Outdoor Play

[00:00:00] **Delphine:** Welcome back to the access to education podcast, where we talk about all things having to do with learning disabilities and learning challenges. As society goes, we swing in and out of fats from not coming home to the lights, go on to tracking our kids on their phones, through the generations, the understanding of how to support children changes.

We move back and forth with ideas today on the show we're talking about getting outside. I remember as a child was participation episodes that encourage people to get out and get moving. As our space in cities is becoming smaller. Finding that outdoor space can be hard sometimes for our kids, with neuro-diversity finding ways to help them get outside and get moving is really important.

They need to see their strengths. In other places, From inside to outside learning can happen. The issue becomes how do we, as parents and educators enhance learning through outdoor play today on the show I'm joined by Jane she's an outdoor play specialist, helping to increase our understanding of the importance of outdoor play.

But not only that, she's also going to help [00:01:00] us understand how to do it. Jane, welcome to the

[00:01:02] **Jane:** show. Thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:01:05] **Delphine:** How did you get interested in becoming an outdoor play specialist? Where did that come up?

[00:01:10] **Jane:** It's been an interesting journey and, somewhat roundabout in a way. I did a degree in landscape architecture and, uh, that was, you know, a while ago.

And I was always interested in, in child, design and child development. And I think part of that came from, you know, my parents were teachers, and I was always interested in like, what were the kids doing outside in the school yard and thinking about, you know, what, if we actually designed these spaces to support what we know about child development.

And then my thesis in university was actually for healing spaces for children with autism. I was so interested in all of those topics, but, you know, life kind of happens and I, I. , doing some other things for a while just to make the, the bills pay the bills.

And, , and then I started to get into environmental education [00:02:00] at the Toronto zoo and I became an aunt and I started to see more about the lack of connection with nature and that, that nature deficit , and then with being an aunt, seeing my nephews play, and it really sparked that interest in children's play again.

So that kind of led me down, down the road, back into children's play and outdoor play and nature play. Realize that it's something that is needed and isn't being, you know, exceptionally well provided for, and that really needed to address that.

[00:02:34] **Delphine:** Wow. That's a really interesting way of getting there, starting with landscaping and letting that kind of flow into the next kind of developmental stage in terms of like, looking at how you can use landscape to engage play.

So does that include like the structures that our kids play on, for example, that you see at parks? Like, would that have been something that you would look at or could look at as like a,[00:03:00] an all encompassing or is it really just about the physical, like putting out blocks of wood or using kind of loose parts for lack of better way of like explaining it?

[00:03:09] **Jane:** Yeah, well, I think, I mean, my understanding of what play is and what children need has, has developed a lot or has expanded. And I think that, you know, the playgrounds that we see these days, they have value and, and they do meet some needs and the, you know, Both the physical needs for, you know, the development, being able to climb and, being able to like, hang off the monkey bars and that the grip strength and the muscular strength that that takes, that's all really important.

And we, we need to allow children to be able to do that. But what I see with the environments that we have today is usually that they don't allow for that opportunity for different kinds of play. So in, in the field that I'm trained in, which is called play work, which comes out of the UK. There are, I think it's [00:04:00] 16 different types of play that they have identified.

And so, you know, imaginary play fantasy play, sensory play, all sorts of different kinds of things, dramatic play there's one called recapalive play, which is all about sort of doing those things that we did, uh, or that are sort of instinctual, like building fires and, you know, creating dams and things that, you know, hunting and gathering things that, set us up for success as a species way back when that are still somewhere in us.

There's that, that urge is still in us. Yeah, and I think we need to look at spaces differently on how can we provide for all of those different kinds of play. And certain children love the play structures, right? Like that's what they want to do. And then others aren't as interested in that. And when all we have right now, which it seems especially like in school yards and we have the play structure and then we have the soccer field and there's pretty much nothing else.

Then what happens to the kids who don't really want to play soccer or who are kind of, you know, [00:05:00] maybe they did that last week and they don't want to do it this week, or maybe. You know, that's not their thing. And , the ones who aren't interested in climbing the play structure, what do we do?

And so, loose parts is, is a great way to, to enrich that environment. So one of the programs that I used to work with worked in schools to bring in loose parts during a recess and lunchtime, and to create a lot more complexity and variety and a richer environment. And I, you know, I'd love to be able to have spaces like that in, , in our, our communities as well, where children can go to the park and it's not just like a play structure.

There's no interesting natural features things that they can climb, but also slow down that. Manipulate. So like pick up things, build, like you were saying, like blocks of wood, like they could build, or even, you know, I mean, having more sticks and things so that they could build a fort or, other stuff that can support that like fabric and, they can afford out of, or a den out of blankets and, we're [00:06:00] wrap it around you and your, the king or the queen or things to enrich the play and, pots and pans for making potions and cooking and these really rich environments.

And, and unfortunately that doesn't often happen. Usually you need more supports like you can't just plunk that down and leave it. But there's a whole movement in the UK about Playworks and adventure playgrounds. And so if you've never, if you don't know about adventure, playgrounds are these like wonderful, magical, amazing spaces.

Yeah. Have these kinds of things. I have loose parts. They have adults that are trained to provide for the children and to do so in a way that isn't judging or putting adult agendas onto the children. It's really this like wonderful space where children can just be children and, and the, the staff are trained to take it from, to start with the play and start with the child and support it from there.

[00:06:53] **Delphine:** I'm curious to hear, cause I mean the direction of the podcast, right? In terms of kids with neuro diversity and differences, right? So you [00:07:00] talked a little bit about. What you did in terms of your, , your thesis in university. But then I wonder, like, how does this outdoor play become something that kids with autism or kids with ADHD, or like maybe physical differences, right?

