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## Evidence-Based Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)\*

### Learning objective:

- To provide evidence-informed answers to concerns and complaints that could drive risk-mitigating decisions and limit children's unstructured play.

### Learning outcomes:

- Have the knowledge and confidence to provide evidence-informed responses to parents, staff (i.e. educators, play workers, etc.) or other decision-makers (i.e. municipal or school board officials) concerned about unstructured play.
- Have the knowledge to support decision-making that increases access to unstructured play.
- Reduce parent, staff or decision-maker concerns/complaints regarding unstructured play.

Question/Concern	How to respond	What does the evidence say?
What is children's unstructured play?	<p>Unstructured play happens when children follow their own instincts, ideas, and interests without an imposed purpose or outcome. It provides opportunities for challenge and exploring boundaries, which allows the child to determine their limits. This type of play involves children personally directing their play without adult intervention.</p> <p>During unstructured play, children choose freely what happens in any given moment based on their individual or collective group interests and ideas. Additionally, children are intrinsically motivated to continue engaging in play, and</p>	<p>Children's unstructured play is <b>freely chosen</b> (a child chooses when, if and how to play), <b>intrinsically motivated</b> (a child plays because they are motivated internally to do so), and <b>personally directed</b> (a child individually and/or collectively directs their own play. It is not initiated in an organized, planned or formal way.<sup>1</sup> and can include elements of risky play, which involves thrilling and exciting forms of play that can be placed in six categories:<sup>2</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• play at heights;</li><li>• play at speed (i.e. riding a bike fast down a hill);</li><li>• play with tools or loose parts;</li></ul>

\* Additional frequently asked questions can be found at: [www.outsideplay.ca](http://www.outsideplay.ca).

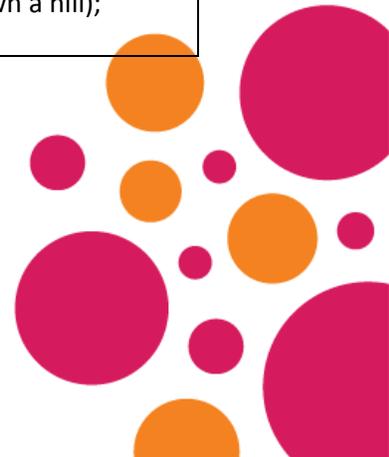
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	<p>are not motivated by external rewards.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● play with various elements</li> <li>● rough-and-tumble play; and</li> <li>● play where children can disappear or get lost.</li> </ul>
<p>Why is children's unstructured play important?</p>	<p>When children engage in unstructured play they experience a number of benefits important for healthy child development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>physical health</b> benefits from promoting healthy weights and reducing sedentary behaviours like screen time;</li> <li>• <b>mental and emotional health</b> benefits like positive self-concept, and supporting the formation and maintenance of friendships;</li> <li>• <b>social health</b> from promoting team work and aiding children's ability to communicate, empathise, cooperate, and compromise;</li> <li>• <b>cognitive skills</b> development, which can promote learning, concentration, and good behaviour in the classroom;</li> <li>• <b>resiliency and risk management skills</b> from providing children the opportunity to experience uncertainty and develop physical and emotional reactions and coping skills; and</li> <li>• <b>environmental health</b> benefits by promoting the formation of a child's eco-identity and care for the natural world.</li> </ul> <p>Further, children are often the most engaged when they are able to lead their own play, and when they contribute to the planning and organizing of that play. They value being active participants, rather than passive listeners and followers in more structured activities.</p> <p><i>(Provide infographic handout on benefits of play as a</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Play is an integral part of every child's healthy development and is embedded in Article 31 in the Convention on the Rights of a Child.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>● The Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play (2015) states that when children are able to engage in unstructured play "they move more, sit less and play longer — 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>4</sup></li> </ul> <p>Further evidence on the benefits to healthy child development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Physical health and gross motor skills:</b> Active, unstructured play reduces sedentary behaviours, helps promote healthy weights and improves motor skills.<sup>4</sup> It reduces adiposity and improves musculoskeletal fitness and cardiovascular health.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>● <b>Mental and emotional health:</b> Unstructured play promotes children's mental and emotional wellbeing,<sup>4</sup> such as positive-self-concept<sup>6</sup> and self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> It supports the formation and maintenance of friendships, which promotes the maintenance of good mental health,<sup>7</sup> while physically active play may decrease anxiety and depressive symptoms.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>● <b>Social health and team work:</b> Unstructured play helps children improve their social competence,<sup>8</sup> including emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy and the ability to communicate effectively in situations</li> </ul>

