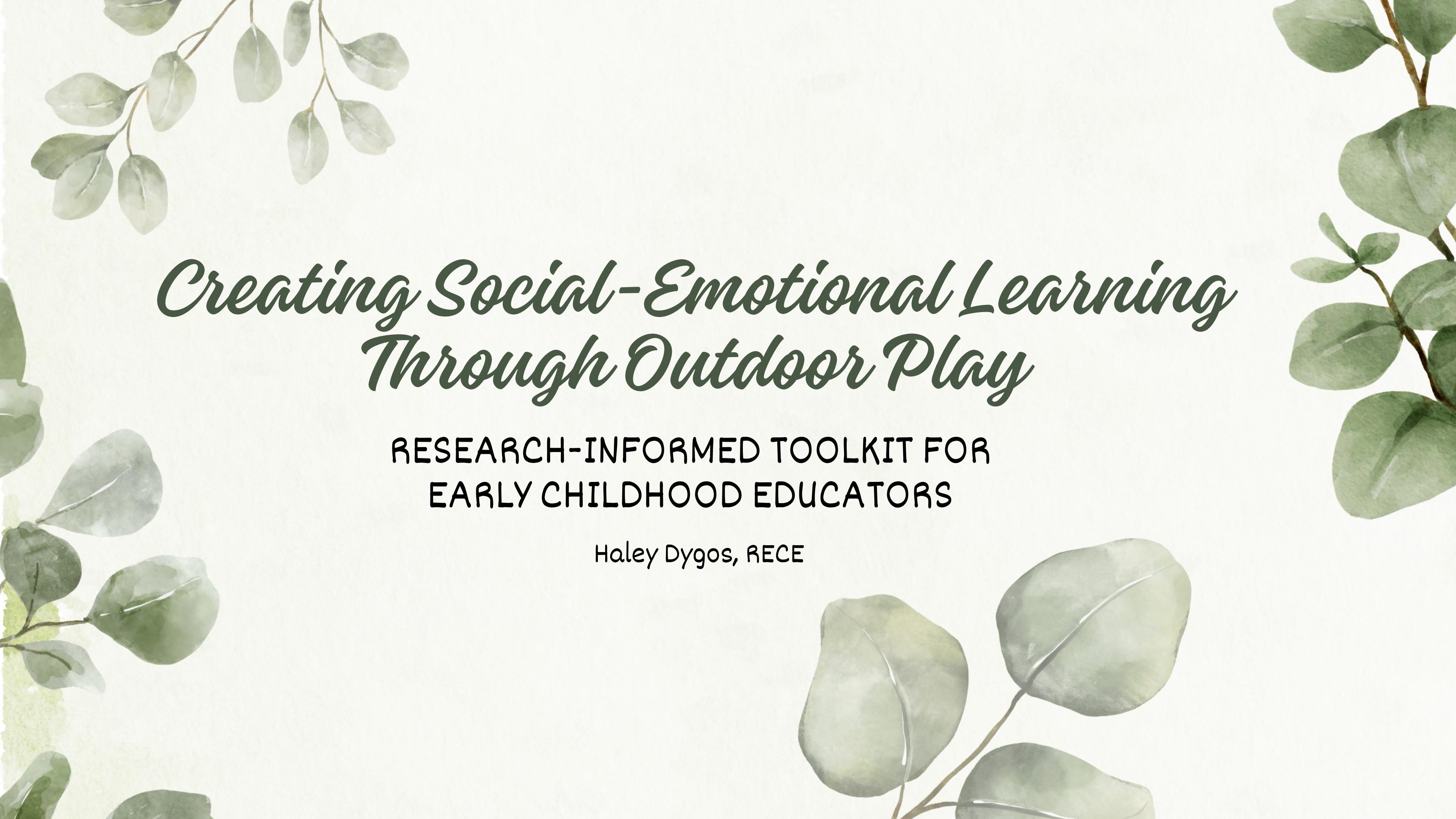




Creating Social-Emotional Learning Through Outdoor Play

RESEARCH-INFORMED TOOLKIT FOR
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Haley Dygos, RECE



About This Toolkit & My Study

Purpose of This Toolkit

- This toolkit is based on a rapid review exploring how outdoor education supports preschool children's social-emotional development.
- It focuses on how outdoor play influences social skills, emotional growth, and overall well-being.

