



Collaborative Decision-Making: Supporting a Balanced Approach to Children's Unstructured Play

Learning Objectives:

- Define the key principles of collaborative-decision making.
- Identify why collaborative decision-making is important to improve access to play.
- List the stakeholders/sectors who should be engaged in the process.
- Identify influencing factors that shape stakeholder decision-making behaviour.
- Identify how to develop guiding principles and shared goals.

Learning Outcomes:

- Have the knowledge to conduct a collaborative decision-making process with relevant stakeholders to improve access to high quality, diverse children's unstructured play opportunities.

Introduction

During play-related decision-making, risk managers or insurers are sometimes viewed as opponents to providing diverse and challenging play experiences. Biases may also exist among other parties who influence or make play-related decisions. It is essential to provide children with beneficial play experiences without exposing them to danger.

There is a need to bring together multiple sectors to address the fears, biases and knowledge gaps associated with providing access to unstructured child-led play opportunities and experiences. Collaborative decision-making can support this process by encouraging all parties who influence access to unstructured play to participate in the decision-making process from the start.

Important to Know

Principles of Collaborative Decision-Making

The purpose of collaboration is to develop joint strategies to achieve a **shared goal**, like developing a play space or policy.¹ A key principle of collaboration is that it is a mutually beneficial relationship between all stakeholders/sectors. When all parties work together they have shared responsibility, accountability and authority. Collaboration includes engagement, dialogue, inclusion and mutual learning, and should be conducted in an environment that can foster these principles.

Why collaborative decision-making is important

Working in collaboration helps stakeholders and sectors understand one another. The decisions that best support access to children's play can be reached through dialogue to understand differing stakeholder's experiences, perspectives and assumptions. By understanding perspectives and assumptions, the partners and stakeholders can work to reach consensus* on important topics, contributing towards a broad base of support across sectors.¹

* Consensus is a middle ground in decision-making, between total assent and total disagreement. Consensus depends on participants having shared values and goals, and on having broad agreement on specific issues and

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Collaborative decision-making fosters a **more balanced approach** to decision-making by:

- Engaging multiple stakeholders;
- Identifying a shared goal;
- Educating all parties on the importance of providing access to unstructured play, and addressing training or expertise gaps;
- Understanding different stakeholder perspectives;
- Identifying and addressing stakeholder fears and assumptions;
- Developing strategies to manage fears and mitigate risks;
- Removing restrictions that limit access to unstructured play; and
- Developing a policy/plan/process/practice to move forward.

Relationship building

Collaborative decision-making fosters relationship building which can:

- Increase buy-in from the top-down and bottom-up;
- Build trust and mutual respect while removing preconceived notions;
- Build the profile of the neighbourhood or school;
- Build shared responsibility; and
- Gain credibility.

Who to include in a play-related decision-making process

In a school environment, collaborative decision-making should include:

- Legal experts, risk management, insurance, facilities team;
- Child development experts;
- Teachers, educators and principals;
- Parents;
- Children;
- The local public health unit; and
- In a municipal setting, the groups could expand to include local organizations, including non-profits.

Specifically, risk management and insurance sectors should be involved from the start to support development of risk benefit assessments, processes and procedures that navigate unwanted risks while supporting challenging play. Involving parents and children can work to address concerns and enables decisions to be made that can meet the needs of the school or community.

How-To Foster Collaborative Decision-making

Key Considerations: Addressing Cognitive Shortcuts, Assumptions, and Perceptions

Stakeholders will bring their own set of influencing factors that shape their decision-making behaviour.

In a collaborative decision-making process, it is important to identify and understand the perspectives of all parties in order to effectively work towards a balanced approach.

To do so, **stakeholder readiness** to implement a new play practice/policy/process should be considered. This includes identifying and understanding stakeholder **beliefs or assumptions, biases and fears** which

overall direction. Consensus implies that everyone accepts and supports the decision, and understands the reasons for making it. Read more at: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/consensus.html>

may be contributing to **cognitive shortcuts**.[†] These short-cuts can lead to decision-making without considering the available information.²

Consider the following factors that influence decision-making behaviours, and how understanding these influences can contribute towards a collaborative and balanced approach to providing play opportunities:

Factors Influencing Decision-Making Behaviours	Questions for stakeholders to consider	How this can foster collaborative decision-making
Values	What does the stakeholder care about? What motivates the stakeholder? Example: Child well-being and academic development.	Understanding this point can help to draw commonalities between parties and increase buy-in and ownership over a shared goal. A result of collaborative decision-making should include a clear discussion on roles and responsibilities of those involved; identify what is to be achieved.
Commitments	Who is the stakeholder representing? Example: other educators, a school, the school board.	This will help participants understand the responsibilities that stakeholders have.
Current practices	What current approach is the stakeholder taking to provide play opportunities? What is and is not working with this approach? What results have been seen from this approach? Has the available evidence been considered? Example: Free outdoor play time is limited to the playground and on the field; children seem bored or unengaged.	This will help all understand what current practices are or are not working. Consideration should be given to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What to discard from past or current practices/processes/policies • What to conserve from past or current practices/processes/policies • What new practices/processes/policies can be developed based on past experiences
Experiences, beliefs, assumptions, biases and fears	What previous experiences have shaped the way the stakeholder makes decisions? What fears are contributing to current decision-making practices? What assumptions are driving the resistance to change practice? Examples: fear of a law suit resulting from the assumption that there will be	This will help understand biases, perspectives and cognitive shortcuts that stakeholders could be making that contribute to decision-making that limits play. This process will also help to understand stakeholder decision-making concerns and address stakeholder fears by

