

OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL

Baby, it's not that cold outside

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Most Ottawa-area adults dread winter and its accompanying balaclavas, hunched shoulders and frozen toes.

But starting next week, when doors open at Canada's first outdoor preschool, winter might mean something else to the region's children: playing outside.

At the Carp Ridge Forest Preschool, about 38 kilometres west of Ottawa, children will stay outdoors - snow, rain or shine - all year round. The only indoor reprieve will be during electrical storms, snow squalls or if temperatures plummet below -10.

"Children are resilient," says Marlene Power-Johnston, 27, a former social worker and head of the program. "It's a hard thing for us to wrap our heads around because we've become an indoor society."

Four children are enrolled in the two-day-a-week program that begins Monday, and Ms. Power-Johnston expects to meet her 10-child maximum capacity when the full-time program begins in January.

But first she'll have to convince parents that their child won't freeze, gobble poisonous berries or get lost in the woods.

"We recognize that a lot of education has to take place for this program to be successful," Ms. Power-Johnston says.

"And addressing parents' fears," she adds.

While the concept is new to Canada, outdoor daycares and preschools have been gaining popularity in Europe since the early 1990s, particularly in Britain, Germany and Nordic countries. Those programs, including forest kindergartens in Germany and the Secret Garden in Scotland, have been lauded for their ability to engage children with nature and active lifestyles, Ms. Power-Johnston says. She adds that kids may take fewer sick days because they aren't cooped up in stale classrooms.

While Canada has lagged behind these countries, some educators say attitudes here are changing because of rising concerns about childhood obesity, indoor toxins and children's lack of exposure to nature in urban centres.

"There seems to be quite a movement starting," says Don Giesbrecht, president of the Canadian Child Care Federation, an umbrella organization representing 20 provincial and territorial organizations across Canada. "It's something that is starting but is not yet galloping across the country."

One of the places where innovative work is happening is Winnipeg, an unlikely location considering the average daily temperature in January is -18. (In Ottawa, the average daily temperature in January is -11). But

Ron Blatz, executive director of Discovery Children's Centre in Winnipeg, said he was inspired to do something after a delegation from Europe visited area daycares and pointed out that Canadian children spend much more time indoors than European children.

"I was embarrassed," he said.

So, instead of building another play gym, he and his staff added a fire pit, garden, sandbox and field of tall grass to an abandoned school field. Instead of keeping kids indoors in the winter, he says, staff try to engage children in building snow forts.

The efforts are snowballing, he says. Last September, he hosted a meeting that attracted 120 landscape artists, architects and educators interested in engaging children with the outdoors. Students at the University of Manitoba's landscape architecture program are designing an outdoor daycare as their current class project.

Ms. Power-Johnston, a former social worker with the Children's Aid Society, said she was inspired to open the preschool after doing research on alternative education models and reading books such as Carl Honoré's *Under Pressure: Rescuing Childhood from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting*.

At her program - which costs \$25 a day and includes organic snacks and lunch as well as bus transportation from Ottawa - children will garden, go for hikes in surrounding forests and explore nature. Story time will take place inside a solar-heated yurt, and if it's really cold, they'll have access to a one-room, heated learning centre with a kitchen.

Parents are educated about dressing their children in warm, layered clothing, she says. Good hydration is another key to making outdoor play safe.

The idea has its critics, but Ms. Power-Johnston says she's confident that a little education will go a long way to soothing fears about Canada's harsh climate.

"It's really normal," she says. "It just comes from fear and this being unknown."