



Assessing the State of Play Among Canadian Children

Nadia Crush, MacEwan University

Introduction

Play acts as a critical role in the physical, cognitive, and social development of children. Play comes in various forms, including physical, imaginative, and structured games. Play is not just a leisure activity for children; it is an essential aspect of their growth and well-being. Through play, kids learn to explore their physical abilities, expand their creativity, and develop crucial social skills. However, with the fast-paced nature of modern life, many Canadian families are finding it increasingly challenging to prioritize playtime for their children. This discussion will explore the importance of play in childhood development, examining diverse play types that foster physical health and creativity. Furthermore, I will be addressing the obstacles that hinder a child's access to play, taking into consideration the complexities created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, I will provide insight into the barriers that Indigenous children face through land-based play. Despite the recognized significance of play in childhood development, persistent inequities may impact Canadian children's opportunities for engaging in play activities. My hypothesis suggests that Canadian children may be engaging in play less than what is optimal for their developmental needs.

The Importance of Play

Engaging in play is a fundamental aspect of childhood that plays a crucial role in the development of the child. Pretend play with peers promotes imagination and creativity, which links to a child's emotional and psychological development. Additionally, unstructured, outdoor play positively affects a child's behaviour, physical activity, and overall health. Waters et al. (2022) conducted a study to assess UK parents' attitudes toward play. It was discovered through surveys that "both parents consider play to be important for their children's development, but not significantly so. Parents who value play have been shown to engage in more play with their children which is beneficial to the child's play level and the parent-child relationship, so its continued importance to parents is encouraging" (p. 1575). However, what parents believe is important for their child does not mean they prioritize their child's playtime over academics. Parents often face pressures to prioritize academic success over play, leading to overscheduled children at risk of stress, anxiety, and burnout. Molu (2023) describes children's play as characterized by self-directed activities driven by internal motivations such as needs, wants, and desires. Play encompasses social, physical, and imaginative dimensions, which enhances their

understanding of the world and how to interact within it as well as navigate challenges. Through play, children can acquire knowledge and skills, fostering personal growth and integration within their social environment. Children best learn their social roles through their peers and can begin to understand desirable behaviours that promote positive interactions. By engaging in play with peers, children learn important values such as cooperation, communication, and empathy. Molu also discusses the impacts of play on a child's emotional development. Children experience a variety of emotions through play such as boredom, jealousy, confusion, and joy. Play provides children with a safe environment to explore these emotions and learn how to express and manage them. Adults can observe these behaviours and provide guidance, when necessary, especially if a child is using inappropriate behaviours to resolve issues. Kirk & Jay (2018) elaborate on the importance of specifically imaginative play, where children engage in more "complex negotiations when creating scenes, continually drawing on the cultural roles, conventions, and models of cooperation of their society" (p. 475). By immersing themselves in these make-believe worlds, children not only showcase their creativity but also practice their social skills by navigating through various roles and collaborating with their peers. This form of play nurtures their ability to problem-solve, communicate effectively, and understand the complexities of social interactions. Play remains a crucial element in promoting a child's physical health and overall well-being. Typically involving physical movement, play contributes significantly to the enhancement of sensorimotor skills, coordination, and balance, as noted by Molu (2023). Activities like dancing, running, jumping, and sports, as well as simpler tasks like sewing and block building, are all forms of play that are beneficial. Highly vigorous activities help children to maintain a healthy weight while improving muscle strength and cardiovascular fitness. As mentioned, activities like sewing and building are essential for the development of fine and gross motor skills, which is especially important for young children. All playful activities can lower cortisol levels, which can help children manage stress and improve their mood. While adults may perceive childhood as carefree, children face the pressures of navigating an adult-oriented world without the necessary experience to cope effectively. Children often feel compelled to satisfy adult expectations, fit in with their peers, and adhere to societal standards of success. By ensuring children have plenty of play opportunities, they can develop healthy stress-relieving habits to be more likely to continue engaging in physical activities throughout their lives. Whether in childhood or adulthood, incorporating play into daily life can have numerous positive effects on physical well-being.