Research Questions

- How does outdoor education influence preschoolers' social skill development during unstructured play?
- How do social-emotional outcomes differ between outdoor and indoor learning environments?

Key Findings

- Supports stronger peer relationships and social interaction
- Promotes confidence and independence
- Improves emotional regulation and overall well-being
- Enhances communication and language development
- Highlights the important role of educators in guiding learning

Why This Matters

This toolkit translates research into practical, easy-to-use strategies that educators can apply in everyday outdoor learning experiences to support children's relationships, confidence, and emotional growth.



How This Toolkit Was Developed

Approach

This toolkit is based on a qualitative rapid review of current research focused on outdoor education and social-emotional development in early childhood.

Search Process

- Databases: Education Source and Academic Search Complete
- Keywords included: outdoor play, nature-based learning, social-emotional development
- Studies published between 2015–2025
- English, peer-reviewed articles

Selection Criteria

- Focus on preschool-aged children (3–5 years)
- Explored social-emotional outcomes
- Conducted in early learning settings

Final Sample

- 54 studies identified
- 50 screened after duplicates removed
- 30 full-text reviewed
- 13 studies included

54 → 50 → 30 → 13

What the Research Shows

Outdoor play supports children's social-emotional development in the following ways:

Social Development

- Stronger peer relationships through cooperative and shared play
- More cooperation and teamwork



Confidence & Independence

- Encourages risk-taking in natural, open-ended environments
- Builds self-confidence



Emotional Development

- Supports emotional regulation through space, movement, and sensory experiences
- Improves overall well-being



Communication Skills

- More meaningful interactions during play and exploration
- Increased language use



Educators play a key role

- Guide and extend children's learning through intentional interactions
- Support social and emotional development



Quick Ways to Support Social-Emotional Development Outdoors

Simple strategies you can use right away in everyday practice:

- Provide open-ended materials (sticks, rocks, loose parts) to encourage creativity and collaboration
- Encourage cooperative play through shared activities and group problem-solving
- Allow safe risk-taking to build confidence and independence
- Support communication through conversation and peer interaction
- Give children time and space to problem-solve independently
- Acknowledge and support children's emotions during play
- Observe first, then guide learning based on children's interests



TRY THIS IN YOUR PRACTICE

Simple Outdoor Learning Experience

Use this activity to support children's social-emotional development through play.

Loose Parts Collaboration Activity

What to Do:

Set up a simple outdoor area with loose parts such as sticks, rocks, logs, leaves, and other natural materials.

What to Observe:

- Are children working together or engaging in parallel play?
- How are children communicating during play?
- Are children problem-solving or negotiating roles?

How to Support Learning:

- Encourage collaboration by asking: "What could you build together?"
- Support communication: "Can you tell your friend your idea?"
- Guide problem-solving: "What could you try next?"

Why It Matters:

This type of open-ended outdoor play supports:

- Social interaction and cooperation
- Confidence and independence
- Communication and language development



Practical Strategies for Outdoor Learning

Building Relationships Outdoors

Outdoor environments create natural opportunities for children to build relationships.

In practice:

- Encourage group play that supports cooperation
- Provide shared materials to promote interaction
- Model turn-taking and communication
- Support children in resolving conflicts



Supporting Confidence & Independence

Outdoor play allows children to take initiative and build self-confidence.

In practice:

- Encourage children to try new challenges
- Support safe risk-taking
- Allow children to make decisions during play
- Avoid over-directing and support independent exploration



Practical Strategies for Outdoor Learning

Supporting Emotional Regulation

Outdoor environments help children manage and express their emotions.

