

Featured Mental Health Initiative

Kindergarten Outdoor Play in Sun, Rain, and Snow!

Knollwood Park Public School (London, ON)

Background

The school has 260 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 and ranks in the top 25th percentile in the board for students who are at the highest risk. The school has a very high percentage of students from low income homes, unemployed parents/guardians, and recent immigrants.



The program was created to address a state of crisis during the 2014-2015 school year. The Kindergarten team was struggling with students with undiagnosed learning disabilities and students who were experiencing trauma at home and expressing themselves in physically and verbally aggressive ways. The Kindergarten team concluded that the physical and mental health of the students was at risk and an alternative approach was necessary.

Promising Practice

The initiative transformed the Kindergarten program from highly-structured, teacher-directed indoor activities to student-led play in an outdoor environment. The Kindergarten team begins every school day by being active outside with students. At the sound of the morning bell, students, educators,

and parents gather in a circle and sing the national anthem. This creates a welcoming, inclusive, and healthy school environment where students and parents are seen, heard, and are valued as members of the community. This can also be a time for the Kindergarten team to have open discussions with parents/guardians and provide guidance or direction to the appropriate support or service. Students get to play outside for at least an hour every morning. A few favourite activities include working together to build leaf piles, baking mud muffins in the sand pit, biking on a mini outdoor track, reading on a picnic blanket, painting on plexi glass, building snowmen, and simply walking and talking with friends.

Impact

The value of outdoor play, movement, and connecting to nature, is significant. Students and educators are calmer, happier, more alert, and healthier. Most students express that outdoor play is their favourite part of the day. Most notable improvements include:

1. Students separate from their parents/guardians feeling safe and comfortable.
2. Parents/guardians are more comfortable talking to educators.
3. There are significantly fewer behaviour management problems with students throughout the day.
4. There are significantly fewer suspensions due to aggressive behaviour.
5. Classroom evacuations due to aggressive behaviour are now rare.
6. Students have increasingly positive relationships with peers and educators.

Sustainability

The Kindergarten team ensures that the program is maintained by engaging a Professional Learning Community who gather monthly to assess, discuss, and plan the program. The school has also committed to supporting the Kindergarten team in participating in professional development sessions to learn new practices to support the optimal development of all children. The school reaches out to the community for donations of equipment to run the program and uses the outdoor space at the school for the location of the program.

Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- Older students can benefit from unstructured free play as well. Develop a time in the school day where older students can participate in free play outside for a period of time before starting the day in the classroom.
- Encourage students to connect to nature during outdoor time by planting a garden or taking nature walks.
- Connect with local conservation areas or green spaces about outdoor education programming that is provided to schools.

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