	<i>supplement to this discussion)</i>	<p>that involve compromise and cooperation.<sup>8</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Learning and attention at school:</b> It has been shown to promote cognitive skills development (attention, concentration, ability to stay on task, and memory)<sup>8,9</sup> and improve behaviour in class.<sup>7,8</sup></li> <li>● <b>Resiliency and risk management skills:</b> When children experience uncertainty during challenging play, they develop emotional reactions, physical capabilities, coping skills, and improve their capacity to manage adversity.<sup>10-12</sup> Effective coping skills promote resilience and good mental health to thrive in adolescence and adulthood.<sup>13</sup></li> </ul>
Aren't structured activities more important?	Children should engage in a variety of structured and unstructured activities. Too many structured activities can make a child feel stressed or anxious.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Organized activities have a developmental benefit but the danger lies in excessively pushing children towards them, resulting in anxiety and stress.<sup>14</sup></li> <li>● For optimal health benefits, children and youth (aged 5–17 years) require several hours a week of a variety of structured and unstructured activities, including unstructured play.<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>
What value do loose parts provide to children, like playing with crates, bungee cords, or pieces of wood?	Loose parts allow children to create their own play culture; children decide what an object is and what they are going to do with it, as opposed to an external designer who has predetermined the purpose. Their play with loose parts promotes creativity while allowing the child to develop problem solving skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When children play with loose parts they are more active and more likely to interact with their peers than on traditional playgrounds with fixed equipment.<sup>16</sup> Loose parts play may also help children become more social, creative, and resilient.<sup>16</sup> In school outdoor curriculums, loose parts can simultaneously help educators and children be more active, and appreciate risk and challenge during children's play.<sup>16</sup> This is because interacting with loose parts during play that do not have purpose can test children's physical prowess and help them develop cooperation and communication with peers, which encourages them to play more.<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>
Isn't it too	Having children play outside in a variety of weather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● There are a number of physical health benefits from</li> </ul>

<p>cold/wet to play outside?</p>	<p>conditions provides the opportunity to teach important life skills, like dressing appropriately for the weather, managing discomfort, and developing resilience.</p>	
<p>Why is it important to play or learn outdoors?</p>	<p>There are a number of physical, cognitive, and social health benefits of going outside. Aside from increased physical activity levels, access to outdoor play can help improve children's conduct and wellbeing. It also encourages greater learning at school, while allowing them to develop an emotional connection to nature that encourages them to care for their environments.</p> <p>Keeping children inside can expose them to sedentary behaviours, like screen time, and they miss out on the emotional, mental, social, and physical benefits that outdoor, unstructured play provides for healthy development.</p>	<p>children's outdoor play, like improved cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body composition, bone density, and cardiorespiratory and musculoskeletal fitness,<sup>4</sup> while outdoor play in natural environments can increase social interaction and creativity. There is also evidence of a link between access to green space, improved children's conduct and overall well-being.<sup>17</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When children have the opportunity to spend time regularly in a natural setting, playing and exploring, they form an "eco-identity". This is an emotional connection to that space, forming the basis for an ethic of care for the environment.<sup>17</sup></li> <li>● Studies have shown that children who engage with curricula outdoors in green space demonstrate greater knowledge gain compared to indoor curricula.<sup>17</sup></li> <li>● Keeping children inside can expose them to more sedentary screen time and unhealthy food while depriving them of the benefits that outdoor, unstructured play has for healthy emotional, mental, social, and physical development.<sup>6,18</sup></li> </ul>
<p>My child came home from school with an injury from unstructured play. I would like this activity to be removed/banned.</p>	<p>It is understandable you're concerned for your child's safety, and these concerns are appreciated. Children actually learn new skills when we allow them to engage in unstructured play, and they're less likely to have more serious injuries later on. They are able to learn about their physical capabilities which allow them to rely less on adults to manage their environments.</p> <p>Preventing access to unstructured play can deprive children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When children experience uncertainty in play, they can develop emotional reactions, physical capabilities, coping skills, and the capacity to manage adversity.<sup>12,13,19</sup></li> <li>● Unstructured play can equip children with risk management skills,<sup>6</sup> allowing them to rely less on adults to manage dangers for them.<sup>20</sup></li> <li>● Children learn about their bodies and improve their physical literacy.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>● Preventing access to challenging or risky play activities can deprive children of the opportunity to develop risk-management skills necessary to thrive as they</li> </ul>
<p>This activity looks too risky and I'm afraid my child will</p>	<p>of the opportunity to develop risk-management skills that are necessary for them to thrive as they grow older. These skills include learning how to navigate risky circumstances and environments, knowing personal physical limits, how to</p>	

