

**FREE <sup>TO</sup> PLAY**

# APPLICANT GUIDE

November 2025



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## ABOUT FREE TO PLAY

Free to Play brings funders, local community foundations, and community organizations together to support children through the power of outdoor play. Round 1 (2025–2026) launches this fall, with projects beginning in 2026.

Each participating community foundation has locally specific details on **communities served, funding request range, and how to apply**. Before you apply, review your local community foundation’s details [here](#). Use the following [Map](#) to support you in determining your local community foundation.





## ABOUT OBJECTIVE

Free to Play supports children by creating the conditions for them to play their own way; moving, imagining, taking risks, and connecting with others how they choose. Caregivers and community members can help create the conditions for outdoor play by providing the time, space, and freedom for children to explore, take safe risks, and play on their own terms.

The Fund aims to:

- Increase opportunities for outdoor play;
- Reduce barriers that limit everyday outdoor play opportunities;
- Contribute to the well-being, confidence, and healthy development of children in your community; and
- Contribute to a long-term shift that values outdoor play as essential to childhood.

## WHAT IS OUTDOOR PLAY?

Outdoor play is voluntary engagement in an activity that takes place outdoors, is fun and rewarding, and is driven by children's own curiosity and motivation. It gives children room to explore, move, take risks, and play their own way, often alongside other children, caregivers, and community members. Outdoor play can also reflect land-based play, rooted in relationships of reciprocity between people and the land.

Outdoor play may include:

- Running, climbing, digging, building, splashing, rolling, imagining, pretending
- Playing with natural materials like sticks, mud, water, sand, grass, or snow
- Taking risks, testing ideas, and learning how to navigate challenge and uncertainty





## ABOUT PURPOSE

**Childhood has changed. Children spend more time indoors, on screens, and in structured activities and less time outdoors climbing trees, splashing in puddles, and going on outdoor adventures.**

**These moments, once ordinary, are now rare.**

Across Canada and around the world, outdoor play is disappearing from childhood. Screen time for children has doubled in the past two decades, while fewer than 40% of Canadian children meet recommended daily physical activity levels. At the same time, families report more concerns about safety, busy schedules, and limited places where children can freely explore and play outside.

Even when families and communities understand the benefits of outdoor play, many still face physical and social barriers to enabling outdoor play. Adult concerns about safety and productivity lead to more structured schedules and less freedom for children to explore on their own. Physical environments can also limit opportunities; some neighbourhoods lack nearby places for children to play, or parents may not feel comfortable letting children play independently. For many organizations, funding, staffing, and resources to support outdoor play opportunities are also limited. Together, these barriers mean that fewer children experience the time, space, and freedom needed for high-quality outdoor play opportunities.



## ABOUT

### FREE TO PLAY RESPONDS TO THIS CHALLENGE

When we invest in outdoor play, we invest in:



**Healthier, happier children:** Outdoor play supports physical and mental health, helping children stay active, manage stress, experience joy, and develop confidence and resilience.



**Curiosity and creativity for a lifetime:** Outdoor play gives children the space to imagine, problem-solve, and explore. Through experimentation and discovery, children learn to take risks, adapt to challenges, and think creatively, skills that last well beyond childhood.



**Connected families and stronger communities:** When children play together, families come outside, neighbours meet, and communities grow closer. Outdoor play strengthens the social fabric of a place, bringing people together and reviving shared community spaces like parks and fields.

## TIMELINE

### KEY DATES

**Applications Open**



November 28, 2025, 9:00 AM PST

**Applications Close**



February 24, 2026, 5:00 PM PST

**Applicants Notified By**



April 2026

**Funding Period**



April 2026 - November 2028

*All funding must be used within this window; activities may extend past 2028.*





## ELIGIBILITY

# ELIGIBLE ORGANIZATIONS

To apply, organizations must:

- ✓ Serve communities in Canada through one of the [participating community foundations](#);
- ✓ Be one of the following:
  - A [registered charity or non-profit](#), including [Indigenous Governing Bodies](#), [municipalities](#); [other qualified donees](#); or
  - An incorporated non-profit organization, such as a community group, Indigenous nation/community, school board, school, or local organization registered federally or [provincially](#).



## NOTES ON ELIGIBILITY

Local chapters of provincial/national charities and/or local charities that have multiple local branches may apply if they have their own accounting and finances. Multiple chapters can apply if they are distinct legal entities.

All activities must take place within the area served by a [participating community foundation](#).

