

# 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 and a team of national and international advisors with expertise in play-based practice, policy and research.

The process of compiling and defining these concepts included 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 document 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:

PLAY

RISK

LEGAL

EDUCATION

GENERAL TERMS

KEY DOCUMENTS

LINKS

# PLAY

Play is a universal, developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant expression of childhood, and can be viewed in a multitude of ways and within the context of many settings. It occurs sporadically during children's free time and is broadly identified as unstructured, though can also include child-directed symbolic 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. Children and youth need the time, appropriate space and affordance to engage in quality play.

**Play** is what children and youth do when they follow their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.<sup>6</sup> Play is **freely chosen** (a child chooses when, if and how to play), **intrinsically motivated** (a child plays because they are motivated internally to do so), and **personally-directed** (a child individually and/or collectively directs their own play).

International Play Association Declaration on the Importance of Play: "IPA promotes the right of all children and young people to time, freedom and space to play in their own way."  
[http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IPA\\_Declaration-FINAL.pdf](http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IPA_Declaration-FINAL.pdf)

Under the rubric of **play**, there are several subcategories.

**Outdoor Play** is play that takes place outside and includes concepts of risky play and nature play. Outdoor play is the umbrella term that assumes the above definition of *play* and takes place in a very broad continuum of spaces that include urban, rural, suburban, and wilderness settings.

**Active Play** is play that includes light, moderate, and/or vigorous physical activity.

**Nature Play** is play that happens primarily outside in a natural environment and/or involves play with natural elements and features, such as water and mud, rocks, hills, forests, and natural loose parts, such as sticks, pine cones, leaves, grass etc.

**Risky Play** is thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury. Risky play provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury risk.<sup>7,8</sup> Risky play is subjective and changes for each child.

Risky play can be categorized as: 1. play with great heights, 2. play with high speed, 3. play with dangerous tools, 4. play near dangerous elements, 5. rough-and-tumble play, and 6. play where the children can "disappear"/get lost.<sup>9</sup>

## OTHER PLAY DEFINITIONS

**Free Play** is used interchangeably with unstructured play. Consistent with the broad definition of play, it is

child directed, intrinsically motivated, freely chosen and is a goal in itself without external rules and structure. Activities such as organized sports are not considered free play.<sup>10</sup> Free play can happen within an organized program when it is child-directed and freely chosen.

**Unstructured Play** is play that is **not** initiated in an organized, planned or formal way. It emphasizes self-directed, emergent aspects of play and is not externally directed by adults. It is aligned, but distinct from play-based learning, which uses play concepts for educator-directed learning (see definition below). It is important to note that play often becomes more structured when children are given time and repeated experiences in the same space.

**Structured Play** is distinctly different from the definition of play understood in this context. This concept includes games when they are adult directed, e.g.: tag, kick the can, soccer, grounders and sport related activities.

**Street Play** is a concept and practice 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 children can play in a social and physical space where the whole community can interact.<sup>11,12</sup>

**Recreation** is the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing.

**Child-directed** is used as a qualifier to emphasize the principle component of play in which the child leads and directs how they choose. The child's central role is in determining their play.

**Playwork** is the theory and practice that recognises supervised children's play should nevertheless remain 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.

**Playwork principles** establish the professional and ethical framework for *playwork* and need to be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

"playwork enriches a child's play environment in order to stimulate the process of development through spontaneous, child-directed play."  
- Fraser Brown, playwork professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

**Playworker** is a skilled professional role that enriches and enhances children's play. A playworker role is to support all children and youth to create and use a space to play by providing a rich environment that children and youth can manipulate to meet their play needs. Their role is to observe and document what they see in order to enhance the child's opportunities for play and to advance their own playwork practice. A playworker is an emerging profession in some parts of the world, but has been in existence for decades in other parts of the world.

**Play value** is a value placed on the environment and/or objects that exist for the purposes of play with a focus on healthy child development. When applied to play spaces, value includes the design, support and content of a place.<sup>14</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 child needs it to be in the play world they have created. Pine needles and pinecones can create a kitchen, fort or imaginary place that a child chooses.

**Playscape** is a landscape that is designed to provide the space and affordance for children's play.

**Playground** is a piece of land used for and usually equipped with facilities and/or equipment for outdoor play and recreation, especially by children. Equipment can include swings, slides and other play structures

**Play space** is an area or environment that includes built and natural opportunities for play. It is an inclusive and supportive physical and social space designated for children to play.

