

canadian partnership for
children's
health & environment



partenariat canadien pour la sante
des enfants
et l'environnement



Aussi disponible en français: <https://healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/jmas/communique-de-presse-de-la-campagne-2026/>

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The call for action, issued by CPCHE and partners, affiliates and collaborators nationwide, is available post-embargo at

English: healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/held/2026-campaign-call-for-action

Français: healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/jmas/appel-a-laction-de-la-campagne-2026

Background, images and resources: <https://healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/held/2026-campaign-outdoor-learning-settings/>

Advance interviews are available

Canada's Schoolyards and Play Spaces Are Failing Kids

Dwindling green space, synthetic surfaces, climate-driven heat and pollution undermine children's health, experts warn

On [Healthy Environments for Learning Day](#) (23 April), national coalition calls for urgent shift to greener, safer outdoor environments where children learn and play

Across Canada, schoolyards and outdoor play spaces are increasingly constrained by shrinking green space and extensive areas of hard or synthetic heat-trapping surfaces, raising alarm among experts about children's health, learning and well-being.

A national coalition of health, education and environmental experts today called for coordinated action to make outdoor environments where children learn and play greener, healthier and more climate-resilient.

Led by the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE), the 2026 Healthy Environments for Learning Day campaign highlights a rising disconnect between what science says children need for physical health, mental well-being, learning and social development and the outdoor educational environments that children currently have access to and those being developed.

Says CPCHE Executive Director, Erica Phipps, "Expanding children's access to healthy and natural outdoor settings is a straightforward, yet so far underutilized, way to nurture children's well-being and support optimal learning. In the face of escalating climate-related risks, growing concerns about toxics and microplastics, and rising youth eco-anxiety, there has never been a greater urgency to invest in natural, health-promoting outdoor settings."

A strong, growing body of research shows children benefit most from access to natural, green outdoor environments. Yet many schoolyards offer limited opportunities for this kind of play and learning.

Says Dr. Louise de Lannoy, Executive Director of Outdoor Play Canada: "The evidence is overwhelming: children do better physically, mentally and socially when they spend time in natural outdoor environments. We should be designing spaces that support that, not limit it."

Signed by CPCHE and 50 partners across the country, the call to action warns about children's declining access to nature and the rising presence of artificial turf and other synthetic surfacing materials in schoolyards, playgrounds, and child care centres.

These materials, including synthetic turf, poured-in-place rubber, rubber tiles and rubber mulch, are often marketed as more durable, requiring lower maintenance and able to reduce certain types of injuries.

However, their widespread use fails to consider the broader context of children's health, climate resilience and long-term sustainability, the coalition says.

Research has identified a range of chemicals in some synthetic surfacing materials, including heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and PFAS (often referred to as “forever chemicals”).

While most studies suggest exposures are low under typical conditions, important knowledge gaps remain. Most assessments have focused on the crumb rubber infill in artificial turf systems and do not adequately capture the potential risks associated with other components, such as the plastic blades of artificial grass. Questions remain about the cumulative health and ecological risks as these synthetic materials break down through normal wear-and-tear and release microplastics and chemicals into the environment.

Says CPCHE Executive Director Erica Phipps: “Young children, in particular, are more vulnerable to environmental exposures because they spend more time close to the ground, breathe more air relative to their body weight, and frequently put their hands in their mouths. It does not make sense to have children playing on artificial surfaces that contain chemicals of concern and shed microplastics when natural and health-promoting options exist.”

She adds: “This is a call to ensure that outdoor spaces in early learning and school settings are designed and maintained in ways that prioritize children’s health, equity and climate resilience, guided by the best available evidence. Typically this means more trees, natural surfaces and vegetation; less pavement, artificial surfaces and plastics.”

“Outdoor spaces should help children thrive,” says Phipps. “In too many cases, they are falling short of what we know children need.”

The concerns extend well beyond chemical exposure.

Synthetic and hard surfaces can reach significantly higher temperatures than natural ground cover, increasing the risk of heat stress, particularly during increasingly frequent and intense heat waves. In some cases, playground surfaces have been identified as among the hottest areas in urban neighbourhoods.

