

PLAY IT'S SERIOUS BUSINESS

A DISCUSSION PAPER PREPARED BY ALBERTA RECREATION AND PARKS ASSOCIATION



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ARPA is gratefully acknowledges the contracted work undertakent to complete this discussion paper by JHOAD Consulting, in particular, the professional consultant services provided by Ms. Judy Hoad.

ARPA gratefully appreciates the funding support received from the Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation/Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation in the development of this paper.



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Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA)

is a provincial charitable not-for-profit organization with a voluntary board of directors dedicated to the promotion of recreation and parks and their benefits to the quality of life of all Albertans.

Our vision...

"A province, and communities within, that embrace and proactively use recreation and parks as essential means for enhancing individual well-being and community vitality, economic sustainability and natural resource protection and conservation."

Our mission...

ARPA builds healthy citizens, communities and environments throughout Alberta.

For more information on ARPA, our programs or services, or the benefits of recreation and parks, please visit our website at <http://www.arpaonline.ca>.

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SEPTEMBER 2011



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BACKGROUND

Why this paper?

Family photographs tell a story - a story of children's PLAY through the generations. In flipping through our family photo albums many of us will come across images documenting children's PLAY. A photograph from 1930s captures three children, each are wearing a wreath of maple leaves they made earlier in the day, when they played Robin Hood in the wood lot. Children wading in knee deep water, while catching tadpoles in the swamp, are captured in a photograph with April 1948 scribbled on the back. The battle between two boys playing soldiers with old farm implements is documented during the summer of 1964. The 70s provide us with images of kids climbing into tree forts, riding bikes in front of the house, and playing with chalk on the sidewalk. Photographs from the 80s consist mainly of baseball and hockey games, skating and gymnastics classes. And for many, the family gallery ends in the early 1990s, replaced with the photographs of organized sports teams taken by professional photographers.

This story of children's PLAY is told very differently throughout the generations. The older photos show kids, kids only, playing outside, inventing their own games and activities, involving all age groups and sharing in the joy of creative activity. Beginning in the later years, we see structured activities and games, rule driven, age specific and directed by adults. The photos tell the story of a shift and a change from free play to structure for the majority of our children and youth. The question is whether the change is good or are there impacts that need to be addressed?

Why this paper now?

All parents want to do what is best for their children and make decisions to support their development and success. Today, more than ever, families and children have choices and resources not experienced by earlier generations. We see a diversity of registered programs and team sports for all ages. And in addition there is a focus on supporting child development through education and team and individual sports from early ages.

Parents make every effort to ensure their children's safety. This concern means many children are almost always in organized and scheduled activities, or indoors when not being directly supervised. In addition, with today's technology, children spend a significant amount of time seated in front of screens and computers, in many cases they may be monitored by cameras or mobile phones to ensure they do not leave secure environments.

In the same time period when parent concern for childhood safety and protection from child abuse was on the rise, organizational fear of injury and lawsuits began to have a negative impact on playground activities and equipment. Indoor play and toys took the place of outdoor roaming and exploration. Recreation and parks operations increasingly offered programs and playground structures reducing the number of supervised, unprogrammed PLAY spaces. As a result the option of free and unstructured PLAY is disappearing in favour of supervised, scheduled and organized games and activities.

In addition to this evolution of children's activities, parents' lives have also changed. The changing expectations and income needs mean many, if not most, young families do not have a parent at home during the early childhood years. In many families, preschoolers spend their early years in child care facilities and school age children attend before and after school programs. In all these programs the focus is often on structured activities. However many children, once they reach 12 years of age, reject scheduled and supervised activities and most communities do not provide alternative places where they can assemble and interact with their peers.

Do we understand the unintended implications?

Over the past three decades there has been a tripling of childhood obesity rates in the country, a fact that is heightening concern at the federal level, and indeed among all orders of government. Some have said the loss of PLAY time and unscheduled activity may be linked to childhood obesity because when there is a gap in scheduled programs many children revert to sedentary activities such as television and computers. From a child health perspective the obesity issue is urgent!

Child development experts are also identifying a number of other impacts. Life skills such as face-to-face communication, cooperation and sharing as well as problem solving skills, conflict resolution and risk identification and management are enhanced through free PLAY with peers and other age groups. PLAY also provides opportunities for developing creativity, imagination and innovation. Although these skills are not acquired exclusively through free PLAY, experts see clear linkages to good communication skills, appropriate risk management and development of emotional intelligence with free PLAY opportunities. It is also recognized that true leadership often develops in the early years, and on the playground.

Is there a case for change?

Society's focus on structure and supervision has placed PLAY in a precarious position. Recent studies on child health and obesity, concerns about our young people and their behaviours, and the growing focus on facilities and adult structure in recreation activities point to problems but provide little in the way of collaborative strategies to resolve the problems. The growing popularity of programs focused on bringing sports training and equipment to children in need misses the mark by ignoring the value of free PLAY and the importance of providing safe and creative spaces to support PLAY.

This paper recognizes the PLAY deficit and makes recommendations to support change. It takes the position that no significant progress will be made without new policy development on children and PLAY, without involving children in designing playspaces and activities and without cross-sector leadership. The matter is urgent given the implications of not taking deliberate action and it raises questions about societies role in children's PLAY. Only through thoughtful dialogue and input can change actually occur.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PLAY is often preceded by the terms free and/or unstructured to distinguish the concept from organized/structured activity. PLAY is fundamental to human nature and is critical in child development. PLAY for the purposes of this paper is defined as:

*“PLAY is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behavior that actively engages the child”
(National Children’s Office, 2004).*

The value of PLAY has been recognized internationally for decades. The International Play Association, founded in Denmark in 1961, advocates for PLAY opportunities that fulfill play’s potential to help children develop physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly, declaring children need PLAY and recreation as well as food, education and loving parents.

Canada ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, recognizing the importance of recreation in contributing to happy and healthy children. And in some pockets change is occurring. There are national and provincial efforts across Canada in fitness, child development and recreation focused on the wellness of children. The concern for children’s health is driven by the growing concern for levels of physical inactivity and increasing levels of obesity. Research shows that “among children and adolescents age two to seventeen, 26% are overweight and another 8% are obese (ParticipAction, 2010). Based on this and other empirical evidence there is no doubt that addressing this issue is urgent.

The research for this project included an extensive review of background papers on PLAY, interviews with Alberta leaders in child development and recreation, and an assessment of international research on the policy and planning related to PLAY. Among child development experts and the recreation and parks sector there is a consensus that children today do not have the same opportunities to PLAY as earlier generations and for a variety of reasons are not permitted to freely explore nature and their environment. The observation on its own is not startling but the impacts of this situation raise a number of serious concerns.

The research evidence clearly shows that free and unstructured PLAY has significant benefits and, in fact, is critical to human development. Those benefits include development of the brain, physical, social, emotional and spiritual health, acquisition of life skills including communication, fairness, patience, respect, cooperation and sharing, enhancement of creativity, imagination, innovation and problem solving skills, understanding of consequences, interdependence, negotiation and conflict resolution and, experience and confidence with asserting control over personal decisions.

However, the research also indicates that despite broad understanding of the value and importance of PLAY, little of the knowledge has lead to new approaches or community support for taking deliberate action to change the situation at the policy, planning and leadership levels in Alberta or Canada.

This paper acknowledges that successful leadership on the re-integration of PLAY into the lives of children, based on experience, knowledge, passion and reputation, could come from the recreation and parks sector, starting in Alberta with ARPA. We conclude that action is needed if we are to address the decline in PLAY and its implications and recommends. As a result, PLAY needs to be re-positioned through policy, planning and leadership, with specific and deliberate approaches for preschoolers (up to 6 years), school age children (6 to 12 years) and youth (13 to 18 years). It should be noted that while Europe has taken steps to engage adults and seniors in PLAY, including designing playgrounds for seniors, this paper does not address the issue of adult PLAY.

Summary of recommendations

The recommendations are for deliberate action, including specific actions, in the form new policies and strategies to enhance existing programs and spaces and are based on what we can adopt from best practices in other jurisdictions.

1. **RESEARCH:** ARPA in collaboration with its national association, CPRA, undertake research to assess the views and values society, parents and children have regarding PLAY.
2. **ADVOCACY:** ARPA in collaboration with child development, education and health and fitness agencies develop and deliver an education program designed to convey the importance of PLAY and advocate for the creation of opportunities for PLAY in all communities.
3. **ENGAGEMENT:** ARPA advocate and support the engagement of the stakeholders in the design of safe PLAY opportunities.
4. **LEADERSHIP:** ARPA lead, through advocacy and the provision of training and resources to communities to support the engagement of children, youth, parents and communities in the design of opportunities for PLAY at the local level.
5. **POLICY:** ARPA and CPRA lead a collaborative partnership to develop and present a National PLAY Policy and a Charter for Children’s PLAY.



PLAY CONTEXT

1. PLAY CONTEXT

1.1. PLAY defined

A review of literature on PLAY reveals that, in general, PLAY definitions are characterized by three elements - freedom of choice, spontaneity and an absence of extrinsically imposed rules.

"PLAY is children's natural behaviour. The healthy development of children is dependent upon sufficient time and opportunities to PLAY. PLAY is spontaneous, self-motivated, controlled by the child. The adult role combines setting the stage and facilitating; that is, supporting rather than directing the PLAY" (International Play Association, 2009).

The International Play Association (IPA) is a non-governmental, voluntary organization founded in 1961. IPA believes that the nature of PLAY and its importance to children's well-being is not sufficiently understood by governments worldwide. IPA has undertaken a number of strategies to heighten awareness of the importance of play worldwide, including a series of consultations on Children's Right to Play.

The IPA states that in spite of the importance of play, many barriers to free play exist, some of which are lack of time, lack of informal places to play, uninteresting playgrounds and lack of inclusion. IPA members around the world promote the value of children's PLAY to help reduce these barriers.

In *Children's Right to Play: An Examination of the Importance of Play in the Lives of Children Worldwide* IPA (2009) states:

"Adults have sought to impose rational and instrumental explanations onto something that is often seemingly irrational and purposeless. Adults' attitudes toward children's play range from ignoring it, to dismissing it as trivial or a waste of time, to curbing it as something dangerous or subversive, through to appropriating it as a mechanism for learning or socialization."

In the same paper the IPA concludes:

"Children's play belongs to children; adults should tread lightly when considering their responsibilities in this regard, being careful not to destroy children's own places for play through insensitive planning or pursuing of other adult agendas, or by only creating places and programmes that segregate children and control their play. Adults should be aware of the importance of play and take action to promote and protect the conditions that support it."

Advocates for PLAY acknowledge it can be both fun and serious. Through PLAY, participants explore social, material, and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them. PLAY helps children to develop a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. Through PLAY, individuals learn to develop competence that allows for greater levels of participation within and throughout society.

Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, says PLAY is fundamental to human nature and is critical in child development. Brown (2009) in his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* defines the following properties of PLAY:

- Apparently purposeless: PLAY is done for its own sake.
- Voluntary: PLAY is not obligatory or required by duty.
- Inherent attraction: It is fun; it provides arousal.
- Freedom from time: When fully engaged, we lose a sense of the passage of time.
- Diminished consciousness of self: We are fully in the moment, in the zone.
- Improvisational potential: We are open to serendipity, to chance.
- Continuation desire: We desire to keep doing it and the pleasure of the experience drives the desire.

