hear they're kind of like a common thread, at least with with my group too, about the relation between agency and and like the child's agency, they choose how they want to play and having the loose parts, sort of prompting that and encouraging it, rather than than being prescribed, the type of play which might



differ from some other programs that are not Forest schools. So the next breakout room we're going to jump into is for a principle of practice that we're weaving through all of our fireside chats, because we believe it is important consideration for all aspects of a Forest school, given that we operate on Indigenous land. So this is Principle number nine of a Forest Nature school and it is that we prioritize building reciprocal relationships with First Nations, Metis and Inuit who have been learning from this land since time immemorial. And the question that we have is what does play have to do with building a reciprocal relationship with First Nations, Metis and Inuit? So I'm really interested to see what responses come from this.

N

Natalia 1:04:32

Welcome back everyone I we were having a great discussion and cut off. Yeah, never seems like enough time. And Marc, can I call on you to share what you're chatting about in your group?

M

Marc 1:04:47

Yes, absolutely. We also had a really interesting conversation. It's always I love these conversations because they always tend to go places that I never really foresaw. Which is enjoyable to me, so there were a couple a couple of themes that we touched on, and I won't take up too much time, I'll try and go over them quickly. The first, we were discussing, like what play has to do with, you know, building reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities and we talked how sometimes just knowing the true history of the land, not just the settler history, but the true history of the land, can actually influence the type of play that a child might choose to engage in. So instead of knowing about, like, just the settler perspective of the location, knowing that if there's, like, you know, Indigenous person shares with children directly or through the program, that there is a certain history to this spot, particular that the kids might treat it differently. Another thing that that came up too was inviting Indigenous people and folks to actually be present, but not not in like the way of trying to, like tokenize, but more in the sense of, like, the Indigenous people are there, and they're actually playing with the kids and as they're playing, the Indigenous person might share some of the language of the land. We talked about in our last fireside chat, how language and land are very much intertwined and so the kids then choosing to use some of that language while they play. And then finally, the kids through their play, are learning about the values of reciprocity, whether that's like reciprocity with the forest. So giving some bird seed to the birds and saying, thank you for letting us play here today. But through learning the values of reciprocity, they're able to then as they move on in their journey through life, be able to build those reciprocal relationships, because they've learned those values in Forest School.



N

Natalia 1:07:14

Thanks so much Marc, similar things coming up for us too. Jason

J

Jason 1:07:22

Hi everyone. I would say the same similar things to what Marc was saying, came up in our conversations, I think on a sort of basic level, the the reciprocal relationship to land itself does a lot to sort of demonstrate and honor the reciprocal relationships we can have with Indigenous culture and history and ensuring that you know, in the work that you do in Forests' school programming, that there is there is storytelling, there is gratefulness, there's thank thankfulness, that these narratives are being discussed and talked about, and recognizing at the same time that it's not white people's story to tell, in fact that having those meaningful connections to elders, to other other representers of the community, to to visit the schools and to engage in the way that Marc described is very important. And I have to be careful about cultural appropriation and telling story on behalf instead and ensuring that those those stories are told by by elders and by others in the community. And a lot of discussion, just in general about the reciprocal nature to land is as I already mentioned, that the play base that happens, kind of sparks I think it's with Marc, Marc already said that the the narratives and the stories that they learn, just naturally begin to reveal themselves in play. And I think that's when I sort of when you know, you're kind of it's kind of working is when you're seeing those metaphors and those narratives popping up in their play and in interesting ways and what the children do. So I think I'll stop there. I think that sort of covers what we talked about.

N

Natalia 1:09:21

Thanks so much, Jason. So now we'll head into our last breakout room. And so we're gonna dive into principle number 10 which says that Forest and Nature school practices policies, programming, reflect and prioritize the building of engaged, healthy, vibrant and diverse communities through consideration of access and equity, and our decisions and actions. So some prompting questions would be how can and or does the Forest and Nature school sector in Canada support accessible and equitable play for all children.

M

Marc 1:24:26

Welcome back everyone just bear with me as I rearrange my 5000 tabs that I have open to in order to facilitate this event. Just give me one second. Yes that was really interesting conversations about access and equity. It's a you know an issue that we're aware of in the Forest and Nature school sector. So maybe we'll hear from a couple of the folks that led

their breakout rooms. Natalia can we hear from you about what your group talked about?

