



*The Biggest Risk is*  
**KEEPING KIDS  
INDOORS**



**2015**

The ParticipACTION Report Card on  
Physical Activity for Children and Youth



# The Biggest Risk is **KEEPING KIDS INDOORS**



**The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth** (formerly the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card) is the most comprehensive assessment of child and youth physical activity in Canada. The Report Card synthesizes data from multiple sources, including the best available peer-reviewed research, to assign evidence-informed grades across 11 indicators. Over the years, the Report Card has been replicated in numerous cities, provinces, and countries, where it has served as a blueprint for collecting and sharing knowledge about the physical activity of young people around the world.

For the first time, the Report Card takes a stand on play in nature and the outdoors—with its risks—and includes a *Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play*. The statement was developed by the Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute (HALO-CHEO), ParticipACTION and a group of 12 other organizations, and was supported by over 1,600 stakeholders from across Canada and around the world.

**This is the Highlight Report of the Report Card;**

to download the full 58-page report, please visit [www.participactionreportcard.com](http://www.participactionreportcard.com).

# Get out of the way and *let them play*



Despite common knowledge that Canadian kids need to sit less and move more, the two lowest grades in this year's report card are a D- for Sedentary Behaviours and a D- for Overall Physical Activity.

We may be so focused on trying to intervene in our children's lifestyles to make sure they're healthy, safe and happy, that we are having the opposite effect. We call this **the protection paradox**. We overprotect kids to keep them safe, but keeping them close and keeping them indoors may set them up to be less resilient and more likely to develop chronic diseases in the long run.

Outdoor play is essential because kids are more active when they're outside:

- » **Ontario preschoolers spend twice as much time being active when play is outdoors (53% of time active outdoors versus 23% of time active indoors).**<sup>10</sup>
- » **Students take 35% more steps when physical education class is held outdoors.**<sup>11</sup>
- » **Canadian kids aged 9-17 who play outside after school get 20 more minutes of heart-pumping activity per day, and are three times more likely to meet the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines.**<sup>12</sup>

It may be no surprise that outdoor time is good for kids—but in wanting them to be safe outdoors, we sometimes over-supervise their play. Kids are more active when they have some freedom to roam and take risks:

- » **Grade 5 and 6 students who are often or always allowed to go out and explore unsupervised get 20% more heart-pumping activity than those who are always supervised.**<sup>13</sup>
- » **3- to 5-year-old kids are less likely to be active on playgrounds that are designed to be "safer," because many kids equate less challenging with boring.**<sup>14</sup>
- » **Children and youth are less likely to engage in higher levels of physical activity if a parent or supervising adult is present.**<sup>13,15,16</sup>

What many parents recall from their childhoods as thrilling and exciting play is often called "risky play" these days. These are the active games and independent play that tested boundaries and included things like exploring the woods, rough housing, moving fast or playing at heights. We are not suggesting that children be reckless, but we do recognize that some risk is actually good for kids:

- » **Kids with ready access to unsupervised outdoor play have better-developed motor skills, social behaviour, independence and conflict resolution skills.**<sup>17-19</sup>
- » **Adventure playgrounds and loose parts playgrounds, which support some exposure to "risky" elements, lead to an increase in physical activity and decrease in sedentary behaviours.**<sup>20-23</sup>

While physical activity injuries to children are common—from all forms of physical activity and not just risky play—the vast majority of these injuries are minor. We need to give kids the freedom to occasionally scrape a knee or twist an ankle.

As stated in the *Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play*, **long-term health should be valued as much as safety.** We need to consider the possibility that rules and regulations designed to prevent injuries and reduce perceived liability consequences have become excessive, to the extent that they actually limit rather than promote children's physical activity and health. Adults need to get out of the way and let kids play.



# Position



**Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.**

## PREAMBLE

We conducted two systematic reviews to examine the best available scientific evidence on the net effect (i.e., balance of benefits vs. harms) of outdoor and risky active play. Other research and reviews were also consulted. The Position Statement applies to girls and boys (aged 3-12 years) regardless of ethnicity, race, or family socioeconomic status. Children who have a disability or a medical condition should also enjoy active outdoor play in compliance with guidance from a health professional.

