

# It's playtime!

Active play and unstructured  
play for child development





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**“[P]lay is persistently undervalued, and children’s opportunities for uninterrupted free play – both indoors and out – are under threat.”<sup>1</sup>**

The period up to the age of nine is a crucial time for the acquisition and mastery of motor skills (walking, running, jumping, crawling, catching, dancing, etc.). With increased confidence in their abilities, children enjoy taking part in a wide range of physical activities that foster their social integration and help them enjoy a physically active lifestyle throughout their lives.

This document on the importance of active play and unstructured play for child development is an initiative of the Table sur le mode de vie physiquement actif (TMVPA). It is intended for those working in education and early childcare services, as well as in municipal, community and other associations. It is a tool they can use to reflect on their current practices and on the significant role they can play in children’s lives by providing them with ample opportunities for active play and unstructured play in environments conducive to it.

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1. Jane Hewes, *Let the Children Play: Nature’s Answer to Early Learning* (Montréal: Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, 2006), 1.







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# Play, a source of learning, pleasure and satisfaction

**“One of the main characteristics of play is the pleasure that children derive from it. [It is] the main tool whereby children express themselves, learn and develop.”<sup>2</sup>**

Each child is unique and has an innate curiosity, a desire to play, a need to socialize and a profound desire to learn. Play sparks the imagination, teaches children how to live harmoniously with others, and fosters socio-affective, motor, cognitive and language learning.

It is, therefore, essential that educators and other stakeholders in the area of child development be able to set up play environments that properly address children’s needs and interests.



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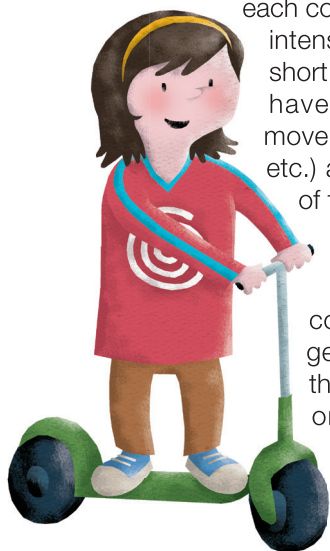
2. Québec, Ministère de la Famille, *Meeting Early Childhood Needs: Québec's Educational Program for Childcare Services* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2007), 20.

# Active play

**“When they have access to stimulating environments conducive to their motor development, children are gradually able to master muscle control, posture, physical coordination and their sense of balance . . . .”<sup>3</sup>**

Active play refers to recreational activities that require children to get moving. It is through movement that children discover the broad range of actions and possibilities offered by their bodies, as well as ways of interacting with others. Low- to high-intensity active play takes a variety of forms that call upon different parts of the body. Children naturally prefer short, high-intensity play over protracted activities of relatively constant intensity.

While physically active play obviously fosters the development of children’s motor skills, it also plays a key role in their global development. The learning that children acquire through active play is different from what they get from sedentary forms, but each complements the other. For example, in high-intensity games in which children can become short of breath and potentially overheated, they have to more consciously manage their movements (avoiding obstacles and collisions, etc.) and be mindful of risks, conflicts, the rules of the game, and so on.



The mastery of motor skills facilitates the emergence of a strong feeling of competence and self-confidence. Children get more enjoyment and satisfaction when they engage in a variety of physical activities on a daily basis because they want to reproduce the feeling of gratification in new activities. But for this to happen, “it is important to offer them as many

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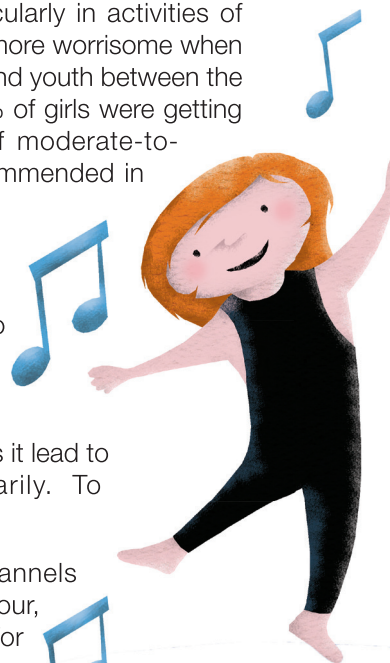
3. Québec, Table sur le mode de vie physiquement actif, *It’s playtime: Messages regarding the implementation of joint initiatives to foster the development of children’s motor skills* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2017), 4.

opportunities as possible to move, explore, interact, take up challenges and enjoy a broad range of pleasant and diverse motor experiences.”<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, it has been observed that sedentary activities have been taking up more and more time in children’s lives, leaving less time for active play, particularly in activities of medium to high intensity. This is all the more worrisome when we recall that “in school-aged children and youth between the ages of 5 and 17, 13% of boys and 6% of girls were getting an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily as recommended in the guidelines.”<sup>5</sup>

Some adults consider that the greater intensity of active play makes it more “annoying” and noisy and therefore too over-stimulating for children. It is normal, however, for children, who love to play and have plenty of energy to spare, to be short of breath and overheated. Does it lead to undue restlessness? Not necessarily. To enjoyment? Most certainly!