## ELIGIBILITY

# INELIGIBLE ORGANIZATIONS

- ✗ For-profit organizations;
- ✗ Unincorporated nonprofits;
- ✗ Business non-profit institutions, including business associations, chambers of commerce and condominium associations;
- ✗ Individuals.

## ELIGIBILITY

# ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

Projects must:

- ✓ Take place in Canada, within the area served by a participating community foundation;
- ✓ Support the objective of Free to Play.



## COMPONENTS OF OUTDOOR PLAY ACTIVITIES

When planning for outdoor play, communities can consider four key ingredients for successful initiatives:



### ACCESS TO OUTDOOR SPACES AND MATERIALS

Ensure children have access to quality outdoor spaces along with materials that support play, like small loose parts, tools, and/or storage for equipment.



### TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Provide opportunities for caregivers, educators, and community members to learn how to encourage and facilitate outdoor play.



### SUPPORTIVE POLICIES

Develop or adapt policies and tools that make outdoor play easier to include in programs and help manage risk.



### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Involve families, caregivers, and community members to understand and support outdoor play and risk.

**Successful initiatives often depend on collaboration across diverse organizations and sectors.** Free to Play supports cross-sector partnerships that expand outdoor and land-based play opportunities for children in communities. Strong projects also focus on building lasting capacity, creating tools, skills, and relationships that sustain outdoor play beyond the funding period.



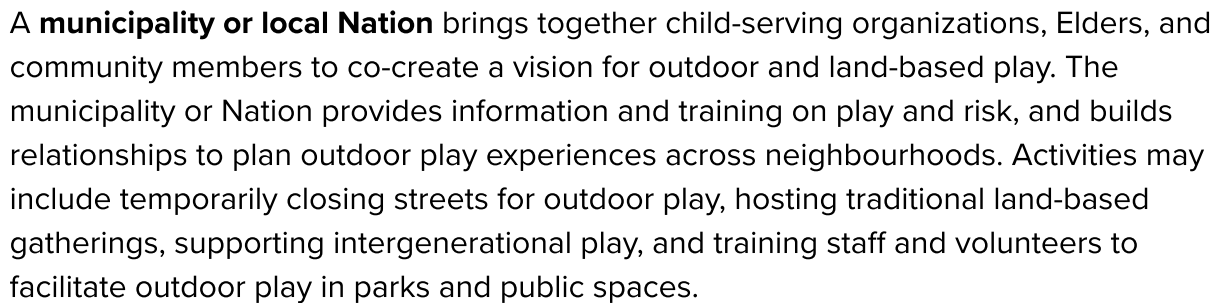
## ELIGIBILITY

# EXAMPLES

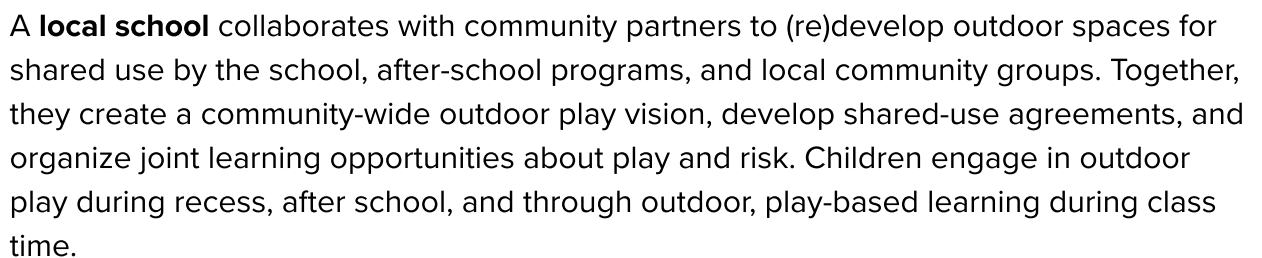
**These examples are meant to spark ideas.** We welcome creative ideas that reflect your community's needs and encourage you to explore projects beyond this list of examples.