Like maybe they can't walk well or, or they need something that's more accessible. Does that not become even more important? Like, as I'm hearing you talk about it, my, one of my, my middle kid doesn't like the play structure and he doesn't like soccer and his school yard has nothing in between. So I can say to him, I'm like, what did you do in the school yard today?

And he's like, well, I played soccer. I'm like, Hm, you don't sound like you enjoy that. He's like, no, but I didn't have another option, but he's got ADHD. So , he needs an outlet and we do something after school. We do boxing, afterschool, which seems to work. . But you know, the days of school are long.

They have these 15 minute, you know, to most schools have two 15 minutes in sort of an hour or something. So how do we create spaces for our kids who. Don't fall on the play structure or soccer field, but who also, [00:08:00] maybe in their thought process because their brains are wired differently or they have a physical need.

How do we incorporate play for them in a way that allows them to be kids? Like I loved your comment there about, you know, children being able to play and just be kids. So what is it that we need to start shifting in the way we look at playground and play?

[00:08:22] **Jane:** And that's a big question.

[00:08:23] **Delphine:** I know that's like a huge, that's like,

[00:08:26] **Jane:** it's a huge question, but it's such a good question.

And it's so, so needed. I think there's a, you know, there's a number of things there, , you are right. That, I mean, every child needs to play and every child has the right to play and it's even, you know, it's in the UN Rights that the Child, the right to the children to play it is, and, and to play in the way that they need and that they want so that they can control the content and the intent of their play.

And, and there's a whole, you know, reason for that. There's so many benefits to play and to playing specifically outdoors and all [00:09:00] children, have it in them, right? Like play as an aid. Now, some of us these days, some children aren't as great at doing it naturally because we haven't given them the opportunities to do it.

But we do need to start to create that. And What we'd like to start with is, is three things. So without time, space and permission, we are erroding childhood. Like we don't need those things for play to thrive. And, and we've taken away a lot of elements of those three things. So time is a huge one right now kids are, you know, school is long.

There's a lot of pressures in school. often there's homework after school or tutoring, if you're struggling. Right. There's when do they get to actually just play right and play? As I think there's a few things play is learning, but I think learning is a subset of play. So play is also for wellbeing.

It's for, you know, development. It's what we're supposed to do. It's how we're naturally supposed to learn and develop and [00:10:00] explore. And, uh, the wellbeing part is a really big part too, right? Like how would you feel if I said, you know, you have to sit in this room and you can't do anything, and here's now maybe here's a piece of paper and some red crayons, but you can't have green ones and you can't have orange ones.

Which is a version of what kids are asked to do. Like it's very restrictive and they need to be able to, to explore their own interests and their own ideas and what they are interested in and become engaged in that. And they need to be able to move their bodies and they need to be able to be outside and interact with other children and interact with the natural world.

I think that, going back to time, what we need to do is we need to make time. So we need to make time for children to play. And children often take at least 45 minutes to really, truly get into play. When you think about that and you think about like what recess or even lunches, like there's no time for that.

So one of the things we advocate for is, is longer periods of play and longer periods of uninterrupted [00:11:00] play too. So they can really get immersed in their play. Now that's not always possible in school, and it's still better to have a, you know, a rich experience for 15 minutes at recess then than two hours of unstructured play.

But if you can do that on the weekend, then that's that's ideal. Or put it in, in other places too, still again, 15 minutes here or there is better than nothing. And then. You know that the space is a space is sometimes like giving your children's space. Like you were saying, like kick them out and, you know, give them the space to be children and to, you know, do their own thing without adults kind of hovering over telling them what to do, or this is, this is good, this is bad.

But it also means an enrich rich environment. So it's what you talked about in the school yard, right? So have two things, you have the playground and you have the field and then, and then what, so how can we create a richer environment? And the easiest way is through the loose parts the more expensive way is through, you know, actual more like landscape design.

And, a lot of the natural [00:12:00] playgrounds are more interesting these days, but they still also have more in my opinion, could, could do even better And then, and then the permission piece is actually one of the biggest, especially in schools. So how do we give children their permission to be, to be children, right?

And to, you know, to do what their bodies are telling them to do. So you think about, all children, but children with diversity, with neurodiversity, , their bodies and their brains are telling them they need to do something. So one of the reasons they can't sit still, you know, is because their body is saying, they need this, they need to move.

They need the stimulation, the input. and when they're not able to go outside and to direct their own play, then that, that gets even worse. Right. So then, then they start having more issues and then they get in trouble and then they get recess taken away from them. Or they're asked to stay after school or they get in trouble at home and they get, you know, more and more and more stifled and.[00:13:00]

And those are the children that really, really, really, really to be outside. Going outside without, you know, a rich environment and without the right kind of permission, doesn't really, it's better than nothing,

so maybe bring me back into the question again.

[00:13:17] **Delphine:** I mean, the question is really sort of, how do we support our neuro-diverse kids if they don't want to be on the structure and they don't want to be on the field? Like how do we as parents encourage them to play when there kind of isn't anything to play with, but also how do we, as a school system start to encourage.

All of the different types of play from all of the different neuro diversities or physical limitations that we might have. Like, I think some of it too, when I think of play, I get stuck on the physical limitations. Like if the child is in a wheelchair, for example, how do I make sure they can still have the same immersion in [00:14:00] play?

Like, for me it seems like a huge limitation, but it probably isn't, it's the way I have it envisioned in my head.

[00:14:07] **Jane:** Well, and that is like, you just hit the nail on the head. So my brain is going in several different directions. So there's how there's the parents and how can we support it? There's the school systems.

