



Response to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health – Study on Children’s Health

Outdoor Play Canada

October 11, 2022

Preamble

In 2015, the following Position Statement¹ on Active Outdoor Play was released by an expert panel:

Access to active play in nature and outdoors – with its risks – is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings – at home, at school, in childcare, the community and nature.

This statement reminded Canadians of the critical importance of outdoor play for children’s healthy growth and development. It highlighted the irony of the widespread belief that keeping kids indoors is safer, when the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the outdoors is far better for physical activity, air quality, social and emotional development, connecting with nature, staying away from screens, health promotion, and reducing communicable disease transmission²⁻⁵. Play is so important it has been enshrined as a human right in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶.

The Position Statement was a landmark publication that galvanized the outdoor play sector. It has been cited over 300 times, used by the Ontario Government⁷ to inform health policy and employed by the District of Saanich in a BC Supreme Court ruling⁸, helping the District defend their stance on outdoor play. In 2018, the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health released their own Statement on Active Outdoor Play⁹, supporting and endorsing the earlier statement.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Children’s Outdoor Play

Before the pandemic, outdoor play was on the decline¹¹, where the COVID-19 pandemic made this concerning trend worse. Within the first few months of the pandemic, efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 in Canada included decisions to restrict and even ban access to outdoor spaces for play¹². **As a result, many children completely lost the habit of going outdoors, while others never had the opportunity to develop the habit in the first place.**

In response, the leaders of Outdoor Play Canada published a new statement¹⁰ outlining the importance of getting outdoors for health benefit across all ages. We were among the first to highlight the outdoors as a place

of lower communicable disease transmission risk⁴. Moreover, we emphasized the particular importance of outdoor play for children during this health crisis, as outdoor play provides children with a sense of control and agency. Play, we stated, is therefore especially important to help children process their emotional responses to adversity and stress such as with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This statement – published in March of 2020 – has been viewed over 16,000 times and has been supported by 162 stakeholders.

In addition, our team among others, led a series of Canada-wide surveys¹³ evaluating the impact of the pandemic on children and youth's healthy movement behaviours. As we suspected, in April of 2020 less than 3% of Canadian children and youth were meeting the Canadian 24-hour movement guidelines for physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep – in contrast to 17% pre-pandemic¹³. Furthermore, 42% of children were getting less outdoor play, where this varied by socioeconomic strata; children and youth living in apartment buildings were significantly less likely to engage in outdoor activity¹³.

While the hope was that children's physical activity and outdoor play would return to pre-pandemic levels as restrictions lifted, this was not the case. Six months into the pandemic, only 4.5% of Canadian children were meeting movement guidelines¹³ and outdoor play remained below pre-pandemic levels.

However, there is reason to be hopeful.

Once the importance of the outdoors for health and wellbeing became commonplace, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rediscovery of the outdoors for health, fun, and relaxation; and for a way to feel normal again¹⁴. The introduction of car-free urban spaces and expanded bike routes¹⁵ helped support kids of all ages in moving and playing more. In fact, in the 2022 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth¹⁴, one of the more encouraging findings was that active play had improved in comparison to the previous report card, published right before the pandemic.

This rediscovery and renewed appreciation of the outdoors has great potential to be an accelerator for outdoor play. We are at a unique moment in time to keep up this momentum and restore the habit of playing outside.

Recommendations

In 2021, six years after the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play was released, Outdoor Play Canada published the Outdoor Play in Canada – 2021 State of the Sector Report¹⁶. This report serves as a chronology of what has happened within the outdoor play sector since the publication of the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play in 2015, an account of where we are now, and a map of where we need to go from here.