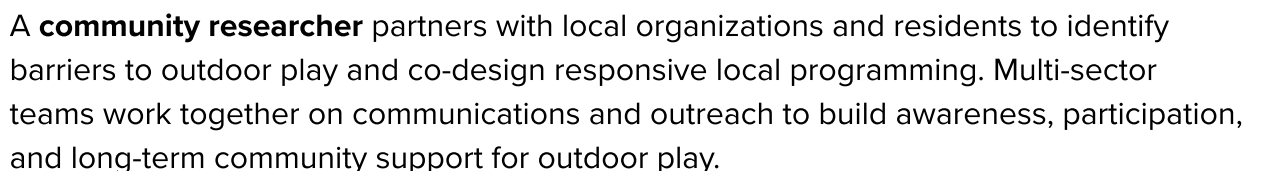
A **family resource program** develops a vision and set of policies for outdoor play within its programming. They hire an outdoor play consultant or partner with a non-profit organization to train staff on outdoor play and risk. Working with a landscape architect, they naturalize their outdoor play space and acquire loose parts through donations and purchases. After sharing information about play and risk with community members, they offer drop-in outdoor play sessions for children and caregivers and invite local childcare programs to visit regularly.



A **municipality or local Nation** brings together child-serving organizations, Elders, and community members to co-create a vision for outdoor and land-based play. The municipality or Nation provides information and training on play and risk, and builds relationships to plan outdoor play experiences across neighbourhoods. Activities may include temporarily closing streets for outdoor play, hosting traditional land-based gatherings, supporting intergenerational play, and training staff and volunteers to facilitate outdoor play in parks and public spaces.



A **local school** collaborates with community partners to (re)develop outdoor spaces for shared use by the school, after-school programs, and local community groups. Together, they create a community-wide outdoor play vision, develop shared-use agreements, and organize joint learning opportunities about play and risk. Children engage in outdoor play during recess, after school, and through outdoor, play-based learning during class time.



A **community researcher** partners with local organizations and residents to identify barriers to outdoor play and co-design responsive local programming. Multi-sector teams work together on communications and outreach to build awareness, participation, and long-term community support for outdoor play.



## ELIGIBILITY

# INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

The Fund will not support activities that:

- ✗ Take place outside of Canada;
- ✗ Are not open to the community they intend to serve;
- ✗ Are one- or two-day events without lasting impact;
- ✗ Are partisan, political, or election-related;
- ✗ Are purely research-based;
- ✗ Are religious or include a requirement to participate in any dimension of faith;
- ✗ Benefit private individuals or interests;
- ✗ Build endowments and reserve funds;
- ✗ Consist of structured, adult-led sports or activities;
- ✗ Deliver virtual programming for children;
- ✗ Focus solely on purchasing playground equipment without activities that promote outdoor play;
- ✗ Focus solely on core funding where there is no project;
- ✗ Involve major capital projects (e.g., building infrastructure or purchasing land or buildings);
- ✗ Involve the purchasing of electronic devices;
- ✗ Undermine or infringe on human rights protected in Canada.





