ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Topic Commentary: Why Outdoor Play?

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Introduction

Play is a dominant activity of children's lives in all cultures[1]. Favourite play memories typically occur outside, particularly in natural settings[2–4]. Adults reflecting on these experiences remember the sense of freedom and fun, a chance to be creative, develop physical confidence and social skills and an opportunity to connect with nature. These play memories and growing research in outdoor play draws attention to important ways that outdoor play differs from play occurring indoors.

While scholarship on play has a lengthy history, interest in outdoor play specifically has rapidly gained the interest of scholars across diverse fields, as they grapple with the importance and meaning of these experiences for children. Papers in this chapter summarize the latest research regarding the influence of outdoor play on development and learning, as well as the important ways that caregivers, educators, policy makers, communities and cities can support children's play. Notable findings include the diverse and important benefits of outdoor play on children's development, health, wellbeing, and potential benefits for families, early childhood centres, schools, communities, and cities that support regular and repeated access to high quality

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outdoor play opportunities.

Research and Conclusions

Outdoor play is unstructured, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated play that takes place outside. It can often include risk taking and risky play[5]. Authors in this chapter express concerns about patterns that suggest successive generational declines in children's engagement in outdoor play, and discuss key reasons for the decline, such as adult risk aversion, an academic focus, accessibility of screens and technology, diminishing availability and quality of outdoor spaces, limited accessible training for early childhood educators in outdoor play pedagogy, and a deficit in policies that adequately support children's outdoor play in communities and early childhood centres[5–13]. James, Dragon-Smith and Lahey[6] also point to how the pervasiveness of Euro-Western approaches in Canada's educational system have turned children away from play and the land, and towards controlled and regimented environments.

Research highlights a clear relationship between time spent in outdoor play and children's physical activity[7]. In addition, research suggests the importance of regular and repeated exposure to high quality outdoor play opportunities for fostering creativity, socio-emotional learning, executive functioning, mental health, a sense of self, motor skills and risk negotiation skills, building the immune system, as well as providing an ideal venue for scientific enquiry[5–13]. Increased access to green spaces has also been linked to variations in children's gut microbiota, in turn influencing cognitive and social development[11]. Further, benefits to the broader community have been identified, including promoting children's feelings of engagement with the world and sense of environmental stewardship[8–10,13,14].

Risky play, which involves activities with elements of challenge and uncertainty, supports the development of children's coping skills, manages physiological arousal and builds confidence[5,15]. Although not all outdoor play is risky play, playing outdoors facilitates risky play. However, modern societies' increasing risk aversion has reduced children's opportunities for such play15. Children routinely express enjoyment in risky play and a desire greater freedom and more challenging play settings[15]. Research links more risky play to better mood, lower anxiety, and improved prosocial behaviour[5,15].

Outdoor play now occurs in the context of rising ambient air temperatures, air quality alerts, and extreme weather events, often resulting in reduced time outdoors[14]. In the face of these

challenges, outdoor play can serve as a pedagogical tool for fostering children's understanding of nature and climate change through enhanced environmental engagement and scientific enquiry and hands-on engagement with the natural world[13]. Early experiences in nature are linked to greater environmental stewardship in adulthood[14]. Moreover, given the many negative health impacts children will face from climate change[14], the well-documented physical, mental, and social benefits of outdoor play may be even more critical to support their resilience and well-being.

The authors raised concerns regarding predominance of small scale and qualitative studies, with diverse methods and definitions of key concepts. These studies have provided a promising foundation for research on outdoor play and opened many avenues of enquiry. Current evidence on children's outdoor and risky play often depends on parent reports. There is a need for systematic large-scale and longitudinal studies using universally acceptable measurement tools that would help identify causal links between outdoor play and children's outcomes, as well as ways to support children with multiple needs, and in different cultural and geographic contexts, to access and engage in high quality outdoor play. There is also a need for experimental studies to clarify the cause-and-effect relationship between children's risky play and mental health. Furthermore, our understanding of the role of technology, both as an inhibitor, as well as a potential facilitator of outdoor play is in its infancy. Recent work has focused on developing more precise coding frameworks to classify the types of activities children engage in outdoors[11]. Likewise, coding schemes have been created to assess the degree to which outdoor play takes place in natural settings[11].

