



UN CRC Article 31: A Focus on Play in Canada

By

IPA – Canada

Canadian NGO Report
Submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

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March 1st, 2020

IPA is an international organization founded in Denmark in 1961 and has members in over 50 countries. It is an interdisciplinary organization, bringing together people from all professions working for and with children. The purpose of IPA is to protect, preserve and promote the child's right to play as a fundamental human right.

IPA Canada is an IPA branch and is a nationally registered NGO that provides a vehicle for multi-disciplinary exchange and action towards preserving the child's right to play in Canada. The current membership is made up of dedicated child advocates from a variety of backgrounds including early childhood education, recreation, teaching, post-secondary institution instruction, research, landscape architecture and playground equipment supply.

As a society we have lost sight of the fact that children and youth need the time, space and freedom to explore their social and physical environments on their own terms – through their self-directed play. Many children lack adequate opportunities to engage in play. This leads to increased challenges in physical and mental health, concerns about screen time, and anxiety about social relationships.

In the past few decades, the social space for children's self-directed play has been reduced by a concern to keep them safe and prepare them for the future. Due to adults' disproportionate emphasis on safety, academic success, and athletic performance, many children and youth lack opportunities to play and acquire the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary to navigate life's challenges and stressors. American psychologist Peter Gray has been looking at how children interact with their environments through their self-directed play and has noted that this type of free play has been steadily decreasing in the past 50 years. At the same time, child and youth anxiety, depression and suicide have been increasing¹.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada recognises that healthy emotional and social development in early years lay the foundation for mental health and resilience throughout life. They report that an estimated 1.2 million children and youth in Canada are affected by mental illness and by age 25, approximately 20 per cent of Canadians will have developed a mental illness². In Ontario, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) reports that amongst students from grade 7 to 12, over one-third (39%) indicate a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression) and that one-in-six (17%) students indicate a serious level of psychological distress (representing about 159,400 students)³.

Children's right to play, participate in recreation, and engage in cultural activities is explicitly recognized in article 31 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC). Yet, all the official government reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have failed to mention play. This lack of recognition for play as a child's right occurred despite the IPA-C identifying a serious lack in play promotion and play provision; despite IPA-C making several recommendations during the last review; and despite General Comment 17, which outlines how duty-bearers are failing children with regard to the right to play and the steps that should be taken to address these shortcomings.

Clearly, there is much more work to be done with respect to article 31. Deficiencies need to be identified and clarified, priority actions set in place, and resources attached to implementation and evaluation. While

sport, recreation and physical activity have been given the lion's share of attention and financial resources, IPA Canada would like to make the case for a much stronger recognition of the importance of play in children's lives as part of these overall efforts. Taking action now to realize the rights of children to play in Canada is essential to reverse the erosion of space and time for self-directed play. Only then will children and youth have the opportunity to develop the skills needed to deal with life's challenges as they grow into adulthood.

Barriers to Play

A rapidly evolving Canadian society is hampering children's ability for engaging in self-directed, free play. The following represents just a sampling of issues that young people face:

- a) "Free" time is decreasing for many children due in part to the increase of two-parent working families and a shift in public policy towards 'early education'. As a result, Canadian parents are turning to structured activities and lessons over free play time, not just for school aged children, but also for preschoolers⁴.
- b) Choices for how to spend free time are often narrow for children in Canada today. Statistics show that they spend an alarming number of hours watching screens of one type or another⁵. Yet given the choice, many children would prefer to play outdoors⁶. While the long-term effect of a high percentage of 'screen time' is not yet well understood, child development specialists advise a well balanced day-to-day experience.
- c) Dual income earner families are struggling to balance work and family life, impacting the time and energy parents have to play with their children, and leading in turn to more children spending more time in organized recreational programs and/or increasing their daily dose of 'screen time.'
- d) Many professionals working with children in institutional education, child care and recreation settings do not sufficiently appreciate the critical importance of free play in children's lives, nor do they understand their role in play provision. There is a need for increased emphasis on play in their professional development curricula. Children would benefit from an increase in knowledge of play by architects, landscape and interior designers, planners, health professionals, teachers, early learning and care providers, coaches, and recreationists.
- e) As populations migrate to urban settings, more children are living in cities than in rural settings. Spontaneous or free play is important for children in both the natural and built environments however, traffic and land-use patterns have both restricted and diminished the natural play territory of childhood. Open space is reduced due to competition for urban land and commercial priorities for its use. The built environment, such as town squares, shopping malls, etc. does not always anticipate, plan for or even permit children playing. Traffic is a serious and increasing hazard in many communities.
- f) Ninety-six percent of major municipalities surveyed in Canada have policies that hinder or limit children's physical activity and recreation, such as by-laws that prohibit skateboarding

or road hockey. A lack of transportation policies make it possible for School Boards to close rural schools resulting in excessive commutes (in some cases a 4 hr return trip) for very young children.

- g) Parents are choosing structured recreational and sports activities over free play partly because they no longer consider neighbourhoods safe for independent play. Fear of abduction and abuse has become one of the threats to children's free play, particularly outdoor play.
- h) While many national initiatives related to sport, recreation and physical activity can be measured within established systems this is not the case for play which is more difficult to measure consistently, especially since responsibility straddles a number of jurisdictions and institutions.

Implementing Article 31 – Focus on Play

The following framework would lend itself to the development of a tracking system for the measurement of progress to the UN Committee during each five-year reporting period.

