

Love to Play

Community Report

Love to Play Project Team

July 2017



Acknowledgements

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Project funding and support



The Love to Play Project

Overview and Results

What is children's free play?

- Free play is a form of play that is initiated and controlled by the child. It is intrinsically motivated, spontaneous, voluntary, and child-directed. ^{i, ii, iii, iv}
- Free play can happen in many different ways, such as creative play, exploration, dramatic (or pretend) play, and gross motor (e.g., climbing, running, jumping) and fine motor (e.g., using scissors, sorting beads) activities.

Why is free play important?

- Free play experiences during early childhood have an impact on developmental, mental, and physical health for children and for the rest of their lives. ^v
- Playing helps children develop strong foundations in many ways: intellectually (literacy, mathematics, and scientific thinking); socially (competence and confidence); emotionally (resiliency and control); and physically (strength and coordination). ^{iv}



Who was involved in the research project?

- The Love to Play project developed as a partnership between the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta, the Early Learning and Child Care Program in the Faculty of Health & Community Studies at MacEwan University, and the Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture department (SC RPC).

What was the purpose of the Love to Play project?

- The project sought to uncover whether and how the innovative design of the Love to Play space and/or associated free play-based philosophy (i.e., child-centered and focused on open-ended learning) fostered free play among preschoolers (aged 3 - 5 years).

What preschool programs and spaces participated in this project?

- Weekly recreation preschool programs at Ardrossan Recreation Complex, Kinsmen Leisure Centre, and Strathcona Olympiette Centre were the focus of this study.
- The programs ran for three sessions over the 2014 - 2015 school year: fall (September - November), winter (January - March), and spring (April - June).
- Observation areas for each preschool program included a preschool room, and either a free play space specifically designed for the preschool (*Love to Play*) or a mini-gym room
- Each program also had access to other spaces not considered within the scope of the research project (e.g., outdoor spaces).

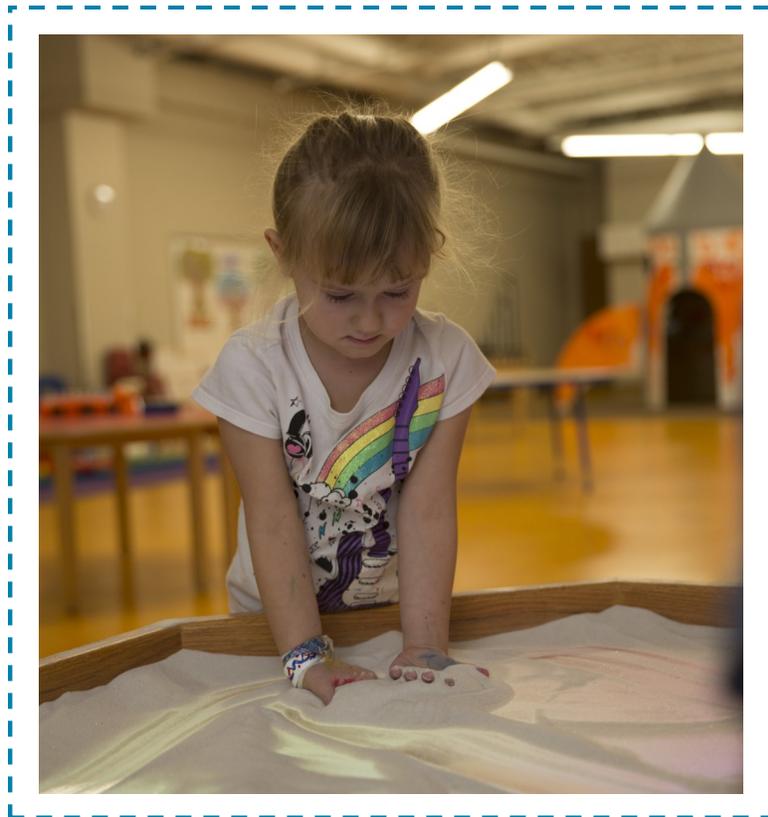


Why were these programs selected to be studied?

- Strathcona County invested \$350,000 into the design of the *Love to Play* room at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex in addition to developing a free play-based philosophy for their preschool programming.
- The three recreation preschool programs followed similar curriculums under a free play-based philosophy.
- All participating recreation preschool programs received varying amounts of new equipment and/or materials to support their program implementation.