## ELIGIBILITY

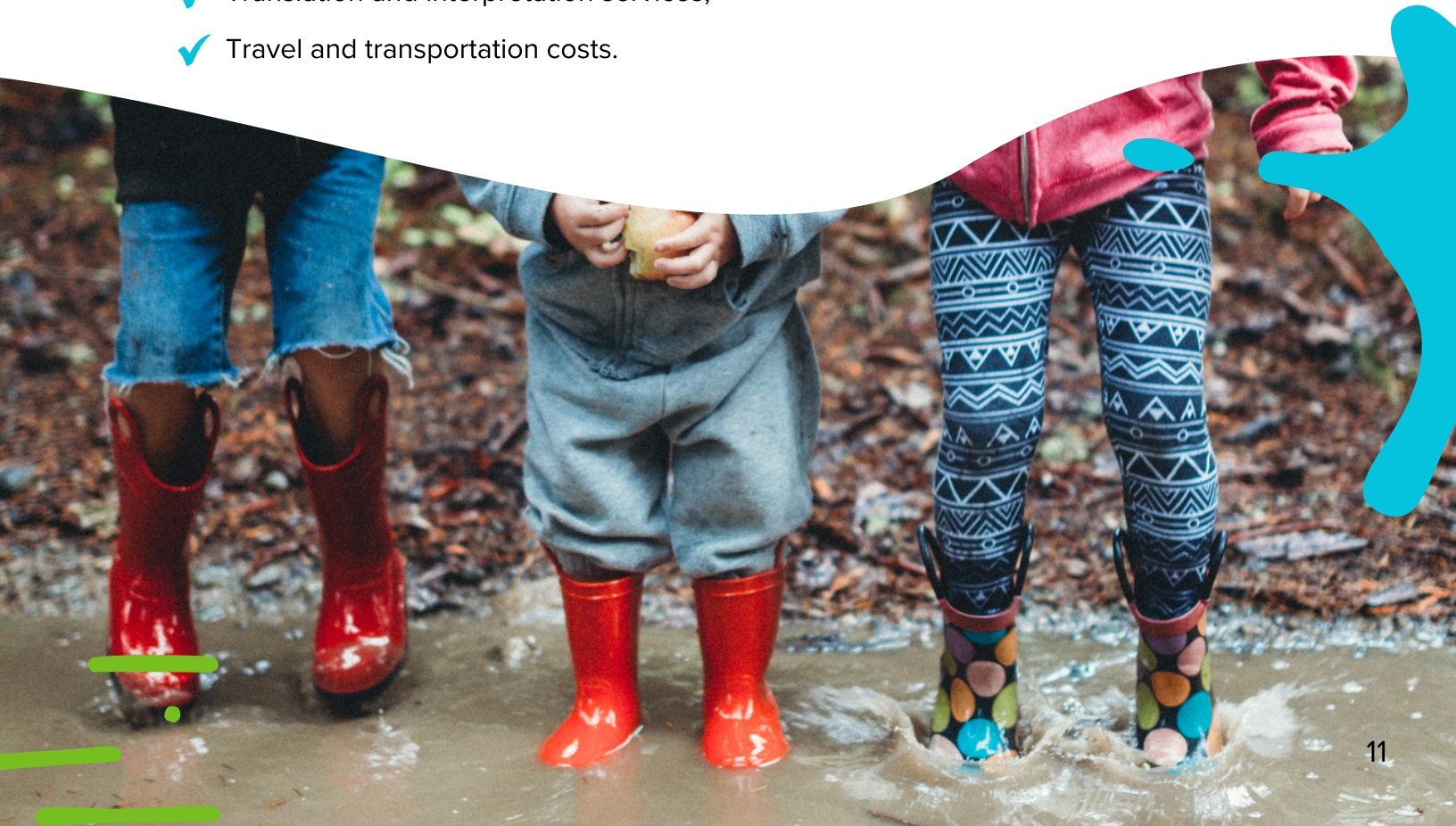
# ELIGIBLE EXPENSES

Projects can begin in 2026 and may continue for up to three years, as long as all funding is used by 2028.

**All expenses must directly support the project.**

Eligible expenses may include:

- ✓ Administrative costs directly related to the project;
- ✓ Communications;
- ✓ Contractor or professional service fees;
- ✓ Evaluation of the project;
- ✓ Honoraria;
- ✓ Materials and supplies;
- ✓ Staff salaries and related employment costs;
- ✓ Training and workshops;
- ✓ Translation and interpretation services;
- ✓ Travel and transportation costs.



## ELIGIBILITY

# INELIGIBLE EXPENSES

Ineligible expenses include:

- ✗ Activities or services carried out outside of Canada;
- ✗ Costs incurred before April 2026 or after November 2028;
- ✗ Expenses not directly related to the approved project;
- ✗ Politically partisan activities, including supporting or opposing any political party, candidate, or elected representative;
- ✗ Purchase of land, buildings, or real estate-related costs;
- ✗ Purchase of electronic devices.





## YOUR APPLICATION

# BUDGET

### HOW MUCH FUNDING CAN ORGANIZATIONS APPLY FOR?

Confirm the funding request range in your community by exploring the list of [Participating Community Foundations](#).



#### When preparing your application:

- Request the amount you truly need to deliver meaningful and lasting impact.
- Ensure your budget reflects realistic costs for your community and your organization's capacity.
- Balance ambition with feasibility, demonstrating how funds will directly support your project goals.

You will complete a simple budget form in the application outlining expected expenses and activities over the duration of your project.

Some community foundations will use a participatory grantmaking process. If your community foundation will be doing a participatory process:

- Reach out to your community foundation directly for details on how to participate.
- Create an account and register your organization in the application system. Please note: you do not need to fill out the full application. Registration only.

Confirm your community foundation's approach [here](#).



## YOUR APPLICATION

# How TO APPLY

- Organizations may submit **one** application. Collaborating organizations can work together on the same application.
- Applications open: **November 28, 2025**, 9:00 AM PST.
- Apply no later than **February 24, 2026**, 5:00 PM PST.

If you have accessibility needs, please contact your [local community foundation](#) for support.