England's *Play Strategy* (Department for Children, Schools and Families: The Children's Plan, 2007) provides a definition of play within its vision for 2020. This document defines PLAY as "children and young people following their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons, having fun while respecting themselves and others."

It must be noted however that for the purposes of our discussion, we are using the definition adopted by Government of Ireland (2004) in its *National Play Policy: READY, STEADY, PLAY*, namely:

"PLAY is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behavior that actively engages the child."

1.2. Value of PLAY

It is widely acknowledged that PLAY is essential to children's development. PLAY provides a fundamental learning process for children, allowing them to expand their skills, knowledge and understanding of the world. It allows them to test their abilities, use initiative, take risks and make mistakes without fear of failure. Through risk and challenge encountered in PLAY, children are able to develop skills and judgment vital to negotiating every-day life.

PLAY is also important for developing social skills and for forming, maintaining and negotiating relationships. It has also been suggested that PLAY supports relationships within the family and between generations. Communities benefit from play spaces as they provide networks of support to children and families and increase community cohesion.

Child psychologists and educators have said PLAY can help build resilience – the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives. In the social service sector PLAY has been recognized as a vital tool in supporting troubled and traumatized children. It can be therapeutic and provide opportunities to express feelings and anxieties.



According to Jane Hewes (Chair, Early Learning and Child Care, Grant MacEwan University, Alberta) learning is generally a by-product of children's PLAY, and PLAY may be a critical ingredient in learning. Additionally, the clearest evidence that children can learn while playing lies in the relationship between socio-dramatic play and literacy (Hewes, 2010). Hewes also reports that a multidisciplinary review of play indicates it builds and shapes emotion, motivation and reward regions of the brain. This may influence the attitude towards learning, by developing self regulation, executive function, flexibility, adaptability and resilience. She concludes that definitive evidence must come through observing rich play and studying its benefits.

Dr. Stuart Brown of the National Institute for Play advocates for unstructured PLAY where children have time to discover for themselves their most vital talents and knowledge.

"We may think that we are helping to prepare our kids for the future when we organize all their time, when we continually ferry them from one adult-organized, adult-regulated activity to another. And, of course, to some degree these activities do promote culturally approved behaviour as well as reinforce our roles as good parents. But in fact we may be taking from them the time they need to discover for themselves their most vital talents and knowledge. We may be depriving them of access to an inner motivation for an activity that will later blossom into a motive force in life" (Brown, 2009).

There is also a concern that the elimination of risk experienced through PLAY leads to ignorance on risk identification and management.

"There are risks in raising children under virtual protective house arrest: threats to their independent judgment ..." (Louv, 2008).

A review of relevant research publications and books demonstrates the common view that free and unstructured PLAY has significant benefits and, in fact, is critical to human development. Those benefits include:

- Development of the brain.
- Physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health.
- Acquisition of life skills including social, physical and communication development.
- Enhancement of creativity, imagination, innovation and problem solving skills.
- Adoption of principle-centered values of fairness, patience, respect, cooperation and sharing.
- Understanding of consequences, interdependence, negotiation and conflict resolution.
- Development of awareness and strategies to manage risk.
- Personal passions, including love of activity, solitude, love of nature and a lifelong enthusiasm for PLAY.
- Learning to have fun, take time, relax, reflect, focus.
- Experience and confidence with asserting control over personal decisions.

Much of the research and literature focuses on the value of PLAY for pre-school and school age children but the importance of PLAY opportunities for youth is gaining momentum. Youth PLAY is addressed, by Play England (2009), in the document *Embedding the Play Strategy*, to the point:

"Older children and teenagers tend not to use the terms "play" or "playing" about themselves. But they have a similar need for places to go where they can enjoy their own informal recreational time and things to do that reflect their own social and cultural lives. Whilst the play builder and play pathfinder programmes have a focus on 8 to 13 year olds, the strategic scope of the Play Strategy encompasses the informal, freely chosen leisure and recreational activities of all children up to age 19."

Caution! Kids at Play? Unstructured Time Use among Children and Adolescents (Boekhoven, 2009) discusses youth more specifically. It notes adults tend to view unstructured activities and time as a threat to adolescent health and well-being and as an antecedent to risk behaviours. However, adolescence triggers a reduction in the level of physical activity and an increase in the importance placed on relationships and social interactions, with an emphasis on shared ideas, experiences and discussion. The paper points out unstructured and exploratory PLAY should be considered as a possible precursor to self-determination in adolescents. The tension between the needs of developing adolescents for time and space to regulate their own behaviours and experience independence, and the role parents play in facilitating their child's healthy lifestyle, appropriate social behaviours and engagement are discussed.

Play England is a leader in advocating for PLAY, basing its work on the premise that PLAY is integral to children's enjoyment of

their lives, their health and their development. *The Charter for Children's Play* (National Children's Bureau, 2007) states:

- *"Through playing, children are creating their own culture, developing their abilities, exploring their creativity and learning about themselves, other people and the world around them.*
- *"Children need and want to stretch and challenge themselves when they play. Play provision and play space that is stimulating and exciting allows children to encounter and learn about risk. This helps them to build confidence, learn skills and develop resilience at their own pace."*

As part of the United Kingdom National Children's Bureau, Play England is a government national delivery partner working closely with local authorities and the voluntary sector to ensure that England's, first ever, national *Play Strategy* transforms public play space and play services. Play England (2009) links PLAY to achievement of a number of National Indicators for children and youth, including health, safety, enjoyment and achievement, a positive contribution and specifically for 16 to 18 year olds, economic well-being.

1.3 PLAY is disappearing - a PLAY deficit

In the recent Canadian television documentary *Lost Adventures of Childhood* (Harper, 2009) the focus is on the disappearance of free and unstructured PLAY. The documentary compares the recreational activities of the postwar years of the 1950s and early 1960s where children were outside, interacting with peers without adult involvement or structure to the scheduled and over-programmed activities of many children today. It raises the issues of childhood stress and lack of engagement. The underlying message is our current path of structured/programmed activities for our children is taking up the PLAY time that is essential to child development.

The book *Under Pressure* (Horne, 2004) discusses how the pressure to give our children the best of everything and make them the best at everything is backfiring on kids, parents and society as a whole. It notes that free play has been depicted as dangerous or having no value. Further stating that the simple magical soaring pleasure of being a child at PLAY has been lost.

Horne (2004) also notes childhood is always evolving yet has always been defined by adults. Society is at a point where childhood is being warped more than ever by adult fantasies and fears, anxieties and agendas. Every aspect of childhood - education, safety, discipline, sports even PLAY are set up to suit adults rather than children. Simply put, we are living in a culture where childhood is too precious to be left to children and children are too precious to be left alone (Honore).

One driver of the shift from active PLAY to structured activity is fear for the safety of the child and protection of the child from stranger abuse and bullying. There is also a fear that the child will be left behind and not excel in the world. Some say parents are living their aspirations through the child. By giving them

opportunities to be the best at something, to be successful in sports, and to win it is assumed that children will become successful adults and leaders. Many of these individual goals are also goals of the organized programs and sports and are seen to enhance individual contribution to society.

The growing concern for child safety and a desire for children to be successful had led to constant supervision and parental desires for children not to be left behind. In addition to these concerns our communities are not designed to facilitate free, unstructured children's PLAY and, as a result, the children's PLAY opportunities have been dramatically reduced.

All parents want their children to be safe and have every opportunity to grow and develop into successful adults. However, the desire to keep children safe means they are becoming constantly supervised.

"Fear is feeding on itself, leading to paranoia. Statistically the world is a safer place for children now than it's ever been before.... We are in an era of hyper-parenting which is good parenting run amok" (Honore, 2004).

Hewes (2010) and other early childhood professionals note that young children often move into structured activity at very early ages, as demonstrated by the pre-school programs and other activities. With the growth of formal after-school programs, school age children move from school to scheduled activities to homework daily without time to engage in PLAY and undirected social interaction.

Another contributor to the PLAY deficit is community design which has a significant impact on access to play spaces in urban environments. Neighborhoods without sidewalks, bike paths and safe walking and biking routes put up significant barriers to PLAY. Increasingly children are driven to school, even when the school is within walking distance. It often seems that communities are designed for cars and adults and not the children. In communities that do invest in playgrounds a lack of adult supervision has been a reported barrier to active PLAY (CABE Space, 2008). Barriers to outdoor play in the United States include the lack of nearby play spaces, overly busy schedules, and the lack of adult supervision at the available PLAY facilities (KaBoom!, 2009). The latter is a significant issue in urban environments.

A further influence limiting play is the impact of increased "screen time". Research clearly indicates that time spent watching television, engaged in computer activity and focused on personal devices has dramatically increased.

"I think that we live in techno-enthusiastic times. We celebrate our technologies because people are frightened by the world we've made. The economy isn't going right; there's global warming. In times like that people imagine science and technology will be able to get it right. In the area of education, it calms people to think that technology will be a salvation" (Turkle, 2010).

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) has highlighted the aforementioned barriers to active PLAY. In *Fair Play: A Consultation on the Play Strategy* it states:

"... there is evidence that opportunities for play – particularly child-led, outdoor play – are falling. Concerns about safety, the loss of open green space, the poor quality and inaccessibility of many existing play areas and the increasingly structured use of children's spare time are all barriers to children engaging in more outdoor play" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

1.4 Implications

So what are the implications? Child development is supported by PLAY which is the foundation for later structured activity and the ingraining of enthusiasm and passion for activity. Historically children transitioned from unstructured to structured activity over time but now this transition is often sudden and at a young age. Children are not experiencing opportunities to PLAY freely outdoors, to engage in unstructured activities or to experience and manage risk.

In *Lost Adventures of Childhood* (Harper, 2009), Don Fulgosi, an evolutionary psychologist, notes that PLAY is ubiquitous, universal and spontaneous and therefore it must have some adaptation value. He believes PLAY may be crucial to how children develop their understanding of other people and how they gain experience with risk so that they learn how to assess and manage it.

"Unstructured PLAY is nature's way of helping children learn. With the increased structuring of a child's time PLAY has virtually been eliminated" (Fulgosi, 2009).

Other child development experts express concern about the elimination of risk in the child's environment and the resulting inability to identify and manage risk. Specifically, Louv (2008) states there are risks in raising children under virtual protective house arrest. Threats to their independent judgment, to their value of place, to their ability to feel awe and wonder, to their sense of the stewardship for the Earth, and most immediately, threats to their psychological and physical health.

Some child psychologists have commented on the difference between sport and PLAY in the development of a child. The issue is not organized sports for children – organized sports are not new. The issue is how much of a child's life is taken up by organized sports and activities, for what some say serves the 5% who are athletically gifted (Harper, 2009).

The impact of increased involvement in structured activity and sports from an early age is both positive and negative. Sport supports physical fitness and helps build discipline, team skills and physical proficiency. But despite the level of involvement in organized sport, many are not engaged in the activity because everything is programmed for them. As a result children don't have to think for themselves, they don't need to solve problems and many don't develop emotional intelligence.