What did the Love to Play project entail?

- Conducted between September 2014 and June 2015, the Love to Play project was comprised of four parts: parent and instructor interviews, preschool space assessment, video recordings of children's play, and photo-related activities with children.



Why was this research project conducted?

- Changes in our communities and society (i.e., urbanization, family demographics, technology usage) have led to a significant decrease in children’s free play time over the past 50 years. ^{i, vi, vii}
- At the same time, early childhood education has become more focused on academic content and school readiness over other developmental milestones. ^{i, vii}
- Children’s play is increasingly becoming more institutionalized, organized, and structure in both home and educational settings. ^{viii}
- Research results from the Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) showed worrisome performance of kindergarten-aged children in Strathcona County. In this province-wide study conducted between 2009 and 2014, researchers used a tool called the Early Development Instrument ^{ix} to measure children’s development in five areas: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and thinking skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. ECMap results indicated that 21.4% of children living in rural Strathcona County were experiencing great difficulty in one or more of these areas, and that 10.6% of children were experiencing great difficulty in two or more areas. In Sherwood Park, those figures were 18.4% and 9.3%, respectively. ^x
- In response to ECMap findings, Strathcona County developed a free play-based space between 2012 and 2013. The *Love to Play* room opened in 2014 in the Ardrossan Recreation Complex facility in rural Strathcona County. The space is open to the public and is also used by the Love to Play preschool.
- Considering preschools are safe and supervised places for children to learn and develop, this rich, sensory preschool environment, was designed to encourage free play opportunities.
- An accompanying free play-based philosophy and curriculum was implemented in all Strathcona County recreation preschool programs, including the one in the Ardrossan Recreation Complex.

Part 1

Parents' and Instructors' Thoughts



> What did we want to learn?

- The purpose of the parent interviews was to understand their perceptions of (free) play, and how children play at home and in other settings (including the preschools).
- The purpose of the instructor interviews was to understand their experiences with the free play-based philosophy and preschool space used, their attitudes towards involving children in the preschool programming, and their perceptions of (free) play.

> What was done?

- Semi-guided conversations with parents and instructors were conducted during the first (pre) and the last (post) two months that the children were enrolled in the programs.
- Six (three lead and three assistant) instructors shared their thoughts in both pre- and post-interviews.
- In total, 43 pre-interviews were conducted with parents, but only 13 post-interviews were performed due to parents' time constraints.

> Results:

What did free play mean to instructors and parents?

- Instructors and parents considered free play as an activity for which children engage in spontaneously and voluntarily.
- For both groups, this self-directed activity provides children with the opportunity to be creative and use their imaginations.
- Parents and instructors saw children's independent decision-making as fundamental to free play.



What did instructors and parents believe is the most important thing for children's development during the preschool years?

- Instructors identified several ways they could support preschoolers' development: (a) positive feedback or encouragement; (b) the provision of a variety of learning opportunities (open-ended, experimentation, exploration); (c) a physical and emotional safe environment; (d) acknowledgement and respecting children's unique needs; and (e) ensuring experiences different than those at home.
- For parents, the most important developmental skills for their children to gain during the preschool years were: (a) social skills (e.g., the ability to follow directions, manners, respect for other, sharing, and turn-taking); (b) confidence; and (c) fine motor skills (e.g., use of scissors and pencils). Some parents also mentioned kindergarten or school readiness as important to gain during this time.

How do instructors think parents should be involved in the recreation preschool programs?

- While the programs were classified as 'unparented', parents were welcome to join in program activities as they wished.
- Instructors, however, felt that parents should not attend regular preschool activities because their presence may impact the children's behaviours. According to them, unparented experiences allow children to participate in activities more naturally and better express themselves.

Why did parents decide to enroll their children in the recreation preschool programs?

- Parents selected their children's preschool programs for a variety of reasons.
- Scheduling and proximity of the facilities to home were the most common factors for selecting programs.
- Other factors included: (a) fostering development across domains; (b) socialization and networking; (c) learning and taking direction from an adult other than their parent(s); and (d) becoming familiar with more structured schedules or routines in preparation for school.



How did instructors adapt their programs and spaces for children?

