MODULE #5



Designing a Playspace With Children in Mind

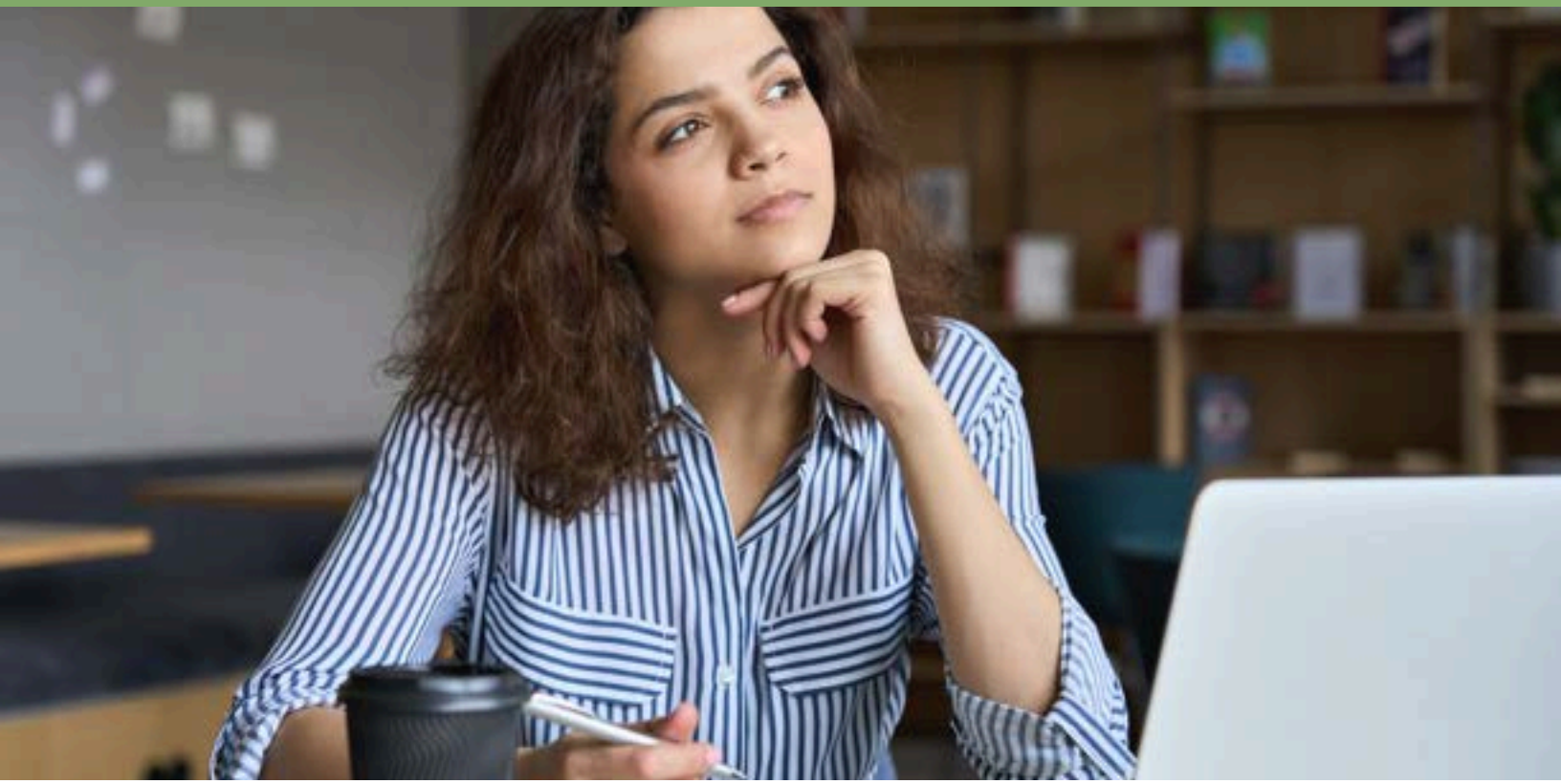
This module invites you to reflect on:

- How educators can intentionally design outdoor playspaces in collaboration with children, rather than for them.
- Understand the value of involving children in playspace design.
- Design outdoor playspaces that reflect children's interests, strengths, and individual needs.
- Support inclusive, flexible outdoor environments that evolve over time.

