

# Early childhood development

## Playing outside in Mother Nature keeps our children and planet healthy

Outdoor play builds motor skills and strong bones, muscles, hearts and lungs. Children learn to problem solve and take appropriate risks. Their independence and self-confidence grows, and they sleep better. Research also shows that spending time in nature improves thinking skills and concentration and makes children happier and less stressed out.

Despite all the known benefits of outdoor physical activity and connecting with Mother Nature, children's outdoor play has dramatically declined over two generations. According to one U.S. study, unstructured outdoor play has dropped by 50 per cent since the 1970s. And an Ontario study estimates that children under age four are sedentary 73 to 84 per cent of waking hours. This trend has raised alarm bells about the impact on children's health and well-being.

"The reasons are complex and need to be more fully understood," says Dr. Candace Nykiforuk, a professor at the Centre for Health Promotion Studies, School of Public Health, University of Alberta.

Contributing factors include:

- an enormous increase in screen time in front of TVs, computers and gaming devices. Children typically begin watching TV at four months. By age four or five, nearly 25 per cent watch more than two hours of TV daily.
- driving everywhere and urban sprawl limit walking opportunities and physical activity,
- safety concerns. Some experts now say that children are overprotected.
- limited outdoor play in many child-care settings where the majority of children spend their days while parents work.

Canada was slow to adopt national guidelines for physical activity for young children,



Outdoor play is critical to children's early development and long-term physical and mental health.

introducing its first standards in 2012. Research findings show that by age six, only seven per cent of Canadian children are meeting recommended daily physical activity guidelines. Children who are physically active early on are more likely to remain active as they get older.



Nykiforuk

Turning things around will take a concerted effort by parents, planners and policy-makers, says Nykiforuk. A mother with two young children, she advises parents to begin with small, incremental changes to their daily routines. Like taking a five- to ten-minute walk down the street with a toddler after bringing them home from daycare, for example.

Policy changes are needed to develop the supports that are essential to healthy development, including high-quality child care and walkable neighbourhoods with ample green space and recreational opportunities, says

Nykiforuk. Outdoor play is not only fundamental to children's health and development, but to the preservation of the natural environment, she says. "Children who play outside and experience nature value the natural world and are more likely to grow into environmentally responsible adults."

Author Richard Louv, who coined the term nature-deficit disorder and sparked a back-to-nature movement with his best-seller, *Last Child in the Woods*, agrees. Louv makes an eloquent plea for renewing the broken bond between children and nature. The future of our planet may depend upon it.

### Canadian physical activity guidelines

- *Infants: several daily sessions of interactive, floor-based tummy time, pushing, pulling, grasping and crawling*
- *Aged 1 to 4: at least 180 minutes of physical activity at any level daily*
- *Aged 5: at least 60 minutes of energetic play every day*