- Instructors felt that the accessibility and availability of equipment, materials, and rooms (e.g., if equipment was present, if spaces were free for program use), physical features of the spaces (e.g., lighting, size of space, windows), and layout of the spaces (e.g., placement of toys, arrangement of furniture) impact children's play behaviours.
- In accordance with a child-centered approach, the instructors indicated that they adapt the programs to ensure the need of and feedback from children is incorporated.

Did parents think anything was missing from the recreation preschool programs and spaces?

- Parents did not think any aspects were missing from the preschool programs and spaces.
- Parents felt that communication between the instructors and themselves could be improved. They wanted to know more about if/how academic-type activities (e.g., colours, numbers/math, letters/alphabet, and writing) are incorporated into the programs, as well as how the preschool days and sessions are organized (e.g., when and for how long children go outside for).
- Parents also indicated a preference for their children to engage in more outdoor time, specifically during winter months.
- Parents appreciated the full-day nature of the preschool programs. They further indicated that a full-day preschool program running more days a week would be an asset, given their childcare needs relative to work schedules.



So what?

- Given that instructors and parents value free play, incorporating opportunities for those activities in Strathcona County's recreation preschool programs may help meet their expectations for programming and child development. It is also important to provide evidence of learning, as suggested by the Preschool Programs Curriculum Framework. Inviting parents to visit the facility during preschool activities or providing documentation of the learning process (e.g., photos and written anecdotal stories) would show how much their children have developed through free play.
- As parents saw the value of free play, but also identified school readiness as important for their children during the preschool years, instructors should be able to clearly communicate to parents how engagement in free play opportunities will contribute to children's preparation for school.
- Parents choose preschool programs that they believe will contribute to their child's optimal development and learning. Particularly, social competence – an area Strathcona County children were underperforming in according to ECMap^x – was considered important for children to gain during the preschool years. As such, parents should be shown how the preschool programs are creating supportive learning environments that help children to develop respectful practices, such as interactions with other children and instructors.
- Instructors are open-minded and are adapting to the new preschool philosophy, as exemplified by their willingness to provide child-centered experiences in the programs.
- Programmers and managers should seek out professional development opportunities to continuously help support or train instructors on creative ways they can address children's unique needs and interests when resources are not readily available.
- Marketing strategies that emphasize how the recreation preschool programs are working to promote development in specific areas may help parents choose programs and be aware of all community resources available for their families.

Part 2

Preschool Spaces



➤ What did we want to learn?

- Our objective was to determine the impact of each indoor preschool environment on opportunities for different types of (free) play.

➤ What was done?

- Three coders independently used the Children’s Physical Environment Rating Scale (CPERS), a validated, third-party tool, to objectively assess the physical attributes of the preschool room and mini-gym/*Love to Play* room in each of the three preschool sites.
- CPERS is comprised of four parts: A) Planning; B) Building as a Whole; C) Indoor Activity Spaces; and D) Outdoor Spaces.
- This tool does not touch on children’s engagement in the spaces (i.e., with the equipment and materials provided) or interactions with their peers and instructors. Instead, it focuses solely on the physical dimensions of the space, particularly on availability and accessibility of resources within the space.
- For the purposes of this project, we utilized only the five subscales (54 items) under the Indoor Activity Spaces (i.e., where most of the children’s time in preschool programming is spent), to assess the quality of the spaces utilized for preschool programming. These five areas are: Modified Open-Plan Space (i.e. enclosed spaces protecting from audio and visual distractions, ability to change arrangement of spaces, noisy and messy activity spaces, connection to outdoors), Home Bases (i.e., cubby space for children’s belongings, distinct eating area, napping area, and a toileting area separate from other activity areas), Quiet Activity Areas (i.e., areas for reading, fine motor, and computer play), Physical Activity Areas (i.e., areas for gross motor, music, and dramatic/fantasy play), and Messy Activity Areas (i.e., areas for arts and crafts, water, and science or nature play).
- Each subscale in the tool is scored on a scale from 0 to 4 with corresponding ratings of poor, fair, good, and excellent.
- An average of the scores for each preschool environment was calculated to determine its overall indoor quality for child development.



➤ Results:

What was the quality of the indoor recreation preschool environments?

- Overall, the three recreation preschool spaces had an overall ‘good’ quality indoor spaces for supporting children’s development.

Were there similarities between the three participating recreation preschool environments?

