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# Children's Right to Play

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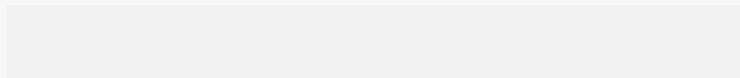
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This project was generously supported through the  
Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy.

Learn more at [lawson.ca](http://lawson.ca)



# UNSTRUCTURED CHILD-LED PLAY

Play where children follow their own instincts, ideas, and interests without a defined purpose or outcome



# PLAY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

An upstream approach to healthy development

- Physical and gross motor skills development
- Mental and emotional health
- Social health and teamwork
- Learning and attention at school
- Resiliency and risk management skills

Embedded in Article 31 of the UN Convention  
on the Rights of a Child

# PROJECT OBJECTIVE

## **A policy toolkit that provides evidence-informed tools and resources to increase access to unstructured play**

- Increase knowledge on the importance of play for healthy development
- Increase decision-makers capability to respond to parent/guardian perceptions that limit play
- Support development of policies and strategies that improve access to unstructured play at school and in the community

### **Target audiences:**

- 1) Municipal, public health and school decision-makers
- 2) Parents and caregiver

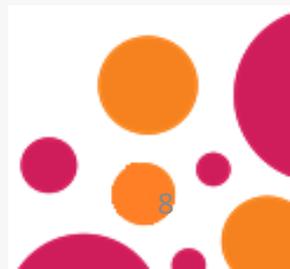
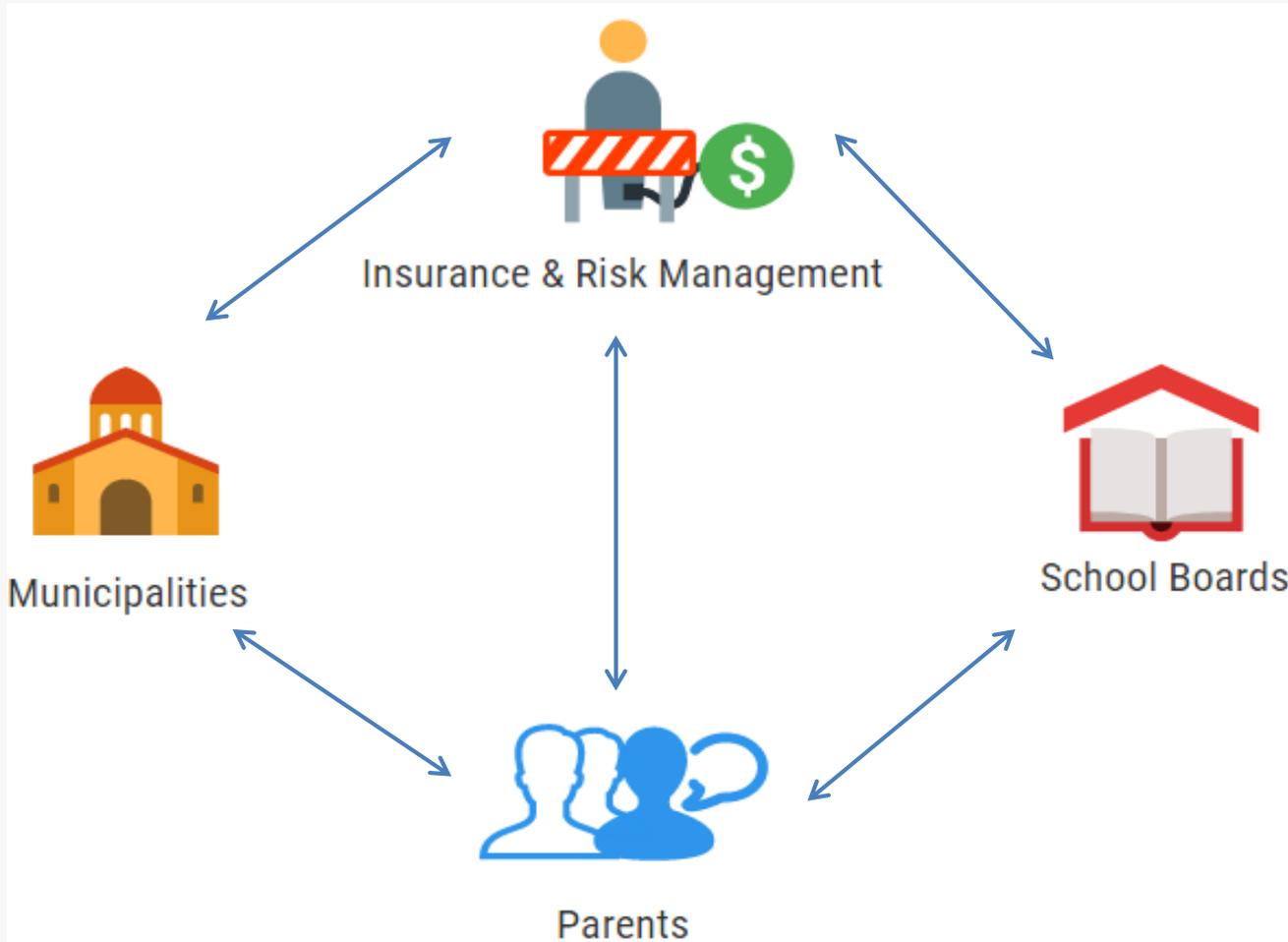


