



Right to Play: A fundamental necessity for healthy development!

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 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.

Play is fundamental to quality childhood and optimal development. Play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated; the incentive comes from within. Play supports children's evolving developmental needs because of its almost endless scope and because there is no right or wrong way of doing things in play. Through play children explore and learn about their environments; they create their own special worlds; they learn to negotiate and cooperate; and they gain a stronger sense of belonging. All these factors contribute to the development of children's identity and self-confidence. (Adapted from the Play Day Manual by the [International Play Association – Canada](#) (IPA-C))

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. The Mental Health Commission of Canada recognises that healthy emotional and social development in early years lays 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; by age 25, approximately 20 per cent of Canadians will have developed a mental illness.

Right to Play and Review of Children's Rights in Canada

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 children'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.

As a society, we need to pay attention to the play needs of our children and youth. 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 build resilience and coping skills to deal with stress as they grow up.

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Identified Areas of Action



Awareness

All adults, including parents, caregivers, education professionals, recreation leaders, planners, and decision makers at all levels of government, need to understand that play is a fundamental necessity for the healthy development of children, which underpins the healthy development of our society. All adults must understand that children and youth need the time, space and freedom to explore their social and physical worlds in order to build a positive sense of self. All levels of government must provide and support awareness raising and education for Canadians to learn about the value of the child's right to play.

Children and Youth Involvement

Children are experts on their own lives, play interests and experiences, and their participation in the planning, development and evaluation of play opportunities in their communities should be valued, respected, and realized. Meaningful, consistent and sustainable mechanisms for children's participation should be embedded in these processes. Children also have the right to see tangible evidence of their contributions.



Policy

Canada has a rich history of play provision. In the 70's and 80's one could find, in various parts of the country, adventure playgrounds where children were free to invent and re-invent their play space. This awareness of play was pushed aside by concerns about safety and narrow, measurable outcomes in education. We need to embed play in public policy at all levels of government, such as public health, education, and urban planning, so that we do not lose sight of this fundamentally important aspect of child and youth development.

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. Available at www.rightsofchildren.ca.