



# OUTDOOR PLAY GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This document provides a compilation of terminology and concepts integral to *outdoor play*. The purpose is to be consistent in our use of terms and build a shared understanding of language used in dialogue on outdoor play across Canada. These are working definitions developed by Outdoor Play Canada founding members, the Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy cohort, the Play Learning and Teaching Outdoors Network (PLaTO-Net) steering committee and broader membership, in addition to national and international advisors with expertise in play-based practice, policy and research.

The process of compiling and defining these concepts included a systematic scoping review to identify common terms and definitions pertaining to play, learning and teaching outdoors, a review of commonly understood definitions derived from the Oxford Dictionary and the Merriam Webster Dictionary as well as the glossary definitions from existing resource documents identified in the key documents section.

Our goal is to clarify commonly used terminology associated with *outdoor play*, provide consensus definitions, illustrate context and demonstrate the relationships between terms.

The terms and resources in this glossary are sorted by category as follows:

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# PLAY

Voluntary engagement in activity that is fun and/or rewarding and usually driven by intrinsic motivation.

Play can be viewed in a multitude of ways and within the context of many settings. For example, not all play is self-directed and intrinsically motivated. It can occur sporadically and is often identified as unstructured, though can also include activities or games with rules.

Adjectives frequently used to describe play include: freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, spontaneous, and fun.<sup>1</sup> Play provides unique physical, mental, emotional, social and cognitive health benefits through physical activity, problem solving, conflict resolution, social skill development, and overcoming fears.<sup>2,3</sup> A lack of engaging spaces suitable for outdoor play in addition to both perceived and real social constraints and parent's ever-increasing control over children's free time have greatly contributed to children spending less time engaged in outdoor play compared to previous generations.<sup>4</sup>

Play is an essential part of every child's healthy development and is embedded as a child's right in Article 31 in the Convention on the Rights of a Child.<sup>5</sup> Children and youth need the time, appropriate space, and affordance to engage in quality play. It should be noted, however, that in this working definition, play is not limited to children.

## CONSENSUS PLAY DEFINITIONS

*Under the rubric of play, there are several subcategories. The following definitions of play subcategories are those that achieved consensus as part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project.<sup>6</sup>*

### Forms of play

**Active play**– A form of play that involves physical activity of any intensity.

**Free play** – A form of play that is unstructured and self-directed.

*Free play is a synonym for unstructured play. Activities such as organized sports are not considered free play.<sup>7</sup> Free play can happen within an organized program when it is freely chosen. It is important to note that play often becomes more structured when individuals are given time and repeated experiences in the same space.*

**Nature play** – A form of play that takes place in a natural environment and/or involves interaction with natural elements and features (e.g., water and mud, rocks, hills, forests, and natural loose parts, such as sticks, pinecones, leaves, and grass).

*Nature-based recreation is a specific form of nature play.*

**Outdoor play** – A form of play that takes place outdoors, where the outdoors is defined as any open-air, wild, natural, or human-made space.

*Outdoor recreation is a specific form of outdoor play.*

**Risky play** – A form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking.

*Risky play is subjective. Risky play can be categorized as: 1. play with great heights, 2. play with high speed, 3. play with dangerous tools/elements, 4. rough-and-tumble play, 5. play where children can "disappear"/get lost, 6. play with impact, and 7. vicarious risk.<sup>8-11</sup>*

**Social play** – A form of play that involves interacting with others.

## Play elements & spaces

**Loose parts** – Natural or manufactured play materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials, moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways.<sup>12</sup>

**Outdoor play space** – Any outdoor area where people can play.

**Playground** – A piece of land usually equipped with facilities and/or equipment that is used for outdoor play and recreation.

## OTHER PLAY DEFINITIONS

*The following definitions were not part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project; however, they were developed in consultation with the Outdoor Play Canada founding members, the Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy cohort, and national and international experts.*

## Forms of play

**Recreation** – A form of play that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing.<sup>13</sup>

**Structured play** – A form of play that includes games that incorporate rules and/or organization.

*E.g.: sport related activities.*

**Street play** – A form of play that occurs when children, their families and neighbours can safely access public streets and spaces to play in their own neighbourhood.