**Play literacy** is the knowledge, confidence, skills and attitudes to support and engage in play.

**Adventure Playground** is as a space that is dedicated solely to children's play. It includes skilled playworkers who facilitate the ownership, development and design of the space physically, socially and culturally by the children who are playing in that space.<sup>15</sup>

**Loose parts** are materials used in play that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials.<sup>16,17</sup>

## RISK

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, Canada's Active Outdoor Play Position Statement 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**

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>18</sup> In the context of children's play, risk can refer to the presence of hazards in a play space, which may cause danger and serve no apparent benefit. However, it can also be used to describe the thrilling and exciting play that can include the possibility of physical injury (Sandseter) and can contribute positively to children's physical, emotional and psychological development (Brussoni). The term risk is not an objective concept and needs to be understood as a variable with inherently subjective value. The following definitions provide research-informed, shared understandings 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 coming poking out on a pathway, etc. Some risks found in children's play environments may need to be mitigated if they have the potential to cause undo harm. However, in most circumstances, they can allow a child 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 child development.*

**Risk** is the possibility of gaining or losing something of value, with an intentional interaction with uncertainty and probability. Risk is subjective and can vary from person to person.

**Hazard** is 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 child does not have the competence to manage the hazard, or where there is no obvious benefit to the child in experiencing the hazard (e.g.: broken railing, fast moving current in a river).<sup>19</sup>

**Harm** is injury, hurt or damage inflicted on a human, object or **environment**.

**Danger** is the possibility of suffering harm or injury.

*“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*

**Safety** is 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>20</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>18</sup>

**Risk management** is a systemic rational approach to managing uncertainty within an operating environment.

**Risk Benefit** is a part of a risk assessment method in which an evaluation of the potential benefits to children and others. Play 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>21,22</sup>

**Risk Benefit Analysis** is a process where the practitioner or program weighs, with equal consideration, the duty to protect children from avoidable, serious harm and the duty to provide them with valuable play opportunities.

**Risk Benefit Assessment** is a practical process and tool for making judgements about the risks and benefits associated with an activity and play space. It includes the control measures that are required to manage the risks while securing the benefits. It assumes that caregivers in the place of play are trained and entrusted with the capacity to make judgements.

**Narrative Risk Benefit Assessment** is a narrative form (as opposed to numerical methods) of a risk benefit assessment that includes factors considered and judgements made.<sup>23</sup>

**Experience Risk Benefit Assessment** includes minute-by-minute observations and potential interventions by adults who have duty of care. e.g.: educators, supervisors in school playgrounds, community child and youth workers, childcare providers.<sup>18</sup>

**Site Risk Benefit Assessment** is the documented process to evaluate environmental factors that contribute to a defined play space.

**Dynamic Risk Benefit Assessment** is a continuous process of identifying hazards, **assessing risk**, taking action to assess **risk benefits**, monitoring and reviewing, in rapidly changing circumstances during a child's play. It relies on communication and dialogue with the child, intuition and skilled, experienced and trained practitioners or caregivers.<sup>24</sup>

**Risk Aversion** defines human behaviours or actions to reduce uncertainty and danger when exposed to unknown, potentially negative outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

**Risk Averse Society** argues that childhood is being undermined by the growth of risk aversion. This restricts children's play, limits their freedom of movement, corrodes their relationships with adults and constrains their exploration of physical, social and natural worlds.

**Risk Reframing** is a process or "intervention to offer parents and educators a context for building new and complex perceptions of risk in children's outdoor free play". It considers a balance between the benefits and potential harms of everyday risk taking for children.<sup>26</sup>

**Risk Mitigation** is an overall approach to reduce the *risk*, impact severity and/or probability of occurrence.

**Injury Prevention** is the effort to prevent, ameliorate, treat, and/or reduce injury-related disability and death.

**Injury** is the damage that results when a human body is suddenly subjected to energy in amounts that exceed the threshold of physiological tolerance, or from a lack of one or more vital elements (e.g., oxygen). Injuries are usually defined by their intention, including unintentional injuries (e.g., fall, motor vehicle crash), and intentional injuries (e.g., assault).<sup>27</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>28</sup>

**Serious Injury** indicates an injury that is severe and undesirable, great or intense. It is a term filled with subjectivity. Within the context of outdoor play, it is not an acceptable outcome.

## LEGAL

**Duty of Care** is a legal obligation (in tort law) that is imposed on an individual requiring adherence to a standard of reasonable care while performing any acts that could foreseeably harm others. It is the first element that must be established to proceed with an action in negligence.

**Due diligence** is the level of judgement, care, prudence, determination, and activity that a person would reasonably be expected to do under particular circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

**Judgement** is our critical faculty, discernment or good sense.

**Liability** is the state of being responsible for something.

**Joint and Several Liability** involves two or more wrongdoers acting independently so as to cause the same damage to a plaintiff. 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. 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.

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.

**Negligence** is 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** 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.

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

**Prudence** is 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** is a standard for what is fair and appropriate under usual and ordinary circumstances.

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

**Guideline** is advice, direction or procedures developed and used to understand or implement policy, regulations or processes. A guideline 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.