## CONTEXT

In an era of schoolyard ball bans and debates about safe tobogganing, have we as a society lost the appropriate balance between keeping children healthy and active and protecting them from serious harm? If we make too many rules about what they can and can't do, will we hinder their natural ability to develop and learn? If we make injury prevention the ultimate goal of outdoor play spaces, will they be any fun? Are children safer sitting on the couch instead of playing actively outside? **We need to recognize the difference between danger and risk. And we need to value long-term health and fun as much as we value safety.**

Risk is often seen as a bad word—by parents, neighbours, care providers, insurance providers,

schools and municipalities. But in play, risk doesn't mean courting danger—like skating on a half-frozen lake or sending a preschooler to the park alone. It means the types of play children see as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but they can recognize and evaluate challenges according to their own ability.<sup>24, 25</sup> It means giving children the freedom to decide how high to climb, to explore the woods, get dirty, play hide 'n seek, wander in their neighbourhoods, balance, tumble and rough-house, especially outdoors, so they can be active, build confidence, autonomy and resilience, develop skills, solve problems and learn their own limits. It's letting kids be kids—healthier, more active kids.

## EVIDENCE

» **When children are outside they move more, sit less and play longer<sup>10,11,26-33</sup> — behaviours associated with improved cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body composition, bone density, cardiorespiratory and musculoskeletal fitness and aspects of mental, social and environmental health.<sup>6,34-42</sup>**

» **Outdoor play is safer than you think!**

- o The odds of total stranger abduction are about 1 in 14 million based on RCMP reports.<sup>43</sup> Being with friends

outdoors may further reduce this number.

- o Broken bones and head injuries unfortunately do happen, but major trauma is uncommon. Most injuries associated with outdoor play are minor.<sup>44-51</sup>
- o Canadian children are eight times more likely to die as a passenger in a motor vehicle than from being hit by a vehicle when outside on foot or on a bike.<sup>52-54</sup>

» **There are consequences to keeping kids indoors—is it really safer?**

- o When children spend more time in front of screens they are more likely to be exposed to cyber-predators and violence, and eat unhealthy snacks.<sup>55-59</sup>
- o Air quality indoors is often worse than outdoors, increasing exposure to common allergens (e.g., dust, mould, pet dander), infectious diseases, and potentially leading to chronic conditions.<sup>60-63</sup>
- o In the long-term, sedentary behaviour and inactivity elevate odds of developing chronic diseases, including heart disease, type-2 diabetes, some forms of cancer and mental health problems.<sup>64-73</sup>

» **Hyper-parenting limits physical activity and can harm mental health.<sup>15,74-76</sup>**

» **When children are closely supervised outside, they are less active.<sup>13,27,16,77-85</sup>**



- » **Children are more curious about, and interested in, natural spaces than pre-fabricated play structures.**<sup>86-96</sup> Children who engage in active outdoor play in natural environments demonstrate resilience, self-regulation and develop skills for dealing with stress later in life.<sup>17,97-114</sup>
- » **Outdoor play that occurs in minimally structured, free and accessible environments facilitates socialization with peers, the community and the environment, reduces feelings of isolation, builds inter-personal skills and facilitates healthy development.**<sup>27,78,87,93,99,115-119</sup>