A central goal of the Report was to identify major priorities and actions needed to move these priorities forward to serve as a common vision for the outdoor play sector to thrive over the next five years. **In consultation with 302 outdoor play stakeholders across Canada, Outdoor Play Canada identified nine major priorities for the outdoor play sector in Canada.** These priorities are:

- Promote the Health, Wellbeing and Developmental Benefits of Outdoor Play
- Promote, Protect, Preserve and Invest in Outdoor Play Environments
- Advocate for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Outdoor Play
- Ensure that Outdoor Play Initiatives are Land-Based and Represent the Diverse Cultures, Languages and Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples of North America

- Research and Support Data Collection on Outdoor Play
- Reframe Views on Safety and Outdoor Play
- Leverage Engagement Opportunities with the Outdoors During and After COVID-19
- Increase and Improve Professional Development Opportunities in Outdoor Play
- Expand and Enable Cross-Sectoral Connections/Collaborations

Within each priority, action items were identified to move the priority forward. Below are key action items we identified as being critical for local, provincial, and national leaders to act on to ensure the health and wellbeing of our children moving forward.

- Make outdoor play a core health promotion strategy for Canadians during, and in the eventual recovery from, the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Leverage the current opportunity of the pandemic to push the importance of outdoor play and recognize the advantages it can bring (such as funding opportunities). Preserve neighbourhood changes that have encouraged and facilitated spontaneous outdoor play (e.g., car-free streets, use of empty green space).
 - Support research on the role of outdoor play (in all its forms) in preserving mental, social and physical health during, and in the recovery from, the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Engage with Indigenous communities to understand Indigenous systems and research, and what that can look like in relation to Land-based outdoor play.
- Include all voices in decision-making (e.g., children, youth, families, communities, leaders, advocates).
 - Drive engagement across all age groups by connecting/collaborating with local organizations.
 - Develop inclusive Play Declarations across multiple levels of government in Canada. Ensure that governments promote and acknowledge that outdoor play is a right in all communities.
- Work together with regulatory and land-use planning bodies to promote and advocate for policies and licensing regulations that support quality outdoor play spaces.
 - Establish policies that ensure access to natural/play areas close to where people live, and that conserve safe, active transportation routes that have come about during COVID-19. Resilient cities have built environments that make it easy to access outdoor play. Make a connection between active transportation and outdoor play within national, provincial and local active transportation strategies currently being developed.
 - Assess, evaluate, preserve and improve access to sufficient, safe and high-quality outdoor play spaces, and advocate for equitable access for all. Community-building activities that aim to rehabilitate public outdoor spaces in low-income neighborhoods may be one strategy.
 - Support the inclusion of a diversity of plants (e.g., trees, shrubs, grasses, wildflowers) in environmental and ecological enhancement planning to enhance the health and wellness outcomes of any outdoor play space.
- Identify champions (including at the community level) and catalysts to achieve these actions.

Summary

Local, provincial, and national leaders need to be held to account so that any post-COVID-19 pandemic “return to normal” includes an adjustment in resource distribution, land utilization, and policy development that facilitates a recalibration of the indoor to outdoor time ratio of Canadians. Outdoor greenspaces must be preserved through efforts such as that of the Ottawa planning committee who recently rejected a development proposal to convert a Kanata golf course into a 1500-home subdivision¹⁷. We must implement a “new normal”

that helps get Canadians outside – to play, learn, teach, grow and develop as healthy, caring, connected and environmentally attentive stewards of each other, the land, water, plants and animals.

Now, more than ever, we need to trade rug burns for grass stains; slippers and pajamas for boots and snow suits; no trespassing signs for invitations to come and play; car dominance for open streets; and land development for green space preservation. Outdoor play can help keep the doctor (and COVID-19) away – *if in doubt send them out!*

We welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee further about our work.

About Outdoor Play Canada

Outdoor Play Canada is a network of advocates, practitioners, researchers and organizations working together to promote, protect, and preserve access to play in nature and the outdoors for all people living in Canada. Outdoor Play Canada's central priorities are to provide leadership and strategic direction for the outdoor play sector in Canada; amplify efforts and successes related to outdoor play; convene and facilitate collaborations among members of the outdoor play movement; and serve as a central portal of credible information on the outdoor play sector in Canada. Through these priorities we strive to galvanize the outdoor play movement to promote the health and wellness of Canadians and the environments in which we live.

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