



CANADIAN
PUBLIC HEALTH
ASSOCIATION

The Voice of Public Health

CHILDREN'S

Unstructured Play

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To enhance the health of people in Canada and to contribute to a healthier and more equitable world.

For more information, contact:

Canadian Public Health Association

404-1525 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R9

T: 613-725-3769 | info@cpha.ca

www.cpha.ca

Children's Unstructured Play

Unstructured play happens when children follow their instincts, ideas, and interests without an imposed outcome. It may include challenging forms of play, and provides opportunities for exploring boundaries that allow children to determine their *own* limits in a variety of natural and built environments. Adults may facilitate unstructured play but not prescribe it. The benefits associated with active outdoor play, a component of unstructured play, have been described in the 2018 position statement by ParticipACTION,¹ and are supported by the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health.²

Access to unstructured play is affected by the emphasis placed on structured extra-curricular activities and academics, which are often prioritized before play. In addition, municipalities and school boards implement strategies to reduce the likelihood of all play-related injuries, which can constrain children's play experiences and associated benefits. These short-term approaches work against the longer-term benefits of providing children opportunities to explore spaces that provide rich play experiences.* Access to these play opportunities can also be limited by the availability of natural and built play spaces in urban and rural environments, and the influence of the child's economic status, colour, gender, religion, culture or ethnic origin.

* CPHA recognizes that education departments have been implementing play-based learning as a preferred approach for early years' education. We appreciate the benefits of this approach for learning, but also recognize that unstructured play, those times where children self-direct play without the presence of adults (when age-appropriate) or an imposed outcome, is also necessary to meet their development needs.

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) recognizes unstructured play as a child's right and a critical component to child and youth health and well-being. Actions are necessary to reduce the barriers limiting opportunities for unstructured play at school and in the community. CPHA commends those school boards, municipalities, other governments and non-governmental organizations that are taking positive steps to improve children's access to unstructured play; however, further steps are needed.†

RECOMMENDATIONS

CPHA calls upon all parents/caregivers, educators, daycares, school boards, public health professionals, the private sector and all levels of governments and Indigenous peoples' governments to improve access to unstructured, child-led play through the following actions:

All Levels of Government

- **Recognize unstructured play as a critical part of healthy child development and adopt a mandate that clarifies this importance.**
- **Develop and strengthen policies that encourage unstructured outdoor play in all seasons and related weather conditions.**
- **Strengthen investments to enhance and protect natural and inclusive play spaces within walkable distances of where children live and learn.**

† Decision-making to increase access to play can be supported by [CPHA's toolkit](#).

Provincial/Territorial Governments

- Invest in unstructured play facilitator training and development for child and youth workers, educators, and principals;
- Amend educators' collective agreements to permit additional supervision time to support unstructured play for recess.
- Reform Joint and Several Liability to require defendants to only pay the percentage of damages for which they are found liable.
- Influence the use of risk-benefit assessment processes to mitigate play-associated liability concerns for daycare providers and school boards.

Municipalities

- Establish a community-wide approach to increasing access to unstructured play that establishes a common vision and addresses community concerns.
- Enhance community planning and design standards to increase and improve all-seasons play spaces and parks within existing communities and new residential or mixed-use developments.
- Identify and address gaps in access to safe places for unstructured play by location and socio-economic status.
- Influence the use of risk-benefit assessment processes to mitigate play-associated liability concerns for municipalities.

Public Health Agencies

- Strengthen partnerships with key organizations to advocate for and provide evidence about the importance of unstructured play for healthy child development and increase capacity to implement healthy public policy solutions.

- Shift the knowledge, attitude, beliefs and behaviours of parents and caregivers concerning unstructured play by using marketing, communication and social media approaches.
- Develop a position in support of unstructured play that uses a risk-benefit approach to balance injury prevention and childhood development (physical, mental, cognitive and social) benefits.

Research and Surveillance

- Collect, monitor and report play space child injury data, including exposure and demographic information, to inform standards and policy development that can be applied across provinces.
- Conduct research on the longitudinal benefits of unstructured play.

Play Space Designers

- Adopt Universal Design Principles such that a variety of play elements are available to individuals of all abilities, including those that provide sensory and tactile experiences.
- Add loose parts* and natural elements to manufactured play facilities, and develop dedicated natural play spaces that include loose parts.