***Module Length: Approx. 1.5 hrs to complete**

Reflection

Take some time to reflect on the following question. We encourage you to write down your responses and come back to it from time to time as you complete the modules!



Children are experts in their own play. When they are meaningfully involved in designing their outdoor environment, they:

- Feel a sense of ownership and belonging.
- Engage more deeply and creatively.
- See their ideas valued and respected.

Reflection Prompt:

Think about your current outdoor space. Whose ideas are most visible? Who might be missing from the conversation?

Activity:
Children's Perspective Walk

Purpose:

To reflect on the outdoor environment through the eyes of a child and identify opportunities to enhance play, exploration, and belonging.

Activity:

Walk through your outdoor space and imagine you are a child experiencing it for the first time.

As you explore, consider:

- What would spark curiosity and wonder?
- Where would children be able to create, explore, and take risks?
- What spaces invite connection, belonging, and collaboration?
- How are children's interests, ideas, and cultures reflected in the environment?
- If children helped design this space, what might they add or change?

Connecting the Outdoor Environment to How Does Learning Happen?

Reflect on how your outdoor environment supports the four foundations of How Does Learning Happen? by exploring the ways children experience Belonging, Well-Being, Engagement, and Expression through the materials, spaces, relationships, and opportunities available outdoors.

Reflection Prompt:

"How does our outdoor environment intentionally create opportunities for children to experience a sense of *belonging*, encourage meaningful engagement, foster *expression* of ideas, creativity, and communication and support their *well-being*?"



Not quite sure about How Does Learning Happens 4 Foundations for Learning? Click here to explore thrc.ca for self-directed learning opportuntites or connect with a THRC Pedagogical Mentor!

Gathering Childrens Input

Designing outdoor environments with intention begins by understanding the children who use them. Children's interests, abilities, experiences, and ideas provide valuable insight into how spaces can support exploration, play, learning, and well-being.

When educators take the time to gather children's perspectives, they create environments that are more engaging, meaningful, and responsive to children's needs.

Strategies for Gathering Children's Input:

1. 

Careful observation of play patterns and preferences:

Observation helps educators uncover children's interests, preferences, and emerging ideas.

2. 

Conversations during play:
Open-ended questions, active listening, and genuine curiosity help educators gather rich information that can guide the planning and design of outdoor learning environments.
Ex. I notice you like playing here. What do you enjoy about it?

3. 

Drawing, mapping, or model-building activities:

Drawing, mapping, and model-building activities provide meaningful opportunities for children to share their perspectives and contribute to the planning process.

4. 

Photo walks where children document favorite spaces:

Photo walks allow children to become active contributors to the design process. Through their photographs and reflections, children share what is meaningful to them, helping educators create outdoor spaces that are engaging, inclusive, and responsive.

Child-led Design In Action:

Listening to Children's Voices Through Design
When children are invited to contribute to the design of outdoor spaces, their ideas often reveal creative possibilities that adults may not have considered.

Reflect on the following scenario:
Educators want to ensure that children's voices are represented in the outdoor space. To gather their ideas, children are provided with loose parts, clay, and natural materials and invited to create a 3D model of what they would like their outdoor environment to look like.

Imagine that several children included the following features in their models:
Areas for climbing and balancing
Places to build with logs and branches
Quiet spaces for observing nature
Water and mud play opportunities

What do these ideas suggest about what children value in outdoor environments?
What would be your first three planning priorities based on this feedback?
How would you involve children in the next stage of the planning process?



Rediscovering the World Through Children's Eyes

Want to deepen your understanding of learning through a child's lens?

THRC Resource Library has a variety of resources to support your journey.

