

Outdoor Play

New pressures and changing social conditions increasingly limit children's experiences of the outdoors.

Why are children spending more time indoors?

- longer working hours, and the absence of a parent at home during the day
- smaller families where there is no older sibling to keep an eye on younger children
- extended family members may not live in close proximity, so the opportunity for grandparents, for example, to be with grandchildren outdoors is limited
- the increase in unit/apartment living, and smaller garden spaces for houses
- greater use of television, electronic games and computers
- driving children to care and activities
- working families need to attend to many domestic chores when at home and may have limited time to supervise children outside the home.



Adult anxieties about safety have added to the time children spend indoors

Anxieties about children's safety also contribute to a culture of protection that may limit children's access to the outdoors. Safety concerns range from 'stranger danger', to road safety, fear of injury, and concerns about sun exposure.

The result is that increasingly, young children spend more time indoors. Watching television, playing electronic games and sitting in front of a computer screen make children's lives more sedentary, putting children at risk of childhood obesity. In addition, children's experiences and appreciation of the natural world, may be very limited. This raises the question of how we can manage these concerns and risks while still allowing young children the full range of opportunities to play, explore and learn in the outdoor environment.

Why is outdoor play important?

The outdoor environment provides children with a wonderful array of opportunities for play-based learning that enhances their development. It allows children to explore, discover, and engage with the natural environment. Outdoor play contributes to all domains of children's development. The outdoors is a place to run around, let off steam and escape the confines of the indoors, but it is much more than just a larger, freer physical space. For some children, the outdoors provides a special place with hidden spaces for imagination and contemplation: for quiet activities including reading, drawing and playing with natural materials. For others the outdoors enhances dramatic play experiences or the opportunity to observe nature.

Outdoor play offers unique opportunities for children to:

- experience new physical challenges
- develop strength and stamina
- use large muscles and fine muscles in new ways
- express themselves verbally with different voice levels
- engage in problem solving during outdoor play
- physically interact with peers by chasing, talking, and playing
- appreciate nature and protect the environment.

Children enjoy being outdoors. A recent Australian study asked young children about their preferred environment. The overwhelming response was that the children in the survey preferred to be outdoors. The many and varied reasons given for this preference mirror the multitude of valuable experiences offered in the outdoors.

This Parent Fact Sheet is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

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Injuries

Injuries are the leading cause of death of Australian children (Blakemore, 2005). More children die as a result of injury than from cancer, asthma and infectious diseases combined. Most injuries to children occur at home.

Most of these injuries are not the unfortunate result of accidents – they are not chance events that could not have been anticipated and prevented. Injuries are rarely the result of accidents or bad luck. Most are predictable and therefore preventable.

Protection

How can we protect children from injury? While in care, children are protected by many safety principles that carers must comply with in planning and maintaining a safe environment. These regulations and guidelines provide basic protections for the safety of young children and the care environment is normally planned specifically to provide for children's needs. These include the need for experiences that provide appropriate challenges. Children learn through play, so the environment is planned to allow diverse experiences for play.

At home and in the care environment, appropriate supervision of young children is the most important protection. Young children should not be left unsupervised.

Protection or overprotection?

We all want to protect children from injury, but children can be over protected to the extent that they are not given the opportunities to experience and learn from appropriate challenges. They need these experiences to grow, learn and to develop life long skills of self-regulation and self-protection.

A report from the U.K.'s Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents partly blamed a steep rise in the local number of child drownings to "children's poor judgement of the risks involved". Ironically, though tragically, the report pointed to overprotective parents "keeping their children too protected for them to be able to develop good risk awareness". The report concluded that children are "simply not aware of the dangers of the outside world". At a more mundane level, children face sport injuries if they have not learned how to fall when playing football, for example.

Children need direct experiences of the world: such experiences cannot be vicariously learned, or taught by direct instruction or learned through watching television and playing electronic games.

Balancing protection with children's needs

Recently, a prominent paediatrician and road injury specialist noted that "Efforts to prevent injury should not put at risk vital opportunities to live, learn and play". This highlights the need for a balance between our desire to protect children from injury and children's need for appropriately challenging environments and activities.

Children gain pleasure from these activities, and they need physical challenges to develop healthy, strong bodies. Equally importantly, children need these experiences to learn how to cope with experiences now, as well as in later life.

There are two messages here:

1. Appropriate, supportive supervision can prevent many injuries
2. Over-protection, particularly if it involves preventing children from participating in activities, not only deprives children of desirable experiences, challenges and opportunities for healthy growth and development, but may contribute to the risk of later injury. Overprotection may put children at risk.

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