Canadian Standards Association

- Amend Playground Standard Z614 to be more considerate of child development needs and acceptable risk-taking in play, including the adoption of a risk-benefit assessment process.

* **Loose parts** are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials (Outdoor Play Working Group (2017)).

CPHA recognizes the need for collaborative decision-making based on a risk-benefit assessment approach that integrates the views of children and youth into the process. These decisions must be supported by adequate funding for natural and built play space development and maintenance. Also, critical to the success of these recommendations is the development and implementation of training and education on the importance of unstructured play that extends beyond traditional stakeholders. It should be tailored to the needs of parents and those who are developing, maintaining and providing access to unstructured play, and developing, supporting, and maintaining interesting, challenging play spaces for children.

CONTEXT

Unstructured play is the business of childhood. It is an integral part of every child's healthy development and is embedded as Article 31 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.³ Children and youth of all abilities have an equal need for time, appropriate space and opportunity to engage in quality play.³ Types of unstructured play can include: play at heights; play at speed; play with loose parts; rough-and-tumble play; and play where the children can “disappear” or “get lost”.^{*} Organized sports or screen-time (time spent in front of the television, computer, gaming console, tablet, smartphone, or any other electronic equipment) are *not* considered unstructured child-led play.

Canadian children are moving less and sitting more with increasing limits placed on them in and out of school. Limiting children's exposure to diverse types of play results in their being exposed to more sedentary behaviours,[†] and being deprived of the

benefits of healthy emotional, mental, social and physical development resulting from play.⁴ This increasingly sedentary lifestyle resulted in a recent call for Canadian children and youth to “move more for their brain health”.⁵

Unstructured play provides a variety of benefits for child and youth health and well-being:

- **Physical health and gross motor skills:** Active, unstructured play reduces sedentary behaviours, helps promote healthy weights⁶ and improves motor skills.⁷ It reduces adiposity and improves musculoskeletal fitness and cardiovascular health.⁸
- **Mental and emotional health:** Unstructured play promotes children's mental and emotional well-being,^{6,9} such as positive self-concept¹⁰ and self-esteem.¹¹ It supports the formation and maintenance of friendships, which promotes the maintenance of good mental health;¹² physically active play may decrease anxiety and depressive symptoms.^{10,13}
- **Social health and team work:** Unstructured play helps children improve their social competence,¹⁰ including emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy and the ability to communicate effectively in situations that involve compromise and cooperation.^{10,12}
- **Learning and attention at school:** Unstructured play has been shown to promote cognitive skills development (attention, concentration, ability to stay on task, and memory)¹⁴ and improve behaviour in class.¹⁵
- **Resiliency and risk management skills:** When children experience uncertainty during challenging play, they develop emotional reactions, physical capabilities and coping skills, and improve their capacity to manage adversity.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Effective coping skills promote resilience and good mental health to thrive in adolescence and adulthood.¹⁹

* Definition adapted from Sandseter EBH. Characteristics of risky play. *J Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning* 2009;9(1):3-21.

† The 2018 ParticipACTION Report Card states that 76% of 3- to 4-year-olds and 51% of 5- to 17-year-olds exceed the *Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines* screen time recommendations of no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time per day.⁵

Societal Pressures

Societal pressures and parental attitudes toward supervision and overprotection have increased while children's independence has decreased. While supervision is needed for infants and toddlers, there is a need to balance these concerns against the benefits of unstructured play as children develop, especially those aged 6 to 12. For the latter group, "helicopter" or hyper-parenting can be perceived as a loss of trust between parents and their children.²⁰ It may have a detrimental effect on children's mental wellness, resulting in psychological problems and reduced self-confidence.²¹ Hyper-parenting can limit a child's ability to freely engage in unstructured, child-led play. For example, children's independent mobility (the distances they are allowed to travel without adult supervision)²² has decreased between generations.^{23,24} Independent mobility directly affects a child's access to play, as children who can travel greater distances are more likely to meet and play with peers,²⁵ be more physically active, and play outdoors more regularly.⁵ Lack of independent mobility also affects a child's ability to walk or cycle to school.

There are a number of factors that influence this change and the overall social climate, including:

- Canadians living within a competitive society that values achievement, with scheduled extra-curricular activities before and after school;
- Traditional and social media outlets delivering messaging that can provoke fear concerning unstructured, child-led play and contribute to risk-averse perceptions;*
- Peer pressure from other parents to either participate in the culture of achievement or to limit a child's participation in self-directed play; and
- Geographic or socio-economic factors that can limit access to safe play spaces in rural or urban environments.