And then, this part here. So I think I'm going to this part that you're talking about, I'm going to address first and hopefully we'll come back to the other parts. But I think what you said is how do we see the child? What is your image of the child? Start from the child. And so try to remove your assumptions and your judgments of what they can do or what they can't do , and find out, you know, what do they need?

What do, what are they drawn to? What are they interested in? And to be honest, this is true for any child, really. But I think children who have differences are so often tried to be forced into a system or a box that doesn't work for them. And so we even more need somebody to recognize, what it is they [00:15:00] truly need.

And I think that one of the things I saw a lot was that people, I don't want to maybe dismissed. I think they kind of dismissed them as not being able to play or as like for autistic children. That's all. No I thing is like, oh, well, they can't play. Or they don't know how to play. And one of the, one of the elements sometimes for a diagnosis of autism is, the inability for fantasy play.

But that doesn't mean that they can't play. They just play differently. And what we need to do is just really like slow down and observe and watch, and then be with them and be that playful partner. And, and we can find things. We can find things that they are interested in. And wondering if that. So like one of the things I saw a lot with, especially with the school programs, I worked with schools that I also worked with, organizations like doing after-school programming and camps.

And we did these pop-up adventure [00:16:00] playgrounds too, which were all like lose parts in a park. So I saw this in all the different places, but particularly in schools, they always said, the teachers would often say, this kid doesn't know how to play, or this kid is going to be a problem. Watch out for this one.

Cause we would go in and we would sometimes do a play day or where we went in and we worked with the school for the whole year to implement this kind of, loose parts play. And we always kind of went, oh yeah. Okay. Like, but you know, then watch the kids. And so often like nine times out of 10, those children didn't do the things that, that we were warned about because they were interested in what was going.

So the children, you know, that were causing problems maybe because it's behavioral or maybe because they know we're, something like ADHD where they're, they're having so much trouble fitting into our very linear, strict school system that when they get outside, they need that outlet. Um, and sometimes if there isn't a, you know, a [00:17:00] constructive way to direct that energy, like you said, if they're not interested in soccer, the playground then they'll create their own drama or their own steps.

So we actually saw that, the problems and visits to the office and, bullying went down because children were engaged and they were interested in what they were doing. So they weren't creating drama.

[00:17:22] **Delphine:** I wonder too, though lik, as you're talking, I'm thinking of those behavioral kids and I'm thinking plays something that isn't evaluated.

Do you know what I mean? There's no pressure. To be perfect on it. It doesn't require previous knowledge. Like they don't have to have learned the lesson that happened yesterday to be able to do it. So I wonder too, if some of it, as you're talking, I'm like, oh, I wonder if it's just because we take the pressure off the child and allow them to be them and not be, so you must sit in your chair and you must write the journal entry.

[00:17:56] **Jane:** .And I think that is a thing, right? Like the, like I said, [00:18:00] they're stifled, right. They're stifled by these rules and these structures they're stifled by, , the pressure to perform. I know a few kids who you could see who have, you know, add or ADHD or on the spectrum, and they struggle so much to fit into that system.

And that does a number on their self-esteem and their. Desire to learn. But when, when we look at, go back and we step back and we look at them as just as children and we allow them to play like all of these strengths and abilities come out, like what I was saying, like the kids that were supposed to be the problem ended up being the ones.

Like there's one, I'm thinking of where the teachers are, like, watch out for this when he's going to cause problems and specifically, meaning like he's going to hit somebody it's going, gonna. , and he didn't, he took a leadership role in the play that was happening, but not a bullying role. And he was organizing and he, they actually ended up doing like a big, [00:19:00] big play fight with them.

with pool noodles and the teachers were really freaked out, but like he showed that he knew how to interact with others. And when. He was being a little bit too rough. He stopped and said, Hey, are you, are you okay with this? Like, is this okay? And he looked after the others who seem to be uncomfortable with something.

So it was like, whoa, you know, this is so cool. Like this kid who has been put into this box and now kind of labeled on officially can do so many other things and show a different side of himself. And I think that that is, that is a huge part of it is because, because we're not telling him what to do, we're not forcing them to do something.

His body and his brain is doing stuff he needs, he knows he needs to do. And he's just naturally taking that on. So I think that , really not like as adults, we, we so often have agendas. We so often have pre assumptions of what children can or can't do. and I, I [00:20:00] just play can be so amazing, like.

I'm always at all of the amazing things that happen, whether it's creativity or problem solving or those kinds of, you know, social inclusion, other kinds of things that happen.

[00:20:14] **Delphine:** Here's one of my big questions for you that, that I, that I have actually written down. And it's how has outdoor play changed over the years? And I asked that question because I put myself in my younger years knowing I'm like an eighties baby. So I'm just on the cusp of eighties. , we didn't have all of the technology that we currently have. TV was a thing. Absolutely. It was a part of my everyday life.

I wouldn't say it was my Saturday morning activity, but it was definitely their cartoons worth thing. But I remember. Just yeah. Have like, I can remember. I grew up in Ottawa and I remember the big snow mounds that would be made at the end of my driveway. And I would spend hours digging through them to build tunnels.

And like, that was all fine and well, and then [00:21:00] unfortunately what always happens and it was an unfortunate situation. And I don't mean to take away from the unfortunateness of the situation, but a child had built one of those, the tunnel collapsed child was injured and like all of that stopped. Right? So those things happen.

And we know that when children play, sometimes they get injured. And that is part of the thing it's like hanging from the monkey bars. You fall down, you break your arm. Like those things are possible, but it's also possible to slip on the ice break your wrist as it is. Right. So, but how has play changed over the years?