Environments

- a) Play Environments
 - Child development experts point out that fixed equipment playgrounds are neither developmentally sound nor cost-effective⁷. Much work is required to shift planning efforts toward a “designed” approach for public spaces and out-of-school/ early childhood centres. Well designed spaces will accommodate a wide range of play possibilities including creative and social play, physical and games play, and consider all ages and levels of ability.
 - Safety standards are evolving to include natural play spaces. These safety standards as well as accessibility standards are made available through the Canadian Standards Association, yet there is a lack of comprehensive legislation and associated policy at all levels of government to ensure compliance. Efforts are required in this regard in order to both protect children from unsafe play and to ensure access for children with disabilities.
 - Recent directions toward connecting children to nature on school/ community grounds have gained prominence. However, more often than not it is the draw of *playing* outdoors in a natural environment that brings - and keeps - children outside. Therefore, it is critical that efforts be undertaken to ensure planning for play environments is integrated with planning for increased access to the natural world.
- b) Playful Communities/Safe Communities
 - Children play everywhere and yet communities on the whole are not designed with children in mind. Municipal planning practices must be committed to fulfilling children's right to play. These will include establishing policies involving young people in community planning, addressing the physical and social safety needs of young people in their communities, and ensuring a range of opportunities for playful engagement throughout the community.

- Recreational sport programs are extremely popular in Canada and engage thousands of children. While these are mostly positive experiences sport programs are not always safe for children. We are starting to pay attention to violence in sport⁸ but more must be done to address this issue at all policy and practice levels.

c) Play and Cyberspace

- Action is required by a generation of adults who have not grown up with play in cyberspace, to understand where young people are at with this medium and to support them in positive usage. More research and dialogue with youth is needed to establish the positive and negative aspects of this very complex field. Efforts are needed to engage young people in exploring the relationship between play in the physical world and play in the virtual world.

Programs

Canada is an ever-changing and increasingly complex society that includes children of First Nations and multi-cultural backgrounds, varying ability and disability levels, a continuum of socio-economic strata, and living in a wide range of urban and rural settings. A range of well-planned, high quality play opportunities is one of the best means for universal access by all children and of supporting their overall growth and development. The following are just a few of the issues and opportunities that warrant more concerted attention:

- City Farms and Adventure Play offerings which are common throughout Europe and elsewhere had at one time a toehold in Canadian government supported provision. Having all but disappeared in Canada, children's advocates continually rank them as a necessary part of the provision mix in urban communities⁹. Research and establishing measures to implement these types of initiatives into the communities where children live should be given a high priority during this next reporting cycle.
- For the most part, play oriented programming offered by municipalities, takes place only during the summer months. As a result, many of these efforts are stale and outdated. Year-round, play opportunities that can evolve with the ever changing needs of young people need to be advocated for, resourced and implemented.
- It has been known for some time that too many schools sit empty during after school hours and weekends and that they can be a key part of the solution in realizing article 31. Continued efforts are required to gain access to this much needed resource, and further, to recognize the importance of supporting more open-ended and playful program offerings in the programming once successful.

Leadership

- The theoretical and philosophical foundations of play leadership practice in early childhood, out-of-school care, and recreation settings are diverse and generally not aligned – if they exist at all. Growing recognition of the importance of the socio-cultural context of development holds good promise as the foundation for a more cohesive approach to play leadership. Concerted, collaborative efforts of key stakeholders will be required to develop common curricula for play leadership development.

Organization

- Responsibility for upholding article 31 falls within various government jurisdictions. However, since it is so often misunderstood, it is not given the kind of prominence necessary to achieving outcome expectations at the individual, community and societal levels. Strategies for play provision, whether encompassing or focused (eg. play spaces), need to be established at all levels of government.
- The child's right to play is too often compromised in legislation, by-laws and policy (eg. policies regarding full cost recovery for service) - if it is even considered. Decision-makers and planners should adopt and apply a 'child friendly lens' to those directives that impact children and realign them accordingly.
- Governments are increasingly relying on not-for-profit agencies to implement the basic tenets of article 31. It is incumbent on all partners and stakeholders involved to work collaboratively in honouring the rights outlined in article 31.

Conclusion

The opposite of play is not work, it is no play. Play deprivation can be devastating for children's physical and mental health¹⁰.

All levels of government have a responsibility to provide leadership with regard to the implementation of article 31 of the UNCRC and, in particular, to maintain a focus on ensuring the right to play.

Recommendations:

That the Canadian Government include the provisions of article 31 in their required national UNCRC implementation plans and include a special emphasis on the child's right to play.

This would include:

- Identification of the specific levels of government, departments and authorities responsible for the implementation of the components of article 31 and the child's right to play.
- Effective communication between national, regional and municipal jurisdictions. A cross-sectoral approach to implementation of article 31 is essential. The lines of tracking progress and of reporting must be clear.
- Ensuring that policy development at all levels in support of article 31 is based on current demographic information and considers the unique characteristics, developmental needs and circumstances of specific populations of children in Canada, e.g., Aboriginal children, children in hospital, children in immigrant families, children with disabilities.
- Development of data collection systems and models of accountability. Canada must be able to measure whether or not the country is making progress. In addition to measuring access and quality of experience in sport, recreation and physical activity, this system would involve

establishing national benchmarks in the provision of self-directed, free play, and a research agenda that begins to map the conditions that allow self-directed, free play to flourish.

- Encouraging the establishment of municipal play strategies incorporating access to a diverse range of outdoor play possibilities, including natural settings, within reasonable proximity of children's homes. (NB. In the UK each local authority must have a play strategy.)
- Ensuring children's participation in planning for play and recreation environments and programs. The best interests of children can best be served by their participation in planning.
- Promotion of a national public awareness campaign, using a variety of methods, to ensure that the value of free play is understood by the Canadian public generally and parents and caregivers in particular.
- Ensuring adequate understanding of the value of play by all professionals working with or for children, including city and parks planners, recreation leaders and designers of multi-family housing.

End Notes

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