* These fears include, for example, the child injuring themselves as a result of play or their being abducted.

Steps are necessary to inform and educate parents, guardians and caregivers of the benefits of unstructured play, the harms associated with hyper-parenting and the importance of child independence in play. Consideration should be given to measures that reframe parental perceptions of risk.

Financial Limitations

School boards and municipalities often face financial limitations that restrict access to unstructured play opportunities. Building, maintenance and programming costs specifically for natural playscapes can limit rich play space development. Remote or rural locations, in particular, are faced with greater challenges accessing funding to develop diverse play environments than are urban school boards or municipalities. Similarly, funding for play spaces may come from fundraising events, whereby low socio-economic status communities have less opportunity or resources available to them for such events.

Legal Concerns and Decision-making

Municipal governments' fears of injury and the likelihood of encountering a legal claim (often driven by parent or caregiver complaints) affect their decision-making.²⁶ Such decision-making limits play when, for example, play apparatus, structures, activities or opportunities (i.e., prohibiting tobogganing hills) are removed in order to reduce the likelihood of injury. The challenge, however, is to separate the consideration of safety (the elimination of hazards from the site) with access to challenging play (the ability for children to test their limits). Play spaces should be 'as safe as necessary' not 'as safe as possible'. Municipalities have implemented by-laws to restrict play, including fines for climbing trees, bans on street hockey or street play, or permits required to access park space. These safety requirements are often implemented without consideration of

child development needs. As a result, children's engagement in diverse types of play is limited.

Similar challenges exist for School Boards; however, their situation is further complicated as provincial and territorial Education Acts include a requirement for a duty of care similar to that of a "prudent parent" for school officials. A further challenge emerges when the requirements prescribed in provincial and territorial Child Care and Early Years Acts are compared to those of Education Acts. The different requirements can challenge the delivery of programs that promote unstructured play, especially when the two facilities are co-located. Consistent approaches should be developed to better align the implementation of the requirements found in both Education and Child Care Acts.

Contributing to these concerns is the issue of Joint and Several Liability, where an injured party is permitted to recover up to 100% of the compensation awarded from the party who is able to pay, regardless of the degree to which that party is found to be negligent. Steps should be taken to reform Joint and Several Liability so that the compensation paid towards an injured party is proportional to the degree to which the defendant was found to be negligent.

School and Childcare Policies

Play is a vehicle for learning and rests at the core of innovation and creativity. It provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive. Play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children, and learning and doing are inextricably linked for them. There is a strong link between play and learning, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy and mathematics, as well as the development of social, physical and emotional skills.²⁷

Childcare facilities are important settings for meeting these developmental goals through unstructured

play, and the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators is commended for citing "reasonable risk-taking" in their Standards of Practice. This standard for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) supports the need to, "design or modify indoor and outdoor learning environments to support children's self-regulation, independence, reasonable risk-taking, meaningful exploration and positive interactions."²⁸

A systematic review has found positive associations between recess and cognitive skills development (attention, concentration, ability to stay on task and memory).^{14,29} Outdoor play and play at recess has also been shown to strengthen problem solving and conflict resolution skills,^{30,31} while providing opportunity for social and emotional learning such as the ability to control aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration.³² Despite this, there are limitations that affect access to unstructured play at recess, including:

- A lack of designated teacher supervision time within their collective agreements, which can reduce their willingness to support unstructured play opportunities;
- Curriculum structures that focus on prescriptive, gross motor play experiences (i.e., organized activity in gym class) which diverge from the importance of creating free time for unstructured play;
- Restriction of unstructured activities at recess by use of safety rules;
- Withholding of recess as a disciplinary action; and
- Restriction or prohibition of outdoor play or recess periods during inclement weather.

Steps should be taken to withdraw these restrictions.

Risk Benefit Assessment

A risk has the potential for a positive or a negative outcome. The potential negative outcome is not hidden and the risk-taker has the opportunity to recognize and assess the challenge. A hazard is a situation where the potential for injury is hidden from the individual and there is limited opportunity to navigate the situation.³³ The challenge is then to remove the hazards while permitting those involved in the activity the opportunity to accept the level of risk with which they are comfortable.