Because technology has come in and I think has robbed. At least I know in my house. Through this last two years, it's robbed the ability of my kids to play, because I think they want things faster. They want things to move. I don't, I don't know what it is, but plays change. So do you ha I don't, I don't know if you can even answer that question or like, talk about it a little bit, but play has really changed over the years.

[00:21:54] **Jane:** Yeah. I mean, I certainly can. I certainly can't talk about it and I'll try. I'll just like you could go on and on and on about [00:22:00] it, or I could, and let's people could, but, , I mean, I think that the, you speaking of, of screens, particularly there is an are designed to, to engage our brains in a way that that allows for, , instant gratification, that, that keeps us always engaged and that we don't necessarily have to think for ourselves right there.

It's like it's coming at them. It's not coming from them. , so they're always entertained there. , There are there actually, like it's actually usually giving her brain hits of dopamine, which is addictive. Right. And then what happens is that exactly children kind of forget to play because they're not being given the opportunities to sit down and find out what they like and come up with ideas.

And so what we see is the executive functioning skills, like problem solving and creativity start to go down. And that also that like needing instant gratification and they kinda don't know what to do with [00:23:00] themselves. Right. So like there's, you know, and then the time piece comes in and th the part of like always being scheduled to activities or having the academic pressures in tutoring, or, you know, always just having things that you have to do that are what you want to do.

Then when you couple that with screens, , I know a kid who. Is plays. He plays a lot of hockey and he does gymnastics high level gymnastics. And he, he has very little time then with school leftover and that time is spent on screen. And so he doesn't know how to really interact with other children properly.

And he doesn't know how to, like when screens aren't there, he doesn't know what to do with them.

So, so it's like, okay, so he's becoming really great at hockey and he's, you can do multiple backflips, but what are you building for the future? Like, you're building a kid who doesn't know how to think for themselves who doesn't know to advocate for them. Doesn't know [00:24:00] how to problem solve and be creative, creative.

And we know that like in the future, computers are going to be able to do a lot, but they will never have the creativity that a human.

[00:24:11] **Delphine:** Well, and the biggest thing for me that you talked about was that social aspect of like how to get along with people. Like, I think of myself in a working environment, I don't work by myself.

I'm not in a, in a hole on my own. I rely on other people to get feedback, to give feedback, to kind of figure out where I misstepped. . And understanding the social implications of that and how that works in the working world. So play really does start to mimic that a little bit.

[00:24:36] **Jane:** Yeah. And I mean, like we're designed to learn from each other, like, you know, there's studies have been done with babies and facial recognition and, and then with, with screens, you know, that don't learn as well on screens.

And certainly the last couple of years have shown that. but our brains don't know how to process it. Right. Like it's, even though I'm looking at. You know, at somebody through a screen, my brain is like, there's like a barrier. My brain is like, [00:25:00] what is this? Like, I don't know. And when we're face to face, it's different.

And then all of the stuff that happens in play, all that social stuff, learning to navigate social relationships, you know, understanding, like I was talking about the boy in the fight, right. That understanding like, what is acceptable? What's not like, when is somebody going to get upset with me and walk off and say, I'm not playing anymore and how to navigate that.

How to navigate social structures, like kind of who's in charge and who's not, where do you want to be? How to solve problems like, and all of that stuff happens in play and it also happens. Or, and this is going back to how we mostly played as children. Not everybody had the childhood that we did, but it sounds like you and I probably had a very similar one, , in the eighties and, that, you know, Adults.

Weren't always hovering. So even in schools, like at recess, there's adults hovering over them and saying, no, don't do this. You can't go to that area. Don't climb this, you know, there's schools that [00:26:00] have rules about not touching other kids. Like how ridiculous is that? My nephew school had a rule for awhile that you couldn't play with anybody, um, a year above, like two years above you or two years below you.

So if you're in grade four, you could play with the fives and the threes, but nobody else. And like, my sister-in-law was like, hello. Like my two kids are two years apart. They play with each other all the time, but they can't play with each other at school. Like this is, I mean, there's a whole other thing about why integrate ages.

That's a whole other thing. But, , when they're always being, edited, right. And even played aids,

like limitation

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[00:26:37] **Jane:** play. And, and you know, when, when we do play dates, You are choosing the adult generally is choosing like, oh yeah, I'm going to call so-and-so's mom and we're going to, or dad, and we're going to set up a play date.

But if so-and-so, if your kid comes and says, I want to play with Johnny and you're like, Ooh, Johnny is not the kid I want you to be playing with. Then you might not do it. Right. And you know, maybe there's good [00:27:00] reasons for that. But you think back to the childhood that we had, like, we often just met up with other kids in the neighborhood.

Right. And without adults always intervening, like there was a central learning that was happening in there. And sometimes it wasn't great. Like sometimes you were the one who got told, you know, like, like for example, there's often like girls aloud or, you know, something like, and, and that's, that's disappointing, you know, that kind of rejection.

And then, but what we are realizing is that by protecting our children from all of those situations, we're actually, doing them more harm than good. So, and going back to the snow Fort that you said collapsed, it's the same thing. By saying, what are all like, let's look at all of the benefits that you guys were getting from building those sports.

And even now that memory, , what does that memory feel like to you? What are the, what are the feelings that you have around it? And then what are all the things you were learning? I mean, you were learning to work together with other [00:28:00] kids. You were learning. Problem-solving what happens when it, you know, we take it this way versus that way.

And you were using creativity and all sorts of stuff. Right. And certainly a sense of wellbeing, but then you take it away because one child got injured and yes, that is unfortunate, but what are all of the other children losing? And what is that, that even that one child losing that was sort of that, and it's that more you were, you were saying too, like that or intangible thing that we can't necessarily measure.