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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- » **Parents:** Encourage your children to engage more fully with their outdoor environments in a variety of weather conditions. When children are supported to take risks, they have more fun and learn how to assess and manage risk in all areas of their lives.<sup>17,25,120</sup>
- » **Educators and Caregivers:** Regularly embrace the outdoors for learning, socialization and physical activity opportunities, in various weather conditions—including rain and snow. Risky active play is an important part of childhood and should not be eliminated from the school yard or childcare centre.
- » **Health Professionals:** Be influential! Promote every child's connection with nature and the outdoors—identify outdoor play resources and partner with municipalities, parks, nature-related organizations, parent groups and children to support this process.
- » **Injury Prevention Professionals:** Find a balanced approach to health promotion and protection that considers the long-term dangers of a sedentary lifestyle along with the acute potential for injury.
- » **School and Child Care Administrators:** Choose natural elements over pre-fabricated playgrounds and paved areas—and encourage children to play in, and help design, these environments.
- » **Media:** Provide balanced reporting—sensationalizing stories about predators and danger elevates fear; cover success stories related to outdoor and risky active play.
- » **Attorneys General:** Establish reasonable liability limits for municipal governments—this means Joint and Several Liability Reform.
- » **Provincial and Municipal Governments:** Work together to create an environment where Public Entities are protected from frivolous lawsuits over minor injuries related to normal and healthy outdoor risky active play. This protection would no longer restrict Public Entities to using the Canadian Standards Association CAN/CSA Z614 “Children’s Playspaces and Equipment” as a guide for the design of outdoor play spaces and as a requirement for the funding of these spaces. An increased investment in natural play spaces in all neighbourhoods is encouraged.
- » **Schools and Municipalities:** Examine existing policies and by-laws and reconsider those that pose a barrier to active outdoor play.
- » **Federal and Provincial/Territorial Governments:** Collaborate across sectors to find ways to improve children’s access to risky active play in nature and the outdoors.
- » **Society:** Recognize that children are competent and capable. Respect parents’ assessments of their children’s abilities and their decisions to encourage self-directed play in nature and the outdoors. Allow all children to play with and form a lasting relationship with nature on their own terms.

This Position Statement was informed by the best available evidence, interpreted by a group of Canadian experts representing 14 organizations, and reviewed and edited by more than 1,600 stakeholders. Details of the process are published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* [[www.mdpi.com/journal/ijerph](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/ijerph)].

Funding for the development of the Position Statement was provided by The Lawson Foundation, the Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute, KidActive and ParticipACTION.





## Overall Physical Activity

70% of children aged 3-4 get the recommended 180 minutes of daily activity at any intensity. However, as the guidelines change to 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity per day for those aged five and up, rates fall to only 14% of kids meeting guidelines at age 5-11, and only 5% meeting the guidelines at age 12-17. <sup>2012-13 CHMS</sup>

**Overall, only 9% of 5- to 17-year olds get the 60 minutes of heart-pumping activity they need each day.** The grade remains a D- for the third year in a row to reflect the balance between one age group that is doing well (3- to 4-year olds) and the majority who are doing poorly (5- to 17-year-olds). <sup>2012-13 CHMS</sup>

INC= Incomplete due to limited research in this area.

# Behaviours that Contribute to Overall Physical Activity

**B-**

## Organized Sport & Physical Activity Participation

- » **75%** of 5- to 19-year-olds participate in organized physical activities or sport.<sup>2011-14 CANPLAY</sup>
- » **75%** of families with a child with a disability report that their child participates in organized sports.<sup>136</sup>

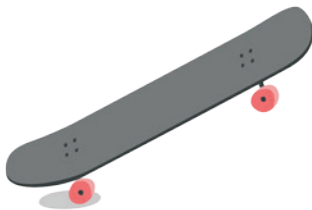


**INC**

## Active Play

- » According to parents, **68%** of 5- to 19-year-olds play outdoors after school.<sup>2011-14 CANPLAY</sup>
- » Kids who play outside after school get **20 more minutes** of heart-pumping activity per day and are three times more likely to meet the guidelines.<sup>12</sup>

**D**



## Active Transportation

- » Only **24%** of Canadian parents say their kids, aged 5-17, only walk or wheel to and from school, while **62%** say their kids are typically driven.<sup>2010-11 PAM</sup>

**INC**



## Physical Literacy

- » Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding people need to value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activities over the life course.
- » Currently, data on this new indicator are limited. Emerging data suggest that **39%** of 8- to 12-year-olds meet the minimum recommended level of physical literacy.<sup>2011-15 CAPL</sup>
- » At least one study shows kids who have good motor skills at age six are more active during their leisure time at age 26.<sup>189</sup>