One thing is certain: active play channels energy and reduces aggressive behaviour, tension and agitation. A natural outlet for stress, it is calming, reduces boredom and satisfies children’s fundamental need to acquire the skills they need for their global development.



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4. Québec, Table sur le mode de vie physiquement actif, *It's playtime: Messages regarding the implementation of joint initiatives to foster the development of children's motor skills* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2017), 4.
  5. Statistics Canada, Canadian Health Measures Survey: *Directly measured physical activity of children and youth*, 2012 and 2013.  
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2015001/article/14136-eng.htm>

## It's your turn to play!

- What obstacles limit the frequency or intensity of play? How can I overcome them?
- How many opportunities do children have during the day to take part in sedentary activities? To engage in physically active play?
- Do I cut down on the frequency of sedentary activities in order to provide more opportunities for active play?
- Am I able to tell the difference between rambunctious play and fighting in a game?
- Do I feel comfortable in situations in which children run, squabble, make noise and hide? Do I tend to intervene? If so, how exactly?





# Unstructured *play*

**Unstructured play initiated by the child boosts self-confidence and fosters autonomy, creativity and interactions with others.**

Thanks to this decision-making power, which is unhampered by procedures or rules determined by adults, children discover that they are capable of showing initiative, structuring and developing their thoughts, and successfully meeting challenges commensurate with their abilities. These successes have a decisive influence on their global development.

Of course, both structured and unstructured play have their places in child development. Each has its own strengths and facilitates its own particular type of learning. The younger children are, however, the more freedom they need to learn—in their own way and at their own pace—how their body functions, so that they can better understand and interact with their environment, take their place in a group and be responsible for the consequences of their actions.

Unstructured play often raises questions about the roles and responsibilities of educators and other stakeholders. Whatever their environment, unstructured play calls upon them to provide the appropriate preparation, support and guidance.

## **It's your turn to play!**

- What are my beliefs (or those of my organization) or assumptions with regard to unstructured play?
- Do I allow children to initiate their own games?
- Do I observe the children to identify their skills and abilities?  
Do I have confidence in their own abilities?
- How does my behaviour influence the children in their games?
- How can I organize my environment so that my behaviour does not unduly impact the children during unstructured play?

# Unstructured *and* active play

**Play can be simultaneously unstructured AND active. It enables children to create their own physically active games.**

This way, they learn through their own experience how to:

- control their bodies
- recognize their strengths and limitations and develop their abilities
- consistently behave in ways that make things safer for them and those around them
- take initiative and try their hand at success

Children proceed at their own pace and take up challenges commensurate with their abilities. As they realize that they can do certain things, their confidence in their abilities grows in leaps and bounds. They continue to learn and gain more autonomy.

## **It's your turn to play!**

- Do you recognize the role that unstructured, active play should have in the global development of the child?
- Which, if any, of my beliefs or fears might limit unstructured, active play?
- How often during the day can children engage in unstructured, active play?
- Is the current organization of facilities, indoors and out, conducive to unstructured, active play? What things could be changed to make the environment more favourable to it?



## Children are more *active* outdoors

**A number of research studies show that the time spent outdoors has a positive impact on young children's levels of physical activity.<sup>6 7 8</sup>**

In an environment conducive to freedom of movement, children can discover and explore activities that burn more energy. In other words, the more time children spend outside, the more physically active they become.

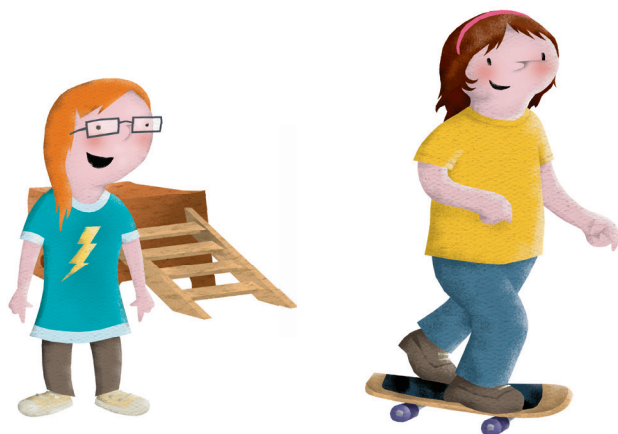
Natural features or spaces can present physical and cognitive challenges that are highly useful in child development. They can, facilitate the development of a stronger spatial sense and the acquisition of various motor activities, and help in problem solving and risk management. All of these are assets that can serve children in other contexts as well.

