

'No matter what the weather is, we're outside:' Demand for 'Forest Schools' soaring in Calgary



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Students build a bridge across a creek with sticks and test it out while learning in nature at Calgary Nature Kindergarten in Lloyd Park, on July 16, 2015. *CRYSTAL SCHICK / CALGARY HERALD*

In a rainy Calgary forest, dozens of adults attending a packed workshop were given strict instructions: just play.

The crew quickly scattered throughout the woods and found their inner child.

“Some people were building things out of wood, some made art projects under the trees,” said Christina Pickles, program co-ordinator at the Alberta Council for Environmental Education.

“People just dispersed and followed their own bliss.”

The activity was part of a sold-out workshop on Forest Schools and so-called risky play held earlier this month that saw 80 educators learn about the benefits of getting children outside.

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Forest Schools, the concept of moving kids out of desks and into the woods for play-based, child-directed and inquiry-based learning (even when it's chilly outside) has long been popular in Europe and is catching on across Canada, especially in Calgary.



Eighty educators gathered at Edworthy Park in Calgary to learn about the benefits and rewards of Forest School and risky play in early May, 2016 as part of an event hosted by the Alberta Council for Environmental Education in partnership with Forest Schools Canada, Common Digs Forest School, the Outdoor Council of Canada and the City of Calgary. *SUBMITTED PHOTO*

“Of all the different dimensions of our work, Forest Schools specifically, and more broadly a general interest in getting young kids outdoors is this burgeoning area for Alberta,” said Gareth Thomson, executive director of the Alberta Council for Environmental Education, a decade-old organization that helped host the recent workshop.

“We’re having trouble keeping up with demand, and it seems to be an idea that is completely resonating with Albertans and Calgarians,” he said.

Calgary-based Common Digs opened a Forest School program in 2014 with spaces for 50 children aged three to five, then added a second park location with another 50 spaces in 2015 because of strong demand, which continues.

“There’s a wait list of 60 between the two locations,” said co-founder Lisa Menzies.

Common Digs’ sister organization, the non-profit Children’s Commons Ecological Society, runs Calgary’s first Nature Kindergarten, a popular program that follows the mandated Kindergarten curriculum in a wild environment (<http://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/new-calgary-kindergarten-lets-kids-explore-the-great-outdoors>).

Another organization, Rediscovering Childhood, ran a popular outdoor spring camp for kids aged four to six over spring break, and there’s lots of

interest in the organization's summer nature camps that will take place in Bowness Park.

"No matter what the weather is, we're outside," said Rena Madadi, director of Rediscovering Childhood.

"We're hardwired to need nature in our lives. People are really starting to see the benefit of children being outdoors from an early age."

The benefits of having children play outside are plentiful and diverse, say educators, and include health benefits, developing an appreciation and understanding for nature, and learning to problem solve, communicate and take risks.

Menzies said children in the Common Digs Forest School are constantly building things such as forts or bridges in the forest.

"They're always working together to create things and constantly negotiating . . . They're learning critical thinking and the ability to have a discussion and express an idea," she said.

Educators attribute the increasing demand for outdoor play to a number of factors, including a pushback against too much structured play and the fact many children spend a lot of time staring at electronic screens.

"People are realizing their kids aren't having the childhood they had, and they're trying to bring it back," Pickles said.



Eighty educators gathered at Edworthy Park in Calgary to learn about the benefits and rewards of Forest School and risky play in early May, 2016. *SUBMITTED PHOTO*

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