



CANADIAN  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION  
CANADIENNE DE  
SANTÉ PUBLIQUE

The Voice of Public Health  
La voix de la santé publique

---

# CHILDREN'S UNSTRUCTURED PLAY: FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

CHRISTINE PENTLAND, PROJECT OFFICER  
FRANK WELSH, DIRECTOR OF POLICY



# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge the land on which we gather, the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk) peoples



CANADIAN  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION  
CANADIENNE DE  
SANTÉ PUBLIQUE

The Voice of Public Health  
La voix de la santé publique

LAWSON  
FOUNDATION



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

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



# OBJECTIVES FOR TODAY

- To understand the benefits of unstructured play for healthy child development
- To understand the decision-making barriers to providing access to this type of play in school and municipal settings
- To identify solutions to make Canada more play-friendly



# AGENDA

- Importance of unstructured play
- Overview of project
- Activity 1: Barriers to play
- Activity 2: Facilitators to encourage play
- Activity 3: A Toolkit
- Activity 4: What's the next step?



CANADIAN  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION  
CANADIENNE DE  
SANTÉ PUBLIQUE

The Voice of Public Health  
La voix de la santé publique

# 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**

- Promotes mental, emotional and social health
  - can minimize depression, anxiety, aggression, sleep problems
- Improves physical health and physical literacy
- Improves risk management and problem solving skills
- Improves resiliency into adulthood

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



CANADIAN  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION  
CANADIENNE DE  
SANTÉ PUBLIQUE

The Voice of Public Health  
La voix de la santé publique



# THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM UNSTRUCTURED PLAY



# WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Children have become **less active, play less freely,**  
have **more limits** placed on them in and out of  
school, and are under **constant surveillance**



POSITION STATEMENT ON ACTIVE OUTDOOR PLAY

# Position



**Access to active play in nature and outdoors—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 child care, the community and nature.**

**PREAMBLE**

We conducted two systematic reviews to examine the best available scientific evidence on the net effect (i.e., balance of benefits vs. harms) of outdoor and risky active play. Other research and reviews were also consulted. This Position Statement applies to girls and boys (aged 3-12 years) regardless of ethnicity, race, or family socioeconomic status. Children who have a disability or a medical condition should also enjoy active outdoor play in compliance with guidance from a health professional.

**CONTEXT**

In an era of schoolyard ball bans and debates about safe-rooging, here we as a society test the appropriate balance between keeping children healthy and active and protecting them from serious harm? If we make too many rules about what they can and can't do, will we hinder their natural ability to develop and learn? If we make injury prevention the ultimate goal of outdoor play spaces, will they be any fun? Are children safer sitting on the couch instead of playing actively outside? We need to recognize the difference between danger and risk. And we need to value long-term health and fun as much as we value safety.

Risk is often seen as a bad word by parents, neighbours, care providers, insurance providers, schools, and municipalities. But in play, risk doesn't mean counting danger like skating on a ball beam lake or standing a preschooler in the park alone. It means the types of play children see as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but they can recognize and evaluate challenges according to their own ability. It means giving children the freedom to decide how high to climb to explore the woods, get dirty, play hide 'n seek, wander in their neighbourhood, balance, tumble and rough house, especially outdoors, so they can be active, build confidence, autonomy and resilience, develop skills, solve problems and learn their own limits. It's letting kids be kids—healthier, more active kids.

**“Outdoor play is safer than you think!”**

- The odds of total stranger abduction are about 1 in 1.4 million based on RCMP reports.<sup>23</sup> Being with friends outdoors may further reduce this number.
- Limb loss and head injuries unfortunately do happen, but major trauma is uncommon. Most injuries associated with outdoor play are minor.<sup>24,25</sup>
- Canadian children are eight times more likely to die as a passenger in a motor vehicle than from being hit by a vehicle when outside on foot or on a bike.<sup>26,24</sup>

**“There are consequences to keeping kids indoors—is it really safer?”**

- When children spend more time in front of screens they are more likely to be exposed to cyber predators and violence, and eat unhealthy snacks.<sup>27-29</sup>

**EVIDENCE**

• When children are outside they move more, sit less and play longer<sup>30-32</sup>—behaviours associated with improved cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body composition, bone density, cardiorespiratory and musculoskeletal fitness and aspects of mental, social and environmental health.<sup>33-35</sup>



# POSITION STATEMENT ON ACTIVE OUTDOOR PLAY

342 organizations supporting

Sparked the “play movement”



# PROJECT OBJECTIVE

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

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

### **Target audiences:**

- 1) Municipal and school decision-makers (primary)
- 2) Parents and caregiver (secondary)