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6. Ferrierra, et al., "Environmental Correlates of Physical Activity in Youth: A Review and Update," *Obesity Reviews*, 8 (2) (2007): 129-54.
  7. I. Fjortoft, and J. Sageie, "The Natural Environment as a Playground for Children: Landscape Description and Analyses of a Natural Playscape," *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 48 (1-2) (2000): 83-97.
  8. J. F Sallis, et al., "A Review of Correlates of Physical Activity of Children and Adolescents," *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 32 (5) (2000): 963-75.

In the Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, we read: “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 child care, the community and nature.”<sup>9</sup>

### It’s your turn to play!

- Which obstacles limit the frequency of active outdoor play? Which ones limit its intensity level?
- Does the outdoor environment provide children with opportunities to enjoy different kinds of active play experiences?
- Are adults and the children entrusted to their care adequately equipped to take part in active play throughout the year?



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9. ParticipACTION, *The Biggest Risk is Keeping Kids Indoors: The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth* (Toronto, 2015), 8.

## The adult's role in all this?

**The adult's role is to provide children with an environment conducive to their development and to support and guide them in their play activities. This requires extensive observation and attentiveness to the children's needs.**

Operating on the principle that **children themselves have the prime responsibility for their own development**, adults observe and support them as they learn, and help to bolster their autonomy. **Adults must not do children's tasks for them but, instead:**

- encourage their initiatives and make sure that play continues to be enjoyable for them
- observe how they use their current abilities and anticipate those still in the process of development
- provide them with opportunities adapted to their abilities and pace of learning
- adapt their own attitudes and behaviour to children's stages of development and needs

By proceeding in these ways, adults exert a direct and positive influence on children's level of confidence and their perception of their abilities.

**A stimulating environment that presents regular challenges**, one in which children can give free rein to their imaginations and their need to move, can be set up both indoors and out. In a space organized to facilitate unstructured, active play, children can enjoy activities that help them to develop their skills, whatever their current level of physical development and aptitudes. A space of this kind, where they can run, jump, crawl, roll, climb, etc., will enable them to test their limits and abilities.



Children also need time to stop and reflect, to be adventurous, and to repeat actions, again and again, in a variety of situations in order to take control of them. For these reasons, the possibilities must also be as diversified as possible.

When creating a play area, it is essential to take into consideration the various kinds of activities that children will engage in there. **A broad range of equipment that is both appealing and appropriate to the stages of child development** should spark their curiosity, encourage them to explore, stimulate their creativity, allow them to daydream and bring them closer to understanding themselves and others. The promise of thrilling challenges is undoubtedly a great way to get children moving.

**The availability and accessibility of equipment and material are also essential**, since the objective is, after all, to allow children to play and burn energy and to enjoy themselves in the process, whenever they feel the need to do so. With free access to the right equipment and material, children gain control over their environment; they also seize opportunities to learn the things that serve their development and foster their motor skills, creativity, autonomy and self-confidence.

Since the desire to play is an intrinsic part of children's nature, the time in which they engage in play is properly their own. However, it is important to **allow children enough time** to expand on and enrich their play activities.



Hence the idea of providing children with environments where they can, alone or with others, invent games that are truly their own, are at a desired level of intensity and of a type that allows them to test their skills and acquire new ones.

### **It's your turn to play!**

- How can I create an environment conducive to unstructured, active play?
- Is there anything I need to change about my habits, attitude or ways of working in order to foster unstructured, active play and provide the children engaged in it with appropriate guidance?
- Do the children have easy access at all times to a broad range of material suitable for their stage of development?
- How can I modify the storage space for materials to make it more accessible for unstructured, active play?

Organizations and their administrators have a crucial role to play in supporting and training educators and other stakeholders and in creating indoor and outdoor environments conducive to unstructured, active play.

- Have I provided for the training and support of educators and other stakeholders in my organization?
- Do we have organizational tools (documents, policies, guidelines, regulations, etc.) that foster unstructured, active play?
- Are all the educators and other stakeholders familiar with our philosophy and procedures?
- Can I make group purchases of materials that meet the children's needs?
- Can I make agreements with other organizations in my community (city, school board, etc.) to gain access to play spaces (park, pool, wooded area, bicycle path, etc.) conducive to unstructured, active play?

# Being comfortable with risk

**Just over half (51%) of parents in 12 countries who have children 18 years old or under say that they would like for their children to be able to play more outdoors but are too worried about their safety.<sup>10</sup>**

To ensure their children's safety, some adults tend to keep them close by, in the house. This way, parents feel that they are reducing the risks to which their children might otherwise be exposed. Thus the constraints placed on play are often needlessly increased. The high-intensity games that children enjoy so much—chases, mock battles, races, ballgames, etc.—are sometimes reined in due to concerns about safety. The ideal, rather, would be to strive for a balance between allowing children to be physically active and protecting them from real harm.<sup>11</sup>



Although the basic principles of safety must be kept in mind when planning and carrying out activities, the latter must support the child's desire to explore and limit the number of restrictions placed on his or her need to be active and enjoy it.