*It is also identified as ‘playing out’ where people can play in a social and physical space where the whole community can interact.*

## Play elements & spaces

**Adventure playground** – An open space where individuals can play that often also has equipment and loose materials for building projects and modifying pre-existing structures. <sup>14,15</sup>

**Playscape** – A landscape that is designed to provide the space and affordance for play.

## Play-related concepts

**Child-directed** – A qualifier to emphasize the component of play in which the child leads and directs how they choose.

*The child’s central role is in determining their play.*

**Play literacy** – The knowledge, confidence, skills, and attitudes to support and engage in play.

**Play value** – The value an environment, object, or activity brings to an individual’s experience of play.

*When applied to play spaces, value includes the design, support, and content of a place.<sup>16</sup> Loose parts offer a certain play value to the player. A loose part with high play value is an object that can be incorporated into a multitude of different play scenarios. E.g.: a stick can be an airplane, a shovel, a telescope, a sword, a hammer, a saw etc. i.e., whatever the playing individual needs it to be in the play world they have created. Pine needles and pinecones can create a kitchen, fort, or imaginary place that an individual chooses. Within this definition, we include ‘activity’ to recognize the intangible elements that give play value (e.g., creativity, imagination).*

## EDUCATION

The process of learning and teaching.

### CONSENSUS EDUCATION DEFINITIONS

*The following definitions related to education are those that achieved consensus as part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project.<sup>6</sup>*

**Learning** – The development of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs and habits.

**Outdoor learning** – Learning that takes place outdoors.

**Teaching** – The process of facilitation of learning.

**Outdoor teaching** – Teaching that takes place outdoors.

**Outdoor education** – Education that takes place outdoors.

**Environmental education** – A form of education aimed at increasing knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of the environment.

**Forest schools** – An educational approach that includes regular and repeated access to natural space and participant-directed, emergent, and place-based learning.

*Forest kindergartens, forest preschools, forest programs are specific forms of forest schools.*

**Land-based education** – An approach to education that recognizes a deep connection and relationship of reciprocity between people and the land.

*This is specific to the North American context based on Indigenous epistemology through which the land is understood beyond the physical sense as spiritual, emotional, and intellectual. Land-based learning is a specific form of land-based education.*

**Learning for sustainability** – A cross-curricular approach to life and learning which enables learners, educators, schools, and their wider communities to build a socially just, ecologically sustainable, and equitable society.



**Nature-based education** – A form of teaching and learning situated in the context of outdoor natural settings.

*Nature-based learning, nature-based preschool are specific forms of nature-based learning.*

**Outdoor classroom** – A shared space of learning and teaching in the school context that is entirely outdoors.

*Unlike outdoor education, outdoor classrooms take regular pedagogy and curriculum outdoors in the school context.*

**Place-based learning** – Learning that considers the importance of connecting learners with their community by anchoring pedagogy within the context of the locally natural, cultural, and social ecosystems.

*The learning focuses on a specific physical space which may or may not involve the natural environment. Place-based education is a specific form of place-based learning.*

## OTHER EDUCATION DEFINITIONS

*The following definitions were not part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project, however, they were developed in consultation with the Outdoor Play Canada founding members, the Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy cohort, and national and international experts.*

**Emergent curriculum** – A way of planning curriculum that is based on the learner's interest and passion at a certain point in time.

*Learners thrive and learn best when their interests are captured. Learning occurs naturally.*

**Inquiry-based learning** – A process where learners have a key role in directing how and what they learn.

*It is when learners learn from each other, and the teacher learns from the learner. Information is investigated, analysed, and discussed between learners. Knowledge is dynamic, collectively constructed and informed by multiple sources. A learner's natural sense of wonder is at the centre of learning and defines direction.<sup>17</sup>*

## RISK

Challenges and uncertainties within the environment that an individual can recognize and learn to manage by choosing to encounter them while determining their own limits.<sup>18</sup>

An emphasis on keeping children safe and eliminating the negative consequences of risk has led to the development of what may be viewed as a risk-averse society.