**D-**

## Sedentary Behaviours

- » **15%** of children aged 3-4 meet the guideline of less than one hour of screen time per day; **24%** of those aged 5-11 and **24%** of those aged 12-17 meet the guideline of two hours or less of screen time per day.<sup>2012-13 CHMS</sup>
- » Children aged 3-4 spend **7.5 hours** a day being sedentary, those aged 5-11 spend **7.6 hours** and those aged 12-17 spend **9.3 hours**.<sup>2012-13 CHMS</sup>

## Settings & Sources of Influence

C+

### Family & Peers

- » **79%** of parents financially support their kids' physical activity.<sup>2010-11 PAM</sup>
- » In Ontario and Alberta, **53%** of grade 9 students report that their parents are very supportive of them being physically active, compared to **42%** of grade 12 students.<sup>207</sup>
- » **85%** of mothers are confident they can influence their children aged 5-11 years to get more active by limiting their screen time.<sup>2014 Bring Back Play Campaign Assessment</sup>

C+

### School

- » All provinces and territories have a physical education (PE) curriculum,<sup>214</sup> but only Manitoba requires a PE credit every year in high school.
- » **53%** of parents report that their kids aged 5-17 participate in sport and physical activity programs at school.<sup>2010-11 PAM</sup>

B+

### Community & Environment

- » Only **11%** of parents report a lack of access (e.g. distance to facilities, few opportunities) as a barrier to their children being physically active.<sup>2010-11 PAM</sup>
- » Parents' safety concerns about neighbourhood traffic, bullying and strangers are the primary barrier to independent free play.<sup>152</sup>

## Strategies & Investments

B-

### Government

- » **11 of 13** provinces and territories maintained or increased their spending on physical activity in 2014.<sup>236</sup>
- » Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation endorsed, and the federal government supported, the *Framework for Recreation in Canada 2015*, and announced plans to develop a pan-Canadian physical activity framework based on *Active Canada 20/20*.
- » The Public Health Agency of Canada awards \$20 million in annual funding via Multi-sectoral Partnerships to Promote Healthy Living and Prevent Chronic Disease.
- » In 2014-15, Sport Canada invested \$16 million in sport participation for children and youth.

A-

### Non-Government

- » The Institute for Canadian Citizenship reported that sport and physical activity play important roles in helping new citizens integrate into Canadian life.<sup>144</sup>
- » The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer are working on policy development and knowledge translation activities to support active transportation.
- » The Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) is investing in physical literacy grants through RBC Learn to Play. The Canadian Tire Family of Companies support 70 sports organizations, including Active at School, which focuses on getting 60 minutes of activity in schools each day.



# Methodology, the Full Report and Knowledge Tools

Our interdisciplinary research team identifies and assesses Report Card indicators to determine grade assignments based on available data, research and key issue areas from the past year. Consideration is also given to trends over time and disparities related to age, gender, household income, etc.

The Full Report, available online only, includes background on our methodology and process, in-depth analyses, summaries of key research, charts, figures and complete references.

Visit [www.participactionreportcard.com](http://www.participactionreportcard.com) to download:

- » 2015 ParticipACTION Report Card – Highlight Report
- » 2015 ParticipACTION Report Card – Full Report
- » Links to background research papers for the Position Statement
- » PowerPoint presentations
- » Media materials
- » Social media kit
- » Infographics
- » Other materials that will help you understand and share the findings.

**ParticipACTION** is a national non-profit organization that helps Canadians sit less and move more. Originally established in 1971, ParticipACTION works with its partners, which include sport, physical activity, recreation organizations, government and corporate sponsors, to make physical activity a vital part of everyday life. ParticipACTION is generously supported by the Government of Canada. For more information, please visit [www.participACTION.com](http://www.participACTION.com).



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ParticipACTION  
77 Bloor Street West, Suite 1205  
Toronto, ON M5S 1M2  
[www.participactionreportcard.com](http://www.participactionreportcard.com)

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