

What is Play?

Play is the business of childhood. It is an integral part of every child's healthy development and is embedded in Article 31 in the Convention on the Rights of a Child.¹ Children and youth need time, appropriate space and opportunity to engage in quality play. It is crucial to children's mental and emotional health and it could minimize depression, anxiety, aggression, and sleep problems.² It improves children's physical, mental, and social health, and has a critical role in healthy development by improving motor skills, social behaviour, independence, and conflict resolution.³ It also provides experiences that can equip children with risk management skills necessary to thrive as adults. Some empirical evidence supports the link between physically active play and decreased anxiety, as well as depressive symptoms and positive self-concept.⁴

There are many categories of *play*. **Unstructured child-led play** is play where children follow their own instincts, ideas, and interests without a defined purpose or outcome. It is not initiated in an organized, planned, or formal way and may include thrilling and exciting forms of play. It provides opportunities for challenge and exploring boundaries, which allows the child to determine their *own* limits.⁵ Categories of challenging play include: 1. play at great heights, 2. play with high speed, 3. play with dangerous tools, 4. play near dangerous elements, 5. rough-and-tumble play, and 6. play where the children can "disappear"/get lost.⁶ Organized sports or screen-time (time spent in front of the television, computer, gaming console like Playstation, Xbox, or Wii, tablet, smartphone, or any other electronic equipment) are not considered *unstructured child-led play*.

Child-led or directed is used as a qualifier to emphasize the principle component of play in which the child determines her or his play.⁷ **Structured Play** includes games when they are directed by an adult, e.g.: tag, kick-the-can, soccer, grounders and sport-related activities.

Outdoor Play is play that takes place outside and includes concepts of unstructured child-led play and nature play. **Nature Play** happens primarily outside in a natural environment and/or involves play with natural elements and features, such as water, mud, rocks, hills, forests, and natural loose parts, such as sticks, pine cones, leaves, grass etc.

Outdoor play, in particular, is known to improve cognitive, social, and emotional health outcomes. Outdoor play where children can disappear or "get lost" has a positive effect on social health indicators and physical activity, and is negatively associated with sedentary behaviours. Such play during school recess breaks tends to maximize students attention at school⁸, and a recent national survey showed that 90% of teachers and 86% of parents believe that physically active children are better able to learn and are better behaved in class.⁹ Furthermore, a systematic review found positive associations between recess and cognitive skills development including improved attention and academic performance.¹⁰ Outdoor play at recess strengthens problem solving and conflict resolution, as well as the ability to develop and sustain friendships, co-operate, and lead and follow. Additionally, natural play environments can support social health as play with loose parts increases social interaction, creativity, and resilience compared to that on pre-built playgrounds.¹¹

An important part of outdoor play is the ability to travel some distance, however this capacity is being restricted by parents. A systematic review reported that independent mobility (the extent to which children can travel and play away from their home unsupervised)¹² was positively associated to physical activity and the likelihood of regular outdoor play. Children who can travel greater distances are more likely to meet and play with peers.¹³

Active play involves unstructured physical activity. It consists of physical activity that is performed at a moderate-to-vigorous intensity level and beneficially affects children's physical health by reducing adiposity, and improving musculoskeletal fitness and cardiovascular health.¹⁴

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. Access to playgrounds that encourage play with loose parts in safe neighbourhood surroundings is of utmost importance.

References

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