Barriers to Play

Many Canadian families today pride themselves on their hurried lifestyle, with their children in various extracurricular activities that take up free time on weekends and after school. Increased focus on academic studies has also led to an overall reduction in time spent on play. Tremblay et al. (2018) conducted a study that examines the physical literacy of Canadian children ages eight to twelve. The study incorporates twenty-five measures within four domains of physical literacy related to physical play: Physical Competence, Daily Behaviour, Knowledge and Understanding, and Motivation and Confidence. The scores were out of one hundred across the domains, with the children scoring an average of sixty-three, which Tremblay rates as quite low. Tremblay

hypothesizes that “These overall “low” scores could be due to societal change where, from a young age, children’s free time is more focused on screens than active play” (p.39). From my own experiences of working with children, it has become increasingly difficult to encourage children to take a break from screens to play. Aggression and tantrums often result from taking away screens, which is concerning. Due to the reduction of active play, Canadian children are lacking the skills required to achieve overall physical literacy. Hewes (2006) discusses the implications that cause a decline in outdoor play opportunities, noting that “Technology, traffic, and urban land-use patterns have changed the natural play territory,” (p. 1) as parents feel more concerned about the heavy traffic in neighborhoods, and carefully structured playgrounds are being built in place of nature. Furthermore, parents aspire for their children to excel in something, often prioritizing achievements in sports or academics over cultivating a well-rounded skill set. Early childhood learning programs focusing on math and reading encourage parents to enroll their young children in these programs before kindergarten to enhance their child’s academic performance. While these programs may contribute to academic success in the short term, research shows that these programs do not “sustain long-term benefits and has a negative impact on some young children” (p.1). Extracurricular activities and academics benefit children, and organized sports often involve play. However, children also need unstructured play time to experience the benefits of play. But parents’ attitudes often prevent their children from experiencing opportunities to play. Waters et al. (2022) identified gender- specific disparities in parental attitudes towards their children's activities. Parents of girls rated “academic activities as more important for their children's development than parents of boys. They believed that their daughters should learn school-related skills at home every day and have more books than toys, while these matters were not so important for their sons” (p. 1576). As a result, girls may miss out on the benefits of unstructured play that are crucial for their overall development.

COVID-19 Impacts on Play

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that children one and above spend at least one hundred and twenty minutes a day participating in playful physical activity. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have demonstrated that “children and youth experienced a significant decline in all physical activities, except household chores” (Moore et al., 2020, p. 4). However, while physical activity has declined, “leisure screen time and social media use was reported as much higher than before the COVID-19 outbreak.” Some possible barriers that children may have experienced that contributed to this decline during the pandemic could be living in an apartment with little to no space for outdoor play, limited access to peers, and a lack of encouragement from parents to play. Research has also shown that “children and their parents in low-SES neighborhoods experience multiple barriers to enabling children’s engagement in unstructured physical activities, including scheduling demands, financial barriers, family obligations, and environmental barriers (e.g. lack of sports facilities and playgrounds, safety issues)” (Aliyas et al., 2024, p. 5). Without space to play during isolation, children resorted to other activities that provided entertainment, and screens. While playgrounds and other leisure facilities were closed, many children still had a backyard that they could play in. However, children lacking a safe

