



OUT TO PLAY



A Guide for Teachers and
Service Providers



Are you interested in partnering with Out to Play?

Thanks for reaching out! You're reaching this information because you're a service provider or teacher who has expressed interest in booking a program with Out to Play.

We're hoping that our photos, along with what we share here will help you determine if a Forest and Nature School program is the right fit for your children and youth. You'll read about the pedagogy, locations, our staff team, how to prepare your volunteers and what's included in our consent forms.



You'll hear Forest and Nature School programs defined like this:

Out to Play offers quality outdoor programming for children and families in urban wild spaces across Ottawa/Gatineau.

All Out to Play programming follows the Forest and Nature School approach: child-centred, inquiry-driven, interest-led and educator-supported learning and connecting through play on the land.

Children and families are offered regular and repeated access to the same natural spaces to hold space for their growing relationship with the land, each other and themselves.

So what does this mean?

While some people might think child-centred or child-led means children can do whatever they want, what we really mean is that they are treated with respect, and that their curiosity and needs are honoured with periods of deep, immersive self-directed and supported play.

Our approach is rooted in trust. As educators we trust that children know how to play. We trust that their play leads their learning. We trust that children are competent, capable and curious with a natural drive to figure out the world around them.

And now for the big one! We trust that the land is enough. It offers enough natural loose parts and opportunities for investigation and challenge. We trust that the land will hold the children in their play and offer endless learning.



You may watch our program and think “But it looks like they’re JUST playing?”

Here’s what our educators are up to as they support the play:

- They’ve laid out learning provocations to offer an opportunity for focus. Many children need a comforting or exciting hook to help them transition into self-directed play. This is why we lay out books, art supplies, magnifying glasses, nature ID books, and big loose parts. These invitations offer children a transition into the group, and into the natural space.
- They might be playing alongside! Educators might join the play for a variety of reasons. They might be helping a new or shy friend integrate into the play. They might be joining to help the dynamics stay kind, or the play stay safe. They might be putting effort into building relationship with a child or group of children to foster community and nurture safe and kind behaviors.
- They might be watching quietly from a distance. When the children’s play has momentum and they’re deeply immersed, and when it’s safe, kind and collaborative our educators keep their distance and try not to impose or interrupt the play. They’re watching, listening and often delighting in the imagination and learning that’s unfolding. They understand the value of child-directed, immersive play and they’re careful not to disturb it.
- They’re co-creating boundaries. Out to Play supports risky play. Play that involves heights, speed, velocity and anything that creates that “scary funny” feeling is considered risky play. As children build that tower of tires and ask a friend to climb on in, or as they tighten their self-made zipline, our educators are stepping in to ask them to pause for a moment to discuss all the ways we’ll stay safe together. By co-creating safe boundaries with children we’re modeling risk-assessment, building collaborative relationships and showing children that they’re worthy of trust.



Natural Landscapes hold the Forest and Nature School approach

Some social service organizations and schools bring their children to the Out to Play Centre for a week, or for one day each week for consecutive weeks.

Some organizations or schools are hoping for a program to be held in a natural space close to building.

Perhaps our partnership has a location organized for you already and you're wondering how that location might work.

Wondering if your natural location would work for this approach?

Forest and Nature School programs don't need forests, though they hold the play beautifully. This learning approach can be facilitated in city parks, school playgrounds even roadside ditches. What we look for in a location is a bit of variation in the landscape and opportunities to support play, including risky play. We consider if a bathroom is close walking distance, and if not, we'll bring the luggable loo!



Here's some landscapes where we've facilitated programs with schools:

A snow covered patch of grass and trees between a school parking lot and the road.

The educator team brought grass baskets for gathering, tarps for hiding and sitting, and ropes for swings and slacklines. The two classes of children played between the trees and under branches. They gathered, collected and sorted natural materials, they built swings and pulley systems, they created imaginary homes under the big boughs and balanced on the slackline ropes. In the winter, the same play unfolded alongside snowy slides and snow piles.

A grassy and sandy playground with two soccer goal posts and a fence surrounding it.

This landscape had been cleared of natural vegetation and variation. We brought tarps, ropes, cords, pulleys, magnifying glasses, nature ID pamphlets, baskets and art supplies. Some children tied the tarps to the playground fence and created tent-like homes. Some children used magnifying glasses on the grasses and dirt to find insects and creatures that they looked up in the Nature ID books. Some children built a pulley platform with a board and rope. They tied the system up to the soccer goal posts and tried lifting each other off the ground. As they enlisted more friends they learned which angles worked best and how to work together to lift friends on their "pulley chair." Some children hunkered down to read and draw in their tent houses.

