

The “Dig into Play” Story: Reimagining Public Spaces for Play

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“Holly! Look! We’re growing a baby!” Under the shade of the only tree in the garden, with gusts of hot wind providing little relief from the heat, an 11-month old infant sat in a bucket of muddy water, smiling, as a group of giggling children showered him with little watering cans. His mom leaned against the tree trunk beside him, “He just climbed in by himself. I don’t know if he was just hot or if it’s because he likes the mud.” Over the course of the summer, it became evident that he was deeply curious about mud. In fact, so were most of the children who came to Dig into Play, and luckily community gardens have it in abundance.

Ecosource’s Dig into Play (DIP) program evolved from our ReRooted in Play project which began in 2014. ReRooted in Play focused on physical literacy and included activities to develop movement skills such as running, jumping, and throwing in a garden setting. The Dig into Play pilot project emerged from observations during the ReRooted program that children wanted free time in the garden to explore...and children need this time now, more than ever. ParticipACTION’s (2015) Report Card on Physical Activity in Children and Youth highlighted several important findings on rates of physical inactivity in Canadian children. A previous study by Colley et al. (2011) also found that Canadian children spent an average of 62% of their daily waking hours in sedentary activities. Like Fjortoft (2001), Ecosource recognized that play in natural environments would present more challenge and versatility for physical activity than traditional structured playgrounds. The vision was to engage Mississauga communities in re-imagining their community gardens as spaces that could also accommodate and provide rich and engaging play opportunities for children. With a generous grant from the Lawson Foundation as part of its national Outdoor Play Strategy, Ecosource recognized an opportunity to reimagine how communities interact with community gardens, and provide additional opportunities for children to get outdoors.

Ecosource is an Ontario-based environmental education non-profit serving youth, adults, and families. Our work began in Mississauga and has expanded throughout the Region of Peel and beyond. We are all about changing the world, right in our own backyard!

We are leaders in grassroots environmental education in the Region of Peel. Our staff works in schools and throughout the community, delivering interactive learning experiences that inspire youth and adults to take actions that make a huge difference to the health of the planet. We are proud to work with over 30,000 students and teachers in our waste education programs, over 1,000 students with the Peel Environmental Youth Alliance as well as over 3,000 youth and adults in our community-based organic gardening and stewardship programs each year! We believe that when people realize how much impact their daily choices have on our environment, they will choose to become better environmental citizens. And we believe that most people are ready and willing to make those changes – they just need information and support. Our vision is to move public attitudes and perceptions about environmental issues toward responsible personal action, while inspiring personal accountability for the viability of the planet!

source: www.ecosource.ca/about-us

The programming format in Ecosource’s gardens had previously been utilitarian, with a primary goal of engaging participants in activities that promote the health and abundance of garden harvests. With DIP, this format evolved to include opportunities for self-directed play. When Ecosource began research to develop DIP, it was surprised to find that very little research had explored the incorporation of play spaces in community-based allotment gardens. The only source found was by Hart, Iltus, and Beeton (2004), in which the Design Trust for Public Space undertook a project to create dedicated play areas in 3 inner-city community gardens in New York City. These designs created spaces that allowed for free-play nature exploration, but also engaged gardeners in serving as “informal teachers” for the children as they played. This approach led Ecosource to work with our community of gardeners to engage in the DIP program alongside the children. Throughout the pilot season, we observed that adult gardeners were sharing the space, often watching what the children were doing. The gardeners would pause from their tasks to watch as the children traveled through the gardens in play. Often, children would stop to ask gardeners what they were doing or planting. Usually, the gardeners would speak to, and show the children what they were growing in their plots. One gardener even took initiative to engage a small group of children in planting some of his extra crops.

Dig into Play allowed children and their families to explore and play in lush garden environments. The children had many available options, such as the Mud Laboratory, Tea Kitchen, Creative Construction area, the Zen Zone, Nature Sculpting, and Small World play. Water and mud were consistently observed to be the most favoured materials. As a cornerstone connection to Ecosource’s work around local food systems, parents were invited to harvest from the garden and prepare a snack for the group. The children were often eager to help, and learned to identify the herbs and crops by using their senses. This happened in a variety of ways, and the Educators ensured that there were materials on hand to engage children of all ages and developmental levels. Sometimes, tasks, behaviours, and play-plots that emerged that tested the limits of what has been normalized as “acceptable” play behaviour. These included the building of pretend weaponry (for uses of securing livelihood or to combat predators/enemies); the use of adult sized garden tools for playwork purposes (outside of traditional garden work); and navigating “wild” (naturalized) areas within the urban garden communities.



Working in the Tea Kitchen: “If you drink this potion, it turns you evil.”

