

Playing During a Pandemic: Why Children Need Outdoor Play More Than Ever

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Every child has the right to play (International Play Association, 2012), especially outdoors. The benefits of outdoor play are long-lasting and are endorsed through a position statement targeting stakeholders who influence children's health and development (Tremblay et al., 2015). This statement was developed to support children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors, and aimed at key early years stakeholders, including parents, educators and caregivers, health and injury prevention professionals, school and child-care administrators, schools and municipalities, media, and government and policy-makers. It describes how spending time outdoors is fundamental to children's physical, mental, and emotional development, and offers a space for them to explore, experiment, and understand their surroundings (Tremblay et al., 2015).

When children participate in active outdoor play, they can move freely, take risks, and challenge themselves (e.g., climbing, exploring new environments); learn their own limits; become more confident, independent, and resilient; learn how to problem-solve; develop different movement behaviours; and foster healthy relationships (Tremblay et al., 2015). When children are outdoors, particularly in nature, they are happier, experience less anxiety, and have more energy (Brussoni et al., 2015). When children do not have the

opportunity to play outside, they are at a greater risk of developing mental illness (e.g., anxiety, depression) and chronic diseases later in life (Gray et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, children's opportunities to play freely outdoors have declined significantly over time, resulting in a rise in non-communicable chronic diseases (Tremblay et al., 2015). There has been growing advocacy around children's outdoor play; in Canada, this has been spearheaded by the Lawson Foundation's Outdoor Play Strategy (Alden, 2016) and by Outdoor Play Canada, a growing network of advocates, practitioners, researchers, and organizations focused on supporting access to play and nature in the outdoors (de Lannoy et al., n.d.).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Outdoor Play

The sudden emergence of COVID-19 and the public health protocols put in place to control the virus have both had a direct effect on outdoor play opportunities for children. Although emerging evidence has shown the virus to infect children less critically than adults, restrictions have been established to prevent the spread to the greater population (Public Health Ontario, 2020). These restrictions have resulted in the closures of schools, playgrounds, recreation centres, and parks, and have set

limits on social gatherings (Government of Canada, 2020).

As a result of these restrictions, Canadian children are spending more time indoors, sedentary, and on screens (Moore et al., 2020). Lockdowns in other parts of the world have revealed impacts on children's mental health. Parents in Italy and Spain reported a perceived change in their child's emotional well-being, observing symptoms such as difficulties concentrating, restlessness, and feelings of loneliness (Orgilés et al., 2020). The unexpected change in regular routine and sudden isolation from peers, educators, family members, and other social supports may have left children feeling a loss of control (Merenda & Martyn, 2020). These feelings are likely exacerbated by restrictions on how, where, and with whom, children can play.

Outdoor play serves as a unique mechanism for children to make sense of their surroundings while giving them the independence and sense of control that is particularly important during this time (Dodd & Gill, 2020). Through play, children are able to process difficult situations, express their emotions, and develop their social identities, all of which can help alleviate the stress and anxiety they may be feeling as a result of public health protocols to control the virus (Dodd & Gill, 2020). During these challenging times, children need play more than ever to help them cope with uncertainty and alleviate stress. Several Canadian organizations have released statements on the importance of outdoor play during the pandemic, and strongly recommend that early years settings prioritize and provide regular opportunities for quality outdoor play experiences (de Lannoy et al., n.d; Mayer, 2020; IPA Canada, n.d). Our Physical Literacy in the Early Years (PLEY) research team is supporting this call to action.

The Evolution of the PLEY Project and PLEY School

The PLEY research team was established at Dalhousie University, and includes an interdisciplinary and multi-institution

partnership of researchers focused on improving outdoor play experiences of children living in Nova Scotia (NS). As part of the Lawson Foundation's Outdoor Play Strategy, our PLEY project integrated loose parts into the outdoor spaces of 19 child care centres across NS and examined the impact on children's physical literacy and other aspects of health and development (Houser et al., 2016). Loose parts are natural and/or synthetic materials that can be moved, manipulated, carried, or combined in various ways (e.g. wooden planks, buckets, tubes) (Houser et al., 2016). The open-endedness of loose parts play affords children many physical, cognitive, and social-emotional benefits (Houser et al., 2016).

With funding from Research Nova Scotia (2019–2022), our team is integrating loose parts into the outdoor spaces of before- and after-school programs across NS. The first step will be to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the family unit, specifically the physical and mental health of children living in NS, and the role of outdoor play in supporting family health and well-being during this time. Our multi-methods approach with parents (surveys and interviews) and children (individual interviews and write, draw, show, and tell methodology) (Noonan et al., 2016), will address important gaps in the literature, most notably allowing children to share their lived experiences of the pandemic in terms of outdoor play opportunities and the impact on their physical and mental health.

We believe these findings will help solidify the importance of ensuring NS children have access to quality outdoor play experiences where they live, learn, and play, both during and after COVID-19. We will also work with educators to understand the benefits and challenges of delivering outdoor play, particularly during the pandemic, and provide training that fits the context of their play environment. Likewise, we will work with parents and community partners to inform the content and delivery of our training. Through this research, we hope that educators and other early years stakeholders, locally and nationally, will have the tools and resources they need to

provide quality outdoor play experiences for children during these challenging times.

Outdoor play is critical in helping children adapt to the uncertainty presented by COVID-19, while helping them keep physically and mentally well. While restrictions are in place to control the spread of the virus, more work needs to be done to support educators and stakeholders on how to provide quality outdoor play experiences for children during these uncertain times. Our PLEY School project will be a critical step in understanding how to support quality outdoor play during COVID-19, and ensuring that places and spaces in which children learn and play across NS provide an environment where children's health and development are optimized.

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