- All three recreation preschools had ‘good’ Modified Open Space, Home Bases, and Messy Activity Areas.

Were there differences between the three participating recreation preschool environments?

- The designated area for reading and fine motor activities in Kinsmen Leisure Centre scored ‘excellent’, whereas Ardrossan Recreation Complex and Strathcona Olympiette Centre both scored ‘fair’ in those areas.
- In terms of Physical Activity Areas, Ardrossan Recreation Complex scored ‘excellent’ because of the variety of gross motor, dramatic, and music-related play opportunities available. Kinsmen Leisure Centre and Strathcona Olympiette Centre scored ‘good’ in this category.





So what?

- Given that messy, physical, and quiet activity areas are intended to support children’s creative, physical, and social activities (according to CPERS), preschool programs may consider identifying components or areas that support and enhance children’s engagement in these types of activities. In particular, improvements to the physical spaces (e.g., availability of resources such as shelving, seating, or playthings) could be made where programs received a lower score in order to optimize potential benefits for children.
- Although preschools may receive a score of ‘fair’ or ‘good,’ these spaces are still adequate for program purposes. A score of ‘excellent’ could be an indication that the space has enhanced properties, and may be considered a leader in the area.
- Programmers and instructors should ensure that their spaces and activities touch on different developmental domains, and provide a range of opportunities for children, rather than solely emphasizing excellence in a single domain.
- Understanding the range and quality of characteristics available in preschool environments may enhance the developmental benefits of programming for children.
- While purchasing of specialized equipment and materials for preschool programs may not be needed, instructors should be encouraged to creatively manipulate and organize the spaces and available resources in order to promote more free play opportunities.
- As the three recreation preschool environments are operated within the SP RPC, it may be valuable to use these findings to assist with future resource allocation in order to provide a more equitable distribution between facilities across Strathcona County.

Part 3

Observing Children's Play



➤ What did we want to learn?

- Our purpose was to understand how children play in - and with the various features of - the preschool environments.

➤ What was done?

- Video observations of children in action during free play time were undertaken to capture the nature and array of play behaviours occurring over the program sessions, without disrupting the regular activity of the room.
- Video recordings occurred once per month in the preschool room and mini-gym or *Love to Play* room, each for 30 minutes.
- Three cameras were wall-mounted at a height and angle as to capture a birds-eye view of the children, ensuring children's privacy was protected and to be as discreet as possible. No sound was recorded.
- Two researchers independently coded the video data using a modified version of the Observational System for Recording physical Activity in Children – Preschool (OSRAC-P).^{xiii}
- The OSRAC-P consists of eight categories related to children's play. These include: physical activity type (e.g., climbing, crawling, dancing, skipping, etc.) and level (e.g., stationary, slow, moderate, fast, etc.), the location of play (e.g., inside, transitioning, etc.), the indoor and outdoor play context or focus of their play behaviours (e.g., art, books, and fine or gross motor activities), who initiated or started the activity in which children engage, the composition of the play dynamics (i.e., who was involved in the activity), and any prompts observed that increase, decrease, or maintain children's play behaviours. Modifications were made by the research team to adapt the tool to the Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture preschool context; for instance, swimming and napping were excluded because these were not part of the Love to Play program.
- The researchers coded the video recordings every 30 seconds by watching the children for five seconds and then filling out the tool for 25 seconds, repeating for every child coded for the duration of the videos.
- In total, 61 children were video-recorded over the study period.



➤ Results:

What play activities were children engaged in during free play time?

- Children at Ardrossan Recreation Complex and Kinsmen Leisure Centre were most frequently seen engaged in arts; fine motor activities (e.g., building with blocks or pushing trains on tracks); and pretend play (role playing using, for instance, kitchen or grocery store equipment, or dress up clothing to explore social relationships).
- Children at Strathcona Olympiette Centre were mostly engaged in fine motor activities, playing with fixed equipment (e.g., jungle gym), and gross motor activities (e.g., running, jumping, and summersaults with no equipment).

How did children engage with the program and others during free play time at preschool?