In an effort to reverse this trend, The 2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play states that **access to active play in nature and outdoors – with its risks – is essential for healthy child development, and that opportunities for self-directed play outdoors should be increased in all settings.**

*The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines the term risk as “a chance or possibility of danger, loss, injury, or other adverse consequences.” As such, it can be used to denote the probability of a given outcome. Over time, this definition has taken on an increasingly negative connotation as it refers to the probability, likelihood or chance of an adverse outcome.<sup>19</sup>*

*To counter this definition, play activists and scholars have moved to define hazard as danger in the environment that could lead to serious injury or endangerment that is beyond an individual's capacity to recognize, and risk as the challenges and uncertainties within the environment that an individual can recognize and learn to manage.<sup>18</sup> Within this context, risk can be seen as the thrilling and exciting elements of play that can include the possibility of physical injury<sup>10</sup> and can contribute positively to physical, emotional and psychological development.<sup>20</sup> The term risk is not an objective concept and needs to be understood as a variable with inherently subjective value.*

*The above definition is a research-informed, shared understanding of risk within a play context. Risks are present in all play environments. They are the objects present that could potentially cause harm, such as the branch of a tree, a rock poking out on a pathway, etc. Some risks found in play environments may need to be mitigated if they have the potential to cause undue harm. However, in most circumstances, they can allow an individual to gain skills in recognizing and evaluating a challenge, thereby deciding to take an effective and safe course of action. This develops judgement and internal risk management skills. Risks can offer the potential of reward i.e., mastery of a skill, such as walking across a log or downhill skiing, and are an important part of healthy development.*

## Risk-related concepts

### **Injury** – Harm done to a living being.

*Injury can refer to physical, mental, and/or emotional harm.<sup>21</sup> Injuries are usually defined by their intention, including unintentional injuries (e.g., fall, motor vehicle crash), and intentional injuries (e.g., assault).<sup>22</sup> Injury covers two general categories: general injuries—unintentional (including poisoning, spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries, motor vehicle injuries, falls, fires, pedestrian-related injuries, water-related injuries, and natural disasters), and violence (child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, suicide, youth violence, and terrorism).<sup>23</sup>*

**Injury prevention** – Efforts to avoid or subvert adverse physical, mental, or emotional injury.

**Harm** – Injury, hurt or damage inflicted on a human, object or environment.

**Danger** – The possibility of suffering harm or injury.

**Hazard** – A potential source of harm or danger.

*Hazards can be mitigated or avoided. They are a source of harm that is obvious (e.g.: walking on the railing of a bridge) or not obvious, such that the potential for injury is hidden, or where the individual does not have the competence to manage the hazard, or where there is no obvious benefit to the individual in experiencing the hazard (e.g.: broken railing, fast moving current in a river).<sup>24</sup>*

**Risk benefit** – Part of a risk assessment method which involves an evaluation of the potential benefits of risk to children and others.

*Benefits such as lay and social value are considered alongside the potential risks associated with the provision. It allows providers to satisfy legal obligations, while promoting a balanced approach.<sup>20</sup>*

**Safety** – A state in which dangers and conditions that could cause physical, psychological or material harm are controlled in a manner to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community.<sup>25</sup>

*Safe or safety are perhaps the most commonly encountered terms in debates about children and risk. e.g.: 'Is this playground, park, tree, public space safe?' It is important to understand that the word 'safe' can mean different things to different people.<sup>19</sup>*

*“in play, risk doesn’t mean courting danger—like skating on a half-frozen lake or sending a preschooler to the park alone. It means the types of play children see as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but they can recognize and evaluate challenges according to their own ability.<sup>1,2</sup> It means giving children the freedom to decide how high to climb, to explore the woods, get dirty, play hide ‘n seek, wander in their neighbourhoods, balance, tumble and rough-house, especially outdoors, so they can be active, build confidence, autonomy and resilience, develop skills, solve problems and learn their own limits.”*

*Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play*

## Risk benefit-related concepts

**Risk benefit analysis** – A process where the practitioner or program lead weighs, with equal consideration, the duty to protect individuals from undue risk, and the duty to provide them with valuable play opportunities.

**Risk assessment** – Evaluating or deciding which risks are significant and how they should be addressed. Risk assessment is one part of risk management.<sup>26</sup>

**Risk benefit assessment** – An approach to risk assessment in which risks and benefits are considered alongside each other. It allows providers to satisfy their legal obligations, while promoting a reasonable, balanced approach. practical process and tool for making judgements about the risks and benefits associated with an activity and play space.

