

Rethinking outdoor play

Children are naturally curious and love to play. Outdoor play offers children more of a chance to explore, play freely, and learn about how they fit into a range of play spaces.

Children get the most out of play when they are able to take control of and create their own play. This can be as simple as climbing trees, or running down hills, and can often involve taking risks and dealing with new challenges.

Despite some adult fears, outdoor play is vital for children's social and personal growth, and should be made part of every child's day.

Play must haves

Active outdoor play should include chances to:

- explore and test limits, such as learning to deal with increasing heights
- use all the muscles of the body, such as skipping and dancing
- practice and improve skills, such as balance, strength, and coordination
- create imaginary games and activities
- be physically and mentally challenged in new or favourite play areas
- share and play with others
- use a variety of play items, such as different sized balls, mud, or buckets

Depending on your child's age and where your child is playing, be aware that some activities and play spaces may need more supervision than others.

Benefits of challenging play

Regularly playing outdoors should involve activities that allow new things to be learnt in a range of ways.

The excitement of outdoor play, whether it be jumping in puddles, crawling through tunnels, or balancing on logs, can help children to:

- learn about decision making and problem solving
- test their abilities and experience adventure

- see what activities, games and play spaces they like
- get over their fears
- become more independent
- cope with stress
- make sense of the world
- increase self-esteem and self-belief
- nurture the outdoor environment
- learn about the weather and different seasons
- build resilience
- use their imagination
- learn how their body's move

Another crucial part of children's social and personal growth is letting them meet and play with other children. All the talking, laughing, and moving around that takes place when children are playing, even if they don't know each other, is a very natural and vital part of childhood.



MOVE,
PLAY
AND GO

Letting kids be kids!

Outdoor play does involve risk, however some 'risks' are simply from having fun:

- making mess
- being noisy
- getting dirty or wet
- small cuts and bruises that are quick to repair
- dealing with uneven surfaces and new play areas
- initial fears of trying something new

- learning to play with other children

It is common as a parent or carer to worry about your child playing outside. Adult ideas of risks in outdoor play however, often do not match the reality of the risk.

Children need to be given the chance to 'have a go', try new things, and explore a range of outdoor areas. This at times, may involve trips, falls, and some tears. However, it is these experiences that make sure children continue to learn and have the confidence to 'try again'.

Weighing up the risk

Setting too many limits and not letting your child play for long periods of time outside could lead to:

- too much inactive play time, such as playing computer games or watching television
- childhood overweight or obesity
- poor social skills
- poor physical skills, such as throwing, running and balance
- reduced self-confidence

The risk of no outdoor play may also slow other forms of growth, such as concentration, creativeness, and the ability to deal with new situations.

Older children in particular still need to be encouraged to be creative and spend time outside, rather than playing on the computer or watching TV. Regardless of whether it is raining, muddy, or too hot, children should build up a minimum of 60 minutes and up to several hours of physical activity each day.

Reframing risk

Children need to be able to make their own choices and learn that taking some risks can be a fun part of play.

As a parent or carer, try not to limit your child's outdoor play time that may involve some risk. Watching and becoming involved in your child's play creates a perfect chance to:

- learn how they make up games and activities
- learn about what they enjoy doing
- give feedback and support
- make sure they 'have a go' and feel successful
- enjoy nature together

Providing a sensible amount of supervision allows your child to play in a range of ways and try different things, with you in sight. Being a play mate to your child can be comforting, especially for younger children. It also helps to build family enjoyment of physical activity.

If your child does get upset when playing, support your child to try something different or have another go.

Additionally, seeing more people outside being active in the community, such as people riding bikes or playing in the park can make local places feel a lot safer. An active neighbourhood also increases the chance of getting to know other families in your area.

Laying the foundations for outdoor play

Outdoor play paves the way for children to form lifelong social, language, emotional, intellectual, and physical skills.

Here are some examples of how to introduce play that may test your child's mind and body. Supervision may be needed for some of the play spaces and ideas.

Imaginative play items

- boxes, crates, baskets (different sizes, shapes, textures)
- balls of different sizes
- ropes, ribbons, scarves, towels, streamers
- planks of wood or beams
- foam noodles
- buckets and spades
- household items, such as brooms, paint brushes, pots and pans
- grass, leaves, logs, pine cones
- outdoor furniture, old clothes, old linen
- ladders
- shells and seaweed
- racquets and bats
- hay bales
- balloons
- tents
- cargo nets, rope bridges
- building materials, such as wooden blocks
- paint, shaving cream
- feathers, cotton wool balls

- flying foxes, swings, tarzan ropes
- fences
- toys with wheels
- roller blades, skate boards, trampolines
- hobby horse
- mats, cushions, bean bags
- tyres and hoops
- objects to jump over or weave around such as, chairs, pot plants, containers (obstacle course)
- bug catcher

Challenging play spaces

- changing terrain
- swings
- slopes
- heights
- water (beaches, pools, lakes)
- farms
- uneven surfaces
- mud, clay
- rock pools
- sand
- trees
- hills
- rain
- ramps
- tunnels
- bushy and rocky areas
- slides
- parks
- steps
- national parks, camp sites
- puddles

Challenging movements

- pulling
- pushing
- dragging
- climbing
- sliding
- jumping
- leaping
- kicking
- swimming
- building
- skipping
- bounding
- throwing
- running
- stop, start movements
- riding
- splashing
- stamping

- marching
- twisting
- dancing
- bending
- squashing
- crouching
- crawling
- touching
- tumbling
- rolling
- digging
- rocking
- weaving

Try to always provide your child with games and activities that, little by little, get harder and more challenging, such as leaping over different sized objects or learning to hop on the opposite leg.

Providing new play experiences as well as collecting a range of play items makes sure your child continues to learn, build self-confidence, independence, and enjoys being active.

Important tips when rethinking the value of outdoor play

- provide chances for outdoor play as often as possible
- coping with challenges is a natural part of outdoor play
- let your child try new things even if it does mean getting dirty or wet
- exploring, problem solving and testing limits is how your child learns
- allow your child to move freely at their own pace
- setting too many limits on outdoor play could lead to other health risks
- provide positive support and supervision

Prepared for Kids – 'Go for your life' by 'Filling the Gaps' – Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Centre of Physical Activity Across the Lifespan, and Australian Catholic University.

© Department of Human Services 2008

Authorised by the Victorian Government, 50 Lonsdale St, Melbourne. Printed on sustainable paper by Geon, 181 Forster Road, Mount Waverly 3149.