There are also physical and societal implications of the loss of PLAY. Many children, when not in scheduled activities, are inside, sedentary and spend time watching television or on computers. This may be exaggerated by parental fear that leads to keeping children indoors. In *Lost Adventures of Childhood* (Harper, 2009) we are told Canadian children spend 90% of their days indoors. The indoor focus, sedentary lifestyle and increased screen-time may be factors in the growing disconnection with nature and the out-of-doors, reduced face-to-face social activity, and the potential decline in leadership.

Dr. Sherry Turkle, psychologist and Director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, indicated peer interaction is critical to child development saying:

"Do we want children to have social skills, to be able to just look at each other face to face and negotiate and have a conversation and be comfortable in groups? Is this a value that we have in our educational system? Well, if so, a little less Net time, s'il vous plait. Technology challenges us to assert our human values, which means that first of all, we have to figure out what they are" (Turkle, 2009).

Further there is increased evidence that children and young adults are constantly in search of artificial stimulation. Many are constantly distracted and lack an ability to focus. Often there is an avoidance of complex problems and an over-reliance on parental direction and management.

Finally there are societal implications in the form of youth disenfranchisement, disorder and criminal activity. *The Cost of Excluding Ontario's Youth from Play* (Play Works, 2005) noted an increase in youth mental and physical risks arising from unprecedented barriers to participation in everyday life. Some of those barriers reported were:

- chronic poverty and rising user fees;
- lack of investment and cutbacks in areas and recreation resources;
- increasingly plugged-in world;
- inaccessible schools;
- lack of voice and meaningful participation in community life; and
- lack of opportunities to play.

Boekhoven (2009) concludes the most effective approach for adolescent PLAY is a balance between structured and unstructured, organized and spontaneous activities, promoting contact with as wide a range of environments in which to learn and play as possible. This could offset the concerns with adolescent health and well-being and potential risk behaviours.

The evidence points to a need for deliberate action to address the PLAY deficit. Creating opportunities for children and youth to engage in free, unstructured PLAY in play spaces they help design with the appropriate level of supervision can be addressed.

A photograph of four children running away from the camera in a school hallway. The children are wearing backpacks and casual clothing. The hallway has large windows on the right side. The image is overlaid with a blue and yellow geometric design. The text "THE VIEW OF PLAY OUTSIDE OF RECREATION" is written in white capital letters on a blue background.

THE VIEW OF PLAY OUTSIDE OF RECREATION

2. THE VIEW OF PLAY OUTSIDE OF RECREATION

Education, health and fitness and child development professionals all have an interest in PLAY as it relates to their respective jurisdictions.

2.1 Education

Piaget (1962) determined PLAY to be crucial; believing learning from which true knowledge follows doesn't come from passively absorbing and storing skills and information, but rather from a construction process, where discoveries emerge from real play with objects, ideas or other people. Through their PLAY children discover the basic laws of gravity and motion long before their first physics class. In fact, Piaget asserted, playful discovery underwrites the kind of learning that is supposed to occur at every stage of the model of development for which he is now famous.

Maria Montessori, the founder of the Montessori philosophy of education, believed "a child's work is to create the person she/he will become." In practice, children are given the freedom to use their inborn powers to develop physically, intellectually, and spiritually. A Montessori classroom provides this freedom within the limits of an environment which develops a sense of order and self-discipline. PLAY is the activity that allows the child to develop and learn.

"...we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child (Montessori, 1949).

Child education experts indicate that activities such as role-play and those that encourage problem solving and decision-making are critical to healthy development. Structured and organized activities do not support those opportunities. In public education curriculum the focus is appropriately on learning but classrooms do not include PLAY as a strategy for learning in most schools.

Dr. Janneke Frank, former Director of the Centre for Gifted Education, University of Calgary, Alberta said in education and recreation our approach is to adapt the child to the program rather than the program to the child.

"I worry about organized play where kids are offered a smorg (adult selected activities) with no opportunity to choose something that makes their heart sing" (Frank, 2010).

PLAY as we define it is not accommodated or encouraged in most classrooms. There is an increased focus on activity but not on PLAY.

2.2 Health and fitness

The health community has raised the concern for the health of today's children. For over a decade researchers have been examining the links to increased levels of inactivity and unhealthy eating habits on the health of children and youth.

Research shows that "among children and adolescents age two to seventeen, 26% are overweight and another 8% are obese. (ParticipAction, 2010)

Reaching for the Top: A Report by the Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth (Leitch, 2007) noted that given the prevalence of childhood obesity and its contribution to many diseases, this is the first generation that may not live as long as their parents. Obesity is now having a huge life expectancy impact, which was not foreseen ten years ago. The focus of the report was on five priority areas, including mental health, physical activity and national injury prevention strategy. PLAY was not directly addressed in the report, however, throughout the consultation process Canadians said:

"Children are spending too much time on television, computers and computer games and do not know how to entertain themselves with activity" (Leitch).

The current research is compelling and makes a strong case for immediate action related to increased levels of obesity and inactivity. The Federal research and concern for the health of Canada's children and youth has compelled the Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation to set physical activity targets for children and youth aged 5 to 19 years. While the research makes a compelling case to increase levels of daily physical activity, the responding strategies tend to be focused on structured/organized programs such as school-based daily physical activity initiatives, or promoting organized community sports programs. There appears to be minimal research that suggests increased opportunities for unstructured active PLAY which may also result in healthy child and youth development.

One report that has addressed the need to increase opportunities for active unstructured PLAY is the *Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth* (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010). A summary of the findings related to PLAY include:

- Less than half of Canadian kids under five are getting regular physical activity as part of their daily routines.
- Whatever the setting, children under five require adequate unstructured PLAY and time outdoors for physical, cognitive and emotional development.
- Children in the early years are increasingly spending a large proportion of their time in childcare centres where active PLAY should be commonplace. However, recent research indicates childcare settings are predominantly sedentary.
- In the early years, active PLAY is required for healthy development, as it builds confidence and basic movement skills, and fosters social interaction, imaginations and self-esteem.
- Less than half of Canadian children and youth use the community physical activity amenities available to them.

The recommendations of the *Report Card* include:

- Families, child care centres, schools and community settings need to provide safe, supervised yet unstructured play spaces for active PLAY where children and their peers can engage in physical activity of their own design.
- Community and neighbourhood programs that provide outdoor supervision for safe, unstructured PLAY need to be encouraged.
- Health and recreation professionals need to promote physical activity, active PLAY and reduced screen time as part of early years support programs for families.
- Policies and programs should focus on ensuring more variety and promotion of recreational sport leagues, with strong youth-led components, and opportunities for programs to be designed and delivered by youth.
- Early Childhood Educators and schools need trained resource staff that offer a minimum of 90 minutes of daily active play time, indoors and outdoors, structured and unstructured.

The Health and Fitness Sector has done an excellent job in raising the concern for obesity and decreased physical activity. Unfortunately, there is limited discussion linking the decrease in physical activity to unstructured play at the community level as a contributing factor to the obesity issue. Most strategies addressing the issues of inactivity and obesity focus on implementing structured programs or sports activities or are directed at the education system through the encouragement of school based daily physical activity. This approach also influences the choice of activities offered in afterschool programs where structure is often viewed as more important than PLAY. It needs to be acknowledged PLAY does support health and overall fitness and needs to be part of a child's day, including after-school programs.

2.3 Child development

Child development expert Jane Hewes (2010) stated there is a strong consensus on the importance of PLAY but a belief that there is little understanding amongst parents regarding the significance of the situation. We have overemphasized structured activity at the expense of PLAY. According to Hewes, children know how to play however we are not creating the conditions for play. We need to learn when to intervene and influence. Parents need to learn not to jump in.

Hewes notes that young children are spending more time in early learning and child-care environments at an earlier age, with the result that PLAY is becoming institutionalized. She notes that early childhood professionals face pressures to be accountable for learning and developmental outcomes. That means children do not have the same long blocks of time for unstructured free PLAY in many of the early childhood programs.

"There is a concern that the decline of opportunities for unstructured free play in the early years may be a contributing factor in rising childhood obesity levels, as well as increased levels of anxiety and stress in young children" (Hewes, 2010).

Other child development experts are increasingly conscious of the issue. Jean Dunbar, Executive Director, YWCA Sheriff King Home, Calgary, AB noted that those who work on child trauma or behavioural problems incorporate PLAY in the assessment process but pointed out that at times adult observation isn't enough, and adult interaction is necessary. Studies also note that children who live in poverty or in households that experience trauma do not have the permission, resources or time to engage in PLAY.

There was also a collective acknowledgement of the need for managed risk in a child's development but there is a growing culture of individual and public resistance to permitting any risk in a child's environment. As a consequence, children are over-protected and do not have opportunities to assess risk and make decisions to manage that risk.

2.4 Playspaces

There has been a fundamental shift in outdoor play environments over the last decade. USA Today (2010) noted the playground of the future is beginning to take shape and it looks a lot like the backyard of the past. The article goes on to state designers are beginning to look beyond the play structures and develop fun, safe and creative spaces and environments. Combating childhood obesity and getting kids off the couch and connecting to nature is a top priority for the recreation and parks sector. The challenge lies in changing society's perspectives and finding creative and innovative ways to make it happen.

Over the last decade the response has been to create safe playground structures. At an Edmonton inner-city school a new playground structure was built with a berm for children to climb and slide on in the winter months. However, after a year the berms were removed because children tended to slide towards the play structure and not away from the structure as was originally intended. The school acted in response to a safety concern removing the berm and the children's response was – "this is boring!!!"



OVER THE LAST DECADE THE RESPONSE HAS BEEN TO CREATE SAFE PLAYGROUND STRUCTURES.

playgrounds, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) with input from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) developed the nationally recognized CAN/Casa z614 Children's Playspaces and Equipment Standards. The CPRA's Canadian Playground Safety Institute (CPSI) provides practical hands-on training for applying the CAN/CSA Children's Playspaces and Equipment Standards.

While the standards are not legislated they are nationally recognized as the standards of practice in designing, installing and maintaining safe playground equipment. The CPSI courses are designed to:

- take into consideration factors that affect playground safety;
- evaluate existing play structures for compliance with the CSA standard;
- complete a written inspection report and provide recommendations for upgrading equipment to comply with the standards;
- Identify and implement an effective inspection and maintenance programs.

When looking at outdoor playspaces the most common reference is to playground structures, not natural play areas that go beyond the actual structure. Typically, over the years the focus has been on gross motor play. However, children can do more than gross motor play outdoors and manufacturers are beginning to take notice (Klingensmith, 2010). Children's opinions of play structures have also been documented. When asked about their playground children commented that the actual play structure was boring and they spent more time under the structure digging in the sand for bugs and such (Klingensmith). Manufactured pieces are too sculpted and do not necessarily foster dramatic and creative play. They do not challenge the imagination of the child as a natural environment does.

Another challenge is that all play environments should meet the latest safety standard and maintenance requirements within municipal areas. Built playgrounds need to evolve and be enhanced to include natural play spaces, sand, water, rocks and hills to climb (Klingensmith, 2010).

