

# Natural Play and Learning Spaces

## IN RENFREW COUNTY

The Natural Play and Learning Spaces (NPLS) program is a one-year school-based process. It is facilitated and developed by KidActive. The program is unique to each school and designed in collaboration with students, educators, parents and the community. Our goal is to enhance natural play spaces and increase active outdoor play and learning for every child.

Research shows a direct link between the quality and quantity of active time children spend in natural spaces and their physical, mental and social health, positive interaction, academic achievement, creativity and overall wellbeing. Children are healthier and more successful in school when they have increased opportunities for active outdoor play and learning in natural and enhanced outdoor spaces. These spaces are an important part of a Healthy\* School Environment<sup>1</sup>.

### How Will KidActive Facilitate the Process?

**ENGAGE:** Provide interactive presentations to students, educators, parents, school councils, and the community.

**LEARN and CONNECT:** Audit existing outdoor school space through surveys and mapping tools. Provide active outdoor play and learning programs for each grade.

**DEVELOP A SHARED VISION:** Collect ideas. Form working groups to define and reach goals.

**DESIGN and PLAN:** Develop a schoolyard design and plan. Create a budget and fundraising plan (including grants).

**CREATE the SPACE:** Implement phase one of the design plan. Work with local resources and materials to reflect local natural and cultural heritage features.

**MEASURE and ADJUST:** Evaluate process and space. Make adjustments accordingly.

### Project Objectives

- Enhance the quality and quantity of active outdoor play and learning
- Build a healthier learning and play environment for all students
- Design and create spaces for inclusive, co-operative, creative, inspiring outdoor play and innovative outdoor learning opportunities in our schoolyards
- Share educational resources to support cross-curricular active outdoor learning
- Engage school staff, student, parents and the community
- Contribute to Ontario's Healthy School Strategy, Children's Outdoor Charter, and align with regional healthy school initiatives across Renfrew County

### collaborative process



*“As Minister of Education, a mother and grandmother, I strongly support all opportunities to get children outside to learn and play.”*  
—Liz Sandals, Ontario Minister of Education

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### Research

Statistics and research identify immediate and impending health issues facing children and youth.<sup>2-9</sup> According to the Standing Committee on Health, 26% of Canadians aged two to 17 are not a healthy weight.<sup>2</sup> This statistic increases significantly for children of low-income families.<sup>3</sup> We know that a child's physical and social environment, including poverty, have a direct connection to their health and well-being, affecting their mental health, resilience, incidence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and ADHD.<sup>2</sup>

Integrating physical activity in natural spaces into every child's daily life increases self-esteem, builds critical life skills, fosters creativity and provides a stronger sense of belonging.<sup>7</sup> Higher activity levels are also proven to prevent chronic disease, increase motivation, improve academic performance and enhance overall physical and mental well-being.<sup>6,11</sup>

Because children's health and well-being are determined largely by the physical and social environments around them, improving these environments can make a positive impact on every child. Increased access to safe and inspiring spaces for active outdoor play and learning is therefore a strong investment in healthier children, a stronger future and more inclusive and vibrant communities.

### Why Natural?

According to research, children who play on playgrounds that incorporate natural elements such as logs, boulders and native plants are more active than those who play on traditional play structures comprised of brightly coloured metal and plastic. In addition to increased opportunities for physical activity, natural spaces have shown to foster imaginative play, creative thinking and co-operative social skills. Other benefits include improved motor skill development, bone and muscle strengthening, improved balance, decreased incidence of injuries, positive social interaction and a stronger connection to nature.<sup>12</sup>

According to Learning Through Landscapes in their *Good School Playground Guide*, the outdoors is emerging as a vital teaching space where learning comes to life in a dynamic, interactive cross-curricular environment. When children are involved in the process of visioning their schoolyard and then developing and maintaining the space, it enhances their connection to place and their respect and pride for their spaces.<sup>13</sup>

Our school evaluations indicate that 90% of teachers identified the need for inspiring and engaging outdoor spaces. Some schools lack green space entirely or have play structures that are being removed. NPLS addresses these specific needs, exercising the efforts of students, educators, school councils, parents and the community. This collaboration nurtures ownership and co-operation resulting in a collective vision creating natural play spaces where children spend a large percentage of their time.

Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. *Reporting on the pan Canadian survey re: Children and nature*. Ottawa, On: Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. Retrieved from: <http://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Children%20and%20Nature%20Survey%20Report%20Final.pdf>

### School Grounds are Vital Spaces

According to Learning Through Landscapes, children have positive experiences in outdoor spaces. There are compelling reasons that make school grounds important.

**UNIVERSAL:** Not every child has access to a garden, a nearby park or woodland. Almost every child has access to school grounds.

**REGULAR:** Daily outdoor play and learning in a natural space, in all elements and seasons, is critical for healthy child development.

**TIME:** Most children and young people spend about 1500 hours of their lives in a school playground. For many, this is more than in any other outdoor play setting. This unstructured outdoor time is more than double the time that they'll spend in Physical Education classes.

**ACCESSIBLE:** School grounds are the most accessible outdoor space for students and teachers, eliminating travel costs and time.

**OWNERSHIP:** Children can be actively involved in the management of their school grounds, helping to foster attitudes of connection and responsibility.

**COMMUNITY:** School grounds are important community assets. They provide spaces where parents interact, and are accessible to the community outside of school hours. School ground development is an important shared investment for everyone.

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