outdoor space were deprived of outdoor play opportunities unless under direct supervision. Unfortunately, parents who worked from home likely could not supervise their children outside, and screens emerged as a substitute for play, a trend that persists in the post-pandemic era. The impact is likely more pronounced for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with Indigenous children potentially facing a disproportionate effect. Despite comprising only five percent of the Canadian population, Indigenous families experience higher poverty rates compared to other groups. Furthermore, due to the pandemic guidelines to socially isolate, children did not have opportunities to play with their peers, which has resulted in “children’s sense of loneliness, anxiety, and lack of development of important skills such as conflict resolution, problem-solving, and creative thinking” (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023, p. 1547). As discussed, these are skills that children learn through play, so without the opportunity to learn these skills, kindergarten teachers found that children are behind in their social and emotional development in comparison to their past kindergarten students. Additionally, I mentioned that play assists in the development of fine motor skills, which is essential for young children. Due to the lack of play during the pandemic, kindergarten teachers reported that their post-pandemic students “had difficulty holding pencils and crayons and cutting papers with scissors” (p. 1547). The students also carried these delays into their first-grade classes, putting them academically behind. The early childhood years are the most critical for the development of “socio-emotional and self-help skills,” which makes it more difficult for these children to catch up to where they need to be. Unfortunately, worldwide researchers have reported similar issues in young children, such as “increasing frequency of child behavior problems (as cited in Gassman-Pines et al., 2020); externalizing behavior issues (as cited in Giannotti et al., 2021); anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (as cited in Nearchou et al., 2020); and a feeling of loneliness (as cited in Egan et al., 2021)” due to COVID-19 social isolation. The impact of the pandemic on children's development is profound and concerning. As we navigate through post-pandemic years, it is crucial to prioritize creating opportunities for play, social interaction, and emotional support for children. By fostering an environment that encourages exploration, creativity, and connection, we can help mitigate the setbacks caused by the disruptions in their early years.

Indigenous Children

Statistics Canada discusses the childhood learning experiences of Indigenous children living off-reserve, noting that “First Nations children living off reserve in low-income families are less likely to participate in language and play activities than First Nations children living off-reserve in higher income families” (“The Early Learning Experiences of Off-Reserve First Nations Children in Canada”). Additionally, a majority of Indigenous children who were not from low-income families played outside daily. This may tell us that economic disparities play a role in the limited access to opportunities for play. Gerlach et al. (2014) explore “how Indigenous children’s play can be shaped by broader historical, political, and socio-economic structures that may otherwise remain obscured” (p. 243). Indigenous children may face higher rates of poverty, which can impact their ability to participate in various play opportunities. Children with a low socioeconomic status may have limited access to toys, recreational facilities, and safe playgrounds.

The lack of resources can impact the variety and quality of play experiences for Indigenous children. While imaginative and outdoor play does not necessarily require equipment, traumas experienced by Indigenous children can affect the well-being of children and impact their ability to engage in healthy, imaginative play. The impacts of colonization, residential schools, and cultural assimilation policies continue to affect Indigenous communities in Canada. Many Indigenous communities have been pushed onto reserves with poor land quality, where communities may face environmental challenges such as inadequate housing and limited safe, outdoor spaces that provide children with play opportunities. As I discussed the health benefits of play in this paper, the lack of play may play a role in why “Indigenous children remain significantly less healthy than other children in Canada on virtually every measure of health and quality of life, and for many Indigenous children, equity remains out of reach” (p. 246). De Lannoy et al. (2023) discuss the importance of land-based outdoor play opportunities for Indigenous children. Opportunities to connect culture with play contribute to Indigenous people's social health and resilience. The author mentions that “supporting knowledge generation with Indigenous Peoples and promoting learning about Indigenous land-based outdoor play may provide an opportunity to build relationships of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada and move towards reconciliation” (p. 9). Residential schools constrained Indigenous children's play opportunities, forcing them to play through a Eurocentric lens, which abolished land-based play. Survivors of residential schools who were unable to participate in traditional play experiences can be “manifested in a mother or father not knowing how to interact, engage, and bond with their children through play or by being playful” (Gerlach et al., 2014, p. 250). By teaching Indigenous children land-based play, not only do children today learn to reconnect with their culture and the land, but their parents can learn with them and begin to heal. Research finds that “cultural identity and continuity are increasingly recognized as fundamental determinants of health for Indigenous peoples, with implications for their health and well-being across their life course,” (p. 251). If Indigenous children experience more land-based outdoor play opportunities, their health risks may fade. The First Nations Health Authority (2020) shares some of the specific benefits of land-based play, including that engaging in risky play offers numerous advantages and teaches valuable life skills such as enhancing problem solving abilities, developing resilience, and fostering persistence. By promoting land-based play, we can support Indigenous children's and communities' health and vitality, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment that transcends generations.