In practice:

- Create calm and flexible outdoor spaces
- Allow movement and sensory-based play
- Support children in expressing their emotions
- Model calming strategies and emotional language



Supporting Language & Communication

Outdoor play encourages meaningful conversations and language development.

In practice:

- Ask open-ended questions during play
- Encourage storytelling and imaginative play
- Introduce new vocabulary related to the environment
- Support peer conversations and collaboration



The Role of the Educator

Educators play a key role in shaping meaningful and responsive outdoor learning experiences.

In practice:

- Observe children's interests, interactions, and needs
- Follow children's lead and extend their play
- Ask open-ended questions to deepen thinking and engagement
- Create inclusive, supportive, and responsive environments





Outdoor Learning Reflection Checklist

Use this checklist to reflect on and strengthen your outdoor learning environment:

- ✓ Opportunities for cooperative and social play
- ✓ Open-ended, accessible, and engaging materials are available
- ✓ Safe risk-taking and exploration are encouraged
- ✓ Emotional support is provided during play
- ✓ Educators are observing and extending children's learning
- ✓ Outdoor experiences are meaningful, engaging, and inclusive

Reflection Question

What is one change you could make to enhance your outdoor learning environment?

Tip: Revisit this checklist regularly to reflect on your practice and identify areas for growth.



Resources for Educators

These resources can support outdoor learning and social-emotional development in early childhood settings:

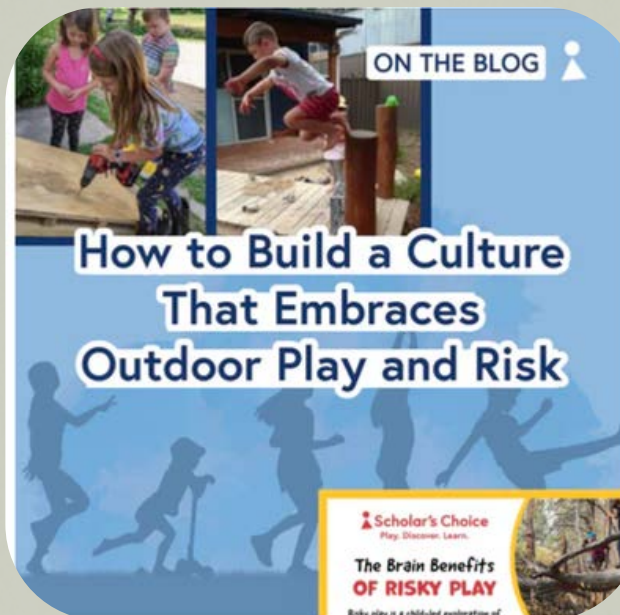
Key Frameworks & Guides

- How Does Learning Happen? – Ontario Ministry of Education
- Think, Feel, Act – Ontario Ministry of Education
- College of Early Childhood Educators – Practice Guidelines
- ELECT (Early Learning for Every Child Today) Framework



Outdoor Learning Resources

- Outdoor Play Canada
- Take Me Outside – Early Years Certification
- Scholar's Choice – Inspiring Play Blog
- Evergreen – Outdoor Classroom Resources



SCAN HERE

Printable Reflection Tool

- Scan to access a printable checklist you can use in your practice.



Printable Checklist

Watch & Learn

Extend Your Learning

- Nature Kindergarten – Frances Krusekopf



Why Outdoor Play Matters

Outdoor play is more than just time outside. It is a powerful way to support children's social-emotional development.

Outdoor play helps children:

- Build relationships, confidence, and emotional well-being
- Experience meaningful, real-world learning
- Explore, take risks, and develop independence



As educators, how we support children and design outdoor environments can make these experiences even more meaningful.

Outdoor play is not just an opportunity. It is an essential part of early childhood learning.

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Thank you

Haley Dygos, RECE