- In all three preschools, children were the ones who commonly started the play activities, not the instructors. These child-initiated activities speak to the presence of free play, showing the spontaneity and intrinsic motivation of play activities children engaged in at the studied preschool programs. The children at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex did this more frequently than children at the other two facilities.
- In all three preschools, the children's play activities were most frequently unprompted, meaning that instructors or other children did not prompt the child to increase, maintain, or decrease their play activities levels. Children at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex had higher a frequency of unprompted activities compared to the other two preschools.
- Children engaged in more group-play (with or without an adult present) than solitary or one-on-one play.
- Given that all three preschool programs are implemented under a free play-based philosophy, it fits that most play observed during free play time was unprompted, child initiated, and diverse.



What did physical activity look like in the preschool programs during free play time?

- The most common types of physical activities observed during free play were sit/squat, stand, and walk.
- Children’s engagement in sedentary activities was more common than light and/or vigorous physical activities in all three of the preschool programs during free play time.
- While sedentary behaviours were more prevalent in the three preschools, it is important to keep in mind that the video observations were conducted during specified free play time. Further, this project neither focused on designated physical activity times nor included video observations of outdoor opportunities, both of which may have changed children’s physical activity levels within the context of the preschool programs.

So what?

- The differences found in children’s play behaviours between the preschools may be partially explained by the instructors’ experiences with the free play-based philosophies (reported in Part 1) and space differences (reported in Part 2).
- Facilities can support children’s free play with the provision of a variety of resources, such as art and craft supplies or blue blocks; the spaces do not need to be set up the same or look the same from program to program. Instructors and programmers should keep in mind that facilities do not need to have the same design and features in order to equally stimulate free play in children.
- There is evidence showing that social role play, e.g., when children take on pretend roles and act out stories in groups, is related to the development of early literacy skills.^{xiv, xv, xvi} In this kind of social play, children coordinate their ideas and actions closely with one another over extended periods of time. It is recommended that the programs focus on planning more opportunities for social role play, providing resources (e.g., props) and giving children enough time to develop their ideas together. Supporting instructors to facilitate extended periods of social role play through professional learning may be helpful in enhancing opportunities for this kind of play. Sharing the connection between this kind of play and early literacy with families may also help to address parents’ concerns about learning outcomes and their expectations of preschool programming that supports academic readiness.
- Physical activity engagement is an objective for preschools: specific programming, or the use of equipment and rooms can be used to promote greater levels of participation.

Part 4



Understanding Children's Perspectives

> What did we want to learn?

- Our purpose was to understand how children perceive their preschool play experiences and spaces.

> What was done?

- The focus of this part was for each child to create a book *Places I Love to Play* with photos, drawings and descriptions of their ideas about the play spaces and play experiences at preschool.
- Instructors began by offering activities to encourage children to think about their play at preschool. For example, instructors read picture books about children playing during circle time and offered open ended art materials for children to represent their ideas about playing at preschool.
- Instructors then gave children time (over several program days) to play with digital cameras. Each camera was attached to a lanyard and worn over the head, allowing children to move freely and use the cameras independently.
- Next, children were invited to take photos of equipment, materials, and places they enjoyed when playing at preschool.
- After the photos were printed, each child had an opportunity to select the images they wanted to include in their book.
- Using a template provided by the research team, and with the assistance of their instructors, the children created individual books using their photos, and adding drawings and descriptions of their play experiences at preschool.
- Each child was invited to share their book with the class and researchers during a circle or small group time, and to talk about their photos and where they liked to play.
- The process was led by the instructors and unfolded over several weeks in the Winter and Spring program sessions.



➤ Who participated and what data was collected?

- Participating children from each preschool (15 at Ardrossan Recreation Complex, 13 at Kinsmen Leisure Centre, and 13 at Strathcona Olympiette Centre) took 316 photos across the three sites (an average of eight photos per child).
- Children created 41 *Places I LoveToPlay* photobooks.
- Photobook sharing and conversations with children about their photobooks were recorded and transcribed by the research team.

