

# Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

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## Outdoor Play

In the late nineteenth century the Free Kindergarten movement in Australia highlighted the importance of nature and gardens to counter the threats posed to inner city children's health and development by the urban-industrial environment. Contact with nature, and the fresh air and space of the 'children's garden' were regarded as antidotes to the crowded and often squalid urban environment.

In the twenty-first century, new pressures and changing social conditions increasingly limit young children's experiences of the outdoors and present new challenges for families and carers.

### Why are children spending more time indoors?

Key amongst the changes that reduce the opportunities for young children to spend time outdoors are:

- 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 supervise grandchildren outdoors is limited
- the increase in unit/apartment living, and smaller garden spaces for houses
- use of television, electronic games and computers for extended periods of time – with new programs and games specifically targeted at very young children
- driving children to care and activities, rather than walking due to time pressures
- working families need to attend to many domestic chores when at home and may use television and electronic games as a type of 'baby-sitter' to keep the children indoors and safe.



The emphasis on acquiring computer and other academic skills may lead some parents to prioritise time spent on developing these sorts of formal skills at the expense of outdoor play.

## **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 are multiple and varied, from 'stranger danger', to road safety, fear of injury, and concerns about sun exposure.

The result is that increasingly, many young children spend more time indoors. Watching television, playing electronic games and sitting in front of a computer screen make many children's lives more sedentary, putting these 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.

Robyn Wellhousen, an expert in planning outdoor environments for young children, poses a question that is relevant to all carers:

***What do we need to provide in children's outdoor spaces to compensate for the ever-shrinking sections of large, free running spaces? How can playground spaces be designed so they facilitate an appreciation of the wonders of the natural world that are rapidly disappearing from many children's lives?***

Her book, *Outdoor Play Every Day*, describes the planning that underpins the establishment of safe but stimulating environments and provides many examples of quality outdoor play experiences.

The planning and design of quality outdoor play spaces needs to consider many factors, including: relevant regulations and legislation; maintenance of equipment; and the changing developmental needs and abilities of the children in the care setting. These factors need to be considered with the understanding that some children may spend long periods of time in the same care setting. A child in full-time care requires a play area with the flexibility to meet all their outdoor play-based developmental needs. Variety is therefore needed and the environment and equipment should allow for different uses rather than be fixed and limited in function.

## **Outdoor play offers a wide spectrum of opportunities that contribute to all domains of development**

There is still a perception that the outdoors is the place to run around, let off steam and escape the confines of the indoors. However, play in the outdoors offers much more than just a larger,

freer physical space: it is a fundamental part of the children's curricula and therefore essential for carers to actively engage with children, just as they do in the indoor environment. The outdoor program extends and complements the indoor program, while inviting 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.

(Source: Wellhousen, 2002, p. 77)

A recent, small scale Australian study, reported in the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, asked children about their preferred environment. The overwhelming response was that the children in the survey preferred to be outdoors. The variety of reasons children gave for this preference was explored in the survey – and mirror the multitude of opportunities for play-based learning that the outdoors provides for program planning. For some children, the outdoors provided a special place with hidden spaces for imagination and contemplation, while for others it was the chance for physical exuberance. The responses indicated that quiet, small spaces in the overall outdoor area can be as valued as larger open spaces where children can release excess energy. Almost all children in the survey used the outdoor environment for enhanced pretend play experiences.

The article also highlights the importance of carers consulting with children about their interests, needs and wishes for the outdoor environment. Working collaboratively and consulting with children acknowledges them as skilled, capable and active contributors to their own learning within the care setting.

## **Safety**

Safety is a primary consideration in planning all activities with young children, and the outdoor environment presents particular challenges for planning to reduce the risk of injury while allowing children appropriate challenges.

Supervision is paramount, so planning should ensure that:

- all spaces are easy to supervise
- spaces that are difficult to supervise, including 'L' shapes or 'U' shaped strips are avoided or additional supervision by carers is provided

Some common hazards include:

- play equipment configurations that reduce sight lines and supervision
- slip hazards; for example, sand on pathways or other hard surfaces
- heavy objects on climbing frames that de-stabilise the equipment
- fall hazards created by moving equipment to inappropriate locations
- climbing equipment placed on, or adjacent to, hard surfaces
- traffic areas that cause collisions and interrupt play
- active play that conflicts with neighbouring quiet play spaces.