<sup>26</sup>

*This includes the control measures that are required to manage risks while securing benefits. It assumes that caregivers in the place of play are trained and entrusted with the capacity to make judgements.*

**Dynamic risk benefit assessment** – An approach to dynamic risk management (see definition below) that emphasizes the need for balance and a sense of proportion.<sup>26</sup>

*This form of assessment relies on communication and dialogue with the individual, intuition, skill, experience, and training on behalf of the practitioners or caregivers.<sup>27</sup>*

**Experience risk benefit assessment** – Minute-by-minute observations and judgements of risks and benefits of play situations by adults who have a duty of care for children.

*e.g.: educators, supervisors in school playgrounds, community child and youth workers, childcare providers.<sup>26</sup>*

**Narrative risk benefit assessment** – A narrative form (as opposed to numerical methods) of a risk and benefit assessment of play situations that includes factors considered and judgements made.<sup>28</sup>

**Site risk benefit assessment** – A documented process to evaluate the risks and benefits of a defined play space.

**Risk aversion** – Human behaviours or actions that aim to avoid or reduce risk when exposed to unknown environments.

**Risk averse society** – A social environment in which risk avoidance and aversion is dominant and valued.

*Such an environment restricts play, limits freedom of movement, and constrains exploration of physical, social, and natural worlds.<sup>29</sup>*

**Risk management** – A process of systematically evaluating and managing risks in an organization, environment or program.<sup>26</sup>

**Dynamic risk management** – The real-time decisions and actions practitioners take during a [play] session.<sup>26</sup>

**Risk mitigation** – An overall approach to reduce the impact, severity, and/or probability of undue risk.

**Risk reframing** – A process or intervention to offer parents, practitioners, and educators a context for building new and complex perceptions of risk in outdoor free play. *Risk reframing considers a balance between the benefits and potential harms of everyday risk taking in play.<sup>30</sup>*

## LEGAL CONCEPTS

**Due diligence** – The level of judgement, care, prudence, determination, and activity that a person would reasonably be expected to do under particular circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

**Duty of Care** – The responsibility or legal obligation of a person or organization to avoid acts or omissions that could likely cause harm to others.<sup>26</sup>

*It is the first element that must be established to proceed with an action in negligence.*

**Guideline** – Advice, direction or procedures developed and used to understand or implement policy, regulations, or processes.

*It is a statement or other indication of policy or procedure by which to determine a course of action. By definition, a guideline is not mandatory. It is recommended practice that allows some discretion or leeway in its interpretation, implementation, or use.*

**Joint and several liability** – Where two or more persons, acting independently of each other, have by their separate wrongful acts brought about a single and specific injury to another person, the law holds them jointly and severally liable for the full loss.

*This involves two or more wrongdoers acting independently so as to cause the same damage to a plaintiff. The law treats each wrongdoer as the effective cause of the plaintiff's entire loss and therefore allows the plaintiff to seek full compensation from any of the defendants found liable.<sup>32</sup> Joint and several liability only begins to operate once a wrongdoing has been proven by the plaintiff. A plaintiff must prove the substantive elements of the tort against a defendant in order for damages to be sought against that particular defendant.*

**Judgement** – Our critical faculty, discernment, or good sense.

**Liability** – The state of being responsible for something.

**Negligence** – The failure to exercise the care toward others, which a reasonable or prudent person would do in the circumstances or taking action which, such a reasonable person would not.

**Occupiers liability act** – This defines an “occupier” of premises as a person who either is in physical possession of premises or who has responsibility for and control over the condition of the premises, the activities carried on there, or the entry of persons onto the premises.

*The Act outlines the occupier’s duty to ensure that persons entering the premises are reasonably safe while on the premises unless the risks are willingly assumed. If risks are willingly assumed, the occupier still has a duty to take all reasonable precautions not to cause a situation of potential harm to the person or their property.<sup>33</sup>*

**Policy** – A course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual.

**Principle** – A fundamental basis of a system of thought or belief.

**Prudence** – Caution or circumspection as to danger or risk, the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason or skill and good judgement.

**Reasonable** – A standard for what is fair and appropriate under usual and ordinary circumstances.

**Regulation** – A principle, rule, law, or directive made and maintained by an authority and frequently accompanies legislation.

**Standard** – Something considered by authority as a basis for comparison; an approved model; a generally accepted level of quality.