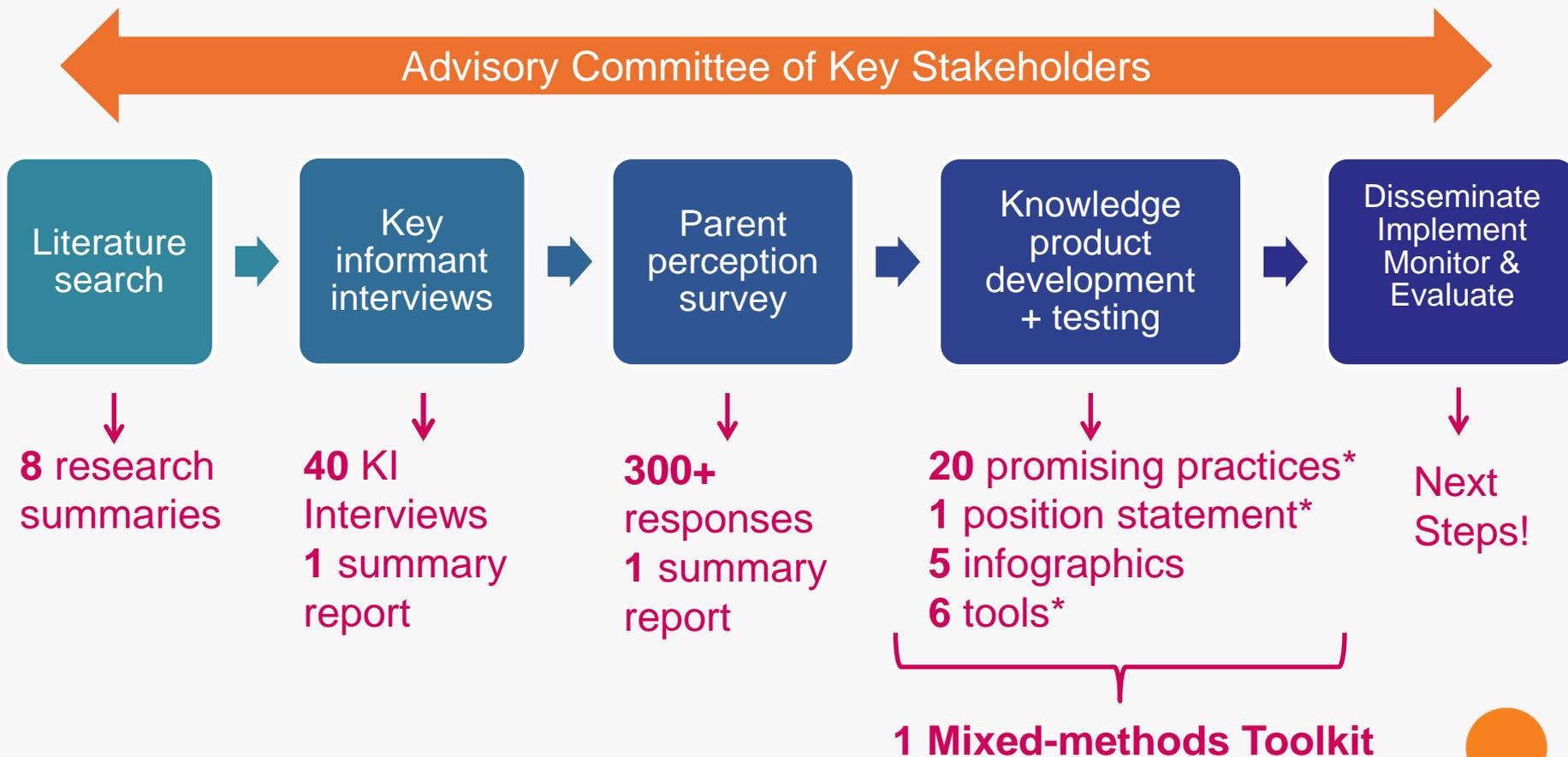


# GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What are the decision making challenges? Are there policy or legal limitations?
- How can we remediate these risks or reduce liability considerations?
- What are parents' perceptions of risk? Are they appropriate measures for establishing policy?



# APPROACH AND KEY OUTPUTS





# TABLE INTRODUCTIONS

Take a couple minutes to introduce yourselves  
among your tables and discuss,

**How do you connect to unstructured play?**

Also identify:

1 recorder

1 reporter



# ACTIVITY 1

To get you thinking, imagine when you were a child. What are some things that you could do then, which children today are restricted from doing? Why is this?

**Write down the barriers you perceive children face today, limiting their access to unstructured play:**

- At school?
- In the community?



