



Sport Community Town Hall Proposal – Outdoor Play Canada

Access to active play outdoors and in nature is important for children’s physical and mental health and development¹. Time outdoors is associated with more physical activity and less sedentary behaviour.¹ Moreover, fostering an emotional connection to nature early in life is important for promoting lifelong pro-environmental behaviour and environmental stewardship^{2,3}. However, restrictions on access to the outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that opportunities for Canadian children to get outside have been limited. The result, as we recently reported, is that children across the country have been playing outside far less than before the pandemic,^{4,5} their physical activity has decreased, and their screen time has increased.⁴ We have additionally shown that the neighbourhood built environment has had a significant impact on children’s time spent in active outdoor activities during the pandemic, where high-density neighborhoods and proximity to major roads were seen as major barriers⁶. Important to note, however, was that time spent outdoors was preserved in high density neighborhoods with better access to parks⁶. Among high-density neighborhoods, those with the lowest income and the highest ethnic concentration have been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19^{7,8}. As time spent outdoors and in nature is important for promoting a healthy immune system⁹, efforts to increase access to the outdoors among these high-risk populations will be especially important for the COVID-19 recovery process.

In addition, fears over risks of infection at schools may lead to an increasing disparity between privileged and lower-income families, with wealthier families investing in private learning pods and divesting from the public education system, and lower-income families with higher vulnerabilities becoming test subjects for online learning¹⁰. One way to mitigate this potential divide is to reduce risk of infection by bringing classrooms outside, in-line with the Canadian Government’s *Risk mitigation tool for child and youth settings operating during the COVID-19 pandemic*¹¹ that suggests that classes be run outdoors to increase ventilation and reduce risk of transmission.

Therefore, as part of the recovery process from the COVID-19 pandemic, we propose that attention be placed on supporting access to the outdoors and outdoor play through: 1) improving neighborhood built environment features to support access to the outdoors and outdoor play, particularly in high-density neighbourhoods, and 2) by focusing on providing outdoor learning and play opportunities in childhood education settings. These efforts are important for the long-term preservation and promotion of healthy and resilient communities across Canada.



References

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