**Tort** – A wrongful act or an infringement of a right (other than under contract) leading to civil legal liability.

## GENERAL TERMS

### CONSENSUS DEFINITIONS

*The following definitions related to education are those that achieved consensus as part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project<sup>6</sup>.*

**Built environment** – Human-constructed physical surroundings (e.g., structures, features, facilities) in which people live, learn, work, travel, and play.

*This includes land use patterns, transportation systems, physical infrastructure of roads, trails, sidewalks, bike paths, parks.*

**Natural environment** – Non-built surroundings and conditions in nature in which living and non-living things co-exist.

*Nature is a synonym for natural environment. It is the environment that is not designed by humans. When humans influence an environment, it is defined as the built environment or cultural landscape.*

### OTHER DEFINITIONS

*The following definitions were not part of the PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, and Ontology Global Harmonization Project; however, they were developed in consultation with the Outdoor Play Canada founding members, the Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy cohort, and national and international experts.*

**Access** – The freedom or ability to obtain or make use of something.

*It is the means, permission, ability or right to enter, approach or use a place or thing.*

**Affordance** – What the environment offers an individual.

**Child development** – The physical, cognitive, social, and emotional progression and maturation of human beings from conception to adulthood.

*A process that is influenced by interacting biological, social and environmental processes.*

**Continuum** – A series of characteristics that change gradually and exist between two different ends.

**Nature continuum** – A series of characteristics that range from space covered with concrete to spaces that encompass only wilderness and natural elements.

*This concept explores how much nature is needed for healthy development and what that may look like. E.g.: from concrete space with no visible nature (except the sky, air, wind, etc.), to a small patch of natural space, open green space to explore, diverse natural features, parks with natural elements, native species, water features, and/or wilderness.*

**Outdoor play continuum** – A reflection of the nature continuum and includes access and opportunities for outdoor play.

*E.g.: streetscape, vacant lot, fabricated play structure, natural play structure, natural features, open space, forest, stream, pond, wilderness*

**Physical activity** – Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure.<sup>34</sup>

**Physical literacy** – The motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.<sup>35</sup>

**Practitioner** – Someone engaged in a skilled profession, job or role.

**Sedentary behaviour** – Any waking behaviour characterized by an energy expenditure  $\leq 1.5$  metabolic equivalents (METs) while in a sitting, reclining or lying posture.<sup>36</sup>

**24 hr movement behaviour** – The combined patterns of sleep, sedentary behaviour and physical activity across the whole day.<sup>37</sup>

## KEY DOCUMENTS

Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

<https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/position-statement-on-active-outdoor-play-en.pdf>

PLaTO-Net Terminology, Taxonomy, Ontology Global Harmonization Project

<https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/plato-net/>

Connecting Canadians with Nature: An investment in the well-being of our citizens

[https://parks-parcs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ConnectingCanadians-English\\_web.pdf](https://parks-parcs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ConnectingCanadians-English_web.pdf)

A Framework for Recreation in Canada

<https://cpa.ca/framework/what-is-the-framework/>

Loose Parts Play Toolkit, Inspiring Scotland

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/publication/loose-parts-play-toolkit-2019-edition/>

Managing Risk in Play Provision Implementation Guide

<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8625/1/00942-2008DOM-EN.pdf>

Nature and Why It's Essential for Kids' Brains: Information for Parents and Caregivers

<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Toronto/Nature-and-Why-Its-Essential-For-Kids-Brains-Information-for-Parents-and-Caregivers/index.php?m=article&ID=52861>

The Nature Playbook – Take Action to Connect a New Generation of Canadians with Nature

<https://parks-parcs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/nature-playbook.pdf>

The Outdoor Play in Canada: 2021 State of the Sector Report

[www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/ssr](http://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/ssr)

Parks for All: An Action Plan for Canada's Parks Community

<https://cpa.ca/policy/parks-for-all/>

The Risk Benefit Assessment Toolkit

<https://adobeindd.com/view/publications/54ad27be-bf53-4810-adc1-1c9505c12e4a/9rb1/publication-web-resources/pdf/2019-11-03-CANADA-RBAT-ENGLISH.pdf>

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

<https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/crc.html>

*Article 31 states that: Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. Canada ratified the United Nations convention on the rights of the child on Dec. 19, 1991.*

The Unstructured Play Toolkit, Canadian Public Health Association

<https://www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play>

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