# BARRIERS TO UNSTRUCTURED PLAY: WHAT WE HEARD FROM KEY INFORMANTS



# BARRIERS: POLICIES, LAWS, GUIDELINES, STANDARDS

## SCHOOL

- Lack of Ministry directed policies
- Teacher supervision & collective agreements
- Operational constraints

- Parent complaints
- Evidence-based best practice
- CSA Z614
- Risk managers & insurance

## MUNICIPAL

- Zoning & by-laws limiting play
- Shared land use agreements



## BARRIERS: LEGAL CONCERNS & DUTY OF CARE

### SCHOOL

Education Acts  
Day care acts

### COMMUNITY

Occupiers liability act **or**  
common law/case  
precedents

Negligence act: Joint  
and several liability



Fear of litigation



# BARRIERS: FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS (SCHOOL AND MUNICIPAL)

Access to funding

Building and maintenance costs

Insurance costs



# BARRIERS: RISK ADVERSE SOCIETY



Competitive society

Influences of traditional and social media

Parental peer pressure

## ACTIVITY II

Think of an ideal school or community environment where children can access play.

- What are the **facilitators** to accessing play?
- What **strategies or actions** can be implemented to support them?
- Consider the levels of influence:
  - Societal
  - Policies
  - Financial
  - Urban design



# A POLICY TOOL KIT

## Briefings

- Accessibility
- Parent Perception
- Educator Perception
- Recess
- Injuries
- Risk v. hazard
- What is play
- Mental Health
- Child friendly cities

## 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 Policies
- Play friendly cities



## ACTIVITY THREE

Given the results of the last two activities what should be added or removed?

Will it support your work ?

What should be our next steps?

# WHAT IS CPHA DOING TO INCREASE ACCESS TO UNSTRUCTURED PLAY?

- Toolkit targeting decision-makers to support development of strategies that improve access to unstructured play
  - completed and online by November 2018

If you are interested in pilot testing toolkit come speak to us!



# TAKE-AWAY ACTION ITEMS

To increase access to play think of one thing you can:

- Do as a parent, or
- Encourage your local school or community to do



# LONG TERM SOLUTION



***“Cities that meet the needs of children will not only create more resilient children, they will help to create more resilient cities.”***



CANADIAN  
PUBLIC HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION  
CANADIENNE DE  
SANTÉ PUBLIQUE

The Voice of Public Health  
La voix de la santé publique



# DISTINCTION BETWEEN: CHILD-FRIENDLY CITY AND PLAY-FRIENDLY CITY

- UNICEF Child-Friendly City Framework
  - the right of children to an environment that promotes a high quality of life
- Several jurisdictions have adopted a child-friendly accreditation system
  - Ex: Finland, France, Germany, Korea and others
- Criteria focuses on the entire scope of children's rights + their participation in local governance
  - Ex targets around: education, social services, equity, and secure living conditions



# WHAT IS A PLAY-FRIENDLY CITY?

- Considers **children's wellbeing and safe, healthy access to play infrastructure** in its approach to urban planning
- Provides possibilities for activity that meet the diverse **needs of children across stages of development**
- Prioritizes access to **play in children's everyday environments** (home, streets, neighbourhoods, etc.), rather than simply in formal dedicated play spaces
- Requires both political investment and **active participation by children** in decision-making



# CRITERIA FOR A PLAY-FRIENDLY CITY

1. Participation of **children in decision-making**
2. Safe and **active routes** around the community
3. Safe and **accessible informal play** environments
4. **Evidence-informed design** of formal play spaces



## EXAMPLE ACTIONS

Criteria	Ex. Action
<b>Participation of children in decision-making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Include the voices of children of diverse ages, abilities, and perspectives</li><li>• Provide direct access to decision-makers through municipal roles for children</li></ul>
<b>Safe and active routes around the community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Utilize design elements to calm traffic and reduce speed, especially in school zones</li><li>• Provide active commute programming to and from school, including with reduced supervision</li></ul>



## EXAMPLE ACTIONS

Criteria	Ex. Action
<b>Safe and accessible informal play environments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Update everyday public space to be inclusive of child play</li><li>• Preserve play-friendly outdoor green space</li></ul>
<b>Evidence-informed design of formal play spaces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure play spaces offer age-appropriate challenges across many developmental stages</li><li>• Develop play spaces through community input from diverse children and parents/caregivers</li></ul>

# BENEFITS OF A STANDARD DESIGNATION

- Encouraging the monitoring and evaluation of changes that affect child wellbeing
- Highlighting key areas for capacity building and multi-sectoral collaboration
- Creating momentum for long-term commitment and sustainable interventions, in both aiming to reach several criteria and to be eligible for renewal of certification
- Allowing earmarked funding and resources for a specific child-focused initiatives
- Driving positive competition among municipalities to achieve measurable results
- Improving the city's public reputation and perceived prestige
- Fostering community participation and connections between citizens and government