"The proliferation of nature-based playgrounds is very much a back to basics movement, advancing the theory that kids don't need pricey equipment to have fun outdoors ... children love climbing a hill and rolling down on the grass ... more than climbing up a ladder and going down a slide" (Klingensmith).

Play structures and playgrounds of all shapes and sizes are part of the Canadian landscape. In response to concerns over the years regarding design, standards and maintenance of

Currently the CPSI offers a series of onsite workshops and an online training course in installation, maintenance, accessibility and inspection of play spaces.

The CPSI has been instrumental in decreasing the number of serious injuries from playgrounds in communities that have adopted the standards for playground safety. However, there have been limited to no resources put into enhancing the play spaces with natural play areas. The primary focus has been in response to safety concerns rather than enhancing PLAY experiences, resulting in safety taking precedence. For example, sand once the primary surface for playgrounds, tends to harden or pack over period of time becoming a hazard if a child falls from a play structure. As a result the standards now call for a more giving and safe surface that will absorb a fall from a designated height. The new surface is designed for safety and not for creative or imaginative PLAY. These safety standards not only decrease active PLAY at playgrounds they increase the cost associated with maintaining them. In some cases this high capital maintenance and the costs associated with complying to CSA standards could be a challenge deterring compliance at the local community level.

This raises the question or challenge recreation and parks departments will face in the future – balancing requirements for safety as outlined in the standards with expanded play areas that incorporate natural landscapes and fosters meaningful engagement. The safety and maintenance issues for each will inevitably be far different.



**PLAY AROUND
THE WORLD**

3. PLAY AROUND THE WORLD

3.1 Global commitment to children

The importance of PLAY in childhood has been recognized at the international, national and provincial levels. PLAY has been on the international agenda for close to 50 years, moving forward from international advocacy and rights, to national policy and action plans and in some cases not-for-profit implementation.

The International Play Association (IPA), founded in Denmark in 1961, advocates internationally for play opportunities that fulfill play's potential to help children develop physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. The organization has members in more than 40 countries, including Canada. IPA members recognize that the well-being of children is a world-wide concern; that creating social and physical environments that foster the safety and the healthy development of children and youth requires global as well as local commitment. Interdisciplinary in nature, the IPA brings current research and trends to members through its magazine *PlayRights*, through its triennial World Congress, and by hosting conferences, symposia and study tours.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted unanimously in 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly, declares that children need PLAY and recreation as well as food, education and loving parents. The CRC has been ratified by 192 countries, making it the most widely ratified convention in history. Article 31 of the convention says:

- *Parties recognize 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 fully in culture 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.*

In 2002, the UN again focused on children in a General Assembly Special Session on Children. Its report, officially adopted by some 180 nations, pledged action in the next decade on issues such as HIV/AIDS in children, education, other health and malnutrition concerns, and violence and exploitation of children. *A World Fit for Children* (United Nations, 2002) also talked about the importance of promoting physical, mental and emotional health among children, including adolescents, through PLAY, sports, recreation, artistic and cultural expression.

UNICEF, the UN agency dedicated to children, has pledged to incorporate sport, recreation and PLAY into its programs around the world.

"Children at PLAY are constantly at work - making new observations, asking and responding to questions, making choices and extending their imaginations and creativity" (UNICEF, 2004).

Sport, Recreation and Play (UNICEF, 2004) states, through sport, recreation and PLAY there are opportunities to:

- strengthen the body, control weight and prevent disease;
- prepare infants for future learning;
- reduce symptoms of stress and depression;
- improve confidence and self-esteem;
- improve learning and academic performance, partly because active kids are less fidgety in class;
- prevent smoking and use of illicit drugs; and
- reduce crime.

The international agency statements and advocacy catalyzed action in a number of countries. Europe took on the challenge early with many national governments playing leadership roles, implementing a top down approach, by agreeing PLAY is integral to child development and success and introducing policy and financial support for PLAY initiatives. In North America advocacy and action supporting free PLAY were introduced by the community, implementing a bottom up approach, through the recreation and parks sector, the health, fitness and sport sectors and the child development sectors. In addition initiatives to address a perceived gap in PLAY facilities by a dedicated individual, in the USA, evolved into a national not-for-profit organization that is leading change across the country.

3.2 PLAY in the United Kingdom

Since the mid-2000s the United Kingdom has made a significant investment in children's PLAY. *Getting Serious about Play* (2004), defined PLAY.

"Play means what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons."

Government leadership for PLAY in the United Kingdom (UK) falls under the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

"Young people want to play and spend time outside and it is important that we provide suitable spaces for them. Alongside learning more about themselves and each other, play facilities will help keep children fit and healthy, help tackle growing issue of obesity and provide parents with places where they are happy to let their children spend their free time" (Play as Culture, 2002).

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) is an umbrella body for the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, providing essential information on policy, research and best practice for members and partners. Play England is a part of

the NCB, supported by the BIG Lottery Fund, that provides advice and support to promote good practice and works to ensure the importance of PLAY is recognized by policy makers, planners and the public.

With the support of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, PLAY was also addressed by a number of interest groups. One group, the National Playing Fields Association, in collaboration with PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council looked at the value of the Playworker in supporting children's play in its report *Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do For Children* (2000). Playworker is the term used to describe people, whether paid or voluntary, who work within services which aim to provide for children's play. Playworkers aim for the minimum intervention in children's activity consistent with keeping them free from harm. This approach has been characterized as 'low intervention, high response', a style of working which supports rather than directs the child. The playworker's core function is to create an environment which will stimulate children's play and maximize their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. Playworkers act as advocates for PLAY and support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can PLAY

Another organization, Skills Active, is a Sector Skills Council funded by the UK Government. Skills Active works with employers to reduce the skills gap and improve the quality and range of play opportunities for children. Under the banner of active leisure and learning they represent the Playwork sector, setting and maintaining quality standards for Playwork, with the objective of building a professional workforce that takes on the views, needs, demands and hopes of the children and families it serves. Their vision anticipates that by 2016 Playwork will be a profession acknowledged as central to the development of children and young people and the fulfillment of their individual potential (Skills Active, 2010).

In 2007, Play England established a *Charter for Children's Play*. The *Charter* was based upon the following key components:

- Children have the right to play.
- Every child needs time and space to play.
- Adults should let children play.
- Children should be able to play freely in their local areas.
- Children value and benefit from staffed play provision.
- Children's play is enriched by skilled playworkers.
- Children need time and space to play at school.
- Children sometimes need extra support to enjoy their right to play.

Following an extensive consultation, a national *Play Strategy* was adopted in 2008, establishing a national vision for play. The vision for 2020 aims to ensure that:

- In every residential area there are a variety of supervised and unsupervised places for play, free of charge;
- Local neighbourhoods are, and feel like, safe, interesting places to play;
- Routes to children's play space are safe and accessible for all children and young people;
- Parks and open spaces are attractive and welcoming to children and young people, and are well maintained and well used;
- Children and young people have a clear stake in public space and their play is accepted by their neighbours;
- Children and young people play in a way that respects other people and property;
- Children and young people and their families take an active role in the development of local play spaces; and
- Play spaces are attractive welcoming, engaging and accessible for all local children and young people, including disabled children, and children from minority groups in the community (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

The national *Play Strategy* is the first government policy focused solely on play and sets out the government's commitments. It is backed by 235 million pounds, dedicated to investment in local play facilities across the country and informed by extensive consultation with children, young people and their parents. The Big Lottery Fund, established in June 2004 to make the Lottery more accessible and responsive to the needs of communities, allocates funds to local authorities under the *Children's Play Program*, as well as other innovative programs. The focus of play provision through local authorities was emphasized in *Time for Play: Encouraging Greater Play Opportunities for Children and Young People* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2009). Les Lawrence Chair, Local Government Association Children and Young People Board stated:

"Providing positive, well managed and stimulating places for children to play has always been an important aspect of the work of local authorities. From adventure playgrounds, to support for voluntary sector play centres and out-of-school provision, local authorities have played a leading role in the development of play opportunities for children of all ages."



Implementation of the *Play Strategy* is focused and deliberate. In 2009 Play England undertook a consultation on *Embedding the Play Strategy* and published the guiding document in 2010. *Embedding the Play Strategy* (Play England, 2010) provides guidance to local authorities on the recommended process for planning and commissioning play provisions. The objective is to achieve improvements on all five of the “Every Child Matters” outcomes and support performance on a range of indicators, specifically the indicator on the level of satisfaction with play areas and parks, as reported by children and young people (NI-199). However other National Indicators are also supported by the *Play Strategy*. Those indicators are:

- NI 1-6 (Stronger Communities) – Community cohesion, civic participation and satisfaction with the local area.
- NI 17, 22, 23 (Safer Communities) – Dealing with concerns about anti-social behaviours, parents’ responsibility for their children and perceptions that people treat one another with respect and dignity.
- NI 48 (Safer Communities) – Children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents.
- NI 50, 54 – 58 (Children & Young People – Be Healthy) – Children’s physical, emotional and behavioural health.
- NI 116 (Proportion of children in poverty) – Good play provision is at heart of safe, cohesive and prosperous communities where children can thrive and develop.

A number of agencies and not-for-profit organizations have stepped forward to support the implementation. One implementing program is *Playful Communities*, part of Play England’s *Community Play* program which supports community engagement in play and promotes the role of the voluntary and community sector in delivering play opportunities for children. *Playful Communities* provides a toolkit for those wishing to get involved in creating, improving and maintaining places where young people can

play and spend their free time. Opportunities for support could include supervised holiday play programs, play rangers, staffed adventure playgrounds, assistance to develop local play areas or campaigning for local play spaces.

Play England and its partnering agencies and associations are focused on making a difference in the lives of children and youth and support achievement of a number of the National Indicators. The heavy investment in PLAY requires local evaluation to assess the impact of the investment program.

3.3 PLAY in Ireland

In March 2004 Ireland launched *Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy* becoming one of the first countries in the world to announce such a policy. The national policy was the Government’s response to the commitments made in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the National Children’s Strategy (2000) and the Programme for Government (2002). Consultation with children and adults helped form the foundations of the policy. When asked about quality of life, children identified PLAY and recreation as the major issue for them, noting there were few places to PLAY and that adults often stopped them from playing. Adults did not identify PLAY and recreation for children as the major quality of life issues. The policy addresses the gap between what children want and what adults had provided.

The definition used in the *National Play Policy* is:

“Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child.”

The objectives of the *National Play Policy* are:

- To give children a voice in the design and implementation of play policies and facilities.
- To raise awareness of the importance of play.
- To ensure that children’s play needs are met through the development of a child-friendly environment.
- To maximize the range of public play opportunities available to all children, particularly children who are marginalized, disadvantaged or who have a disability.
- To improve the quality and safety of playgrounds and play area.
- To ensure that the relevant training and qualifications are available to people offering play and related services to children.
- To develop a partnership approach to funding and developing play opportunities.
- To improve on, an evaluation and monitoring of, play provision for children in Ireland.

The *National Play Policy* included 52 actions, placing responsibility for implementation of the action with Government Departments, the Office of the Minister for Children, local authorities, City and County Development Boards, The Health Service Executive and the Centre for Early

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AT THE INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL LEVELS.

Childhood Development and Education. The Office of the Minister for Children monitors implementation for action.