Conclusion

Play emerges as a foundation in the development of children, encompassing physical, cognitive, and social dimensions. The diverse forms of play, ranging from physical activities to imaginative games, provide a safe environment for children to explore and nurture their abilities. However, contemporary challenges, such as the fast-paced nature of modern life and the pressures for academic success, pose barriers to prioritizing playtime for children. Barriers such as the global COVID-19 pandemic and families from low socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods have led to reduced physical activity and increased screen time. In addressing the challenges presented, raising awareness about the critical role of play in childhood development is imperative. Ultim-

ately, recognizing and prioritizing the significance of play in childhood is not just an investment in the well-being of individual children but a commitment to building healthier, more resilient communities.

References

- Aliyas, Z., Collins, P. A., Sylvestre, M.-P., & Frohlich, K. L. (2024). Investigating social inequalities in children's independent mobility, active transportation and outdoor free play in two Canadian cities. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 39, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2024.102642>
- de Lannoy, L., Barbeau, K., Seguin, N., & Tremblay, M. S. (2023). Scoping review of children's and youth's outdoor play publications in Canada. *Promotion de La Santé et Prévention des Maladies Chroniques Au Canada*, 43(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.43.1.01>
- Exploring Your Program "Connections to Land -based Learning" Webinar Presentation Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR)*. (2020). <https://www.fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-Exploring-Your-Program-Connections-to-LandBased-Learning-Webinar-Slides.pdf>
- Gerlach, A., Browne, A., & Suto, M. (2014). A critical reframing of play in relation to indigenous children in Canada. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 21(3), 243–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.908818>
- Hewes, J. (2006). *Let the children play: nature's answer to early learning*. Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre.
- Kirk, G., & Jay, J. (2018). Supporting Kindergarten Children's Social and Emotional Development: Examining the Synergetic Role of Environments, Play, and Relationships. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 32(4), 472–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2018.1495671>
- Mark S. Tremblay, Patricia E. Longmuir, Joel D. Barnes, Kevin Belanger, Kristal D. Anderson, Brenda Bruner, Jennifer L. Copeland, Christine Delisle Nyström, Melanie J. Gregg, Nathan Hall, Angela M. Kolen, Kirstin N. Lane, Barbi Law, Dany J. MacDonald, Luc J. Martin, Travis J. Saunders, Dwayne Sheehan, Michelle R. Stone, & Sarah J. Woodruff. (2018). Physical literacy levels of Canadian children aged 8–12 years: descriptive and normative results from the RBC Learn to Play–CAPL project. *BMC Public Health*, 18(S2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5891-x>
- Molu, F. E. (2023). Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education and Children's Right to Play. *Journal Plus Education / Educația Plus*, 33, 50–64. <https://doi.org/10.24250/jpe/si/2023/fem/>
- Sarah A. Moore, Guy Faulkner, Ryan E. Rhodes, Mariana Brussoni, Tala Chulak-Bozzer, Leah J. Ferguson, Raktim Mitra, Norm O'Reilly, John C. Spence, Leigh M. Vanderloo, & Mark S. Tremblay. (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak on movement and play behaviours of Canadian children and youth: a national survey. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 17(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-020-00987-8>

- “The Early Learning Experiences of Off-Reserve First Nations Children in Canada.”
Www150.Statcan.gc.ca, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-644-x/2010001/article/11279-eng.htm.
- Waters, G. M., Tidswell, G. R., & Bryant, E. J. (2022). Mothers’ and Fathers’ Views on the Importance of Play for Their Children’s Development: Gender Differences, Academic Activities, and the Parental Role. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(4), 1571–1581. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12520>
- Watts, R., & Pattnaik, J. (2023). Perspectives of Parents and Teachers on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children’s Socio-Emotional Well-Being. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(8), 1541–1552. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01405-3>
- World Health Organization. “To Grow up Healthy, Children Need to Sit Less and Play More.”
Www.who.int, 24 Apr. 2019, www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthychildren-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more