So we need to look at it as a risk benefit. , Assessment, we call it, but you know, it's a balance.

[00:28:38] **Delphine:** So I think this is, and this doesn't apply necessarily to outdoor play, but I think you could, you could kind of explain how it works on the outdoor. So schooling for kindergarten. We here in Ontario, certain age for some of the other provinces don't start till five, but the, the learning is meant to be play-based.

And I often get questions from parents as an administrator when we do our kindergarten registration or we do kindergarten, [00:29:00] evenings, and parents are always like, well, how do kids learn through play? Like don't they need to sit down and rote memory learn, you know, eight. Cause they need to know how to read by grade one.

They need to know how to write their name. I, and I, how do we, I'm trying to word this question in a way that makes sense. So it can apply to both in the classroom and out of the classroom, because we know play can happen in both places. Your focus is on outdoor play, but play is important in an outright cause they can't, some days they can't get outside, it's too cold.

It's too wet. There's various reasons. So we have to create plans. Can you talk a little bit about how play can be done for learning that play and what I mean by learning? I actually mean like learning about numbers and alphabets and you know, problem solving and all of those educational skills that they're going to need that go beyond the reading and writing, but then.

They go together. They do actually mesh and it does make sense to have them together. So how do we take the learning that would be physically done in a chair to outside? Cause I can hear a lot of parents saying yeah, yeah, yeah. Play outside. That's great. But that doesn't mean my kid is learning how to add or [00:30:00] how to subtract or how to like read or any of those things.

But actually you can do all those things. So can you talk about that a bit?

[00:30:07] **Jane:** So I think that the first thing we have to do, or I think one of the best things to do is to think back to our play.

So think about how you played as a child, but think about, and the reason I'm asking this is because I think, you know, I know, I mean, I know we need to value children's play more and we need to value it. Essentially in terms of wellbeing and mental health, but we also need to recognize that it is, it is so much of how they learn and it's how we were designed to learn.

So when we think about a time that we were playing, like you were talking about the, the snow forts to, you know, what were you feeling at that time? What were you interested in or engaged in.

[00:30:57] **Delphine:** Oh me specifically. Oh [00:31:00] yeah. I mean, I, I remember those fondly. I remember being really cold, but not really caring.

And I remember coming up against challenges of like the snow would get so impacted that it would get frozen and then we'd have to think, okay, well our plastics, you know, our plastic shovel, isn't going to work. What do we need now? Right. And so then we'd have to go and like find something else. You find a stick or you'd find a stronger shovel, or you'd like, use an, I can actually remember using another ice block to try and chip at the ice to get through it.

Right. And the way we would maybe want the tunnel to run where we wanted it to kind of go down and then back up again. So we could kind of pop up like little, um, groundhogs and kind of like look around down the street stuff. Like those are the things I remember. I actually remember the smell of the snow too.

Like it had like a smell to it. I don't know. It's the funny things you remember.

[00:31:46] **Jane:** And so , we're recording this, , we're not, showing the video, but Delphina and I are talking over video and so I can see her face, it's lighting up, she's smiling. And so, you know, I think when we look at our own play, we start to realize like [00:32:00] how important it was for us.

And you may not realize like, okay, what I was learning, but it was, you know, it was so essential and it was so important. And to remember that, and then, you know, even just thinking about what you were just talking about, like you were learning about, you were learning about physics, you were learning about, you know, what happens when I go, I make this, ramp go down and then I make it go up and then you roll things down at, or you personally go down it as a slide, or, you know, you were learning about like, States of matter, like how, how the snow compresses and how it becomes ice.

And then, you know, what happens on the day that it gets warm? Well, then it melts and it's water and let's look where it's flowing and, you know, viscosity and all of these science concepts are happening. And then, , all of the, like the problem solving and the creativity, and then, you know, you're thinking about the physicality of digging a hole in a massive pile of snow, right.

And gripping the shovel. And you're building [00:33:00] strength in your hands. One of the things that we see is like children in early childhood people think, well, like I got to put a pencil in my kid's hand and they got to learn how to write well, if your kid doesn't have, like, if you look at an x-ray of the kid's hand, like they're, they're, it's, their hand is not developed yet enough to hold a pencil.

So what you have to do. But we need to do is provide opportunities for them to develop those muscles. So things like climbing on the monkey bars or digging in the dirt, being an ma you know, yes, molding and wishing and whatever, and, and Plato, like, Plato's a perfect one, right. That physical strength of, of working the dough.

And then eventually there'll be able to hold the pencil. So I've done a, you know, I've done a lot of, a lot of work recently with , early years, the, in Ontario, it's the early on programs, which is they're free programs in, communities and, to, to take a lot of their stuff outside.

So pretty much anything you [00:34:00] do can be taken outside and. But sometimes what we wanted to do this one last organization I worked with, we really wanted, they realized that they didn't want to, it was actually a response to COVID that, were not able to do in our programs. So, but they were reopening outdoor programs last, not last fall to the fall before.

And so they realized that they didn't want to just like take the Play-Doh outside or take the parachute and the books outside, they realized that they need, they could do more. And so I came in to really focus on like, you know, what is, what is the it go back again to that time, space and permission, you know, particularly space, like how can we find a rich space?

And you were talking about also about parents, same thing, teachers, how do we find an enriched space if we don't have it, you know, in our backyard or in our, if you live in apartment, you don't have that. If the school yard doesn't have it, how do you create a rich space that is optimal for learning and, and loose parts or one [00:35:00] of the.

