Challenges Early Childhood Educators Face in Promoting Outdoor Play - A Qualitative Study

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Background

Outdoor play (e.g., climbing, running, hiding), and the inherent risk-taking that comes with it, is crucial for children's social, physical, and intellectual development, emotional well-being, self-confidence, and risk management (Brussoni et al, 2015). However, early childhood education centres often restrict outdoor play due to limited understanding of its importance, excessive safety fears, and liability concerns (Canadian Public Health Association). Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) play a vital role in supporting children to engage in unstructured outdoor play, they yet identify unique challenges when promoting outdoor play, as well as when incorporating outdoor play in their pedagogical approaches.





Aim

To determine the challenges Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) identity in promoting outdoor play

Method and Participants (n=40)

Five focus groups were conducted with BC professionals working in the ECE field. Participants discussed their experiences with outdoor play including: how it impacts the children in their centres and their professional practice, challenges, and their needs for support when promoting outdoor play. Focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants Demographic

- All participants were female
- 32% of the participants hold multiple roles: e.g. was an ECE and now a Licensing Officer
- Over 50% of the participants indicated children in their centres get more than 2 hours of outdoor play daily (current requirement for licensing)
- 78% of the participants have experience working with Indigenous, lower income and newcomer families

Thematic Analysis

Lack of confidence in the competency of the

"You trust [the children], but sometimes, like, they might have poor judgement too" 'I'm watching it thinking okay, I just have to trust here, cause, and then this child is yelling at other kids to be careful"

"I let them climb trees, but like, how high should I let them go?"

Lack of knowledge on risk assessment "It was a situation where upon review, we realized that we needed to have a particular process in place, um, like a risk assessment, um, ensuring that we have some boundaries, um,

Comfort in Working with the Facilities 'It's a fear of equipment getting tossed over the window and landing in the middle of a street...just not necessarily an understanding of how loose parts can benefit an outdoor play space" 'Space that we are using is limited, not only children, we are limited too. So I think space is the very most"

"It could be like, due to extreme heat, or like you've experienced with the smoke the last few summers, the limitation, that we don't really have any control over"

Weather/Climate Conditions

Sharing the Space "For up to three to four programs to share one outdoor play space. So that children's right to outdoor play will now be scheduled according to the clock. And again, the infants are the ones that um, end up being the most deprived because they have the misfortune of actually taking a nap during the time that they're scheduled forty minutes of outdoor play occurs"

Concerns for Getting sick

"Because our kids are infant, toddler, so lots of time we have a request

like to keep them inside, if they have a runny nose or something, and

they're like too cold out there, want to keep them in...and not get dirty"

I think since our kids are coming up with more and more allergies I find

this year, the allergies are really impeding the want to go out to play"

Personal Experience with Outdoor

"Like what, how I had when I was growing up. I could go outside when I wanted to and we had no restriction...have that freedom to make those decisions on their own.

Putting Regulations in Context "Don't ask don't tell" 'Staff need to be willing. The only person who complain about going outside in the rain are the adults."

so it wasn't as free as maybe we wanted it to be."

Personal

Perception of Risk

for Young Children

Interpretation

of licensing

regulations

Perception of

Responsibility as an ECE

External Environmental **Factors**

Internal **Factors**

External Social Factors ECE (Relationship **Perceptions** with other Stakeholders)

Co-workers

Parents

"In a different country, sometimes [the parents] believe that children will get sick if they're outside, in, in poor weather...cultural clash"

Cultural Differences

Lack of Trust for Judgement and Autonomy of ECE "Sometimes parents think of us just as babysitter...like you're just working in the early childhood care there. Not even as a teacher"

It is my risk

"My heart going boom boom boom...it's my risk and my responsibility so I don't allow [risky play] when [the children are] with me, whereas I feel more comfortable, safe...what would I explain to the parents"

Licensing Officer

Relationship with LO "So there's a lot of people who are very anti-risky play. They'll get hurt and my licensing officer will write me up for that"

"Licensing officer coming and saying shouldn't put that up there, you shouldn't put this down here, so all those things. So, that we have to really watch and follow, right, rule and regulation I think, and also space"

Different Pedagogical Approach ""One of the challenges that I'm seeing right now is, um, that you and your coworkers are not seeing, you don't have the same understanding of what outdoor play is...is for them. They limit it because they want always to be

"It depends on who you ask" 'If a child really wanted to do something and they knew i was okay with one person but the other person wasn't okay, that they could ask the, like, go find that staff"

Discussion

Both internal and external factors influence ECEs' perceived barriers. These results suggest that although ECEs may recognize the potential benefits of outdoor play, the perceived lack of resources and supports makes promoting outdoor play particularly difficult. The ECE's confidence in professional competency can be affected by relationships between ECEs and colleagues, licensing officers, children, and parents, which are seen as foundational to support outdoor unstructured play successfully. Supporting resources should help ECEs to (1) improve the quality of the outdoor play space, (2) gain skill and confidence to address other stakeholders' concerns (i.e., parents, co-workers, and licensing officers), and (3) increase perceptions of young children as competent and capable.

Conclusion

The qualitative data shed insights on ECE's view on the importance of outdoor play, risk perceptions, managing safety and liability fears, and guide the development of a plan for changing service delivery. Resources such as risk assessment guidelines, samples of outdoor play would likely help ECEs in promoting outdoor play. Ultimately, these findings are to be incorporated into a larger Early Childhood Outside study, which aims to develop a digital risk reframing tool to educate and promote outdoor play within ECE staff, administrators, students, faculty members, or licensing officers.

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Other People's Children

'We do have to remember that

we're working with families"

elationship between risky outdoor play and health in children? A systematic review. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2015;12: 6423–6454. doi:10.3390/ijerph120606423 (2) Canadian Public Health Association. Educator's Perceptions: Children's Unstructured play. Photos by Robert Collins and Myles Tan, 2019