# PLAY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

## Child Participation in Decision Making

### **Norway, Law gives children a voice in Urban Planning and Municipal Legislation**

- 1981: municipalities must appoint a children representative to defend children's interests in land use cases
- National Policy Guidelines (NPG): municipal legislation planning process must ensure children's POV are considered and given opportunity to participate

### **Leeds, England, Child Friendly Leeds initiative, Children's Mayor**

- Goal of becoming a city where children are valued and supported
- Each school enters a Grade 5 candidate; any citizen under the age of 18 votes
- Children's Mayor roles (1 yr term):
  - develops and implements a manifesto with City Council to make the city better for children; attends civic visits; perspective on municipal issues

# PLAY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

## Safe and Active Routes around the Community

### South Korea, Model School Zone Program

- To create safe active transport routes between places children frequent (residential areas, elementary schools, and childcare facilities)
- Urban planning improvements included:
  - traffic calming measures (i.e. speed bumps);
  - universal right-of-way for pedestrians;
  - clearer barriers between roads and sidewalks;
  - painted roads with messages about child and school zone safety;
  - skid-proof pavement; and
  - ban on street parking on all roads leading to school entrances.
- 32% fewer traffic accidents involving children/year, & cut average vehicle speed near schools in half



# PLAY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

## Safe and Accessible Informal Play Environments

- **Bogota, Colombia**
- Revamp of childcare centres across the city through the creation of ‘children’s priority zones’.
- Sectioned-off spaces around the centres to allow for:
  - Play streets programming;
  - Pop-up parks;
  - Enhanced landscaping for nature play. The zones will use wayfinding principles to help guide children through space, but still allow free exploration.

# PLAY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

## Safe and Accessible Informal Play Environments

- **Woonerf (Norway) or Home Zones (UK)**
- “Inclusive and liveable streets”
- residential streets in which pedestrians share the street with vehicles
- Cars follow the pedestrians’ pace (15 km/hr).
- One of the key objectives of Woonerfs/Home Zones is to increase the opportunity for children to play in the streets



# Safe and Accessible Informal Play Environments Woonerf (Norway) or Home Zones (UK)

VISIBLE  
ENTRANCES

PHYSICAL  
BARRIERS

SHARED AND  
PAVED SPACE

LANDSCAPING AND  
STREET FURNITURE



@LiorSteinberg



# PLAY-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

## Evidence-Informed Design of Formal Play Spaces

### European Playground Standard, Designing for Gradated Challenge

- Playground design by this Standard is grounded in the concept of graduated challenge to engage children across developmental stages in one play space
- All equipment is designed to be accessed by a three-year-old and older
- Incorporates a risk-benefit assessment to designing play spaces



# CALGARY'S PLAY CHARTER

Calgary is committed to promoting play, providing play opportunities, and educating all Calgarians of the importance of play to our community. As signatories to this charter, organizations concerned with positive childhood development, it is our responsibility to promote, enable, and work towards comprehensive play opportunities for all.

## PLAY LOOKS LIKE

- ✓ Children of all abilities, alone or in groups, engaged, focused, solving problems, having fun. It can look physical, imaginary, creative, dramatic or social, energetic or lethargic.

## PLAY SOUNDS LIKE

- ✓ Laughter, conflict, imaginative stories. It can be boisterous or silent.

## PLAY FEELS LIKE

- ✓ Excitement and challenge. It can be scary, wondrous, doubtful, hesitant, thrilling and magnificent.

## WE BELIEVE

- ✓ Play develops a core set of skills for healthy well being.
- ✓ That play is a vital component of childhood; it is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.
- ✓ Play is fun, uncertain, challenging and flexible.
- ✓ When children have opportunities to play they use creativity, innovation, and reflection to learn, experiment, solve problems, create new worlds, test boundaries, assess risk, and meet challenges.
- ✓ Play is a natural state for a child.

## WE WILL

- ✓ Support play that encourages physical, emotional and social development.
- ✓ Understand and communicate that risk is a valuable component to play, and we will encourage, support and enable play that allows children to develop risk-taking skills.
- ✓ Create environments that children can control – providing flexibility in materials and spaces that promote inquiry and evoke curiosity.
- ✓ Embrace the geography and climate of Calgary and support children to play outdoors all year-round.
- ✓ Educate and inform adults, using common language across all organizations, on the importance of play.
- ✓ Involve children in the decisions that affect their lives.
- ✓ Report on our organization's experience with play.

# CANADIAN HIGHLIGHT: CALGARY PLAY CHARTER

- Outlines why Calgary believes play is important and “how, in working together, we can create a community that supports and encourages comprehensive play opportunities for all Calgary children”
- Addresses play as a critical social component to a healthy city
- Commits to play advocacy, programming, and policies
- Accountability framework for those who sign-on
- Over 36 Calgary + area organizations signed