Additionally, in 2006 the Children and Youth People's Unit, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland undertook a consultation on PLAY, resulting in *Giving Priority to Play* (PlayBoard, 2006), a briefing paper setting out key steps to children's right to PLAY by ensuring children have age appropriate facilities and time to PLAY freely.

3.4 PLAY in Germany

Germany has a unique community based initiative for children's play spaces in its program for *Youth Farms and Activity Playgrounds*. At the end of the 1960s the first *Youth Farm* was opened in Stuttgart, and the first *Activity Playground* was started in the Markisches Viertel, Berlin. The provision of these play spaces has expanded across the country.

The *Youth Farms and Activity Playgrounds* spaces are focused on leisure activities and generally are open after school during school terms and all day during school holidays. Children 6 to 14 years have free access to these spaces which are supervised but not connected with any schools. Children who visit the farms/playgrounds do not need to register and can decide when and how often to attend on their own. Activities are offered but children can also decide whether to participate or if they prefer to do something on their own, singly or in groups.

Financing playgrounds and supplying land and buildings falls to the communities and are set down in a Federal law, which states the development of young people must be aided by the necessary offers of youth activities. These are to develop from the interests of young people and are also to be structured by those involved. They are to contribute to a self-determined existence and to encourage social responsibility and interest.

The financial and material aid are provided by the communities but the playgrounds and farms are run by parents' initiatives or as community institutions that receive community aid and are responsible for the use of money and materials. The play spaces are expected to adhere to a set of guiding principles that include free access for all visitors, continuity, changeability, independence, maturity, integration, ecology and community development.

Although initially founded in West Germany, following the reunification of Germany in 1990 the democratic playground work, which measures itself against the needs and wishes of the children themselves, was expanded across the country.

3.5 PLAY in the United States

There is a unique non-government organization in the United States that is focused on children and based on principles and strategies that address issues related to PLAY. In 1995, a young and dedicated community development worker, Darell Hammond, helped build a community playground. He was concerned about the lack of playgrounds in cities and wanted to change the situation. With the sponsorship of Home Depot he founded KaBoom! in 1996 and started building playgrounds across the United States, supporting communities in the providing safe and fun places for children to PLAY.

From the beginning Hammond was concerned about the impact of the lack of safe play spaces on children. Initially it was an issue of creating safe places for children. However, impacts beyond the lack of safety were evident. KaBoom! identifies childhood obesity, attention deficit and anxiety disorders, behaviour problems and delayed or lack of social, cognitive and creative development as results of the lack of PLAY. It also links lack of green spaces, fragmented communities and failing schools to the PLAY deficit.

In 2007, Hammond's growing interest in supporting the larger cause of PLAY led to the *National Campaign for Play* and the creation of the *Playmaker Network* and *Playful City USA* under the umbrella of KaBoom!

The *Playmaker Network* established and supported by KaBoom! is an online grassroots network of play advocates who work hard to promote PLAY in their communities. It is a resource of Playmakers, defined as individuals who speak, build, encourage, share, organize, repair, renew, advocate, represent, activate, mobilize and PLAY.

Playful City USA is a recognition program intended to build a cohort of cities that support play. It recognizes local innovation and leadership. In addition to the *Playful City* program, *PLAY Matters* outlines 12 best practices in PLAY and provides recommendations for communities.

The vision of KaBoom! is that every child in America will have a great place to PLAY within walking distance. KaBoom! continues to fight the PLAY deficit through advocating for three strategies:

- Constructing innovative, kid-inspired playspaces, using a community-build model that improves the well-being of children we serve as well as the neighbourhoods in which they live.
- Sharing knowledge and tools needed for anyone to find, improve, and /or build playgrounds on their own.
- Building a broad movement driven by research, analysis, policy, and community engagement (KaBoom! 2009).

Over the past 15 years KaBoom! has made a difference in the provision of safe playspaces for kids in American cities and continues to do so.

A young child is playing in a snowy environment. The child is wearing a blue and white plaid jacket, a blue and white striped hat with a pom-pom, and dark gloves. The child's arms are outstretched, and they are smiling. The background shows snow-covered trees and a fence. A large blue and yellow graphic overlay is present, with the text "PLAY AND RECREATION IN CANADA" in white capital letters.

PLAY AND RECREATION IN CANADA

4. PLAY AND RECREATION IN CANADA

4.1 Canadian PLAY initiatives

Canada ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, recognizing the importance of recreation in contributing to happy and healthy children. In 2004 the federal government released *A Canada Fit for Children*, an action plan in response to the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. Our Federal government pledged to increase opportunities for physical activity and PLAY and to create more positive experiences around physical activity and sports.

A general internet-based review of Canadian programs or initiatives that focus on PLAY and play spaces revealed limited activity across the country. There were only four provincial PLAY focused initiatives which are highlighted below.

The International Play Association (IPA) Canada was formally organized in 1990. The current membership is made up of dedicated child advocates from a variety of backgrounds including early childhood education, recreation, teaching, post-secondary institution instruction, research, landscape architecture and playground equipment supply. IPA Canada acts as a resource and promotes, supports and coordinates PLAY oriented initiatives with emphasis on children's environments, play leadership, child development through play, toys and play materials, safety and play, children with special needs and organized sports. IPA Canada notes PLAY is not about providing safe playgrounds for children, it is about protecting their right to be free to explore and discover the physical and social world around them on their own terms.

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) is a national alliance of 13 provincial and territorial partners, each having a representative on the CPRA Board of Directors. It is a charitable voluntary-sector organization dedicated to realizing the full potential of recreation and parks services as a major contributor to community health and vibrancy. The members are recreation and parks professionals in over 2,600 communities who collaborate with other national organizations operating in the recreation, physical activity, environmental, facilities, sports, public health, crime prevention and social services arenas. In 2009, a new governance structure for the association was adopted which resulted in the creation of a national alliance of provincial and territorial partners.

Over the course of its 60-year history, CPRA has become a credible and strong national leader in recreation and parks sector. In addition to advocacy on the benefits of recreation and parks services, CPRA provides members with information, resources and professional development so they can make a difference in their community. Through broad-based community involvement, the Association finds solutions to social challenges, influences policy direction and generates momentum towards community quality of life. One such initiative was "Everybody gets to play™", an initiative which sought to remove barriers for children in communities for play opportunities and experiences.

In April 2010 the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) Board of Directors along with provincial and territorial association Chief Executive Officers determined the Association's strategic direction over the next five years and set its renewed vision, mission and values and an integrated action plan of seven key strategic priorities. The strategic priorities include:

1. Sector leadership, collaboration and advocacy.
2. Public awareness, education and participation.
3. Research and development.
4. Communications and marketing.
5. Awards and recognition.
6. Professional development and standards.
7. Association excellence and sustainability.

The strategic priorities do identify continued involvement in *Everybody gets to play™*. Also, with the reach of the national membership and commitment to addressing its social issues through policy, advocacy and public awareness, CPRA is well positioned to assume a leadership role in promoting and advocating for increased PLAY opportunities across the country.

4.2 PLAY in Nova Scotia

Recreation Nova Scotia's (2010) *A Plan to Play* is a simple resource designed to help kids choose safe, friendly places to PLAY within their neighbourhoods. In response to the current publicity around street hockey and that it is viewed by some as unsafe PLAY and in some cases illegal, Recreation Nova Scotia developed a simple process that parents and youth can use to plan a safe outdoor activity within their local community. The focus is on getting parents and youth talking about safe outdoor PLAY opportunities that accommodate a time and place that won't upset the neighbours. A one page planning guide can be downloaded from the Recreation Nova Scotia website.

4.3 PLAY in Ontario

The Ontario Partnership for Active and Engaged Youth, *Play Works* is a provincial partnership of organizations that are dedicated to bring back the power of PLAY to Ontario youth between the ages of 13 and 19 years. *Play Works Partnership* is dedicated to influencing policy and advancing local and provincial public agendas. The partners represent the areas of sport, physical activity, civic engagement, arts, culture, rural youth and recreation.

The program grew out of a concern that there were increasingly fewer places for young people to gather, and fewer opportunities to access, participate in and lead activities of their choosing.

Play Works Partnership supports communities to create environments that support youth growth and development through PLAY. *Youth Friendly Communities, Best Practices* states that play activities for young people take on many forms such as writing and performing, organizing a three-on-three basketball tournament, going on an overnight canoe trip or joining a youth council. How play activities are offered can range from youth-led or youth-driven (Play Works Partnership, 2008).

Additionally in *The Cost of Excluding Ontario's Youth from Play* (Play Works Partnership, 2005) researchers noted that youth are facing unprecedented barriers to participation in everyday life. Some of the cited barriers include:

- chronic poverty and rising user fees;
- lack of investment and cutbacks in areas and recreation resources;
- mental and physical health risks;
- escalating obesity;
- increasingly plugged-in world;
- inaccessible schools;
- lack of voice and meaningful participation in community life;
- lack of opportunities to play.

The report makes a case for investing in youth and increasing opportunities for PLAY will result in savings in a variety of sectors, such as: justice, education, health and wellness and recreation and sport. It suggests an estimated \$1 invested in physical activity in the early years can save \$3 in health care costs later in life (Play Works Partnership, 2005).

Play Works has developed four policy recommendations to help the province of Ontario, schools, youth organizations and municipalities take action.

1. Adopt positive youth development strategies: It was recommended that both the provincial and municipal governments adopt a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach as a foundation for youth development programs.
2. Eliminate user fees for youth programs in low-income communities.
3. Eliminate funding silos with a dialogue between the recreation sector and Ministry of Children and Youth Services as a strategy to maximize existing resources.
4. Increase youth friendly play spaces: Youth friendly facilities mean that adolescents are actively supported and provided with opportunities for their growth and development through play. (Cost of Excluding Ontario's Youth from Play). This recommendation also refers to increased access to schools as hubs and community activity centres (Play Works Partnership, 2008).

In response to the identified need *Play Works* provides information to decision-makers, policy influencers and community leaders keeping them informed of good practices, success stories and current research and trends. Over the past five years they have sponsored number of initiatives:

- **Do It Yourself:** This was a one-time project designed to find out how young people successfully planned their own play programs. Seed funding and adult support was provided and key findings were documented in the final project report (2008). The final evaluation noted that communities investing as little as \$1,500 in new youth initiatives resulted in a great return for both the youth and the community. The project reports revealed that youth have a strong capacity for planning their own play in ways that not only benefited youth, but the communities in which they live.
- **Youth Friendly Communities Recognition Program (For Rural and Small Communities):** The program recognizes communities across Ontario that create and foster youth friendly environments as demonstrated by their activities, investments and policies related to youth play. As of 2010 there are 32 communities from across Ontario that are recognized as youth friendly communities.
- **Good Practices:** The learning's from the youth friendly communities are documented in a series of good practice documents which are used by communities that want to develop, expand and enhance their work with youth.

4.4 PLAY in Saskatchewan

Created in collaboration with ARPA, Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association's (SPRA) *Play Leadership Program* is dedicated to providing play leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to coordinate safe and quality PLAY opportunities for children across Saskatchewan.