You know, a forest or even in Mississauga where I am. There's a lot of, there's a lot of ravines, like, so even though you may be in apartment buildings in a very urban environment, not too far, there's some really interesting parks and ravines, and often at the edges of the playgrounds, there's some interesting spaces with things, right?

So you don't always have to, you could bring loose parts and you could bring pots and pans and buckets, or, you know, rope and fabric. And that offers a lot of opportunities, but you could also find, you know, sticks and leaves and acorns and, you know, Water is an amazing one water and mud and sand offers so many opportunities for bitch blame.

[00:35:41] **Delphine:** The children are going to get dirty.

[00:35:43] **Jane:** Uh, yes.

[00:35:46] **Delphine:** And they might hurt themselves with the stick. Jane.

[00:35:48] **Jane:** I know, I know

[00:35:50] **Delphine:** nobody can see this, but this is Jane covering her eyes as I'm making these comments. Cause she's like, I know, I know. I know, but we really need to let them do this. Right. I mean, that's, that's what I'm trying to get at.

That's why I'm [00:36:00] making fun of it. But just to say, like, I think we, as parents need to worry less about, they're going to be wet. They're going to be dirty. They might get hurt.

[00:36:07] **Jane:** We really do, because I think that

[00:36:08] **Delphine:** takes away the permission to play because then we become those hovering parents. Right. Who are like, don't do that.

You'll get hurt or don't do that. I'm going to have to wash your clothes. Like,

[00:36:18] **Jane:** and it's about the big picture too, right? Like, so, you know, I'm a parent of a young child and I have dealt with this firsthand, , of oh gosh, you're doing this. And I know like, okay, so it's not outdoor play, but last night we had.

Well, should we had hamburgers and she wanted to put plum sauce in her hamburger. So I said, fine, you know, but the next thing I know, she's wishing it in her hands. Like hand cream. Right. And my first year she was like, don't do that. But then I just, I stopped myself and I was like, you know what, she's getting something from this.

Like, there's, it's a sensory thing. It's, , learning about the, you know, what it's like to feel this. And so I let her do it, but, you know, I said like, we're going to wipe your hands before you go off anywhere else. So I think [00:37:00] it's looking at. It's looking at the bigger picture of like, yes, sometimes this is going to make more work for me, but in the long run, I know that it's supporting her develop.

So, you know, going out and playing in a mud pile or in the rain and jumping in puddles, like, yes, I'm going to have to do with puddles.

[00:37:20] **Delphine:** I don't know. It's like magnets to water. Like I even had some grade sixes the other day. No rain boots just in shoes. And they're walking through the puddle and I'm like, guys get out of the boat, but they're like in heaven, what, what is it about puddles?

[00:37:34] **Jane:** Well, I think there's honestly, I think, you could do a whole breakdown about that. Like what are they learning? You know? And in early years, particularly, there's a lot of focus on that. Like understanding what is their thinking? What is, you know, what are they getting out of this? And, but like water is just one of those magical things and where, you know, cause it's, it's.

Always different. It's interesting you jumping in and it splashes the feeling of jumping in the puddle is like [00:38:00] really satisfying. Right. Sound the sounds. Yeah. I think , we also like recognizing those things, like children are always drawn to these things, like, what is it about this? And then, you know, how can we provide more opportunities for that too?

Right. So, and another thing with like adventure, playgrounds, you know, one of the things they try to think about is like, what is lacking in the community. So if there's no trees around, then the playground is like, well, how can we support, you know, that idea of a tree. So maybe it's climbing a tree and having the height of a tree.

So, you know, and they work with the children, they allow the children to, to, to create a structure. They work with them. Usually it's sometimes it's not always that way, but it's very much about the children creating their own spaces. And so like, so the work that I did with, uh, the early on it, we saw, you know, it was very like, I really, we focused and we started on it. And part of this was because of COVID we felt like we, you know, we didn't want to have materials that we had to take [00:39:00] back and sanitize, you know, we, we, the educators were already stressed enough.

We didn't want to be bringing stuff that they had to carry and then lead back. And, you know, so we went very minimal and it was really about like, we really focused on. , the adult piece of letting the children explore, , giving the opportunities to get muddy or to, to walk into the, the stream.

But we chose spaces that had small streams and we did risk benefit assessments. There's like, okay, what would happen? You know, so you don't, and that's, there's a whole topic of risky play. And, risky player play that has risk is, is innate to childhood and indeed to playing. Um, but, and so how can we support it?

So what we tried to do was like, look at again, the risks and the benefits, because there's always a lot. Well, there's often a lot of benefits. but we found like that the children were counting, you know, they were lining up acorns, they were counting them. When you think about math skills, like math skills is not like two plus two equals four.

It's like learning to [00:40:00] understand patterning and sequencing matching things together. So like with the acorns, they were, they were lighting them up in a circle and creating something. And so maybe that wasn't their intent to understand math, but they were learning. And you know what? We saw kids drawing in the dirt, which is a pre-writing skill.

And sometimes they were even depending on their age, they were trying to write letters. They were, , thinking like, like I was talking about those science concepts from you playing in the snow, they were investigating that, like, what happens when I throw a rock in the water, it displaces the water.

What happens when I pile a whole bunch of rocks here with dams, the water and the water flows around. so there is, there's so much that you can do outside and I think there's so much you can do through play and what we really want to focus, like when I was working with that organization, but also my own work that I think play-based also gets really play-based gets hijacked.

[00:41:00] is it really played right? Like, or what is play-based? So I try to go more to the place side, as opposed to the sort of education, because you can set up something that you still have a very specific goal and intention for. And if you try to force the child to do that intention, even if.

