

# THE RIGHT TO PLAY

## *What is the “Right to Play”?*

It means that all children and youth have the freedom to play, relax, and have fun.

Play can mean different things. It can be:

- Playing outdoors 🌳
- Playing indoors 🏠
- Playing with friends 👫
- Playing by yourself 🧒
- Making up games ⚽
- Using your imagination 🎨

## *Why is play important?*

Play is more than just leisure or fun. It is essential for children’s healthy development and helps them build important skills like: making friends, being creative, solving problems and building confidence and resilience.

Self-confidence, self-awareness and good problem-solving skills help maintain good physical and mental health. Outdoor and nature play also have an impact on children’s health by improving mood, reducing stress, and helping with anxiety and depression.

More generally, communities benefit from play too. When children are encouraged to play outside, neighbors connect more often, and the community can feel safer and more welcoming.

## *Why is play an issue for government?*

Play impacts many other areas of policy. Children who develop a love of physical activity and sports are likely to be physically healthy adults who need fewer health interventions.

Children who develop social relationships and limit screen time have better mental health outcomes. Children who are free to imagine and take controlled risks do better educationally and socially and become better problem solvers and independent thinkers.

Provincial and national governments, as well as the United Nations, have recognized play as a fundamental right of children and an important public policy goal.

The provincial government, municipalities, the non-profit sector and citizens all have a role in securing the right to play for every child. Accessible public spaces, public safety, family support and education, guidelines on technology use and the education system all impact whether or not children can access appropriate programs, facilities and safe places to play.

## *What do we know about play today?*

In 2025, researchers asked young people about play and free time.

Here's what they found:

- 75% of children they interviewed between the ages of 9 and 12 regularly played the online game Roblox
- Over half said that their friends had phones and social media accounts
- Most children were never, or almost never, allowed to be out in public without an adult
- Over 50% of children under 12 said that they were not allowed to walk down a store aisle alone
- And over 15% of children said they not allowed to play alone in their yard.

But they also found that this did not reflect what children and youth would prefer. When they asked young people about their preferences, they responded that they felt they were spending too much time on their phones and tablets and would rather have more free play and organized activities, but that they were often choosing screens because it felt like the only place where they were allowed to explore freely and independently.

## What are some factors that can impact play?

### Characteristics of the population in New Brunswick

New Brunswick's population is growing and becoming more diverse, with many rural areas, an aging population, First Nations communities, bilingual families, and newcomers.

Access to play can be harder for some people because of things like:

Transportation: getting to activities can be difficult in rural areas, and even in cities

Poverty: paying for activities or materials is not an option for many families

Disability: accessible and safe options are not always available

This means that some children, especially Indigenous, newcomer, and rural families, have fewer chances to access both free play and organized activities.

The increasing costs for equipment, travel, and program fees can also limit involvement in activities for everyone.

### Technology

Smartphones, gaming, and streaming have changed how children spend their free time. Parents may also be distracted by their own devices, giving less support for active play, and children's time on digital devices means that they often don't have the space to 'get bored', which can reduce imaginative play.

Digital spaces can be creative, but too much screen time and not enough physical play is a growing concern. In New Brunswick, only 12% of youth stay under the recommended 2 hours of recreational screen time, and only 24% meet daily physical activity goals.

### Ideas to consider:

- Some schools are becoming phone-free to encourage children to get smartphones at a later age or learn how to limit their usage.
- Public campaigns and school programs can help teaching healthy digital habits.
- Some communities are reopening local spaces for independent play and use fun tools, like QR code trails, to get children moving outdoors.
- Some countries are taking stronger actions because they are treating social media use as a public health issue, similar to cigarette smoking. For example, Australia has banned all social media for children under 16, and other countries are considering similar rules.

## What are some factors that can impact play?

### Changes in Culture and Community 🌍

In the past, children often played outside with neighbors. This is less common today, and play is more likely to happen indoors or in organized, paid programs led by adults.

Parents, schools, and communities are also more worried about safety and are often trying to remove all risks instead of managing them safely. This makes play more controlled and less adventurous when playing on their own, taking safe risks and understanding their own limits is what children's brains need to develop important skills through play.

Heavier traffic, fewer safe outdoor spaces, and busier family schedules have made informal play harder. Cultural attitudes have also changed, and children playing outside are sometimes seen as "too noisy" or "disruptive," making public play less accepted.

### 💡 Ideas to consider:

Some countries have taken steps to support managing risk safely (instead of removing it altogether) so children can have more freedom for outdoor and adventurous play:

- Wales created a law called the Play Sufficiency Duty, which requires local governments to make sure children have enough places and opportunities to play. They also provide guidance and tools to help communities do this.
- Play England has encouraged the rest of the UK to create a similar law and a National Play Strategy, so play is included in decisions about parks, schools, and community planning.

Some cities have also redesigned public spaces to make play easier:

- In London, the Play Streets program allows neighborhoods to temporarily close roads so children can play safely outside, helping build stronger communities and encouraging physical activity.
- In New Zealand, new rules make it easier for councils to support community streets and regular Play Streets.
- In Bogotá, Colombia, the weekly Ciclovía program closes over 100 km of streets to cars, creating space for walking, biking, and outdoor activity. This idea has now spread to hundreds of cities around the world.
- UNICEF created the Child Friendly Cities Initiative, which over 40 countries are part of, and that helps cities plan safer, more welcoming spaces for children.

## *What are some factors that can impact play?*

### **Influence of School and Extracurricular Activities** 🏫

Schools have become more focused on academic results, and families often choose structured activities to help children succeed or compete.

This focus on performance and early competitive sports leaves less time for free, unstructured play and relaxation.

#### 💡 **Ideas to consider:**

Some places have taken measures to support movement and play throughout the whole day, not just during gym class:

- Newfoundland and Labrador created a policy requiring daily physical activity for students.
- Scotland has a 5-year national play plan that invests in playgrounds and puts children's right to play at the center of urban decision-making.
- New Brunswick is testing out programs offering multisport and play before school, at lunch, and after school (with snacks and homework help) to include children who may face barriers like cost, transportation, or scheduling.

## *What is the future of play?*

With support from governments, schools, communities, and families, children in New Brunswick can have more safe outdoor play, a healthier balance with technology, and better spaces to play every day.

Most importantly, we need to listen to children and youth about what they need and want, so we can protect and strengthen the right to play for all children in New Brunswick, both now by filling the gaps, and in the future.