Replacing natural green space with synthetic materials also removes critical environmental functions, including shade, cooling, water absorption and carbon storage, benefits of increasing importance as communities adapt to a changing climate.

“In many cases, we are trading away natural protections for convenience,” says Phipps.

The call to action notes that children’s access to green space is uneven and, in some areas, declining. National and international research shows that children benefit most

from access to high-quality natural environments, yet these are often least available in lower-income and marginalized communities.

“This is about making better choices so that outdoor learning spaces reflect what we know works for children, and ensuring those benefits are available to all,” says Phipps.

According to the Call to Action:

- Average greenness in Canadian cities dropped by over 8% between 2000 and 2025 (Statistics Canada), with large urban centres seeing a decrease of 10.5% driven by development and urbanization
- A citizen-science audit reported that 73% of Ontario schoolyards had an overall Schoolyard Quality Score less than half the optimal score, with wealthier communities generally scoring higher overall. Only 45% of schools audited had any kind of naturalized play spaces, and in a third of schoolyards, 50% or more of the surface was paved
- Children are healthier, more active, have enhanced learning and self-regulation of emotions and behaviours, improved social interactions and better mental health when they spend ample time in natural outdoor settings
- Outdoor play improves children’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional health. Spending time outdoors is linked to greater physical activity, improved cardiorespiratory fitness, and less sedentary behaviour in children aged 3-12 years
- Green outdoor settings confer the greatest benefits. Healthy weight, improved cognitive function, reduced anxiety and depression, and reduced ADHD symptoms, have all been associated with children’s frequent access to quality green spaces
- Playground surfaces, including playground equipment, can become dangerously hot without shade protection. One study found that the hottest areas of a city neighbourhood were on playground surfaces
- ~48% of schools in Canada are located within 200 metres of high traffic roads and thus have a higher risk of exposure to traffic pollution
- Children’s access to local green space in Canada ranked 15th of 40 countries on the Urban Green Space Index in 2022. Children in neighbourhoods composed mostly of low-income, immigrant and/or racialized populations tend to have less access to green space, according to UNICEF Canada (2022)
- A study of three major urban centres in Canada found less green space and higher nitrogen dioxide concentrations (an indicator of traffic-related air pollution) in neighbourhoods affected by socio-economic deprivation

“Where a child lives should not determine whether their educational settings support their health or undermine it,” says Phipps.

A precautionary path forward as climate change raises the stakes

The risks are intensifying in a warming climate.

Extreme heat, wildfire smoke and other climate-related hazards are already affecting children's ability to safely learn and play outdoors (*).

Synthetic and hard surfaces can reach significantly higher temperatures than natural ground cover, increasing risks during climate-driven extreme heat events. At the same time, replacing vegetation reduces shade, cooling and water absorption, key features of climate-resilient spaces.

The report concludes that a precautionary approach is warranted.

Where safer, nature-based alternatives exist, reliance on synthetic surfacing should be reduced, alongside expanded research, better monitoring, and greater transparency about the materials used in children's environments.

Key priorities identified in the Call to Action include:

- Protect and expand green space in schoolyards and child care settings through stronger land-use and planning policies
- Set minimum standards for healthy, climate-resilient outdoor learning environments, including access to natural surfaces, shade and vegetation
- Reduce reliance on hard and synthetic surfacing, prioritizing natural, sustainable materials where feasible
- Invest in retrofitting existing spaces, including depaving, tree planting and nature-based design—especially in underserved communities
- Integrate climate resilience into outdoor settings, including measures to reduce heat exposure, improve air quality and manage flooding risks
- Support outdoor and land-based learning, including Indigenous-led approaches that strengthen connections to nature
- Strengthen data collection and public reporting on environmental conditions in child care settings and schoolyards, including heat, air quality and access to green space
- Coordinate action across governments and sectors, aligning education, health, environment and infrastructure policies and investments to support healthier outdoor spaces

“These are practical steps that protect children now while closing critical knowledge gaps,” says Phipps, adding that healthier outdoor environments can support child development, reduce health risks, strengthen climate resilience and advance equity, all at once.

“We know what works,” says Phipps. “The question is whether we are willing to create environments that truly put children first.”