[†] Cognitive shortcuts (or heuristics) are when someone makes a quick judgement to solve a problem.

	parent complaints, or previous experience with a child injury.	developing mitigation strategies.
Beliefs of the Benefits	What benefits will the stakeholder see if the current practice changes? Example: improved attention in class, team work and cooperation among peers.	The importance of unstructured play should be framed such that those included in the discussion are engaged and care. For example, there should be alignment with stakeholder priorities, such as: Finance: how will an unstructured play environment affect existing financial issues? Health: what are the health benefits of play? Education: what educational or behavioural outcomes can be accomplished through play or play-based learning?

Adapted from: Heifetz, M. (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press.

Identifying, understanding, and addressing the factors that influence decision-making behaviours from all stakeholders can build collaboration and shift perspectives by establishing a shared understanding,¹ thereby improving access to quality, diverse unstructured play.

Developing Shared Goals

Collaborative decision-making should be guided by a shared purpose or goal that considers the contributions of all members. Involving all parties in the development of goal setting can foster a greater sense of commitment and engagement, build trust, and contribute towards greater coordination when decisions are made. Each decision-maker must agree upon and understand the importance of the shared goals or common purpose. Shared goals should be developed by listening to the perspective of each decision-maker, and are:

- agreed upon by all members;
- documented, for example, in a statement that uses inclusive wording to support ownership (i.e. “we”), is easily accessible by all members (e.g., in the terms of reference, on a wall, or on a website), and are revisited every meeting. Consider the following example:

“We recognize that unstructured play is a child’s right and is integral to healthy child development. We commit to educating parents, caregivers and other decision-makers on its importance while implementing evidence-informed, child-centered strategies that increase access to opportunities for play.”

Guiding Principles for Decision-Making

A collaborative decision-making approach should center on a set of core values that have been agreed to by the group. These values will support any decisions that are made or actions that are implemented, such as a *play policy*.[‡] All decisions proposed should be outlined and implemented to reflect these

‡ An approach to developing a play policy is available in this toolkit.

underlying principles. This consistency allows the community to observe a direct connection between what is valued as being important and what actually happens in practice. In existing play policies, key principles that have been used to guide the decision-making process include:

Child-Centred Best interests of the child are a primary consideration	Collaboration Coordination and integration among stakeholders is prioritized	Community Engagement All voices are heard to address community needs
Family-Oriented Families are supported and empowered to facilitate play opportunities	Equity All children have equitable opportunities for, access to, and participation in play	Sustainability Infrastructure is environmentally-friendly and maintained over time
Action-Oriented Planning is focused on achieving targeted outcomes	Inclusivity Diversity of experience, culture, lifestyle, and ability are recognized	Enhancement Play spaces complement and enhance their surroundings

Other considerations to adopt at the start of a collaborative process include adoption of the 80-20 rule for agreeing upon decisions, where at least 80% of the group is in agreement and 20% at most may be in disagreement.

Committing to Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

To increase validity and merit to the decisions made, all members should center their approach on evidence-informed decision-making. Committing to this approach as a “ground rule” ensures the consideration and incorporation of available research and information into all implemented actions. Evidence-informed decision-making should consider a *variety* of evidence sources, such as:

Type	Source of Evidence	Example
Research evidence	Research findings shared in journal articles or synthesized reports/documents	Outdoor Play Position Statement ³ and supporting literature review ⁴
Community health issues, local context	Surveillance data (i.e. surveys) or community health status reports	Ontario Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey ⁵ or playground/school yard incident reports
Community and political preferences and actions	Needs and interests of the community, Local or provincial political climate, or School or organizational climate	Town hall meeting with parents/caregivers, youth and decision-makers
Resources	Financial, human, and materials	Internal monitoring reports

Adapted from the National Collaborating Centre of Methods and Tools (NCCMT). (N.D). A model for Evidence-Informed Decision-Making in Public Health.

Further learning:

<http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collaborativeleadership>

<http://www.hbsc.org/membership/countries/canada.html>

<http://injuryevidence.ca/>

<https://www.injuryresearch.bc.ca/resources/injury-data-online-tool-idot/>

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5. Freeman JG, King M, Pickett W. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children: Focus on Relationships. *Public Health Agency of Canada*. Ottawa 204 pp.