A dense forest beside a grassy park with a trail that ran through it.

This forest offered many play opportunities that the grass park did not. The children wandered on the trail and stepped into a space where they laid their backpacks down beside a fallen tree. The educators had brought burlap, pulleys and baskets. Many children climbed the fallen tree and made their way along it to jump down at a safe spot. Some children built hammocks between the trees. Some spent the day tying up a giant spider web for the group to try to climb through.

Our educators will always bring a few learning provocations to the natural space. They'll start each day with a story that offers playful inquiry and an invitation to be imaginative. Then they'll invite the children to go play. Some children settle into play easily. Some need some scaffolding, and this is when our educators will play alongside or offer books, art or loose parts to help the transition.





A Day on the Land

Each day at Out to Play is unique and co-created between the children and their educators. Children play until its time for opening circle, snack and Story. They'll share some of their ideas and curiosity. This offers the start of the day's inquiry!



After snack the children will follow a trail to explore and settle in to play. Children lunch out on the land through almost all weather, and play alongside friends and educators. They return later to Closing Circle to share what they learned that day, and what filled their hearts with joy.

Wondering about our staff's qualifications?

Out to Play's school educators are Early Childhood Educators or OCT certified teachers. We also have a registered social worker, and wilderness guides on our team. You might meet them too! Many of our educators have completed their year long Forest and Nature School Practitioners course through the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada.

Our summer staff are students doing their teaching degrees or Early Childhood Education. Like the year-round team they participate in training at the start of each season on facilitation skills, risk-benefit assessments, emergency responses, co-creating boundaries, diversity and inclusion and hard skills.

You'll find our team to be kind, intuitive and skilled facilitators. We know you'll be well-supported by them.

Ratios matter to you. They matter to us too.

Out to Play maintains low educator-child ratios to offer a high quality outdoor play experience that can support risky play and nurture kind and trusting relationships. For children 4 years and older we maintain a minimum 1:8 adult to child ratio. For preschoolers we plan for a 1:5 ratio.

We'll adjust our 1:8 ratio to be a lower ratio for groups that have children with complex needs. Or we'll plan with you to ensure children that need 1:1 support have that on our days together. It's important to us that we help you navigate these barriers to ensure all your children can join us.

To maintain the 1:8 ratio, we may chat with you about enlisting your parent or student volunteers.



Wondering what is required for children to participate in an Out to Play program or partnership?

Out to Play programs require a Informed Consent, and Medical Consent, as well as information about allergies and social needs. Parents/Guardians will also be asked whether they grant photo consent, this is not required.

We'll share a copy of each here so you know what to expect:

Informed Consent for Out to Play Programs

Please read in full before consenting to the Assumption of Risk:

At Out to Play we support children in becoming confident, capable people who have a sound sense of their abilities and interests, and the ability to take age-appropriate responsibility for their own safety. Adult anxieties about children can lead adults to limit their opportunities. This makes it harder for children to learn the consequences of their actions and makes learning less engaging. Furthermore, educators, public health professionals, and child development experts are concerned that children today spend less time playing and learning outdoors, with harmful implications for their well-being. For this reason, unstructured outdoor play and learning are central to this program/experience.

Out to Play takes reasonable steps to manage and balance risks, while at the same time allowing children to play freely. Program participants acknowledge its inherent risks of harm and personal injury. While minor injuries like bruises, bumps and scrapes are not uncommon, serious injuries are rare, and life-changing injuries and fatalities are unlikely in the extreme. Still, as with almost any activity, indoors or outdoors, it is impossible to guarantee that they will not happen. You are required to accept this as a condition of your child's participation.

A Summary of Risks

The variety of risks is more than can be listed here and will vary depending on the program. Out to Play educators are trained and experienced, and their role is to support children in learning and playing, while keeping the risks to an acceptable level.

Below is a list of some of the more significant risks:

- Injuries from executing strenuous and demanding physical activities
- Injuries resulting from matches or fire
- Injuries resulting from the presence of harmful plants, natural loose parts, wild animals, and/or ticks
- Changing and inclement weather, including storms, high winds, and lightning

- The possibility that your child may not heed safety instructions or directions given to the group or delivered individually
- Injuries arising from the actions of other children
- Negligence on the part of other participants
- While the injuries sustained in outdoor activity are mostly minor, they can be severe, and on extremely rare occasions, even fatal
- That all rules are designed to enhance the safety of your child and others and are to be followed at all times
- That fire and open-fire cooking require special instructions and training from the facilitator
- That your child's risk of injury increases with fatigue

In unstructured, outdoor play, children freely choose which experiences and forms of play they are comfortable engaging in. Your child is under no obligation to participate in all experiences and may choose not to participate at any time during the program.