Some community foundations will use a participatory grantmaking process. If your community foundation will be doing a participatory process:

- Reach out to your community foundation directly for details on how to participate.
- Create an account and register your organization in the application system. Please note: you do not need to fill out the full application. Registration only.



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PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATIONS



APPLICATION PORTAL

*Opening November 28, 2025*



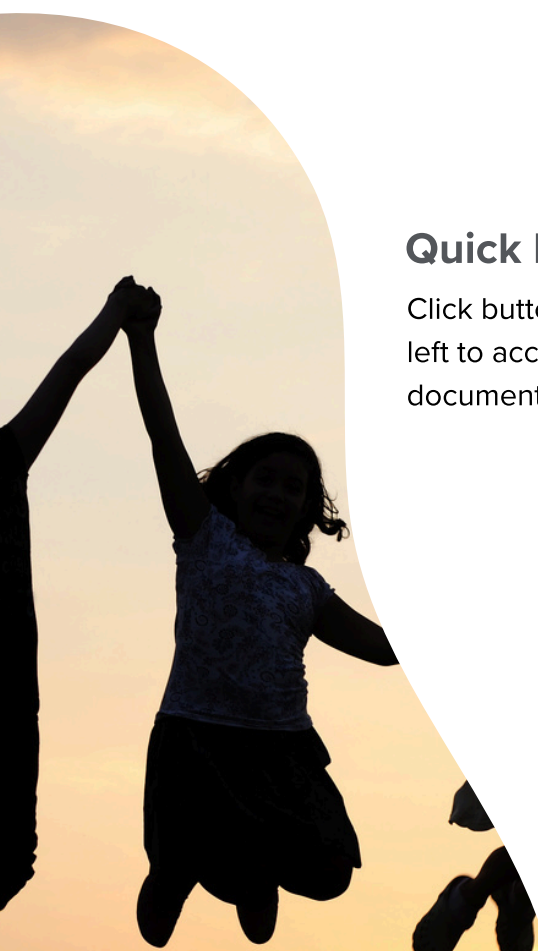
PDF APPLICATION

*Read-only*



### Quick Links

Click buttons on the left to access key documents!



# YOUR APPLICATION SELECTION PROCESS

Applications will be reviewed by a local review committee convened by [participating community foundations](#).

Some community foundations will use a participatory grantmaking process. This approach is part of advancing trust-based philanthropy and ensures that people with lived experience and local knowledge have a meaningful voice in how funding flows.

Reach out to your [local participating community foundation](#) to learn more about their review process.



## EVALUATION PRINCIPLES

Evaluation will be guided by each community foundation’s knowledge of local context, priorities, and the concept of “[nothing about us, without us](#)”.

Eligible application reviews will be guided by the following principles:

Principle	Description	Section of Application Form
<b>Alignment with Free to Play Objective</b>	The proposed activities clearly advance the Fund’s objective of supporting outdoor play for children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program Alignment</li> </ul>
<b>Community Benefit</b>	The proposed activities respond to identified community needs, are rooted in local priorities, address current community barriers to outdoor play, and involve meaningful participation from community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Engagement</li> <li>• Communities Supported</li> </ul>
<b>Feasibility and Readiness</b>	The proposed activities have a clear and realistic plan that can be achieved within the timeframe, with a reasonable budget and demonstrated organizational capacity and understanding to deliver.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational Alignment</li> <li>• Project Timeline</li> <li>• Budget</li> </ul>
<b>Long-Term Impact in the Community</b>	The proposed activities show potential to create lasting change by strengthening opportunities for outdoor play and building local collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program Alignment</li> <li>• Community Engagement</li> </ul>



## RECIPIENT INFORMATION

# RECIPIENT CHECK INS

Organizations approved for funding will sign a Funding Agreement before receiving their fund payment(s). Our goal is to have light-touch reporting with an emphasis on reflections, learnings, and stories from children/families.

Depending on your organization type, you will complete the following report(s):

- **Midway Check-in** (*selected recipients*): Some organizations will complete a short check-in with their local community foundation halfway through their project to share high-level updates, challenges, and successes. After you complete this check-in, you'll receive the second half of your funding.
- **Final Report** (*required for all recipients*): All funded organizations will complete a final report to share their results, reflections, and stories of impact.



## RECIPIENT INFORMATION

# OUTDOOR PLAY IN PRACTICE

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

**Recipients of Free to Play will be invited to join a shared learning experience designed to spark ideas, build skills, and strengthen relationships around outdoor play.**

This learning journey will help organizations deepen their understanding of outdoor play, network with an ecosystem of fellow recipients, and explore practical ways to support outdoor play in their communities.

