



### Learning Objectives:

- Identify the purpose and applications of a play policy.
- Understand the role of parents and caregivers, schools, and municipalities in providing high quality, challenging play opportunities.
- Understand the need for guiding principles and a collaborative decision-making process in the development of a play policy.
- Identify the key components of a best practice play policy.

### Learning Outcome:

- Demonstrate an understanding of play policies that can be applied to an organizational context, in order to collaboratively prepare and implement an effective play policy.

## Preface

Children's unstructured play is recognized for its critical role in the development of creativity, resilience, problem-solving abilities, and risk management skills.<sup>1,2</sup> Organizations that provide a setting for play (e.g., schools, municipalities, childcare centres) shape children's access to high quality unstructured play opportunities. Developing and implementing a policy on play provision is a strong approach to balance the need to offer challenging play experiences with the need to keep children safe from harm.<sup>3</sup>

## What is the Role of a Play Policy?

Developing a play policy can assist municipalities, school boards, and other organizations in demonstrating their role and commitment to providing unstructured play opportunities. It can act as a reference tool, or 'blueprint for action', when making and implementing decisions that affect children's access to play.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Key Providers of Children's Unstructured Play Opportunities

### *Parents and Caregivers*

Parental attitudes towards children's unstructured play have been recognized as a key determinant of both the quality and quantity of children's play activities.<sup>5</sup> The home is typically the first play environment for young children, where parents and caregivers facilitate play opportunities. Once children begin to play outside of the home, either in daycare, school, or municipal settings, parents and caregivers have the right to expect play spaces that allow for rich play experiences, while keeping children free from harm.<sup>3</sup> The availability of a policy that transparently outlines the values, practices, and evidence behind a setting's play provision can inform adults about their child's care. This can address safety concerns that may limit approval of play opportunities and support parents in positive facilitation of play across settings.

### *Schools*

In North America, elementary school children spend about thirty hours per week at school, which can result in about four thousand school breaks in their primary learning career (kindergarten through grade 6).<sup>6</sup> The centrality of the school environment to childhood highlights the important position of this setting to provide a range of play opportunities. The frequency of play during school hours, the physical

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landscape, and access to outdoor play spaces during, between, and after class times can all shape play habits. In urban areas, school grounds are often the only local open space for play.<sup>4</sup> Play and formal education should be seen as complementary endeavours.<sup>3</sup> Children's unstructured play provides the opportunity for experiential learning, while evidence suggests that it directly improves children's ability to meet educational goals. To address these concerns, play policy would be established by school board level while the implementation of the policy, i.e. the play practice, is determined by the school with the authority resting with the principal. The use of the term school or school environment has been used to reflect both environments.

### ***Municipalities***

Play occurs in the everyday environments of children (i.e. home, streets, neighbourhoods, green space as well as formal play spaces).<sup>7</sup> As such, there is a call for local governments to consider how to create opportunities for children's unstructured play when designing and modifying public spaces. Community infrastructure, such as neighbourhood safety features, active transportation routes, and park proximity, influences child participation in unstructured play.<sup>8</sup> Defined principles concerning unstructured play can facilitate cooperation and action by multiple municipal agencies to prioritize its access within a community.<sup>4,7</sup>

## **Planning and Development**

### ***Collaborative Decision-Making***

Planning for the development of a play policy should be done in collaboration with all parties who may be affected by the policy. When these parties work collaboratively, they have shared responsibility, accountability, and authority over its development and implementation. This process can help increase buy-in, obtain alignment among decision-makers in a school or municipal setting, and support their shared understanding of the policy's purpose. Parents and children should be included in this process, as it can work to address their concerns and enable tailored decision-making to meet their needs.

#### **In a school environment, collaborative decision-making should include:**

- ✓ Legal experts, risk management, insurance, and/or facilities team(s)
- ✓ Child development experts
- ✓ Educators and principals (it is recognized that final authority at the school level rests with the principal, who is also responsible for implementation of the policy.)
- ✓ Parents
- ✓ Children

#### **In a municipal setting, this list should expand to include:**

- ✓ Local public health unit(s)
- ✓ Other relevant government agencies (i.e. parks and recreation, transportation, police)
- ✓ Local residents and organizations related to play and child development

For more information on collaborative decision-making in play and tips on how to facilitate this process, please see the related document: [\*\*\*Collaborative Decision-Making: Fostering a Balanced Approach to Provide Unstructured Play Opportunities.\*\*\*](#)

### ***Guiding Principles for Policy Development***

The first step to developing a play policy involves establishing and consulting the core values that have been agreed to collaboratively among decision-makers. These values act as a reference point to support

policy development that meets the needs of partners and stakeholders, especially children. All actions proposed in the policy should be outlined and implemented to reflect these underlying principles. This consistency allows the community to observe a direct connection between what is valued as being important and what actually happens in practice.<sup>3</sup> See the [Collaborative Decision-Making Tool](#) for examples of key principles to guide policy development.

