

POLICY BRIEF

September 25th, 2025



A project led by Outdoor Play Canada

**ACTIVE OUTDOOR PLAY: A POWERFUL TOOL
FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN KEY HEALTH,
SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES
FACED BY PEOPLE LIVING IN CANADA**

Prepared by Outdoor Play Canada

Executive Summary

Active outdoor play has the potential to be a transformative strategy for improving health, social well-being, and environmental sustainability in Canada. This brief emphasizes the urgent need for a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach that embeds active outdoor play into national frameworks, including health, climate, and urban planning. Building on the momentum generated by Canada's 2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, and informed by the launch of the upcoming 2025 Position Statement, the brief highlights Canada's international leadership and evidence-based contributions to advancing active outdoor play policy and research. It notes that previous efforts have focused predominantly on children and youth, and now recommends expanding the approach to encompass all age groups. By investing in active outdoor play, policymakers can drive progress toward multiple United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—including health, climate action, and sustainable communities—while fostering healthier, more resilient populations and ecosystems. This brief concludes with clear calls to action and recommendations by sector for unlocking the full benefits of active outdoor play across the lifespan.

Introduction

The Issue

Throughout the last 10 years, Canada has navigated a rapidly shifting political, social, and economic landscape, marked by increasing climate-related events and disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic (1). These challenges intensified concerns around physical, mental, and environmental health for many Canadians (1).

Each year, 1 in 5 Canadians face a mental health issue, yet access to appropriate care remains a significant barrier (2). Meanwhile, extreme heat events have become the norm each summer as Canada continues to warm at twice the global average due to climate change (3). For adolescents, the psychological toll is even greater: beyond everyday mental health struggles, many report intense emotions and anxiety linked specifically to the climate crisis (4).

Adding to these pressures, excessive sedentary behaviours is now estimated to cost the Canadian healthcare system over \$2.2 billion annually (5).

Canada and countries around the globe have been tasked with addressing these intersecting crises efficiently and effectively, and need solutions that drive interdisciplinary, cross-sector outcomes and benefits.

A Solution

Despite the scales of the intersecting crises, one powerful, cost-effective, large-scale solution lies in plain sight: active outdoor play. With wide-ranging benefits for the health and well-being of humans and the environment, active outdoor play offers a holistic response, not just for Canadians, but for communities around the world.

Why Now?

Despite growing recognition of its value, active outdoor play is not yet embedded in national health, climate, or urban planning strategies. Broader, coordinated action is urgently needed—across ministries, age groups, and jurisdictions. Investing in active outdoor play is not just a health decision; it's a policy solution that supports climate action (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13), healthy lives (SDG 3), sustainable communities (SDG 11), life on land (SDG 15), and life below water (SDG 14).

Canada's Leadership in Outdoor Play

A key turning point for the outdoor play sector in Canada was the 2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, led by the founding members of Outdoor Play Canada (6). Over the past decade, this Position Statement has galvanized national momentum, influencing major policy shifts that prioritize outdoor play—especially in support of healthy child development (6). Canada is recognized as a global leader in outdoor play research and policy, with landmark contributions including: the 2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, the Canadian Public Health Association's Position Statement on Active Play, the Canadian Paediatric Society's Position Statement on Risky Outdoor Play, and the Outdoor Play in Canada: 2021 State of the Sector Report. However, much of this work has focused primarily on children and youth. To address and build on the progress of the past decade, Outdoor Play Canada has spearheaded the development the 2025 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play (7). This new Statement expands the scope of active outdoor play beyond childhood, positioning it as a powerful solution to pressing global challenges—across the lifespan (7,8).

Research Overview: The Evidence

Why Outdoor Play Matters

Research shows that active outdoor play benefits both children and adults in powerful ways (7):

- Increases physical activity and reduces sedentary behaviour
- Supports better sleep quality
- Boosts holistic well-being—physically, spiritually, mentally, socially, and environmentally
- Fosters deeper connections with nature and promotes climate-conscious behaviour
- Delivers cross-sector benefits in health, education, recreation, and environmental conservation and climate action.

These benefits highlight the need for policies that protect and promote active outdoor play—for healthier people and a healthier planet.

Key Audiences for Action

Active outdoor play is more than a personal pastime—it is a public health strategy, an environmental solution, and a critical large-scale, system-wide policy opportunity. To translate research into action, we must first engage key collaborators and partners across sectors.

1. Community Leaders in Advocacy and Research

- Organizations like Outdoor Play Canada, ParticipACTION, the CHEO Research Institute, and Queen's University are already advancing the active play agenda. These groups provide evidence-informed frameworks, lead public campaigns, and support policy change. They are natural allies in scaling up efforts.

2. Governmental and Public Sector Partners

- Specific to this issue, the ultimate levers of legislative change lie with the Government of Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. These bodies have the authority to embed active outdoor play into health promotion, climate resilience, and urban design policies.

3. Broader Policy and Practice Audiences

- **Individuals and families:** Seek safe, accessible, and enjoyable opportunities for active outdoor play.
- **Urban planners:** Design inclusive, nature-rich environments.
- **Local governments:** Prioritize outdoor play in community planning.
- **Public health units:** Implementing active outdoor play as a strategy to improve population health outcomes.
- **Conservationists:** Aim to balance ecological protection with equitable public access to natural spaces.

Conclusion

With growing concerns about rising screen time, declining mental and physical health, and the worsening impacts of climate change, we must rethink traditional approaches that we feel comfortable with but often fall short in addressing these complex and interconnected challenges. Active outdoor play offers a powerful, everyday solution—one that bridges sectors and delivers scalable, sustainable benefits for individuals, communities, and the environment in Canada. It is time to recognize active outdoor play as essential to building a healthier, happier, and more resilient future for all people living in Canada, and for the places where we live, work, and play.



The Recommendations

1. Promote Active Outdoor Play at a Societal Level

The Government of Canada should lead a national effort to recognize and elevate the value of active outdoor play for people of all ages on a societal level in Canada (7). This includes launching public awareness campaigns, integrating outdoor play into health and education policies, and investing in supportive infrastructure and environments.

2. Ensure Equitable Access to Outdoor Spaces

Access to safe, inclusive, and nature-rich outdoor environments should be treated as a basic right for all people living in Canada (7). All levels of government must work together to expand and protect these spaces—especially underserved and urban communities.

3. Foster Cross-Sector Collaboration

Government, public health, education, recreation, and environmental sectors must collaborate to make active outdoor play a shared priority (7). Joint initiatives, aligned policies, and sustained funding are essential to support long-term impact.

4. Empower Public Health and Healthcare Professionals

Health practitioners should be equipped to communicate the holistic benefits of outdoor play and integrate it into public health programs. This includes “prescriptions” for outdoor time and community-level initiatives.

5. Design Playable and Sustainable Urban Environments

Urban planners should prioritize the creation of child-friendly, elder-inclusive, and environmentally sustainable play spaces based on the principles of a universal design, with an emphasis on preserving existing green space and natural environments (7). Collaboration with policy- and law-makers is critical to ensure planning policies and bylaws actively support active outdoor play as a core part of community life.

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