THRC Books & Resources

- Really Seeing Children (#11124)
- Discovering Nature with Children (#2543)
- Natures Playground (#633)
- Let Them Play (#6513)
- Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms (#11455)

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it."

Rachel Carson, The Sense of Wonder, Pg. 44-49.



Video Reflection

Curious to learn more?
Watch the video below to discover how connected learning environments can help bring children's voices, ideas, and interests to life.



Video Title:

Early Years Learning Environments - Investigating the Natural World

Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1_bnFxHjkQ

What reflections do you have after watching this video?

Building the Vision Together

Now that the children have shared their ideas and created representations of their vision for the outdoor playspace, the next step is to move from planning to action!

Next Steps:

Invite the children to revisit their designs and work with them to identify which ideas could realistically be introduced into the outdoor environment.

Educators can support this process by documenting recurring themes, interests, and requests, then engaging children in collaborative decision-making.

Consider exploring questions such as:
Which ideas can we try first?
What materials will we need?
How will we know if the space is working the way we imagined?
Who can help us make this happen?



We have all heard the phrase, "It takes a village." Creating meaningful and engaging outdoor learning environments is no different. Consider forming a **playground planning committee** that brings together educators, children, families, and community members to collaboratively shape a shared vision for the outdoor space.

Designing for Inclusion and Individual Differences

Designing for inclusion means planning for a wide range of abilities, preferences, identities, and ways of engaging. The most effective outdoor playspaces offer multiple ways to access, experience, and enjoy play so every child can participate and belong.

Complete this sentence:

"An inclusive outdoor play space is successful when every child can...

"When educators believe that all children have the right to participate and when they use inclusive approaches, they are more likely to find ways to reduce barriers, understand how each child learns, and create environments and experiences that are meaningful and engaging".



UNESCO. (2009). Policy guidelines on inclusion education. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Inclusive Outdoor Features

As you design your outdoor playspace, select features that support a wide range of abilities, interests, sensory preferences, and ways of engaging in play. Your goal is to create an environment where all children can access, explore, participate, and belong.



Communication & Navigation

- □ Picture-based signs
- □ Multi-language signage
- □ High-contrast pathways
- □ Braille elements



Accessible Movement

- □ Wide pathways
- □ Smooth surfaces
- □ Ramps
- □ Transfer platforms
- □ Ground-level play experiences



Social Play

- □ Cooperative games
- □ Gathering spaces
- □ Outdoor stage
- □ Shared building experiences



Sensory Experiences

- □ Nature sounds
- □ Water play
- □ Sensory garden
- □ Tactile panels
- □ Musical features



Quiet & Retreat Spaces

- □ Small garden area
- □ Cozy seating nook
- □ Shade structure
- □ Nature observation zone
- □ Self-regulation space

Identifying Barriers and Opportunities for Inclusive Play

Read each scenario and consider how a child might experience your current outdoor play environment, using the reflection questions below to guide your thinking.

Think about;

- What barriers might they face in your current play space?
- What design features could be added to help them participate fully?
- Identify potential changes or additions that could make the space more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming for all children.

Scenario #1:

A child who uses a wheelchair and enjoys imaginative and creative play.

Scenario #2:

You've noticed a child sometimes feels overwhelmed by noise and crowds.

Scenario #6:

A child who recently arrived in the community and speaks a different first language.

Final Thoughts

Every small step you take to involve children in the design process can lead to more meaningful, engaging, and inclusive outdoor experiences. This week, challenge yourself to partner with children as co-designers and discover what new ideas emerge when their perspectives guide the process.

Choose one action you will try this week and record it below.



REMEMBER! →

The most responsive outdoor environments are not designed for children alone. They are designed with children, through ongoing observation, collaboration, and curiosity.

MODULE #5
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites & Podcasts

Rusty Keeler Resources:

1.) Sunflower House Design

2.) 20 Ways to Create Play Environments for the Soul

3.) Rusty Keeler's: Loose Parts Guide



Self-Directed Learning Opportunities:

- **Webinar Recording:** Inclusive Sensory-Rich Nature Play for Children's 7 Senses

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