Robert Leonard, Ecosource: Dig into Play

“Risky Play,” is a topic that is at the forefront of the play movement both in Canada, and internationally. The focus of Dig into Play isn’t directly rooted in “risky” play, however, this way of playing can be uncomfortable for some adults, and as such, needed to be addressed. After an on-site session at one of our gardens, an adult-lead expressed concern about a group of 4-5 year olds using adult-sized garden tools (long handled shovels and garden forks). She felt she couldn’t leave the area in which the children were working for fear that someone would get hurt by the tools. Observation notes documented that the children were cautioning one another about safety while the Garden Play Educator was present. Statements such as, “Back up guys! I’m going to try to lift this”; “Everyone move back! I’m gonna pry it up”; and, “This is a long shovel. You need to back up when I say ‘CLEAR THE WAY!’” were recorded by the observer.



Creative Construction Area: Dismantling an old platform

Ecosource: Dig into Play

One thing that was surprising to find as we began program delivery in the gardens, was that users were much more open and receptive to the overall “messy” and “risky” components of the program than was initially anticipated. Upon reflection, it seemed that the participants who came to the gardens had some understanding of what the program involved. We attributed this to three factors; families participating in multiple visits, supportive adult-leads, and clear communication about the program’s objectives which are rooted in Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff, 2005).

As the gardens grew and changed throughout the season, so did the nature of the play. At the beginning of the season, before all the plants had really begun to grow in abundance, it was observed that children were more engaged with the activity stations that involved building, sculpting, and small world play. As the gardens grew throughout July and August and the plants began to tower over the children, they spent the majority of their time watering, observing, asking questions, photographing, and playing with water and mud. As the plots began to be cleared for winter, the children’s attention once again returned to the more constructive play activities.

DIP expanded past the gardens when possible, into surrounding forested areas for “Adventure Walks” to observe and collect items from the ground to play with. This activity was cited consistently as a favourite activity by parents and children alike. The program allowed participants to explore parks and greenspaces in the city that they didn’t know about before coming to DIP. One parent wrote, “The nature walk was also a great experience, along with the opportunity to see a family of tiny little baby ducklings that couldn’t have been more than a couple of days old! This was something that he still tells us about! If it wasn’t for this program, we wouldn’t have even known that the gardens and cute little forest [existed] in one of the parks!”

The DIP program challenges the adage, “Leave no trace,” with regards to children’s interaction with the natural world around them. While this is a fitting motto for an ecosystem under threat, in most instances natural environments can withstand human interaction and that in turn, may lead to greater social benefit for individuals (Browning, Marion, Gregoire, 2013). Children are often discouraged from interacting with nature in a way that allows them to make meaning of the experience. This interaction is necessary to counteract what Louv (2005), coined as “nature deficit disorder.” Sobel (2012), wrote about how children develop a stronger relationship with nature when they are immersed in it in a self-directed way. Exploration and play meaningfully connect children with nature, but also expose children and parents to the variety of ecosystems that are at risk as the region continues to rapidly grow. In the future, Ecosource would like to expand on the interest that our participants have shown to include a variety of different places and experiences that the region’s abundant greenspaces have to offer.

There were some challenges that arose throughout the season. As the program was mostly “mobile” in nature, travelling to our six community garden sites, the amount of materials needed to successfully deliver and implement this program was extensive. There were some measures put in place for materials storage and many supplies were duplicated and left at the respective sites. Additionally, the summer of 2016 in Ontario was brutally hot and dry, presenting less than ideal conditions for staff, who were out in the heat and sun for several hours each program day. Despite the temperatures often above 30° Celsius, our participants were undaunted, and many agencies and families came to multiple sessions throughout the summer and brought family and friends. By the third community session, parents who had come previously were chatting together as the children played.

While community allotment gardens are indeed fascinating places of wonder and intrigue for children, they are also used by many individuals within the community as a food source for their families. There are competing interests in community gardens where a multitude of users with different intentions and goals share the same resource. Despite these challenges of meeting a variety of needs in the community garden, the opportunity for outdoor play is invaluable to children and families, especially as



Ready to Explore

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more and more families live in high rise condos and apartments complexes in Mississauga. One mother wrote, "I have taken my children to [...] DIP sessions. My children have thoroughly enjoyed each one of them. My family lives in a condo so we don't have a backyard. As such, the DIP sessions are invaluable to us." In 2017, Ecosource is committed to expanding opportunities for children and families to get out and play in nature and in their city.

For more information about Ecosource and our programs, please visit www.ecosource.ca



Fully immersed in play at the Mud Laboratory
Ecosource: Dig into Play

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Holly Marsh is a Registered Early Childhood Educator with over 8 years experience working with toddlers, preschoolers, kindergarten and school-age children. For over 6 years, Holly has been working for the Early Learning Centre at the University of Toronto-Mississauga. Holly's work in this lush wildlife-surrounded child care program helped to shape her personal educational philosophy. In addition to urban, small-space food gardening, Holly has encouraged children to learn about waste reduction, and energy conservation. Holly holds a B.A. in Early Childhood Education from Ryerson University, and a Diploma in Early Childhood Education from George Brown College.