Additional considerations for the outdoor environment include:

- How outdoor spaces can be made pleasant for adults (as well as children) so it is less likely to result in adults congregating in a single area, and avoiding less appealing spaces
- Many children love to have hiding places in the outdoors, so using low shrubs, and orienting cubby openings towards the general play area can help. How else can safety around hiding spaces be improved?
- How familiar are children with an outdoor environment of specific equipment
- Do children of different ages need separate play spaces? Why or why not? How can opportunities for them to play and interact together be promoted while their safety is managed?
- Is the area and equipment checked daily? Is there a systematic approach to this? How are repairs and maintenance needs handled?
- Are surfaces and equipment suitable for children of all ages and abilities within the service?
- How do plants and shrubs provide interest and aesthetics to the environment? Are they non-toxic? Could any plants trigger hay fever and asthma or pose threats of choking from small fruits, seeds or berries?
- Is the shade provided able to protect children from the sun while they play?
- What is the cultural context of how families view outdoor play for their child? What is their view about risk taking, physical or messy play? Is this view the same for each gender? What will carers do in this situation?

The outdoor environment is an invaluable place of learning and engagement. It provides opportunities for children to explore, discover and develop a relationship with and an understanding of the natural environment around them with unique opportunities for sensory experiences, physical activities, observations, constructive play with sand, water and mud, socio-dramatic play, art, science, mathematics and environmental education. Dau suggests that 'there is little that happens indoors that cannot happen outdoors', but that the outdoors may provide opportunities for experiences that cannot be duplicated indoors (2005: 1).

### References:

Dau, Elizabeth *Taking Early Childhood Education Outdoors*, 2005

Greenfield, Cheryl "Can run, play on bikes, jump the zoom slide and play on the swings": Exploring the value of outdoor play' *AJEC*, vol 29, no 2, June 2004

Wellhousen, Karyn *Outdoor Play, Every Day. Innovative Play concepts for Early Childhood*, 2002

The Department of Human Services in Victoria has a detailed and informative guide for planning outdoor play areas for children's services. It can be found by putting the following title in to Google: Outdoor Play A Guide for Children's Services Centres.

*QIAS: 4.6, 5.2, 5.4*

*FDC: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.5, 4.1*

*The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this article is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website [www.econnections.com.au](http://www.econnections.com.au)*

## Case Study: ‘Outdoor Play’

The outdoor play area of the Emerald Hill Child Care Centre caters for the different developmental needs and capabilities of its diverse age groups. The centre, managed by KU Children’s services in Victoria, features outdoor areas that open directly from rooms, with a fence dividing the toddlers and pre-schoolers area. Each area is set up so that it is safe but challenging for each particular age group. Staff conduct a safety check of the outdoors each morning and set up activities before children go outside.

As much thought and effort has been put into planning the outdoor environment and activities as has been given to the indoors. Although experiences provided are based on the interests and needs of the children, provisions are made for both ‘energetic’ and ‘quiet’ play.

A variety of experiences is available for the toddlers outdoors: climbing frames and slides; planks for the children to jump off and somersault onto a large mat below, books to read; a table set up with cogs and wheels; a painting easel and large blocks for children to build a bus or car. A large colourful sun-shade protects children in the sand pit, where a toy stove and fridge invite children to make a cake and sing “Happy Birthday”.

The centre’s focus is on balancing the need for a safe environment with the children’s need for experiences that are stimulating and provide appropriate challenges. The realities of an inner urban location mean that the outdoor environment must be innovatively planned to make the most of the available space. Artificial ‘smart grass’, used in the toddlers’ area is safe and practical; it is easy to maintain and feels lovely underfoot. Safety considerations mean that climbing equipment is positioned in a larger space, with the appropriate “fall zone” around it.

The babies’ outdoor area provides experiences for children aged up to 24 months. A walk-in sand pit allows direct entry, while rocking horses and push-along three wheeler bikes cater for the older children in this group. Various rattles and pop up toys sit on a large sheet of velour fabric. Painted murals provide colour and opportunities for language. The mural closest to the sandpit depicts sea creatures: fish, sea horses and star fish. One popular activity for this age group is being held up to see over the fence. Trams and motorbikes



are favourite sights but the children also wave their parents “good bye” over the fence.