**Practical Considerations**

Schools, municipalities, and other play settings must balance their desired policy goals with their available resources and context. An essential step is to review the resources and regulations of the organization(s) that could facilitate or limit proposed actions.<sup>9</sup> These include financial resources, human resources, and related policies that are currently implemented. These variations underscore the need to assess the current context and adapt play policies to meet organizational needs. An example play policy is provided below to guide and facilitate its development. Organizations are encouraged to modify information to best fit their context.

**Example Play Policy**

<p><b>Guiding Principles</b></p>	<p>The guiding principles of the play policy outline the core values that will drive the development and implementation process.</p> <p><b>Example</b></p> <p>This play policy will be based on values of collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainability. These principles will be realized through engaging multiple stakeholders, recognizing the diverse needs of the community, and considering the long-term impacts of infrastructural decisions.</p>
<p><b>Vision Statement</b></p>	<p>A vision statement outlines the organizational philosophy and the overall purpose of having a play policy.</p> <p><b>Example</b></p> <p>Every child should play outside every day. This play policy defines our approach to decisions to meet this goal and provides a framework for development of play opportunities. It recognizes the importance of play and responds to the need to implement high quality play experiences.</p>
<p><b>Policy Objectives</b></p>	<p>A list of objectives describes the policy’s vision by providing specific goals for the policy.</p> <p><b>Example</b></p> <p>The enactment of this policy will:<sup>5,10</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Raise awareness about the developmental benefits of play</li> <li>✓ Realize a common understanding of children’s unstructured play</li> <li>✓ Maximize the range of play opportunities available to children</li> <li>✓ Support development of high quality, interesting, and flexible play opportunities</li> <li>✓ Allow children the time, space, and permission to play freely</li> <li>✓ Engage community members and stakeholders in play decisions</li> </ul>

<p><b>Definition of Play</b></p>	<p>A clear and universal definition of play is necessary to guide policy parameters.<sup>5</sup> Organizations should draw from both child development research and exemplar play policies to reach a collaborative decision on a concise, evidence-informed definition of play.</p> <p><b>Example</b>                  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 play that is not initiated in an organized, planned or formal way.<sup>11</sup> Unstructured play can include outdoor play or risky play. Risky play involves thrilling and exciting forms of play that can be categorized into 6 categories:<sup>12</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● play at heights;</li> <li>● play with speed (i.e. riding a bike fast down a hill);</li> <li>● play with loose parts;</li> <li>● rough-and-tumble play; and</li> <li>● play where children can “disappear” or “get lost”.</li> </ul> <p>Organized sports or screen-time (time spent in front of the television, computer, gaming console (like Playstation, Xbox, or Wii), tablet, smartphone, or any other electronic equipment) are <i>not</i> considered unstructured play.</p>
<p><b>Key Features of a High Quality Play Environment</b></p>	<p>To properly address the developmental needs of children, a play policy should explicitly commit to providing appropriate, stimulating, and challenging play for all participants.<sup>4</sup> Decision-makers should specify key features that support high quality play opportunities.<sup>3,7</sup> Outlining the components of a rich play environment can help identify essential improvements required in the context of their play space.</p> <p><b>Example</b>                  Decision-makers are committed to play environments that include various elements:<sup>5,7,10</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Challenging play experiences across developmental stages and ages</li> <li>✓ Play opportunities that stimulate multiple senses</li> <li>✓ Outdoor play in a variety of weather conditions</li> <li>✓ A balance between experiencing thrill and providing safety</li> <li>✓ Accessible play opportunities based on universal design principles</li> <li>✓ Provision of loose parts and natural elements</li> <li>✓ Easily accessible to all individuals</li> </ul>
<p><b>Roles and Responsibilities of Key</b></p>	<p>Clear expectations of those who facilitate children’s play opportunities can support high quality play provision.<sup>4</sup> Outlining the responsibilities of ‘play practitioners’* provides a link between play policy goals and play delivery.<sup>3,13</sup></p>