Implications for Development and Policy

The papers in this chapter list the many benefits associated with children's regular and repeated access to high quality outdoor play opportunities[5–13]. Gill[8] suggests an urgency to the need for action and change, raising the spectre of collective generational amnesia as children who grew up with restricted outdoor play opportunities become parents themselves and view this as the norm. He also raises the rapid pace of development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries; the opportunities this provides, but also the potential threats if planning neglects children's needs and does not prioritize provision of accessible and high quality and natural play spaces.

James, Dragon-Smith and Lahey[6] discuss the importance of learning from Indigenous perspective on outdoor play, which consider humans as part of nature and consider time spent playing and in nature as necessary to protect and to promote life-long learning. Acknowledging and honouring Indigenous philosophies and approaches, the “energy and medicines” of the land, Elders, and cultural families, can help provide a more holistic approach and children’s understanding of the ecosystem and their place within it[6].

Daly and Corcoran also propose strategies for designing play spaces that lessen the adverse effects of climate change and extreme heat[14]. Materials such as rubber, gravel, and artificial turf tend to absorb and retain more heat than natural surfaces, especially when exposed to direct sunlight. Increasing shade coverage, especially through tree canopy rather than artificial shade structures, can significantly reduce surface temperatures. Replacing concrete or rubber with natural elements can also improve a play space’s ability to absorb rainwater during storms, helping to reduce flooding and runoff. Schoolyard greening, environmental learning, and the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing can strengthen children’s connection to nature and eco-centric perspectives[6,14].

The collective role of parents, educators, policy makers, communities and municipalities in supporting outdoor play is reflected in the key implications for development and policy:

- Parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators: Parents and early childhood educators are often regarded as gatekeepers, carrying the responsibility for enabling children’s access to outdoor play[11]. Consider children’s opportunities for regular and repeated outdoor play in varied natural and built outdoor environments. Strike a balance between scheduled activities, screen time and free time. Resist the urge to limit risky play and adopt benefit–risk analyses instead of solely risk-minimization approaches[16]. Seek out environments that balance safety with opportunities for challenge and recognize the importance of outdoor play in supporting children’s learning, development, health and well-being[5,11,13]. Consider the cross-section between environmental education and outdoor play within early childhood provision[13].
- Post-secondary institutions: Provide early learning students, as well as educators already working in centres, with accessible training in outdoor play pedagogy. Support educators in understanding their role in outdoor play provision and developing a playful pedagogical approach[13]. Embrace and integrate Indigenous philosophies and ways of knowing[6].

Establish an outdoor-based practicum within Canadian post-secondary early childhood education programs to enhance early learning educators' skills in outdoor pedagogy[9].

- Policy makers: Develop policies that support regular and repeated access to high quality outdoor play opportunities in early learning programs[11]. The current licensing and regulatory systems tend to be indoor-centric or focused on provision of fixed play equipment. Provide opportunities for licensing of outdoor programs. Support policies that that encourage risky play while preventing serious injury. Incorporate evidence-based design guidelines for the outdoor environments of early childhood education centres, including the importance of access to nature and loose parts and risky play opportunities[5,12]. Encourage daily outdoor time in all weather7, while balancing the need to protect children from negative health impacts of climate change[14]. Address risk aversion through implementation and support of risk benefit assessment frameworks[16].
- Municipalities: Recognize the needs of children and their caregivers as central to master planning, and the importance of widely and equitably accessible outdoor play provision. Engage children in participatory design. Explore designs that limit the dominance of traffic and encourage multi-generational social encounters[8,10] Heighten play-friendly principles as a strategic municipal focus through a designated official with an explicit child-friendly planning focus[8].

Children can and should be able to play throughout their communities. Addressing the barriers and creating a supportive culture and environment is a collective responsibility. Individuals, such as parents, and educators, and even children themselves, can make meaningful improvements in outdoor play opportunities. A collective approach that also involves institutions, governments, municipalities and the broader community would be exponentially more powerful in fostering lasting change and ensuring children's equitable access to high quality outdoor play spaces and opportunities.

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