SPRA *Play Leadership Training* is an opportunity for youth and individuals in the recreation and parks sector to develop their leadership skills and sensitivities required to lead PLAY activities through firsthand practical experience. The *Play Leadership Program* consists of a minimum of training hours which are evenly divided between theory and real-life experience. First Aid and CPR are also required to be a fully certified Play Leader. (SPRA Play Leadership Website)

The primary program objectives include:

- Increased opportunities for children to participate in PLAY activities.
- Improved quality of PLAY opportunities by developing training resources that are based on current research and theory of PLAY development.
- Providing a choice to participate in the training, either online or by attending/ hosting a workshop.

This involves 16 hours of course work, on the job practical experience and guidance and support from Play Mentors who support leaders in training.

SPRA maintains a database that lists qualified Play Leaders and Mentors. Communities, regions and organizations are able to contact the leaders who in turn will either facilitate workshops or coordinate community PLAY events. In addition SPRA maintains an online forum for Play Leaders and Mentors. All leaders are required to maintain their qualifications through a continuing education program of courses, seminars and other learning opportunities.

An offshoot of the provincial Play Leadership Program is *Take the Lead* which, originated through a partnership between Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region and the Southeast Connection Sport, Culture and Recreation District. Adults within the community act as leadership coaches and support the youth leaders who plan, deliver and participate in active PLAY programs. There are two components to the program:

- *Leadership Coach Training* for adult community leaders who are provided with a resource kit and tools they will use to support youth engagement and youth leaders;
- *Take the Lead Training* is a full day course designed to help coaches work with youth to design and implement their active PLAY programs.

The *Take the Lead* program supports the *Play Leadership Program* principles and practices. Communities nurture and support their own youth leaders by encouraging them to design and implement their own active play programs.

4.5 PLAY in British Columbia

Several cities in British Columbia were engaged in *Child and Youth Friendly Initiatives* in the early 2000s. In collaboration, the Society for Children and Youth of B.C. and Yates, Thorn, & Associates, Victoria, BC completed a project review of the *Child and Youth Friendly Communities Initiative* for the Society for Children and Youth BC in 2003. The *Child and Youth Friendly Communities Initiative* promoted the concept of child and youth friendly communities. It aimed to help community groups, including children and youth themselves, to assess their neighbourhoods through the eyes of young people and engage in activities that will improve the well-being of children and youth in their local communities.

The term PLAY is not addressed in the guidelines or initiative. The review concluded there was interest and value in the momentum gained through the programs throughout BC and recommended continuing to engage children and youth in planning in such areas as parks and open space, transportation, community services and recreation and provide tools and training opportunities to support child and youth friendly communities.



**PLAY IN
ALBERTA**

5. PLAY IN ALBERTA

The recreation and parks sector historically has had a lead role in providing quality children and youth PLAY programs at the community level. The sector evolved from a commitment to ensuring children and youth had safe and supportive environments in which to PLAY. Municipal recreation departments across the province would provide supervised PLAY areas and offer year round PLAY opportunities for both children and youth. Historically recreation was a municipal department responsible for recreation facilities, children and youth programs and community and family play events.

In the early 1980s, during Alberta's first economic boom, recreation across the province benefited from an influx of grant programs, such as the *Major Cultural Recreation Facility Grant* (MCR). As a result of the MCR Grant municipalities built major facilities such as regional recreation facilities, pools, twin arenas and community parks. In support of this growth area the Alberta Recreation Parks and Culture Department (or Alberta Recreation, Parks and Wildlife as it became known) employed a section of professional staff devoted to children and youth programs and services. The department supported municipalities by providing grants such as the *Regional Play Leadership Grants* and by offering direct professional consultation to communities (ARPA, 2009).

While the 1980s experienced an unprecedented period of growth and development for the Alberta recreation and parks sector, the 1990s was a time of government downsizing and shifting of priorities. During this time the Alberta Government eliminated both the municipal transfer payment and recreation/parks capital grants. Municipalities were forced to downsize services and explore alternate program delivery models. ARPA's *Foundations for Action: Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta* summarizes the result:

"Boundaries between public institutions and the private and non-profit sectors started to blur. ...communities started to focus their services within the four walls of their facilities rather than taking a more balanced approach that included community partnerships. They started to embrace the move from provider towards facilitator, enabler and educator" (ARPA, 2006).

By the mid 1990s the impact of this shift in priorities was dramatic in changing the face of municipal recreation across the province. The capacity of the municipal recreation and parks departments to provide children's and youth programming was greatly diminished. A number of systemic shifts in policy, program delivery and accountability started to take form. For example:

- Budgets and resources were focused on facility development, and specialized program staff positions in many communities were eliminated.
- Decreasing budgets forced municipalities to adjust their cost recovery policies to include children and youth programming.

- Community-based sport and recreation organizations became the primary program delivery agencies and the recreation and parks departments shifted to a facilitative, supportive role. Recreation and parks departments focused their energy and capacity on facility operations and management.
- Focus has been on supporting organized and supervised programs – which have a structure and registration format.
- Playground sites have focused on the equipment and safety issues, and have strayed away from more natural environmental play areas.

The impact on PLAY opportunities during the 1990s was dramatic and the changes to municipal recreation are still apparent today when examining facility schedules. There is a demonstrated decrease in community facilities that are open for drop-in unstructured PLAY opportunities, such as: community gymnasium open for drop-in free physical activity times; or studio time where a thriving artist can create a piece of art without formal instruction or classes. In addition a common observation of three recent rural municipal recreation and parks master plans is the lack of available space for unstructured physical activity and PLAY spaces in the community. All access to recreation facilities, other than swimming times, was through organized sport or children's programming. In other words, they had to be registered in a program to use the facilities, other than during scheduled free skating in the arena, or open swim times in a pool.

ARPA's *Foundations for Action – Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta* (2006) addresses PLAY in the Emerging Recreation Priorities of its Action Plan. Action #38, Getting Serious About Play, notes *"Clearly, Albertans need to become serious about creative play, spaces and opportunities, about universal access to play and about excellence in play leadership"* in the short term, and recommends multiple inter-sectoral links will be necessary if success is to occur. The Action Plan is specific, but to date, there is little evidence of progress.

5.1 Alberta Recreation and Parks Association

ARPA is committed to enhancing recreation opportunities for children and youth by building the capacity of recreation and parks providers within the sector. With the exception of the *Alberta Play Leadership Program* the following initiatives have their own focus and priorities beyond enhancing PLAY opportunities.



5.1.1 High Five®

High Five®, which originated in Ontario through Parks and Recreation Ontario, is a quality assurance process intended to equip providers to foster safety, wellbeing and healthy child and youth development. The focus is on organizational and programming strategies that support the High Five® philosophy. The program involves:

- Training and workshops, performance measures, program assessment tools and promotional material.
- Principles of Healthy Child Development is the core leadership training workshop and includes one section on PLAY. The principle identifies PLAY as spontaneous, unstructured and exploratory. The training module emphasizes that leaders need to be flexible, support the enthusiasm of children to explore ideas on their own and recognize laughter and creativity are the keys to learning.

Communities across the province, and across Canada, have adopted High Five® as their primary leadership training program in support of quality children's recreational programming.

High Five® focuses on quality children's programming for children between the ages of 6 to 12 year and does not apply to preschool or youth programming.

5.1.3 Alberta Play Leadership Development Program

The goal of this initiative is to ensure that high quality PLAY opportunities are available throughout the province, via education, training and promotion. This is a well researched leadership development curriculum, which was piloted in three Alberta communities (Edmonton, Calgary and Grande Prairie) in 2004 and 2005.

The program consists of five modules and focuses on developing senior PLAY leaders who will mentor junior PLAY leaders. The modules include:

- Play Perspectives: Introduction to the concepts, values and benefits of play and how it plays a vital role in healthy child development.
- Games: Introduction to various games and the need for age appropriate activities that influence the physical, mental and social development of children.
- Creative Play: Involves various types of imaginative play and how it nurtures the creative side of child development.
- Chaotic Play: Another name for "free play" where children are encouraged to explore and express themselves in a self-directed play setting.
- Pulling It All Together: This is the transition module focusing on applying the theories of the four previous modules into practice.

This program also engages youth in leadership roles as PLAY leaders within a creative PLAY setting. The initiative has not progressed beyond the pilot stage and has been put on hold until financial support and resources are in place to implement the training program.

5.1.3 Everybody gets to play™

This nationally driven program through CPRA mobilizes communities to provide recreation without barriers for all children regardless of their families' financial status. The mandate is to focus and advance the role that recreation and parks plays in positive child and youth development in Alberta. By providing support for low-income families to have equal access to play/recreation, Everybody gets to play™ makes an excellent case for recreation and parks as a contributor to improving the lives of children and youth living in low-income families. The focus is on fostering the physical, emotional, and social health of children and youth promoting healthy child development and preventing anti-social behavior. The program information highlights strategies required to reduce barriers to participation. Policy development, community assessment, and fact sheets are provided to assist communities and agencies required to increase participation by low income families.

5.1.4 Kids at Hope

Kids at Hope inspires, empowers, and transforms families, youth serving organizations (schools, recreation and parks departments, police and fire departments, etc.) and entire communities to create an environment where all children experience success, NO EXCEPTIONS! *Kids at Hope* has developed a curriculum of seven training modules and supporting material.

This is not a program but rather a cultural shift or way of thinking about how we view kids in our communities. It is about shifting from a view that all kids are at-risk to one

where all kids can be successful with the support of caring adults and community leaders. Through a series of workshops, tools and strategies:

- Adults will inspire all children and youth to achieve success, NO EXCEPTIONS!
- Caring adults will enable all kids to realize their own potential.
- Organizations/institutions and communities will transform their operational systems to support kids achievement at all levels.

ARPA partnered with *Kids at Hope* in 2009 committing to bring the program to Alberta. In April 2010 the Founder/President of *Kids at Hope* visited 11 Alberta communities to introduce the philosophy. ARPA believes if the stigma 'youth at risk' is removed and replaced with a belief system the message that children and youth are valued and capable of success will be delivered throughout Alberta.

5.1.5 Children and Nature

In 2008 the ARPA hosted a *Provincial Dialogue on Children and Nature*. A diverse array of professionals and practitioners discussed the issue of children disconnecting with nature. The reasons for this apparent disconnection range from reduced accessibility and access to natural terrain to perceived and real risks associated with children playing in natural environments. One of the priority recommendations from the Provincial Dialogue was to *"Redesign unsafe places and create opportunities for kids and parents to experience fun times outdoors with trained leaders and guides."*

ARPA has taken the lead in supporting the Children and Nature Network by encouraging and supporting communities, services and individuals to create opportunities for children to reconnect with nature.

5.1.6 Youth Development through Recreation

ARPA's Annual *Youth Development through Recreation Services Symposium* provides a forum to advance knowledge of youth development through recreation. It is designed to showcase successful youth programs from across the province, and colleagues and peers share their learning's through focused discussions.

5.1.7 SoGo Active

This is a national youth initiative that promotes active fitness and physical activity for all youth. The program provides financial support, tools and resources for youth to design and control their own individual, "get active" plan. Communities support groups of youth in applying for the annual grant.

5.2 Government of Alberta

While the provincial government does not have any specific programs or initiatives directly related to childrens PLAY it does support childrens sport and recreation services.