## Barriers

- Social and political drivers
- Policies, laws, guidelines and standards
- Risk adverse society
- Financial considerations (schools and municipalities)

**Social and Political Relationships  
Influence Unstructured Play**

# SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS INFLUENCING UNSTRUCTURED PLAY



## KEY MESSAGES

- Different sectors identify the same issues and solutions
- Decision-making should include risk managers and insurance from the **onset**
- Need a better understanding of duty of care
- Need training/education on risk management approaches
- Need greater flexibility of **application** of the Standards; consider loose parts and nature play
- Training/education for playground inspectors/risk managers on importance of risks in play
- Need knowledge mobilization to inform best practices

# A POLICY TOOLKIT

## Briefings

- Accessibility
- Parent perception
- Educator perception
- Recess
- Injuries
- Risk v. hazard
- What is play?

## Infographics

- Why play?
- Recess
- Mental health
- 10 benefits of play
- Perception versus fact

## Tools

- Duty of care checklist
- FAQ for parents
- How to foster collaborative decision-making
- Loose parts play framework
- Outdoor play policies
- Play friendly cities

**Promising Practices**

# WICKED PROBLEMS

- Changing faces of children in Canada
- Parental, caregiver and educator perceptions
- Risk communication
- Legislation and Liability
- Education and childcare
- Liability and negligence



# ALL MATERIALS AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD AND SHARE

## [WWW.CPHA.CA](http://WWW.CPHA.CA)

### 5 Key Findings on Unstructured Play & Mental Health

- Promotes positive feelings**  
When children engage in unstructured play, they report feeling joy, bliss and competence. When they don't, they report feeling bored, sad and angry.
- Builds resilience**  
When children experience the uncertainty of challenging or risky play, they can develop emotional reactions, physical capabilities and coping skills that equip them to manage adversity. These skills are important for resilience and good mental health in childhood and into adulthood.
- Improves concentration**  
Unstructured play is associated with improved attention span, especially in children who have trouble focusing for long periods of time.
- Helps develop & maintain healthy relationships**  
Evidence indicates that unstructured play can provide the opportunity to improve social competence. This means that children can improve their problem-solving skills, emotional intelligence, and ability to empathize. Children can become more self-aware and are better able to compromise and cooperate.
- Improves undesirable behaviours**  
Studies with schools report fewer problems with unacceptable behaviours like bullying when unstructured play is increased. When children lead their own play, they can engage in social and emotional learning, such as the ability to control, aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration.

In Canada, between 2006 and 2015, the use of health services for mental health issues increased by 23.6% among both children and adults and 47% among those over 65. Evidence shows that increased play can help reduce the impact of mental health and is important to children's overall well-being. Further research is needed to confirm these findings. This project is funded with the generous support of the L'Espresso Foundation.

## RECESS

Space and time for unstructured play!