**A danger: something the child doesn't see; a challenge: something the child does see and decides to deal with—or not.<sup>12</sup>**

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10. IKEA, *The Play Report* (Leiden: Inter IKEA Systems, 2015), 15.

11. Participation, *The Biggest Risk is Keeping Kids Indoors*, 41.

12. R. Moore, et al., *Play for All Guidelines: Planning, Design and Management of Outdoor Play Settings for All Children: Workbook* (Berkeley, CA: 1987).

Of course, unstructured, active play can involve certain risks,<sup>13</sup> such as scratches, bruises and torn or soiled clothing. But in a safe place suitable for child development, children have everything needed to play freely without any impediments to initiative or learning.

**Risk is beneficial to children, who thereby learn to test their limits and acquire confidence and autonomy.** It is important that adults support them in taking risks, particularly by observing and encouraging them and, if necessary, setting specific limits. With this type of non-invasive supervision, children learn to evaluate and manage risks in their play activities as well as in other aspects of their lives.

In its guide, *Activités extérieures dans les centres de la petite enfance et les garderies*, the Ministère de la Famille states that in educational childcare spaces and in planning activities, it is necessary to provide spaces and activities that allow children to take certain risks. “These measures will ensure that the boldest children will not seek out challenges that are too dangerous for them, thereby endangering their own safety. It is through experiences such as these, in which children climb, jump, slide, etc., that they develop and apply the self-protective habits they need to stay safe.”<sup>14</sup> The message to take away from this is: **overprotectiveness can be a real obstacle.**<sup>15</sup>

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13. Risk inherent in the practice: ordinary, and normally predictable, hazards associated with an activity. ÉDUCALOI, *Responsibility for Injuries in Sports*. <https://www.educaloi.qc.ca/en/capsules/responsibility-injuries-sports>

14. Québec, Ministère de la Famille, *Gazelle et Potiron: Cadre de référence pour créer des environnements favorables à la saine alimentation, au jeu actif et au développement moteur en services de garde éducatifs à l'enfance* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2014) [Free translation].

15. Québec, Table sur le mode de vie physiquement actif, *It's playtime: Messages regarding the implementation of joint initiatives to foster the development of children's motor skills* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2017), 13.

## It's your turn to play!

- Does the organization of play areas comply with safety standards? If not, what improvements could be made?
- What beliefs and fears do I have with regard to safety in unstructured, active play activities?
- Do I curb children's play activities out of fear that I'll be held responsible if there's an accident?
- Which safety rules could be revised to give children more freedom in active play activities?
- Do I fully understand the difference between danger and risk?
- Given that there is no such thing as zero risk, do I accept the element of risk that can exist in certain unstructured, active play activities? Am I comfortable with this aspect of my role as an adult? How do I evaluate and manage risk?
- Do I inform parents regarding my organization's position on active play and on the risks and benefits this involves for children and their development?





## Now it's *your turn to play!*

Here are a few examples of methods and strategies you could use to promote active play and unstructured play:

- Set aside as many periods as possible to give children more opportunities to play during the day.
- Encourage children to make decisions for themselves and to create their own active play activities.
- Take every opportunity to go outdoors because, there, children feel freer to engage in higher-intensity play (running, climbing, jumping, etc.).
- Set aside active play periods in a variety of areas so that children can enjoy diversified experiences.
- Organize the space and the environment in ways that encourage children to take up stimulating challenges; you might, for example, provide them with a broad range of materials that are appealing and suited to their size and abilities.
- Make the children's interests and strengths your focus, encourage them and congratulate them on their achievements.



# Things are really moving!

Active play and unstructured play are a source of learning, enjoyment and satisfaction, for it is through it that children fine-tune their motor, cognitive, language and socioemotional skills, come to understand themselves and learn how to live harmoniously with others. While the desire to play is innate in children, the road to independence is strewn with obstacles.

It is hoped that parents and all those who work on behalf of children (in educational institutions, municipal organizations and in recreational and childcare services, etc.) understand the importance of active play and unstructured play in children's global development. Their role is essential because it is they who guide children, create learning opportunities for them and provide them with spaces (both inside and out) where they can play as they wish in activities of their own making.

By acting as supporters and guides, adults foster the acquisition of physically active lifestyle habits at a very young age. In this way, children discover early on the pleasures of play while developing their full potential. And there is a good chance that these habits, which were so beneficial to them in childhood, will stay with them into adolescence and adulthood.



## Additional reading resources

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