➤ Results:

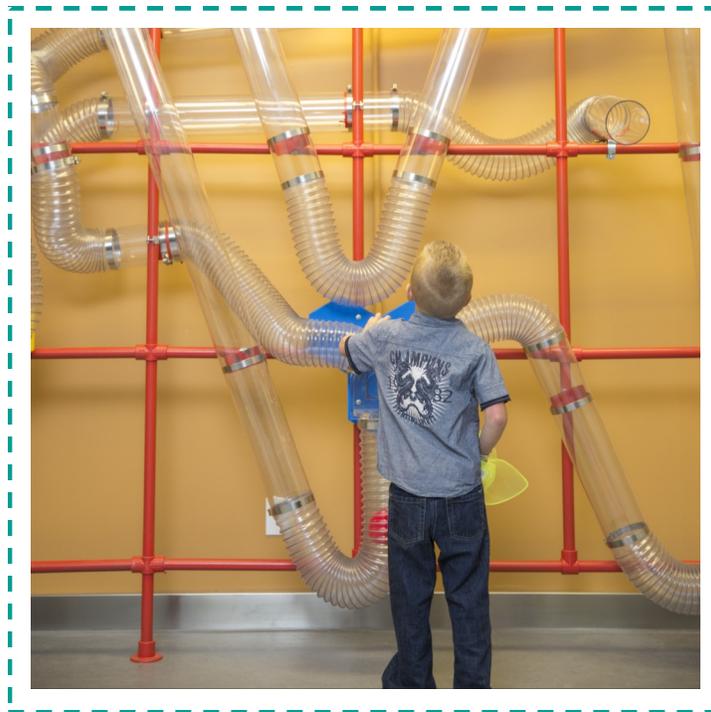
What did children tell us about play?

- Children had lots to say about their play and many were eager to share stories with each other, and the instructors and researchers. They described many things they liked to do at preschool, and expressed enjoyment of the play experiences in each of the programs.
- Children’s photobooks provided many examples of play with the loose materials and playthings provided in the preschool. Their descriptions of these experiences spoke to their enjoyment in using materials creatively and for their own purposes, to make things, and to build things.
- Several children were drawn to elements of surprise in the environment, returning to these as favorite experiences (e.g., the wind tunnel in Ardrossan Recreation Complex and the popup dinosaur floor toys in Kinsmen Leisure Centre/Strathcona Olympiette Centre).
- Children like to make things happen in their play and to repeat these things.
- Children invent games together using the equipment and materials in the environment in specific ways. They return to these games over and over, sometimes individually and sometimes with their friends. Some of these experiences include a storyline (e.g., they like to “play crab” underneath the boat in Kinsmen Leisure Centre). Others described repeating specific movement sequences using the equipment (e.g., climbing up, sliding down, and going in and out and under).
- The photos reveal that children look at their environment from multiple angles. Photos of the ceiling and the floor and the walls as places for play were common. Descriptions of photos of ceilings and walls often involved taking on imaginative roles (e.g., as superheroes or astronauts).



What did instructors say about these activities?

- Instructors were invited to comment on these activities during interviews (Part 1) at the end of the program year.
- The instructors spoke about how much the children enjoyed using the cameras. Several instructors commented on how much the children had to say about the photos. For instance, one instructor described the children as being “full of stories.”
- Several instructors described a new awareness of children’s perspectives as a result of the activities. They were surprised by how children saw the space differently from what they thought. As one instructor explained, “it gives you a child’s goggles.”
- One instructor commented on how the experience showcased children's planning in play: there is preparation and purpose within children's actions, which may not been readily obvious.





So what?

- Children use space and materials for their own purposes in play. They attach meaning to their play experiences in specific areas, through invented games and repeated play stories. Supporting instructors to observe and reflect on these repeated experiences as part of an ongoing planning process may keep programs responsive to children's interests in free play.
- Children use space in novel ways in their play (e.g., they see the ceilings and walls as places to play). The design of play environments could take greater advantage of the potential of these spaces to stimulate imaginative play, for example as a place to feature novel play elements like those mounted on the walls in the Ardrossan Recreation Complex *Love to Play* room.
- These findings confirm the evidence in play research that loose materials offer many possibilities for free play. A review of the quality and availability of these materials in Strathcona County recreation preschool programs in relationship to current practice in early childhood education may inspire new thinking. For example, many early childhood programs are providing quantities of found, recycled and natural materials for free play, in addition to commercial playthings and toys.
- Children have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the design and evaluation of their play experiences at preschool. They proved to be capable photographers. Instructors experienced deepening insight of children's interests and developmental capacities and needs during the photo activities. There is an opportunity to provide professional learning for instructors on how to engage young children in designing and evaluating their own play experiences. This may improve the quality of the experiences for children and lead to greater awareness on the part of families about the value of Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture preschool programs.

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