

# Early childhood leisure experiences of African Nova Scotian children: The privilege of risky outdoor play

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## Background

The opportunities for learning through supportive outdoor environments enable children's cognitive, physical, and emotional development. Despite the notion of children's right to play, privilege, or an unearned and unacknowledged societal advantage, does impact how Black children and their families experience outdoor play.

The purpose of this paper is to present how outdoor risky play is accessed and perceived by parents and early childhood educators (ECE) of African Nova Scotian children.

## Key Findings

### Valuing outdoor play: "he just loves playing, getting dirty"

Families and ECEs in ANS communities spoke fondly about their own experiences with outdoor play as young children. Participants described personal experiences growing up in Black communities, where unsupervised, free play was encouraged and normalized.

"Yeah, I definitely think outdoor play is important, [...] he loves it outside and he loves just playing, getting dirty [...] Even just at home when he's just watching, he goes to the door, gets his coat, and his boots, and kind of just looks at me."

### Anti-black outdoor spaces: "A fear of that extra policing"

Parents and ECEs shared their concerns about allowing children to engage in risky play. Participants across communities spoke about the fear Black families and Black ECEs experience when ANS children engage in risky play due to the potential injuries and the consequences that follow.

"They're gonna get hovered over if they go to the [children's hospital], and we've had situations in the past where the mom would call me and say, 'The social worker is gonna call you and you need to let them know that this happened at daycare', so yeah there is a fear of that extra policing."

## Methods

This qualitative research project was informed by Critical Race Theory and Black Critical Theory. Early childhood educators (ECEs) who care for Black children and parents with Black children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years (n = 15) participated in virtual, semi-structured interviews.

### Under-resourced black communities: "there's no place around here for my kids to play"

Both parents and ECEs stated that access to outdoor play spaces was limited in many historic ANS communities, often due to their isolation and underfunding.

Participants discussed that many historic ANS communities had not seen the same infrastructure upgrades and amenities that other communities throughout the province have had, such as playgrounds, recreation centres, and parks.

Other necessities were missing from communities, critical for family safety like the unavailability or inaccessibility of sidewalks, dangerous neighbourhood speed limits, and proximity to highways.

"For those that may live at the beginning of (community) they may not be able to get to you know—because of course it's not safe to walk on the highway, so if they don't have a vehicle, the odds of them getting to that playground are pretty slim."

## Conclusions

While emerging areas of play, including risky outdoor play, are becoming popularized within a European context, the trending focus on risky outdoor play within the early childhood community has not considered the historical connections of Black communities to outdoor learning, nor the contemporary challenges that relate to racism, including over surveillance of Black children and lack of safe outdoor spaces. This study has highlighted key challenges prevalent in ANS communities. There are infrastructure gaps that need to be filled that will improve physical and cultural safety of Black children, such as partnerships with communities to develop early childhood programs and recreation spaces to improve access to risky play.