Sessions will be facilitated by Free to Play's national technical partners, experts in play, outdoor learning, and child development, and will include:

- Practical strategies to support outdoor play in different settings
- Examples and stories from communities across the country
- Space to exchange ideas, challenges, and successes with other funded recipients
- Tools and resources to support implementation and reflection
- Optional prompts and activities to bring back to your community

This learning experience is not about reporting, it's a supportive space to strengthen projects and build a growing movement for outdoor play across Canada.

More details will be shared with funded recipients following your approval.



# ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

## OUTDOOR PLAY RESOURCES

For organizations seeking ideas, research, and tools to design or strengthen their outdoor play initiatives, [Outdoor Play Canada \(OPC\)](#) offers a comprehensive collection of evidence-based resources. The OPC website includes examples of successful projects, research reports, and practical guides that explore how outdoor play can thrive across different settings and communities.

- [Outside Play Toolkit](#)
- [Outdoor Play Canada Resources](#)
- [Outdoor PLAYbook](#)
- [Canadian Paediatric Society](#)
- [2025 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play](#)
- [Risk Benefit Assessment Toolkit](#)
- [Play, Learn, and Teach Outdoors—Network \(PLaTO-Net\)](#) definition of terms
- [Seven Cs Design Guidelines](#)

## UNSURE OF WHAT TYPE OF ORGANIZATION YOU ARE?

Here are some databases that may help you search your organization and confirm your organization type:

- For registered charities:
  - [CRA database of qualified donees](#)
- For incorporated nonprofit organizations:
  - [Federal Database of Corporation](#)
- For Indigenous governing bodies that are qualified donees
  - [List of municipal or public bodies performing a function of government in Canada registered as qualified donees](#)

## HAVE AN ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENT?

If you have any accessibility requirements for accessing and completing the application, please contact your [local community foundation](#).

## OTHER QUESTIONS?

We're here to help. We encourage you to contact your [local community foundation](#) if you have additional questions that are not within this guide.





## KEY TERMS

## DEFINITIONS

**INDIGENOUS GOVERNING BODY:** Indigenous Governing Bodies include qualified donees, non-qualified donees, charities and non-profit organizations serving Indigenous peoples.

**LAND-BASED PLAY:** An approach to play that recognizes a deep connection and relationship of reciprocity between people and the land.

**LOOSE PARTS:** [Loose parts](#) are natural or manufactured play materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials, moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways.

**NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS:** Non-profit organizations include associations, clubs, or societies that are organized and operated exclusively for social welfare, civic improvement, pleasure, recreation, or any other purpose except profit. An NPO is not a type of qualified donee and cannot issue official donation receipts. See examples [here](#).

**NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US:** This principle recognizes that individuals with lived experience know what is best for themselves and their community and that their participation is integral to success. When the principle is used, the organization's work is guided by the needs and aspirations of the people being served. Those people served are provided meaningful opportunities for participation in activity planning, leadership, evaluation, and promotion.

**OUTDOOR PLAY:** [Outdoor play](#) is voluntary engagement in an activity that takes place outdoors, is fun and rewarding, and is driven by children's own curiosity and motivation. It gives children room to explore, move, take risks, and play their own way, often alongside other children, caregivers, and community members.

**QUALIFIED DONEE:** Qualified donees are all organizations that are listed in the CRA's database of qualified donees and this includes registered charities. A qualified donee can issue official donation receipts for gifts it receives from individuals and corporations. See examples [here](#).

**RISK:** Challenges and uncertainties within the environment that an individual can recognize and learn to manage by choosing to encounter them while determining their own limits. See details [here](#). This is distinct for hazard, which is defined as: a potential source of harm or danger. Hazards can be a source of harm that is obvious (e.g.: walking on the railing of a bridge) or not obvious, such that the potential for injury is hidden, or where the individual does not have the competence to manage the hazard, or where there is no obvious benefit to the individual in experiencing the hazard (e.g.: broken railing, fast moving current in a river).

**RISKY PLAY:** A form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking. It is now well-established that risky play is essential for children's healthy physical, mental, social, and cognitive development. See details [here](#).

*Free to Play is made possible through partnership with participating community foundations, Waltons Trust, the Lawson Foundation, and Canadian Jumpstart Charities.*

**WALTONS**  
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