**Principle** is a fundamental basis of a system of thought or belief.

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

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

## EDUCATION

**Play based learning** describes an educational approach that focuses on local human and natural environments and includes the role of an educator who supports, and facilitates learning in play through a pedagogical process such as inquiry and documentation. There is a particular focus on equity and social justice issues as well as environmental content.<sup>30,31</sup>

**Co-construction** is the philosophy in early childhood education that recognises children as knowledgeable, skilful and competent contributors to their own learning.

**Democratic learning** is children's right to participation and involvement in decision-making. Children's learning of democratic values is best achieved through informal learning situations, such as those that occur in outdoor play. These informal learning situations are associated with the immediate and unplanned, and with the resulting interaction, both between adult and child and within the child group.<sup>32</sup>

**Emergent Curriculum** is a way of planning curriculum that is based on the children's interest and passion at a certain point in time. Children thrive and learn best when their interests are captured. Learning occurs naturally.

**Forest School** is an educational approach that includes regular and repeated access to a natural space and child-directed, emergent and inquiry-based learning. Children spend between a half-day to a full day in urban or near urban parks, natural spaces adjacent to or on school grounds and outdoor spaces.

**Inquiry-based** learning is a process where children are invested in the learning process, have been provided a key role in directing how and what they learn. It is when children learn from each other and the teacher learns from the children. Information is investigated, analysed and discussed between students. Knowledge is dynamic, collectively constructed and informed by multiple sources. Children's natural sense of wonder is at the centre of learning and defines direction.<sup>33,34</sup>

**Land-based** education is an Indigenous approach to learning that recognizes a deep connection and relationship between people and the land. Relationship with the land, community elders and local storytelling are important parts of land-based learning. Storytelling is an essential method to teach and learn about cultural beliefs, values, customs, ceremony, history, practices, relationships, and ways of life.

## GENERAL TERMS

**Affordance** is the quality or property of something or a physical or social environment that **defines** its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used.

**Access** is 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.

**Built Environment** is part of the physical environment that is human-made or the modified physical surroundings in which people live, work, and play. The built environment includes: land use patterns, transportation systems, physical infrastructure of roads, trails, sidewalks, bike paths, parks; design of the physical elements in a community.

**Child Development** is the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional maturation of human beings from conception to adulthood. It is a process that is influenced by interacting biological, social and environmental processes.

**Continuum** is a series of characteristics that change gradually and exist between two different ends.

**Flow** is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. It is completely focused motivation, often achieved by children when fully immersed in play. During flow, people typically experience deep enjoyment, creativity, and a total engagement.<sup>35</sup>

**Natural Environment** includes all living and non-living things that are naturally occurring on Earth. 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.

**Nature Continuum** is a series of characteristics that range from space covered with concrete to spaces that encompass the natural elements. They are slightly different from each other and exist between two different end possibilities. This concept explores how much nature is needed for healthy child development and what does that look like? e.g.: concrete space with no visible nature (except the sky, air, wind etc.), a small patch of natural space, open green space to explore, diverse natural features, parks with natural elements, native species, water features, wilderness.

**Opportunity** is a set of circumstances and timing that makes it possible to do something.

**Outdoor Play Continuum** reflects the nature continuum and includes access and opportunities for outdoor play culture. e.g.: streetscape, vacant lot, fabricated play structure, natural play structure, natural features, open space, forest, stream, pond, wilderness

**Physical Activity** is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure.<sup>36</sup>

**Physical literacy** is the motivation, confidence, *physical* competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in *physical* activities for life.<sup>37</sup>

**Practitioner** is someone engaged in a skilled profession, job or role.

**Sedentary behaviour** is any waking behaviour characterized by an energy expenditure  $\leq 1.5$  metabolic equivalents (METs) while in a sitting or reclining posture.<sup>38</sup>

**24 hr movement behaviour** involves the combined patterns of sleep, sedentary behaviour and physical activity across the whole day.

# KEY DOCUMENTS

Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play

<http://www.haloresearch.ca/outdoorplay/>

Managing Risk in Play Provision Implementation Guide

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

A Framework for Recreation in Canada

[http://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Framework%20For%20Recreation%20In%20Canada\\_EN.pdf](http://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Framework%20For%20Recreation%20In%20Canada_EN.pdf)

Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion

<http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/>

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.

# LINKS

**UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC)** - <https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/crc.html>

**Canadian Safety Association Playground Standards** - <http://www.ccohs.ca/products/csa/27019532014>

**Canadian Playground Safety Institute** - <https://www.cpsionline.ca/>

“CPSI, through a network of partners, provides education and support in playground safety to industry practitioners and associated stakeholders. Our product range is creative, needs driven, user friendly and sustainable.”

**Canadian Standards Association** - <http://www.csagroup.org/global/en/services/codes-and-standards/standards-development>

“Canada’s largest standards development organization. Standards are developed ‘through our balanced, consensus-based process.’”

**Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety** - <http://www.ccohs.ca/>

**Canadian Risk Management Society** - <https://www.rims.org/education/Pages/CRMdesignation.aspx>

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