The Canadian Standards Association's (CSA) standard for "Children's Play Spaces and Equipment" (CAN/CSA-Z614) provides a foundation for playground safety that minimizes the likelihood of serious and/or life-threatening injuries, but is not intended to address child development needs. It is voluntary and its intended use is not specified. Therefore, its application is determined by the user. Daily practices associated with play spaces, however, are strongly influenced by the Standard, as they are often applied as a minimum safety requirement or safety guideline by decision-makers. As such, the prevention of all injuries may be valued over the social, psychological and physical benefits of unstructured play. As a result, play structures that are designed to meet the standard may lack challenge, and place limitations on loose parts play. An alternative to this methodology could be the use of a risk-benefit assessment approach that balances the need for hazard identification and removal with the benefits of unstructured play to permit the establishment of interesting play spaces. A second approach may be to use the methodology incorporated in the European or Australian Playground Standards where playgrounds that do not conform to safety standards may be permitted for use should they not present a hazard to the users.

Loose Parts and Nature Play

Children who play with loose parts are more active and more likely to interact with their peers than they would on playgrounds with fixed equipment.²⁶ Loose parts play may also help children become more social, creative, and resilient.³⁴ Similarly, playgrounds designed with natural elements encourage children to play longer and in more engaging ways than contemporary play structures,^{1,35} as children tend to prefer natural outdoor play environments, and natural playgrounds may provide more enjoyable physical activity experiences for children.⁴ However, guidelines are lacking to support the development of such environments.

Play Space Accessibility

CPHA commends the provinces of Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia for having enacted comprehensive accessibility laws, and the CSA's *Annex H: Children's play spaces and equipment that are accessible to persons with disabilities** as important steps to making play spaces in Canada more accessible. Unfortunately, accessibility Acts and *Annex H* are often poorly understood, leading to confusion or inconsistency in their application. There are also a number of technical aspects that can limit play for all children, such as those that require a *minimum* accessibility standard to be met on the occurrence of major construction or redevelopment of a play space. Consequently, quality of play may be ignored, as the primary focus is placed on approval of the technical elements. Design plans for accessible play spaces often omit equipment or features that support challenging play, along with sensory and tactile elements of play. This approach can lead to perceptions that the play space is boring by typically developing children, and that they will avoid these spaces. Furthermore, highlighting the functional limitations of individuals by implicitly designating

* This voluntary annex establishes minimum accessibility guidelines for newly constructed and redeveloped play spaces.

specific areas for accessible play can limit access to rich play experiences by, for example:

- perpetuating stigma;
- limiting the number of diverse play elements, including sensory and tactile experiences; and
- excluding children with non-physical disabilities.

The application of Universal Design Principles* or the approach of Herrington and Brussoni³⁵ could improve accessibility for and meet the play needs of all children.

Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities face strengths and challenges related to unstructured play. Challenges may include limited access to land, limited community infrastructure, aging facilities, competing community priorities, and the effects of colonization that have resulted in a variety of related outcomes. Strengths include cultures and traditions that support unstructured play, geographical benefits with access to water and land (although for some communities this remains a challenge), values that support unstructured play, and Elder teachings.

Other Considerations

Research related to unstructured play and the information consulted to make play-related decisions can be limited by the inconsistent use of the term play and its derivatives, such as risky play, nature play, outdoor play and unstructured play. This lack of consistent terminology and definitions poses difficulties with the consistent measure of effects and comparison of outcomes.

Concerns also exist around injury data reporting and collection methods related to play, such as:

- denominators in play statistics that cannot be readily compared to other sources of information (i.e., it is difficult to compare the number of

children using playgrounds with those enrolled in organized sport);

- lack of information collected on the potential cause of the injury (i.e., what apparatus or piece of equipment was involved, and the category of injury (e.g., fall));
- lack of demographic data;
- collection of injury reporting data that does not identify the location where the injury occurred (e.g., backyard v. municipal playground); and
- balancing of the need for quantitative data with that for qualitative assessment and evaluation, as a means of capturing the perspectives and experiences of children, parents and guardians.

Unstructured play happens when children follow their instincts, ideas and interests without an imposed outcome. It provides the opportunity to develop physical, mental, emotional and social health while contributing to risk management skills and resilience. These skills provide the foundation for children's success across the life course. Access to unstructured play, however, has become limited and action is needed to reverse this trend. The recommendations propose a variety of actions that will help to improve children's access to unstructured play.

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* The principles of Universal Design can be found [online](#).

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