N

Natalia 1:24:58

Yeah, for sure. I'm sort of still gathering my thoughts, but one thing that we talked a bit about was kind of this. This question and maybe a bit of tension in most of programming being privately offered. And so one way that many programs are, are kind of being able to offer those programming, that programming is to connect with schools and other community organizations to support educators and feeling more equipped in like a public school setting to engage in the pedagogy and support nature based play in in schools. Something else that we chatted about was having like an extra stack of mittens, hats, comfy clothes, for different weather conditions, as well as having like extra snacks or cookouts at the site for children and families who may not have stable access to food. And we actually talked a lot about how COVID has largely disrupted that access to food for many families. And so that's, that's something that many program leads have been keeping in mind. Also talked about kind of engaging with the community that you'll be working in to better understand their needs. Someone in our group chatted about how the programming kind of rotates around different communities and so taking the time to build those relationships, and learn a little bit more about the community is really helpful, and ensuring that the programming is meeting needs. And then we also talked a lot about funding to support families to access programming, as well as for educators who are looking to shift into the like a practitioners course. Yeah, I think I think I'll stop there.

M

Marc 1:27:29

Thank you, Natalia. Yeah, it's a it's a incredibly important topic and I think it was reflected in the chat box as well, that, you know, this is this is something that we really need to dig into. So I hear you, I hear you on that. Cameron, perhaps you can share some of what was was discussed in your breakout room?

C

Cameron 1:27:53

Sure, we did mention there's a number of different pathways sort of, to equity and access, and we didn't land on anything specific in the sense of a definitive, which I think is probably a good, that's a good sign. Um, one of the things that was mentioned was the idea of making sure that there's, you know, there's been an increased particular through CNAC's involvement and make sure there's things in French and English, making sure that that area of access is is addressed. There was a lot of discussion also around this idea of sort of that line or a trail line at a place between outdoor education and a Forest and Nature school. And with those things are in partly because in terms of what it means in

terms of access, because some some people had that ready, like physical proximity to Forest or like outdoor spaces. Others need to be bused in. And so what does that actually mean? And we did get into a little bit of the discussion as to, you know, how much can you do some forest and nature programming in areas that are not, you know, that are outdoors, have the Forest and Nature school part there, but also creating it. So it makes it accessible to those people who are not able to go to travel. And then I guess one of the other points, you know, there's a few other ones but one of the other ones that did come up there was how to negotiate the matter of private versus public. And almost a twist on that was even the idea of saying, Well, what happens if we want to do something like in a park, where the idea of doing something one of the members of the group was talking about a case where just trying to do something in a local park was difficult because it wasn't even sure how to do the insurance. Like for an insurance, it wasn't a daycare, it's not something else. So how do you actually provide insurance that allowing something to create access for people in places where Forest and Nature school isn't prominent or available. And yet, the logistical and legal requirements for some practitioners is a barrier.

M

Marc 1:30:13

Thank you, Cameron. And thank you to everyone. I could go on about this, I'm sure, but I recognize that we have reached 4:30. And if folks probably have other things they would like to be doing as well throughout their days. So I just wanted to quickly thank everyone for participating today. We really appreciate your input and everything that was shared today, notes were taken, we will be bringing those back and looking at them as part of our efforts to co create quality indicators for Forest and Nature school practice. And if there was things that you felt like you weren't able to say you're going to feel comfortable saying, and we'd like to have a different method. We also have our two online surveys, there's one in English and one in French that are available, I think Heather will drop the links again in the chat. And also for those who are interested in or would like to share it around, this video was recorded. And we will be putting it up online. We'll put it on social media, so you'll be notified when it gets posted. And we'll try and email it out to everyone who registered too. The next fireside chat will take place on March 31, at seven o'clock pm Eastern, and it's going to be on relationship with risky play, which I think folks here might know there's a bit of a nuance difference between play and risky play. In the meantime, if you ever want to get in touch, we have our new email address that is [community@childnature.ca](mailto:community@childnature.ca). And finally, our comms person who has been helping us in the background managing all of the breakout rooms. Thank you Charlene has asked for a photo for social media. So if you are comfortable with that, if you want to hang around for maybe just a minute or two, and we can pop our cameras on and take a quick photo for everyone else who, you know, thank you so much for participating. And we'll hopefully see you at the next one. Bye, everyone.

