

## **If in doubt, let them out – a child’s right to play**

New research from Statistics Canada’s *Canadian Health Measures Survey* reaffirmed the dramatic decline in Canadian children’s fitness seen over the past 35 years with only a third of Canadian school-aged children meeting physical activity guidelines. Other research from the same survey showed that physical activity increases when children are outdoors, with each additional hour spent outdoors per day being associated with 7 more minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, 762 more steps, and 13 fewer minutes of sedentary time. Canadian children need to get outside to play more, to help them move more – and it is their right.

November 20<sup>th</sup> marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document enshrines a child’s right to play - Article 31(1) states that “States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child... 31(2) ... and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.” Article 24(2f) also commits states to “To develop preventive health care, guidance for parents...” which can include the health benefits of active play.

Canada is failing to honour these commitments. The 2018 ParticipACTION Report Card on the Physical Activity of Children and Youth gives Canada a “D” grade for “Active Play and Leisure Activities”, while the 2019 UNICEF Canada Baseline Report for the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being shows that only 21% of children ages 5 to 11 engage in at least 1.5 hours a day of active play and unstructured activities. The recent Statistics Canada research reaffirms these findings.

Playing outdoors is better than indoors, but the availability of digital media coupled with fears concerning stranger danger, and play injury, among others have shifted children indoors. A recent Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, that is endorsed by the Canadian Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health, concluded that “Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.” In an era of schoolyard ball bans and debates about safe tobogganing, have we as a society lost the appropriate balance between keeping children healthy and active and protecting them from serious harm? Have we restricted a child’s right to play and their access to the holistic health benefits of active outdoor play?

Adult’s fears about all that can go wrong when children play is a barrier to letting children play outside. In the case of schools and other institutions, these fears can result in unnecessary and restrictive policies that limit the amount and type of play available to children. Yet the injury statistics show that children today are safer than at any other time in Canada. Car crashes are the leading causes of child death, yet we do not hesitate to put our children in cars to “keep them safe”. The risk of abduction by a stranger is so remote that statistics are not regularly kept. The last estimate was 1:14 million, about the same as winning Lotto 649. The likelihood of a child dying from a fall from play equipment or a tree is even lower at 1:70 million, and there are no recorded deaths for children falling from trees in the 17 years of available statistics. Serious injuries are also extremely rare; the likelihood of sustaining a fracture while playing is 0.0004%.

There are also unique benefits of being in the outdoors, particularly in nature. When children play the way they want outdoors they move more, sit less and play longer. They get their hands dirty and are exposed to microbes that help them build immunity. They make their own goals and figure out the steps

to attain those goals. They learn, build resilience, develop social skills, and learn how to manage risks and keep safe. Their eyes get the exercise needed to combat short-sightedness.

The research is clear: children's outdoor play supports a myriad of health and developmental outcomes. Despite these benefits and the remoteness of adverse events we restrict our children's right to play outside. On the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child we are reminded of our duty to provide, encourage and facilitate active outdoor play for our children's healthy development – if in doubt, let them out – it's their right.

Outdoor Play Canada  
401 Smyth Road  
Ottawa, ON K1H 8L1  
613-737-7600 x4114  
[info@outdoorplaycanada.ca](mailto:info@outdoorplaycanada.ca)