\* **Play practitioners**, sometimes known as playworkers, are professionals in child settings who are trained to support challenging play opportunities. The role of a play practitioner is to create and enhance flexible play environments that promote unstructured play. Play practitioners plan for, observe and reflect on play, yet they neither direct nor organize the play

<p><b>Players</b></p>	<p>This section of a play policy should briefly describe the key supporters of children’s play and their respective duties.</p> <p><b>Example</b>                  To facilitate high quality play opportunities:</p> <p><b>1) Children</b> will create and direct their own play activities.<sup>3</sup></p> <p><b>2) Supervisors</b> (parents, educators) will do three things.<sup>3</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a ‘low intervention, high response’ approach, which leaves play-based decisions to children, but provides support on request</li> <li>• Act as a friendly, supportive, and informative resource when needed</li> <li>• Stay up-to-date on and apply play training and knowledge</li> </ul> <p><b>3) Schools, municipalities, and other play settings</b> can promote children’s safety during unstructured play by following six steps:<sup>3,5,10,14</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide professional development opportunities that educate ‘play practitioners’ about best practices of facilitating play</li> <li>• Identify areas of capacity building to improve supervisory skills</li> <li>• Support rules of play that balance developmental needs and safety</li> <li>• Monitor and update play space as needed to meet the key features of a high quality play environment</li> <li>• Communicate with ‘play practitioners’ about changes to and management of the play environment</li> <li>• Provide adequate funding and resources for program development and maintenance</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental Considerations</b></p>	<p>A strong play policy will anticipate challenges in a play setting by including details on how to frame and respond to environmental risks in a positive context.<sup>10,14</sup> The section should detail risk assessment procedures and guidelines on weather conditions, in a manner that supports the objective of providing rich play experiences. Organizations may also refer to specific risk-benefit assessment tools that will inform their policy decisions.<sup>†</sup></p> <p><b>Example</b>  <b>Risk Management</b> – The organization commits to providing play opportunities that are as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible.<sup>15</sup> A risk-benefit approach will be used to consider the potential benefits afforded by a play opportunity alongside any potential negative consequences, with documentation.<sup>16</sup> This assessment will ask the question, <i>do the potential benefits justify allowing risk of injury to remain?</i> Decisions about the play environment will focus on eliminating hazards (sources of danger likely to</p>

experience. Their training focuses on understanding when and whether to intervene in play to optimize children’s learning and development.

<sup>†</sup> Several tools have been developed to support risk-benefit assessment in children’s unstructured play including: (1) [Risk-Benefit Assessment Form](#) jointly by Play England, Play Scotland, Play Wales, and PlayBoard Northern Ireland; and (2) [Education Risk Benefit Assessment for Outdoor Learning Areas](#) from Government of South Australia Department for Education and Child Development. These tools, among others, can provide a framework to be adapted to the local context and completed through principles of collaborative decision-making. The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada is developing a *Risk-Benefit Assessment Tool* which will address the application of this approach to the Canadian context.

	<p>cause harm), while maintaining an acceptable level of risk that is sensitive to both child safety and child development needs.</p> <p><b>Weather Guidelines</b> – The organization commits to continue providing high quality play opportunities in a variety of weather conditions.<sup>14</sup> In times of strong sun, precipitation, or cold temperatures, the organization/school will communicate with parents about appropriate clothing and protection to permit outdoor play. The organization will apply a risk-benefit approach to determine if and when play should be postponed due to inclement weather.</p>
<p><b>Monitoring and Evaluation</b></p>	<p>A clear monitoring and evaluation strategy should be embedded in the policy to proactively plan for assessment on its implementation and effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> Organizations should review any existing procedures for evaluation and/or specify new procedures to guide evaluation. The policy should be monitored and evaluated at regular intervals and the findings should inform improvements in both the policy and play opportunities.<sup>9</sup></p> <p><b>Example</b></p> <p>Decision-makers will identify a working group to evaluate the policy and its implementation on an annual basis. Evaluation will involve consultation of all play stakeholders, including children, parents, and ‘play practitioners’. Key findings of the evaluation will be made available to stakeholders, and the working group will be responsible for reporting back on measures taken to apply these findings and improve play opportunities.</p>

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