Parent/Guardian Assumption of Risk

When I consent to the Assumption of Risk I am agreeing that:

I/We have read the Risk Assessment Summary for Out to Play.

I/We have reviewed the Risk Assessment Summary for Out to Play with my/our child and have instructed our child to listen to and follow the instructions provided pertaining to participation at Out to Play programs.

I/We are aware that participation at Out to Play involves many risks, dangers and hazards including but not limited to those referred to in the Risk Assessment Summary and freely and voluntarily assume the risks, dangers and hazards inherent in participating at Out to Play, including all those described in the Risk Assessment Summary and the possibility of personal injury or death of my child.

Being satisfied that Out to Play is suitable for my/our child, I/we give my/our permission and consent for him/her to participate

I will notify Out to Play ownership or employees if my child suffers from any medical or health condition that may cause injury to themselves or others, or may require emergency care during their participation.

Parent Signature

Date of Signature



The forests and meadows include the risk of bees and wasps. A child could encounter their first sting and not know they have an allergy. For this reason we also require a **Medical Consent**. It reads:

I consent to my child receiving any necessary medical treatment for any injury or illness during their participation at Out to Play, including for stings and allergic reactions (ie. Benedryl Spray for mild reactions and/or EpiPen Jr and Children's Benadryl Liquid in the case of a life-threatening reaction), admission to hospital and necessary treatment therein, that may be deemed essential for their care and well-being. PARENTS/GUARDIANS WILL BE NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY IF A NEED FOR SUCH CARE ARISES.



Getting ready for the day

Every group of children that attends an Out to Play needs to be dressed appropriately to be on the land.

Children need to wear pants tucked into their socks to prevent against ticks. If your child's gender expression means they need to not to wear pants they are welcome to wear a skirt, tutu or dress over their leggings! A long sleeve shirt will protect against sunburns, but t-shirts work well with sunscreen applied in the morning. Each child is also required to wear a sunhat.

Children also need to wear bug spray to protect against mosquitoes and ticks. The Out to Play team carries sunscreen and bugspray to provide, as required.

Parents and guardians will receive a packing list for the day. However, the Out to Play team is prepared for children to arrive wearing unsuitable clothing, and without some of the necessary items. We know there are many barriers to accessing quality outdoor play experiences, and suitable outdoor gear is one of those barriers. The team will collaborate with you in advance to know what to expect and will be ready with back-up gear, as needed.

What information will our families/community receive?

Every parent/guardian attending an Out to Play program will receive an Information Letter with contact information should they have questions. This Welcome Letter includes what to expect in a program, and a packing list.

If English is a second-language for the community that you serve, let's discuss having the Informed Consent, Medical Consent and Information Letters translated into the languages needed.

Preparing your Volunteers

If your group has a number of children that exceeds our ratios with two educators, or if your group has children with complex needs that need additional support then we'll need to discuss enlisting volunteers. Your volunteers might be parents/guardians, practicum students or volunteers already working with your organization or school.

Through supporting an Out to Play program your volunteers will become more comfortable with being out on the land, and in supervising children in play outdoors. They might find it challenging. Seeing children engaged in risky play might stretch their comfort zone. To help prepare them to feel ready and supportive of the approach we suggest sharing the website and Parent Handbook with them. We also offer an evening Information Night - a 1 hour meeting at your location where families and prospective volunteers will be able to ask questions.

We need your volunteers to align with the Out to Play educators is being playful, accepting, curious and empathetic as they support play, find ways to say "Yes!" and collaborate on risk-assessment with the children. They'll be well supported!





Ready to sign your community or classroom up?

Once we're settled on a date and location for your program lets discuss with us the best way for you to share the list of children and families that will be attending the session. It might be a class list, and paper copies of the Informed Consent, Medical Consent and Photo Consent. In this case, we will rely on you to pass on medical notes and allergies.

If we agree, in advance, that more detailed information is needed on each child, we may pass the registration link on to you for you to share with your families/community. The registration page offers space for families to share more detailed social, medical and behavioral needs. It also shares a copy of their registration and consents with them by email.

Please remember, we will make every effort to have these consent pages and the registration page translated. In the case that we are not able to, we'll discuss with you having your workers or volunteers translating the pages for your community.

Thank you!

We're appreciative that you took the time to read through this information. And, we're especially appreciative that you're interested in supporting children in a quality outdoor learning experience. Thank you for partnering with us. We're so looking forward to our days on the land with you.