Through the lens of play then are you really, is it really play? And are they really getting the benefit of like being interested in something themselves and engaging with it and having like a meaningful experience, a meaningful hands-on experience?

[00:41:32] **Delphine:** Just again, to think of it as cause I was just thinking of something I need to set up in a classroom, you're a little kiddo, who's struggling to have social interactions.

So I was like, okay, well we're going to set up groups and we're going to do board games, you know? And, and we're going to purposefully create the groups so that they have to work with different people, but then I'm like, well, is that me right? As you're saying it, I'm like, well, am I then negating the reason for that? So it's interesting. I'll have to think.

[00:41:55] **Jane:** Yeah. So I think again, like go back to the child, like, and if you can find out like, What [00:42:00] is the child interested in and then, you know, go, go kind of backwards from there. So like, if they're really interested, maybe they are really interested in puzzles, you know, how do you support that?

And then how do you find ways? So you can have it be like a puzzle with letters on it. If you want to have, uh, you know, a literacy, rich environment, but it's not about, you know, sitting down and saying, what's that what's that what's that.

That's why. Well, no, and it's true. I don't want to be spending my time on my phone. I want to be doing real things and I want to be present with my child. I just did a post on, on how to support literacy outside for family literacy day, which was a couple of weeks ago. So, you know, if people want an idea, there's some, some ideas in there.

[00:42:42] **Delphine:** So just while you're on that talking about before you share the Instagram. But I just want to get to one final question. We just kind of start to wrap up the conversation because I feel like we could keep going for a while and I have lots of really deep questions, but they're all like a podcast on their own.

So yeah, but what's the biggest hurdle that we're facing right now with engaging in outdoor play? I think I [00:43:00] know the answer after what we've talked about, but I'm curious to hear what you think the biggest hurdle is to getting outside and just letting our kids play.

[00:43:09] **Jane:** So I guess I'm, I'm interested to hear what you have to say.

[00:43:13] **Delphine:** I personally, I think it's two things. I think firstly, it's that as the adults, we think there isn't time for it because there is school there's after-school activities. There is our own work, our own pressures as parents of things that we need to do. Therefore we don't have time to sit with our kids in place.

So we therefore assume that we can't do play. I think I'm learning from you that what I need to do is really just kick my kids outside more and say, I'm not playing with you. You're going to figure it out and I'm not going to watch and I'm not going to hover and I'm not going to tell you you're going to get hurt and I'm right.

I'm going to be more that, but I also think screens are in our way. I really, truly do. Yeah. As a parent who's relied on screens for the last two years so that I can get anything done. The brain shift and the mind shift that I need to do [00:44:00] to say, I don't need screens to keep my kids entertained. And they don't need me to be entertained is a tough one.

So that's what I think is stopping us. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you have something else in there.

[00:44:11] **Jane:** No, I mean, I was the things that, that came to my mind first were, were two things, time and, and kind of a mindset. And, and those are actually, basically you, you, you said you touched on, and I think that, maybe, and maybe time is a mindset, like you were saying, like, we think we don't have time and, and maybe we don't have time for three hours outside, certainly not every day, but kicking your kids outside.

If you have an environment that is like, I want to say safe, but it's, you know, And I think there's a thing around risk that they say is, is safe as necessary, not as safe as possible. Um, because safe as possible is, is, is not a, it's not interesting. It's boring and it's not doing our children any good.

It's doing them harm. , I think there's something to be said about setting up an environment. That's a supports play [00:45:00] that is like a rich environment that has opportunities for play. And then the permission piece, you know, being able to give them permission to get dirty or to do something that you might be a little unsure about.

Um, and there's lots of resources about, about risk and play and how to support it. So I think that there is that, and I think we also need to, uh, Th there is just a thing that like, we are busy, like our lives are busy.

You know, one of the things that happened when we were younger, um, was often, especially like in the seventies often there were, there were parents that weren't working. Right. So maybe it wasn't every parent, but moms were often at home. Right. So they were, even if they weren't like, you know, right in there directing the play they were around.

Right. So you could go out into the neighborhood and you could play with other kids. And you knew that there was like somebody was at home or, you know, somebody was around and, and the kids were around because they didn't have to be in care because somebody was at home. So that's, that's a huge difference today.

And [00:46:00] I've seen it with my own child that when I was on maternity leave, we would meet up with the neighborhood kids and we would play. And I would wonder, like, I know there's other kids in this neighborhood, like where are they? And then eventually when my child went into full-time care, I realized like we just don't have time.

And those kids that were around had stay at home parents. Yeah. So, and, you know, we can't like, I'm not advocating for people to quit their jobs and be, stay at home parents. Cause that's not realistic, but you know, a, where can we find those other moments of time? So if it's on the weekend, like resist the pressure to put your kids in all the things, there might be benefits to being in some things like, I, I believe in certain, , like if a child, my child shows a lot of interest in art, then maybe we'll do that.

Or I think swimming is a really important skill to learn, but like, I don't want to be doing more than, let's say one thing the season with her, like, or one thing a week, , we need the time at home, whether it's inside or outside for that, that unstructured time. And again, we [00:47:00] went back to like, that's for wellbeing and mental health, but it's also for cognitive development and emotional development, social development, and all sorts of physical to everything.

Right. And I think that we also need to advocate for play in the places that children's beds. So that's where my, the primary work that I'm doing is working with other organizations. Um, I have done consults with parents to support outdoor play environments, but yeah, my primary work is to, to get other people, to see the value of play and the value of that unstructured free play, and to, and how to support it.