Partner comments

“As we expand child care services across the country and support existing programs, we have an incredible opportunity to give every child daily access to natural spaces that nourish curiosity, confidence, and care for the world around them. Early learning flourishes in environments where children can dig in the soil, feel the grass beneath their feet, and watch the seasons change. As we build the future of early learning and child care, we must be mindful not to replace living landscapes with plastic and artificial surfaces, materials that may be convenient but compromise the vital connection between children and nature.”

- **Don Giesbrecht**, CEO, Canadian Child Care Federation

"We know that children’s exposure to climate hazards from extreme heat, air pollution, flooding and climate-sensitive disease vectors is increasing. This is impacting children’s health and exacerbating health inequities. Inequitable access to climate-resilient outdoor green spaces, such as tree-shaded play areas at schools and child care settings, means that some children are at even greater risk from these and other climate hazards.”

- **Ian Culbert**, Executive Director, Canadian Public Health Association

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The Collective Call for Action, in full: <https://bit.ly/4ss6JTv>

Signatories to the Call for Action: organizations devoted to public health, environmental protection, climate action, legal aid, social justice, education, early learning and child care, occupational health and safety, and parent advocacy:

1. Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE)
2. Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)
3. Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF)
4. Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment (CANE)
5. Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE)
6. CAPE - Manitoba Committee
7. CAPE - New Brunswick Committee
8. CAPE - Newfoundland and Labrador Committee
9. CAPE - Nova Scotia Committee

10. CAPE - Ontario Committee
11. Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA)
12. Environmental Health Clinic at Women's College Hospital
13. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)
14. Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA)
15. Pollution Probe
16. Centre for Environmental Health Equity (CEHE)
17. Little Things Matter
18. Prenatal Environmental Health Education (PEHE) Collaboration
19. Association for Canadian Educational Resources (ACER)
20. Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA)
21. Association of Early Childhood Educators of Newfoundland and Labrador (AECENL)
22. Breast Cancer Action Quebec (BCAQ)
23. Canadian Health Association for Sustainability & Equity (CHASE)
24. Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors - Ontario (CIPHI-O)
25. Canadian Lung Association
26. Children's Environmental Health Clinic (ChEHC)
27. Child and Nature Alliance of Canada
28. Clean Indoor Air Toronto
29. Climate Action Partnership
30. Early Childhood Educators of Yukon Territory (ECEYT)
31. École Les Mélézes dorés
32. EcoSchools Canada
33. Environmental Defence
34. Evergreen
35. Forests Canada
36. For Our Kids
37. Friends of Tecumseh's Forests (FOTF)
38. Green Communities Canada
39. GreenLearning
40. Greys For Green
41. Human and Environmental Physiology Research Unit, University of Ottawa
42. Human Early Learning Partnership, University of British Columbia
43. Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA)
44. Lung Association of New Brunswick
45. Ontario School Safety
46. Outdoor Play Canada
47. Outside Play Lab
48. Rewilding Native Gardens
49. Support Our Students Alberta

50. Seniors for Climate Action Now!
51. Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA)
52. Sustainable Buildings Canada
53. Take Me Outside
54. Windfall Ecology Centre

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In 2025, CPCHE's nationwide Call for Action warned children are particularly vulnerable to heat-related serious health hazards because:

- *A child's body produces more heat during activity and has a lower capacity to cool down through sweating than an adult's*
- *They dehydrate faster than adults, and*
- *Young children may struggle to communicate feelings of overheating, placing great responsibility on caregivers and educators.*

Children with disabilities or chronic health issues such as asthma, heart conditions, kidney problems, and mental or physical disabilities are especially susceptible. Research shows that even temperatures not deemed "extreme" can drive up emergency room visits for kids.

Meanwhile, the impacts go beyond physical. Hot classrooms can impair attention, memory, and emotional regulation, making it harder for students to learn. Studies link elevated temperatures to irritability, poor sleep, absenteeism, and reduced academic performance.

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Available for comment:

Erica Phipps, MPH, PhD, Executive Director, CPCHE

Helen Doyle, BSc, CPHI(C) - Ontario Public Health Association/Canadian Public Health Association

Louise de Lannoy, PhD, Executive Director, Outdoor Play Canada