5.2.1 Active Alberta Policy

The Government of Alberta has recently released a policy statement entitled *"Active Alberta Policy"* with the objective of maximizing the impact of provincial funding to achieve measurable impacts on Albertans' activity levels, health and quality of life.

The *Active Alberta Policy* is based on research regarding the many benefits associated with participation in recreation, active living and sport, such as improved mental and physical health, improved education outcomes, strengthened communities and economic benefits. This policy is intended to encourage more Albertans to become more active over the next ten years and to incorporate recreation, active living and sport into their lives. The policy includes participation in sport as well as unstructured PLAY, encouraging and improving opportunities for children to engage in high quality, free, and creative PLAY. More specifically, the *Active Alberta Policy* states as a strategic priority:

"Working with partners, encourage and improve opportunities for children and families to engage in high quality, unstructured, and creative play."

5.3 Alberta municipal or community initiatives

It was beyond the scope of this research to attempt to identify all the PLAY and playspace opportunities in the province. The following examples provide insight into three different initiatives in Alberta that represent enhanced PLAY opportunities for children and youth.

5.3.1 Calgary

In the recreation and parks context, programming is approached from a quality assurance perspective and generally the profession is focused on the recreation for life framework. In Calgary, the draft Master Plan is looking at the total spectrum of service delivery. Further, Calgary is adopting the High Five® initiative by focusing on after-school programming for 12 to 16 year olds. Although practitioners understand the value of PLAY, it is not a priority in recreation programming states Heather Cowie, former ARPA Children and Youth Committee Chair. The focus is on more intentional structured initiatives such as the Calgary Afterschool Program the City of Calgary recently implemented.

However, two Program Specialists for Calgary Community and Neighborhood Services comment that there are various youth focused programs that have some degree of structure but the actual activities are left to the youth to design, lead and engage, which is the primary principle of youth focused PLAY. Activities such as Go Girl, Super Girls, Toast and Jam, D.J. Program for teens, Art and Spray Paint are all youth driven.

One unique program in Calgary is the Dalhousie Homework Club, originally set up in a community hall as a place where the kids would complete their homework for the first hour,

and then participate in organized events for the second hour. It was a structured program as opposed to an unstructured program. From the outset supervisors had difficulty engaging the kids and were dealing with behaviour problems. After a couple of months the leaders approached the kids and gave them the opportunity to design their own program and activities. An agreement was reached that the kids would do their homework if they had any to complete before they participated in any activities.

Activities are now PLAY focused and include creative arts and games, such as chess and as well as homework. Kids know they have fun for two hours at a time and the club does not feel like an extension of school. In addition leaders focus on establishing relationships. The program is one of the most successful in the area and behaviour problems have been mitigated.

"The barriers and behaviour problems had diminished and they are not working together as a team. There is lots of laughter and noise for the two hours." (Calgary Leader)

Despite the implementation of children driven activities, the Dalhousie Homework Club is still called a Homework Club to give parents a degree of comfort. Parents have commented that they have seen a change in the kids who are now more engaged and having fun.

5.3.2 Westside Recreation Centre – Turning the Table for Youth: A Place to Play

The Westside Recreation Centre is a not-for-profit, community operated facility in southwest Calgary. In response to the increasing need for youth to become more active and engaged in physical activity Westside Recreation Centre committed to be part of the solution. The Westside Recreation Centre built a 65,000 square foot expansion featuring a dedicated fitness environment for youth. The new Youth Centre includes:

- Youth Wellness Areas with state of the art equipment and youth fitness instruction.
- Active Play Spaces that include interactive fitness equipment, youth fitness classes, a plasma screen and a DJ booth.
- A Youth Gymnasium, which will be dedicated space for youth to shoot hoops, play badminton, dodge ball or ultimate tournaments.
- Youth Education Rooms where youth can work on school assignments and receive free homework help and take part in educational seminars.

The Westside Recreation Centre is dedicated to having the best youth focused programs and facilities and is already viewed as a leader in youth education, recreation and PLAY.

The expansion opened it's doors to youth on May 11, 2010.

5.3.3 Edmonton

The City of Edmonton currently offers drop-in playground opportunities for children 6 to 12 years old as well as youth drop-in options. The program guide lists games, sports, crafts, music, drama and special events? and is available free of charge to any child wishing to participate. Free PLAY time is not mentioned in the program guide. Although leaders ensure participants PLAY safely it is noted that parents are responsible for their children at all times and must be available in the event of an emergency.

The City of Edmonton is leading the country with their commitment to accessible playgrounds. Edmonton is the first Canadian city to establish a policy to make sure all new and retrofitted playspaces are accessible to all children.

"Building accessible playgrounds means all kids are given the chance to reach their potential and have fun just being kids." (Sanderson, 2009).

The City of Edmonton and the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability developed a tool kit for accessible playspaces which contains strategies and helpful hints to make programs offered through municipalities, schools and community organizations more inclusive.

5.4 Post-Secondary Institutions

The University of Alberta Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation (U of A), has had on its faculty, members with research and training interests in childrens play. More specifically an international oriented program entitled *"Play Around the World"* is managed through the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation.

Within Grant MacEwan University, Dr. Hewes integrates childrens play into early childhood development courses.

A photograph of three children playing in a field of tall grass under a blue sky with white clouds. A young girl in a yellow shirt and light blue shorts is in the background, arms outstretched. A boy in a blue shirt and yellow shorts is in the foreground, leaning forward with one arm raised high. A younger girl in a red shirt and pink shorts is in the middle ground, looking towards the boy. The image is overlaid with a large blue and yellow geometric shape that resembles a stylized 'A' or a large arrow pointing upwards and to the right.

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES

6. ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES – SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR CANADA AND ALBERTA

6.1 National policy

The UK (England and Northern Ireland) and Ireland have federal policy in place that drives initiatives at the local level. In the UK the PLAY policy falls under the National Children's Bureau, an umbrella organization for the children's sector. The UK policy not only ensures a focus on PLAY but measures PLAY initiatives against national outcomes for children. Also in the UK funding for children's PLAY programs are allocated through the Big Lottery Fund and local communities can access funds through this organization for locally designed and implemented PLAY programs.

Ireland also has established a national policy and funding for PLAY, and based on the policy has set out objectives and actions for implementation and monitoring success. Responsibility for implementation does not lie just with the federal government but also with local leisure/culture authorities, health services, education and early childhood services.

6.2 Children and families engaged

In the UK it was concluded that multi-agency PLAY strategies in communities are a way forward. PLAY strategies, developed in consultation with children, young people, families and communities are integral to success and ensuring children have more PLAY opportunities available, delivered in a coordinated way and in which they are active decision-makers.

Local authorities, as outlined by *Better Play* (2009) need to ensure high quality spaces and a variety of supervised and unsupervised provision is available to all. However, provision is not driven by the local authority but rather local authorities are encouraged to engage their citizens, young people, their families and communities, in the planning of local PLAY spaces.

The concept of involving children and families is also part of the strategy in Germany and the USA.

6.3 Local implementation

In the UK, local authorities are mandated to provide adequate resources and a strong infrastructure to support PLAY, and can access funding for these purposes through the Big Lottery Fund. Several case studies of local communities are available. Successful programs are those that were planned across departments and with local organizations, as well as with children and their families.

In Germany, the intentional focus is on supervised playspaces that are open and freely accessible to all children. This is a model reminiscent of the playgrounds of earlier generations and a model that responds to children's needs.

6.4 Leadership

KaBoom! is one of the most successful organizations in making a difference for children and youth by providing play spaces and supporting PLAY throughout the USA. It is an example of making a difference from the community level up, rather than as directed by national policy. KaBoom!'s approach of working with local communities, children and families aligns with other communities and countries that recognize the need to engage stakeholders in the development of play spaces and activities.

The leadership and dedication of Darell Hammond and the funding secured from sponsors have supported significant change for children throughout the country. It is evident a leader, a champion for PLAY is critical if we are to move beyond the wringing of hands about the PLAY deficit and the implications to ensuring PLAY and PLAY spaces are reinstituted for children in our communities.

6.5 Build on strengths

Recreation programs and initiatives, facilities, parks and playgrounds dedicated to children and PLAY are significant assets in our communities. However, the research loudly and clearly points to a PLAY deficit. Research also provides information on how a society, through deliberate strategies and actions can make a difference. The research does not say existing programs and spaces need to be discarded but rather points to the enhancement of these programs and spaces so that free, unstructured PLAY can safely be accommodated.

Existing ARPA programs that support PLAY should therefore be recognized and enhanced.

- **High Five®** could incorporate messages, stories and strategies that promote incorporating free, unstructured PLAY within all children's recreational programming.
- **Alberta Play Leadership Development Program** should be enhanced to incorporate minor changes related to PLAY and implemented as a core training program.
- **Everybody gets to play™** fact sheets and information that promotes participation in organized sport and recreational activities should be improved. Changes could include promoting the value of unstructured PLAY in fact sheets and training.
- **Kids at Hope** could be expanded to include creative PLAY as a vehicle for promoting success. Additions to the program could include the incorporation of creative PLAY into the training and resource material for *Kids at Hope Ambassador Program*.
- **Children and Nature initiative** is a valuable resource and has provided a network to promote the value of providing natural PLAY environments for children and youth.

- **Youth Development through Recreation Services** is an excellent biennial example of youth engagement and provides an opportunity to learn more about youth concerns issued through focus groups and dialogue.
- **Sogo Active** supports the concept of self-directed and creative PLAY and could be a vehicle for promoting common messages and encouraging youth to consider the concepts of creative PLAY in their proposals.

6.6 PLAY for all ages

Through the exploration of PLAY it became evident that solutions should build on existing programs and playground standards which already address PLAY for different age groups. At the general level the approach for preschoolers, school age children and youth needs to differ to reflect the changing vulnerability, judgment and maturity.

6.6.1 Preschoolers (safety, supervision, engagement)

Given the need for child safety and the vulnerability of young children, PLAY for preschoolers must be in a safe environment with adult facilitation/supervision. However, this is different from scheduled activities that are adult planned and delivered. In some communities parents are addressing the concept of PLAY in early childhood through “play dates” and drop-in activities in community centres but, in many families, children are in childcare facilities from an early age.

Jane Hewes noted PLAY is becoming institutionalized as an increasing number of preschoolers are enrolled in childcare or daycare facilities. Early childhood professionals who work in these facilities face increasing pressures to be accountable for learning and developmental outcomes and tend to structure activities throughout the day. The result is a loss of long blocks of time for unstructured free PLAY. The challenge to change the situation lies in the hands of childcare facilities, recreation agencies and governments that set policy on these facilities and parents.

Play spaces and playgrounds that can be visited by preschool children with parents and preschool groups are important components of a community’s infrastructure. Therefore, playground infrastructure needs to include not just the structures and equipment but spaces that have water, sand, grass and natural obstacles that encourage exploration, creativity and connection to nature.

6.6.2 School age children (safety, engagement, supervision)

School age children are transitioning from constant adult supervision to independence. Their lives are structured with school, organized teams and activities and after school programs. As noted by the Dalhousie Homework Club leaders, healthy, happy and enthusiastic participation evolves from engagement in deciding what to do and designing their activities.