<p>get hurt. Why should my child engage in unstructured play?</p>	<p>cooperate with peers, and solve unforeseen problems.</p>	<p>grow older.<sup>21</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children are more likely to get injured during organized sports than unstructured outdoor play.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>
<p>I've noticed that teachers at my child's school are letting children do things like hold sticks and climb trees, why aren't they stopping them?</p>	<p>Society has become overly accustomed to adults directing children's activities, solving their problems and navigating their social worlds for them. When adults step back from that role, children learn to direct themselves and discover their own interests, which could provide opportunities to solve problems, manage emotions, and navigate social dynamics. Children thrive when there is an element of challenge or risk in play, and when this is facilitated or supported in a controlled manner.</p>	
<p>I've heard that access to recess can sometimes be limited. When could this happen and should it?</p>	<p>Recess might be withheld for a variety of reasons, including punitive measures for behaviour, providing extra time for academic "catch-up", or during certain weather conditions. However, withholding recess can be counterproductive because recess provides time and space for unstructured play, which offers many benefits. It can be an opportunity for children to improve their emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy, and teamwork skills. It can also promote cognitive skills development, such as learning and attention, and improve behaviour in the classroom.</p> <p>Unstructured play can be especially beneficial for children with behavioural problems because it provides them with opportunities to control aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration. It also provides the opportunity for children to form and maintain friendships, which is important for social and emotional development.</p> <p><i>(Provide infographic on recess as supplement to this</i></p>	<p>Unstructured play during recess can provide many opportunities for children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children can improve their emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy, and teamwork skills.<sup>8,10.</sup></li> <li>Recess can provide children with behavioural problems with opportunities for social and emotional learning, including the ability to control aggression and regulate feelings of anger and frustration.<sup>11</sup></li> <li>It can help in the formation and maintenance of friendships which supports social and emotional development and maintenance of good mental health.<sup>9</sup></li> <li>Children can experience academic achievement. Physical activity breaks at school have been shown to improve grades and standardized test scores, while positive associations have been found between recess and cognitive skills development (attention, concentration, ability to stay on task, and memory).<sup>22</sup> Teachers have also reported that unstructured play at</li> </ul>

<p>Why are you encouraging outdoor, unstructured play at home? What about strangers and injuries on the road?</p>	<p><i>discussion)</i></p> <p>Outdoor play at home is important. Serious injuries and kidnapping are both very rare, but if you are nervous, there's safety in numbers. Find other parents in your community who are willing to allow their children outside for unstructured play at the same time you're home. You should also teach your children to navigate neighbourhood traffic, how to look before they cross the street, and brainstorm safe spaces where they can play freely.</p>	<p>recess can promote better behaviour in class.<sup>7,22</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The likelihood of getting kidnapped is very rare in Canada. In 2014, there were 41,342 missing child reports, of which only 29 were related to non-parent abduction while 1 to 2 cases over a 2 year period were true stranger abductions (Canada-wide data can be found at: <a href="http://injuryevidence.ca/">http://injuryevidence.ca/</a>).<sup>23</sup></li> <li>● Serious injuries resulting from car accidents are very rare.<sup>24</sup> A child is more likely to be seriously injured as a passenger in a motor vehicle than from playing on the street; Canadian children are eight times more likely to be involved in a fatal motor vehicle accident as a passenger than as a pedestrian.<sup>25</sup></li> </ul>
<p>How can I keep my child safe if they're playing at home, near streets, and in our neighbourhoods?</p>	<p>It is important to give your child the space to freely engage in unstructured play. "Helicopter" parenting can be perceived as a loss of trust between parents and their children, which negatively affects children's mental wellness.</p> <p>There are a couple of tips to help you reframe your perceptions of risk when your child plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Count to 10 before you intervene.</li> <li>● Remember what it was like when you were a child playing.</li> <li>● Find a starting point where you're comfortable and go from there - comfort and trust comes with experience.</li> <li>● Watch your child, from a distance, play freely with their friends. Observe their competence and how they bounce back when they fall. This can help you build trust in them when they are on their own.</li> </ul> <p>Visit <a href="http://www.outsideplay.ca">www.outsideplay.ca</a> to help gain the confidence to allow your child to engage in unstructured play.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Various hyper-parenting styles, such as "little emperor", "tiger mom", and "converted cultivation parenting" are associated with decreases in children's physical activity and the associated benefits..<sup>26</sup></li> <li>● Over-involved parenting can be perceived as a loss of trust between a parent and their child. It can negatively affect children's mental wellness resulting in psychological problems and reduced self-confidence.<sup>6,26</sup></li> </ul>

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