



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 the Child.¹ Children and youth need time, appropriate space, and opportunity to engage in quality play. Play is crucial for children's mental and emotional health, and it can reduce their experiences of 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 behavior, independence, and conflict resolution.³ Engagement in play provides experiences that can equip children with risk management skills necessary to thrive as adults.³ 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 (sometimes referred to as risky 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 activity.⁵ Unstructured child-led play provides opportunities for challenge and exploring boundaries, which allows the child to determine their own limits.⁶ There are six categories of challenging play, including: play at heights, play with speed, play with tools, play near dangerous elements, rough-and-tumble play, and play where the children can "disappear" and/or get lost.⁷ Organized sports or screen-time (i.e., time spent in front of the television; computer; gaming consoles; tablet; smartphone; or any other electronic equipment) are not considered unstructured, child-led play.

Structured play includes games or activities that may be directed by an adult or where there are rules and/or guidelines (e.g., tag, kick-the-can, soccer, grounders, and sport-related activities).⁵ During structured play, children adhere to outside rules or structure and do not have freedom of navigation.⁸ They may also be directed by an adult or external authority figure. This structure is contrary to child-led play, where children are active agents in their expressions and movements and do not adhere to rules or guidelines enforced by outside authorities.⁸

Outdoor play is play that takes place outside and includes concepts of UCLP and nature play.⁵ **Nature play** occurs primarily outside in a natural environment and/or involves play with natural elements and features (e.g., water, mud, rocks, hills, forests) and natural loose parts (e.g., sticks, pine cones, leaves, grass etc.).⁵

Outdoor play, in particular, is known to improve cognitive, social, and emotional health outcomes.⁹ 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.³ Such play during school recess breaks tends to maximize students' attention at school,¹⁰ and a recent national survey showed that 90% of teachers and 86% of parents believe that physically active children are better able to learn in the classroom and are better behaved during class, compared to children who are not physically active.¹¹ A systematic review of the influence of school-based physical activity and children's classroom

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learning found positive associations between recess and cognitive skills development, with children's engagement in physical activity including improved attention and academic performance.¹² In particular,

outdoor play at recess improves children's ability to solve problems and resolve conflicts, and their ability to develop and sustain friendships, co-operate, and lead and follow.¹⁰ Engagement in natural play spaces can improve children's social health, as play with loose parts increases social interaction, creativity, and resilience compared to that on pre-built playgrounds.¹³

An important part of outdoor play is the ability for children to travel some distance unsupervised; however, there have been declines in children's unsupervised travel distance.³ This global phenomenon may be due to parents' fear that their children will be harmed (e.g., hit by a car or kidnapped) if they travel alone.¹⁴ A systematic review reported that independent mobility (i.e., the extent to which children can travel and play away from their home unsupervised)¹⁵ was positively associated with children's engagement in physical activity and the likelihood of children engaging in regular outdoor play.³ Furthermore, children who travel greater distances unsupervised are more likely to meet and play with peers.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.⁵ Access to playgrounds that encourage play with loose parts in safe neighbourhood surroundings is of utmost importance¹⁰ because engagement with loose parts can foster curiosity,¹⁸ motivate them to manipulate and navigate their environment and play spaces,¹⁹ learn self-regulation strategies,²⁰ and increase their desire to play outdoors in creative ways.²¹

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