**30** The number of hours children spend in school per week

**4,000** The number of recess breaks in a child's lifetime

Schools can provide a range of opportunities for **UNSTRUCTURED PLAY**

**BENEFITS: Unstructured play can...**

- Improve attention, concentration, and memory
- Increase physical activity levels
- Strengthen social and emotional learning
- Support resilience and self-regulation
- Improve mental health and well-being

**Encourages**

- Play equipment, including natural, loose, and movable parts
- Supervisors that facilitate play and support reasonable risk-taking, meaningful exploration, self-regulation, and positive interactions
- Outdoor time in diverse weather conditions
- Extended recess breaks
- Rules that support access to a variety of activities and play spaces

**Discourages**

- Withholding recess for disciplinary, behavioural, and/or academic reasons
- Excessive safety rules influenced by parent concerns
- Too much or too little supervision
- Rescheduling outdoor recess during cold, wet, or hot weather
- Limited access to diverse play spaces and tactile and sensory elements

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### What research tells us... UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

benefits healthy child development

- Fun and Creativity**
  - Unstructured play is fun and is generally creativity
  - This is especially true when using objects that can be moved, carried, combined, and redesigned. They can be taken apart and put back together
- Social Health and Team Work**
  - Unstructured play at recess is shown to strengthen problem solving and conflict resolution skills
  - Outdoor play where children can explore independently can improve social health indicators
- Mental and Emotional Health**
  - Unstructured play is important to children's mental and emotional health
  - Unstructured play can promote positive self-concept and self-esteem
  - Active play can help decrease anxiety and depression
- Physical Health and Gross Motor Skills**
  - Active, unstructured play helps reduce sedentary behaviours, promotes healthy weight gain, improves gross motor skills
  - This includes body fat, improves musculoskeletal and cardiovascular fitness which benefits physical health
- Learning and Attention of School**
  - There is a positive correlation between unstructured play at recess and improved cognitive skills, such as attention, improved math proficiency, and memory, as well as improved grades and standardized test scores
- Resilience and Risk Management Skills**
  - When children experience unstructured play they can develop emotional health, social capabilities, coping skills and problem-solving skills
  - These skills promote resilience and independence in times of adolescence and adulthood

Unstructured play includes and allows children to have their own interests and ideas without a defined purpose and within the rules and boundaries and supervision that are set. They are engaged in some play, but not necessarily in a structured way. This project is funded with the generous support of the L'Espresso Foundation.

### Unstructured PLAY

Perceptions	PLAY	Facts
Unstructured play is fun and enjoyable, but often undervalued by schools and parents.	✓	The more unstructured play a child has, the more they are able to develop and maintain social and emotional health benefits. Unstructured play has many important benefits.
We need to have play to improve learning and play has many important benefits.	✓	Active play is important for children's mental, social, and physical development.
It's not safe for my child to play outside.	✓	When properly done, children can be encouraged to play outside. Children can be encouraged to play outside. Children can be encouraged to play outside.
We need to have play to improve learning and play has many important benefits.	✓	Unstructured play is important to children's mental and emotional health.
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## WHY PLAY?

Children are moving less and sitting more

- 9% engage in 60 minutes of daily physical activity, scoring a D- on the WHO's MET-COR report card
- 76% engage in over the 2 hours daily recreational screen time limit recommended for a balanced lifestyle, increasing the risk of obesity, poorer relationships and worse academic performance
- 20% are overweight and 13% are obese - up 3x since the 1980s

Children are playing less with more limits placed on them in and out of school

- ↓ child independence and the distances they roam without supervision
- ↓ child perceptions that play spaces are boring

Children are having a harder time focusing in the classroom

- ↑ conduct disorders and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) especially among males under 12 years old

Child and youth anxiety, depression, suicide, and feelings of helplessness are increasing

- ↑ stress from increasing academic pressures and extra-curricular activities
- ↑ poor mental health which has been linked to declining life play and can lead to trouble forming/maintaining relationships with peers

**Increasing access to outdoor, unstructured play benefits children**

- ✓ Promotes physical health
- ✓ Promotes mental and emotional health and well-being
- ✓ Improves social skills, confidence and stress levels
- ✓ Improves learning and attention at school
- ✓ Improves resilience and self-management skills

Play is embedded in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children need space and time to engage in quality play. This project is funded with the generous support of the L'Espresso Foundation.

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