Child education experts indicate that activities such as role play and those that encourage problem solving and decision making are critical to healthy development. Structured and organized activities do not entirely or adequately support those opportunities. Since the school focuses on educational learning, it is important that children have opportunities to develop social skills, problem solving skills, creativity, self regulation, executive function, flexibility, adaptability and resilience opportunities through PLAY. Supervision to ensure safety is part of the program, but the children decide what they want to do.

6.6.3 Youth (engagement, supervision, safety):

Young people have a need for places to go where they can enjoy their own informal recreational time and things to do that reflect their own social and cultural lives. Adolescents place importance on relationships and social interactions, with an emphasis on shared ideas, experiences and discussion, rather than physical activity. However, in the teenage years parents remain concerned about safety and appropriate behaviour. During these years PLAY is less about supervision but rather facilitating engagement in activities of choice while still highlighting healthy choices, social responsibility and personal risk management to ensure safety.

6.7 Playspaces and play structures

Playground structures commonly define outdoor playspaces and little attention is given to the space and natural opportunities surrounding the structure. In the desire for safety adult designed play equipment and structures have led the PLAY sector. However, research points to the need to reintegrate children with nature, to provide them with safe opportunities for free, creative PLAY. Recreation management have been advocates for the inclusion of natural play spaces in play spaces.

The challenge of meeting safety standards and creating spaces for creativity and PLAY can be addressed through rethinking the design of our playspaces and play structures. The remaining challenge is that of personal safety for children when they are in these playspaces. The solution needs to lie in supervision, in leadership, in oversight, not programming.



**A PATH
FORWARD**

7. A PATH FORWARD

7.1 The challenge

The research and views of professionals point to the importance of creating a new environment for children where opportunities for safe, unstructured PLAY are balanced with structured activities. We need to create and support appropriately equipped spaces where kids PLAY safely without structure. We need to build a new culture and understanding to support returning kids to the yards, streets and playgrounds, where they can develop problem solving, good judgment and risk management skills.

The challenge is to move from understanding the issue and the implications to develop policy, strategies and action plans. Advocacy with all orders of government, with organizations and parents is required. We can learn from other communities and propose programs and activities. However, elevation of the importance of this issue and the development of cross-sector collaboration requires leadership.

7.2 Leading change – a role for recreation and parks under ARPA leadership

Amongst those interviewed there is support for recreation leadership to bring attention to the issue. Areas where recreation can be most influential include training practitioners to work with children as animators, not programmers and schedulers. As well, there is strong support for accessible PLAY spaces that are conducive to children's PLAY.

The foundation of recreation and parks goes back to the post world war years when teachers and leaders began discussing how they could enrich the lives of children by providing environments and programs. In recent years, the focus of recreation and parks has been to advocate for and support facilities, programs and activities.

Throughout the last 60 years, ARPA has promoted the significant role recreation and parks plays in developing healthy people and communities. Accordingly, ARPA has advocated for better school recreation programs; the use of schools and school areas for community recreation; strengthening of early childhood services; improved and stable financial support for recreation programming and facilities; enhanced professionalism and standards; enhancing the quality of life for citizens; the establishment of urban and countryside parks; and, provincial government support for community recreation, sport, art, culture and parks programs for all Albertans. A priority that runs through many of the ARPA reports is PLAY.

From its initiation in February 1950, through the following decades, ARPA has been actively involved in education, training and development, advocacy and research. ARPA has a record of educating practitioners and the provincial and municipal governments on various initiatives. Education includes building awareness on programs and standards in such areas as Playground Standards that are intended to enhance safety for children.

Some practitioners within ARPA note that a movement to planned and funded activities over the years has taken the focus off PLAY. Furthermore, in the modern environment, PLAY is not facilitated or supported in any formal way. Is there a leadership role for recreation and parks to meet the PLAY challenge? We believe that the answer is unequivocally YES.

ARPA has over 1300 members and represents a large portion of Alberta municipalities as well as corporate, academic, student, volunteer and individual recreation practitioners and affiliated stakeholder members. Those members represent over 3.5 million citizens in the province. The organization advocates for healthy citizens, communities and their environments, and endorses a vision of:

"A Province and communities within, that embrace and proactively use recreation and parks as essential means for enhancing individual well being and community vitality, economic sustainability and natural resource protection and conservation."

Given its knowledge, passion and stature, ARPA is well-positioned to champion a movement to re-integrate PLAY into the lives of children. ARPA has a record of collaboration, education, and advocacy on behalf of professionals and municipal recreation and parks departments in the Alberta.

Alberta places strong emphasis on locally driven and implemented recreation. ARPA and Alberta communities have many programs and initiatives that have the potential to support PLAY. It is appropriate that the existing structures and initiatives be supported and enhanced through the deliberate introduction of PLAY policy, leadership, community engagement and the creation of time and space for PLAY.

Effectively addressing the PLAY challenge will require an appreciation for, and commitment to, collaboration. The goal of collaborative action will be to increase awareness and educate practitioners, parents and citizens on the value PLAY; invite stakeholders to create new opportunities; and build partnerships to implement change.



RECOMMENDATIONS

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 RESEARCH:

ARPA in collaboration with its national association, CPRA in partnership with key stakeholders e.g. IPA Canada, undertake research to assess the views and values society and parents have regarding PLAY.

- 8.1.1 Research could be quantitative in the form of public opinion research, or qualitative in the form of focus groups.
- 8.1.2 Research would confirm the level of support for change and help determine the appropriate leadership on this issue.
- 8.1.3 Research would also set the benchmark for awareness and for the development of indicators and outcomes.
- 8.1.4 Research should be repeated on an annual or semi-annual basis to assess the degree of change.
- 8.1.5 Research of case studies that promote unstructured play as a strategy to address the concern for children's inactivity and obesity.

8.2 ADVOCACY:

ARPA in collaboration with child development, education and health and fitness agencies develop and deliver an education program designed to convey the importance of PLAY and advocate for the creation of opportunities for PLAY in all communities.

- 8.2.1 The implications of the PLAY deficit are significant and society and parents must understand the impacts of children being in structured environments and in adult organized activities from an early age. If the situation is to change then awareness building on the need to create space and time for PLAY is required.
- 8.2.2 Education of funders is also required and ARPA needs to take focused action to educate government and service agencies on the value of PLAY, the implications of the PLAY deficit and the importance of PLAY opportunities and spaces in all communities.
- 8.2.3 In addition to awareness, funders must support the reassessment of public resources and the different levels of government must find new approaches to financially contribute to addressing the PLAY deficit.
- 8.2.4 Within Alberta, ARPA can initiate discussion, policy and action at the local level through advocacy with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and the Association of Alberta Municipal Districts and Counties.
- 8.2.5 ARPA can also take a leadership role in building awareness and support with other provincial/territorial recreation and parks associations and CPRA.
- 8.2.6 ARPA to review PLAY deficit circumstances with Alberta's corporate sector to assess partnered opportunities.

8.3 ENGAGEMENT:

ARPA advocate and support the engagement of the stakeholders in the design of safe PLAY opportunities.

- 8.3.1 Engage children and youth in designing and developing playspaces in their communities.
- 8.3.2 Engage communities and neighbourhoods in the implementation of local strategies to address the design of playspaces and opportunities for all ages (preschoolers, school age children and youth).
- 8.3.3 Advocate for incentives and federal and/provincial funding for implementation of pilot initiatives at the local level.
- 8.3.4 Local recreation departments and community recreation providers allocate funds to provide supervision of local playspaces.

8.4 LEADERSHIP:

ARPA lead, through advocacy and the provision of training and resources to communities, to support the engagement of children, youth, parents and communities in the design of opportunities for PLAY at the local level.

- 8.4.1 Update the Alberta Play Leadership Development Program to support PLAY facilitation and animation and create training opportunities at the local level.
- 8.4.2 ARPA's Children and Youth Committee identify common messages and strategies that build awareness and common messaging to incorporate into the current children and youth program.
- 8.4.3 ARPA's Children and Youth Committee work with the Parks and Open Space Committee to advocate for and support enhanced natural play environments and playspaces.
- 8.4.4 ARPA/CPRA host a National Children's PLAY and Recreation Symposium.
- 8.4.5 ARPA, with other partners (e.g. ATPR and the U of A), incorporate "childrens play and applied imagination" as a priority focus within the Norman Kwong Centre for Community Recreation Excellence.

8.5 POLICY:

ARPA and CPRA lead a collaborative partnership to develop and present a National PLAY Policy and a Charter for Children's PLAY.

- 8.5.1 ARPA support CPRA and other allied stakeholders (e.g. IPA Canada, etc.) in proposing a national policy on Children's PLAY and a Charter for Children's PLAY, using the international best practices and case studies.
- 8.5.2 ARPA and CPRA work the all orders of government - the ISRC, through presentations, conferences, dialogues and face-to-face meetings to gain approval of the policy and charter.



**WE NEED TO TAKE A DELIBERATE
AND PROACTIVE APPROACH
AND REFOCUS ON CREATING
OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN
TO PLAY...**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As a society, despite the best of intentions, we have systematically eliminated opportunities for children to PLAY - to role-play, to create, to innovate and to explore the environment beyond the walls of their houses without the direct involvement of adults. Research reveals this shift to structured activities can be linked to an inability to focus, a need for artificial stimulation, an avoidance of complex problems, a lack of understanding of risk identification and management and an over-reliance on parental direction. And since children also spend the majority of their unscheduled time indoors and involved in sedentary activities there is a link to childhood obesity, a major concern of parents and medical practitioners.

If we are to address the developmental and health issues of our children we need to take a deliberate and proactive approach and refocus on creating opportunities for children to PLAY, to explore their outdoor environment and interact with peers without adult direction. There needs to be a better balance between PLAY and structured activity so our children can develop those skills that will be important in their adult lives, skills such as physical and emotional intelligence, conflict resolution and negotiation, problem solving and risk management.

On Children:

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.*

*You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth. [Kahlil Gibran]*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Of the many organizations and institutions with a stake in the issue, ARPA may be in the best position to champion a movement to re-integrate PLAY into the lives of children. The issue is one for all of us and it is time for proactive leadership.

This paper generally reviews the research on PLAY and the play deficit and provides information on a number of initiatives in PLAY provision. It also makes a number of recommendations. We want to know what you think!

Here are some questions to guide the discussion and input from the recreation and parks sector.

1. From your perspective, do you agree there is a PLAY deficit? Give some specific examples from your observations.
2. This paper outlines some of the impacts of a PLAY deficit. Do you agree with the observations and from your perspective, what are the most critical ones to address?
3. From your perspective what challenges would your community face in addressing the PLAY deficit issues as presented in this paper?
4. What are your observations about the focus areas and priorities in the recreation and parks sector?
5. How does the provision of play spaces factor into your organization's priorities?
6. What is your community requesting with respect to playspaces and playgrounds? Are these the right recommendations?
7. Thinking about the recommendations, which ones will be the easiest to implement? Which recommendations should be a priority?
8. Thinking about the recommendations, where should we start?
9. As a practitioner, what can you do to make a difference? How could ARPA help?
10. Are you aware of any other initiatives within Alberta that promote unstructured PLAY in your community?
11. Any other thoughts or comments?

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