And you asked, you asked that originally too, about how to schools do it. And that's, that's a, that's a large question because I mean, a teacher could just take their class outside and I encourage people to think about learning differently and think about emergent curriculum, , and, and following the interest of the children and but schools are very complex ecosystem and, and they, they need different strategies for it to really work.

And that was what the whole program [00:48:00] that, that I was involved in before, which is not currently running. And it's at least not in its original form. it was working with the adults. It was working a lot with the attitudes and the strategies and the supports and the policies, and then the stuff, the loose parts was like totally secondary or even, you know, lower , and some working with kids, but for the most part, the kids, you know, they knew what to do.

It was, we had to set up the right ecosystem.

[00:48:26] **Delphine:** The other difficult thing about that ecosystem in schools. And even to some extent in daycares, because I've certainly seen it happen even in the before, and after-school care that my daughter's in now. COVID has really put a wrench and a complication in for many of us in terms of how we can and how we can't do things.

Right. And I think it's made everybody just much more wary. It's definitely starting to settle down. I think we're, we're getting into a pattern where we understand what is possible and what isn't possible. And now it's kind of releasing some of that a little bit and saying, okay, we can put this back.

But I think this [00:49:00] conversation has kind of reigniting my understanding of why I need to incorporate that play. I mean, I've got so many of these little kindies who haven't been able to have social interactions with each other for two years, because they've been told to stay apart. And now they're trying to negotiate how to play together, but isn't outside the best place for them to do that because the walls are bigger, right?

There's more space. They can give each other the space and distance, um, while still working on the social connection. So this just for me personally, it's been a great conversation.

[00:49:30] **Jane:** and I think that, there are so many benefits from taking, learning outside, like children there's studies that show children learn better outside.

Like they learn better when they're engaged. They learn there there's brain research shows that we learn better when we're playing. And I think that's important to be that it's meaningful place. So it's not just that play. That's been forced on us. Like you're going to play soccer now, or that's not truly play.

and there's other stuff about like the sensory stuff of being outside, like it's a more sensory, , it's a more neutral sensory experience where the inside [00:50:00] is very overwhelming for a lot of children. There's that there's freedom of movement. Adults are often have less rules about things, right?

Like it's, we often let her kids get messier outside than we would inside, or we let them climb outside and we went inside and they need to do all those things.

[00:50:15] **Delphine:** So are there any good websites that you would send families to, to explore outdoor plate?

I mean, I'm thinking like Pinterest probably has, uh, boards boards, but there must be other places that have good resources as well.

[00:50:31] **Jane:** And I note about Pinterest, like Pinterest can be amazing, but you know, be aware. Okay. Pinterest, doesn't always, I think it often puts a little pressure on us. It certainly, as parents, I get like, it's like, oh, I have to do this.

I'm not a good parent. If I don't do this amazing sensory setup for my child and it doesn't need to be like that. Right. Like just like honestly, going outside, start with going outside, start with following the child's lead. Like, what are they interested in? What are they exploring? Do they like, if [00:51:00] they like, you know, jumping in the puddles, go find some puddles or make a puddle, you know, turn the hose on and make a puddle.

Honestly kids always like the majority of kids love mud, mud and water or sand and water are magical. So, you know, it doesn't have to be complicated. You can think about what you were interested in as a child, but also be aware of like, not forcing that on your child.

so I think there's a couple, websites. So, , my company's called Wild Bright Play.

So wildbrightplay.com and if you're interested in more of the like nature deficit, getting children outside and connected with nature, the, child in nature network is amazing. And it was started by Richard Lu who wrote the book, uh, the last child in the woods, also a great book.

And they have some great stuff on there and a lot, they also have a really wonderful if you're looking for research articles, they have a wonderful research library that, you know, if you're a teacher and you need something to say, Hey, you know, I got this research article, this, [00:52:00] this study was done.

It's a bit, it'll tell you why you need to do this basically. The other one, , that I love is, play Wales. So it's Wales in the UK, amazing website about play, not always about outdoor play, but they have like a ton of resources.

Another one is that they have some really great infographics and, also larger toolkits for those who want to go deeper. The Canadian public health association, , and they have really taken on this, this, , idea that outer play unstructured outdoor place or that free play is it's a public health issue.

So in the sense that what we are depriving of children is causing more problems later for public health. , and they have some really great infographics and stuff. So, definitely go there also a risk if you're looking for more information about risk. , the it's it's tricky cause it's like the child in nature network, but it's the, child in nature Alliance of Canada.

They do a lot of forest [00:53:00] schools and advocate for that kind of stuff. And then they do train for school trainings. They have a lot of good stuff on, on risk. They actually have a course all about risk if you're really interested. And then I was thinking about two books that I would say if there were two books that I could tell somebody to get the first one, especially a parent, but also a teacher.

The first one would be balanced and barefoot by Angela Hanscom. Every time I read that book, I reread it all the time. Like it is just so. And the other one, especially if you're thinking about learning and learning in different ways , is Peter Gray and, , free to learn. And I think he also has a really good Ted talk about the decline of play as well.

[00:53:41] **Delphine:** Jane, where can people learn more about you specifically? I know you've got an Instagram. You did mention the website, but I would mention it again. And then your Instagram.

[00:53:49] **Jane:** Yeah. So Instagram is, at Jane , if you will link to it, but if you search, , I think if you search outdoor place specialist, it should come because that's in my [00:54:00] name and, wild, bright www dot wildbrightplay.com.

[00:54:07] **Delphine:** Great. Well, Jane, thank you so much for this conversation. , it has my brain spinning and all kinds of possibilities this week when I take the kindies outside and, , even with my own kids and the next, this is family day weekend for us. So some time to get outside and play. So thank you so much.

[00:54:21] **Jane:** You're so welcome.