The 3 to 5 year old area is the most challenging, with a climbing tree and a tyre swing. A vegetable garden, with silverbeet, broccoli and herbs, is tended by the children. There are also opportunities for quiet activities such as reading books, building with Lego or writing or drawing.

While all outdoor equipment meets safety standards, constant supervision is required. Staff need to be close at hand to guide children in their use of the equipment and to provide encouragement and assistance if needed as they acquire new skills and practice existing ones. Limits or rules regarding use of equipment and behaviour are implemented consistently by staff to ensure the safety and well being of the children and staff and environment.

*QIAS: 4.6, 5.2, 5.4*

*FDC: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.5, 4.1*

## 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. Many more suffer injuries, with recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting that, in a four week period during 2004 – 2005, 25% of children aged 0-14 years had been injured seriously enough to require some intervention and/or to impact upon their normal activities (ABS, 2007).

**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.**

As concerning as this level of childhood injury is, it is reassuring to know that child deaths from injuries have been halved since 1979, when an average of 2 child deaths from injuries occurred daily (*Kidsafe* 2000). Legislation (for example, the use of car seat belts), compliance with safety regulations and equipment standards are among the primary safety factors that have led to this decrease in child deaths.

### **Planning a safe early childhood environment**

Carers implement many safety principles in planning and maintaining a safe environment. State and Territory legislation must be complied with and quality assurance principles also provide guidelines for carers. While these provide basic protections, there are a number of other factors that can be considered in establishing and maintaining safe environments for children. Some suggestions are outlined in the accompanying article on Outdoor Play.

Innovative planning and managing safety issues can provide opportunities for mixed age groups to play and interact together. This is especially valuable when children do not have older siblings to look up to and learn from.

Effective supervision that supports children in their activities is needed in all environments.

The findings of a recent report from the Department of Family and Community Services (2007) provide a different perspective on risk factors. The study looked at factors

associated with childhood injury, and classified these into a 3 part 'conceptual framework': contextual factors, family factors and child factors. Contextual factors that increased a child's risk of injury included the level of caregiver education, family experience of economic hardship and heavy traffic in the neighbourhood. Most injuries to young children occur in their homes. Among the family factors that correlate with a high rate of childhood injury are the age, mental and other health conditions of the primary caregiver. Carers can support families in risk categories by, for example, providing information to and education of parents via newsletters, tip sheets or an information evening.

The characteristics of injured children were found to significantly differ from those of non-injured children. Specifically gender was a key factor, with boys at much greater risk than girls. Diagnosis of ADD or ADHD was a significant risk factor, as was the primary caregiver's concern over the child's emotions or behaviour. While these findings may not be surprising, they do suggest that different strategies and levels of supervision may be needed for different children.

### **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 and risks. 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 may 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**

In a recent address, prominent paediatrician and road injury specialist, Shanti Ameratunga noted that “Efforts to prevent injury should not put at risk vital opportunities to live, learn and play”. Her message highlights the need for a balance between our desire to protect children from injury and children’s need for challenging environments and activities.

Children gain pleasure from these activities, and they need physical challenges to develop healthy, strong bodies. According to a UNICEF report, “a hidden price is being paid by ... children ... whose lives and childhoods are being circumscribed by unprecedented levels of parental concern.” 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. Careful planning and appropriate, supportive supervision can prevent many injuries. Awareness of the characteristics (including temperament) and capabilities of individual children is an important factor. It helps carers to plan activities, design environments and provide supervision that is tailored to the extra risk of individual children, without unnecessarily over restricting the experiences of more cautious and capable children, for example. This assessment of individual children’s ‘risk’ and potential for injury needs to be regularly reviewed to respond to changes in children’s knowledge and skills development .
2. Over-protection not only deprives children of desirable experiences, challenges and opportunities for healthy growth and development, it can be counter-productive and contribute to the risk of later injury.

### **Over-protection needs to be understood as a risk factor.**

*Our goal in playground safety is to surely reduce the damaging injuries without eliminating the challenges and opportunities for risk. Too little risk and challenge in a playground leads to inappropriate risk-taking and the seeking of thrills in a fearless and destructive manner. Too much can result in children feeling threatened, unsafe and unhappy. (Greenfield, 2004)*

### **References:**

Australian Bureau of Statistics, Health of Children in Australia: A Snapshot, 2004-05

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