



*Alliance nationale pour les enfants*

*National Children's Alliance*

## **Recreation in Middle Childhood An Overview**

**A literature review prepared for the Middle Childhood  
Initiative of the National Children's Alliance**

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Michelle has a diverse and extensive background in the area of health promotion with a particular focus on children, youth and families. Michelle's own research has examined the family, coach and peer relationships of children involved in competitive and recreational sport.

Her professional work has involved academic instruction, research and evaluation, project management, strategic and operational planning, government relations, media relations, partnership development, and is currently focused on knowledge management and communications.

She has served as a consultant to a variety of government, corporate and non-government clients, as well as athletes, coaches, teams, and academic committees.

Her experiences have cultivated a desire to ensure young people have positive developmental experiences which encourage inclusivity, diversity, healthy views of body and self, and foster strong interpersonal skills and social awareness.

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## Healthy Child Development: The Role of Recreation

*Children need people in order to become human.... It is primarily through observing, playing, and working with others older and younger than himself that a child discovers both what he can do and who he can become – that he develops both his ability and his identity. Development, it turns out, occurs through this process of progressively more complex exchange between a child and somebody else – especially somebody who's crazy about that child.*

*– Urie Bronfenbrenner, Developmental Psychologist*

This brief overview document can only begin to touch upon the various complexities involved in the provision of opportunity for children aged 6-12 years old (middle childhood) to “play” as a fundamental part of their healthy growth and development. It provides a high level examination of play opportunities and experiences through recreation, which will serve as an overview to assist with planning and strategy development for the National Children’s Alliance.

### **Socioecological Models of Child Development**

Theoretical models of child development have frequently focused on developmental “stages” and their corresponding behaviours in relation to development. For example Erickson<sup>1</sup> describes middle childhood as the “latency stage”, characterized by the child:

- Being busy building, creating, accomplishing
- Being able to receive systematic instruction
- At risk of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority if he/she despairs of his/her skills and status among peers
- Being socially decisive

While these are helpful considerations, current child development approaches tend to take a more broad-reaching socioecological approach, many based on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s work. Regarded as one of the world’s leading scholars in the field of developmental psychology, Bronfenbrenner’s primary contribution was his *Ecological Systems Theory*<sup>2, 3</sup>, in which he delineated four types of nested systems, with bi-directional influences within and between systems:

1. **Microsystem:** Immediate environments (family, school, peer group, neighborhood, and childcare environments)
2. **Mesosystem:** A system comprised of connections between immediate environments (i.e., a child’s home and school)
3. **Exosystem:** External environmental settings which only indirectly affect development (such as parent’s workplace)
4. **Macrosystem:** The larger cultural context (Eastern vs. Western culture, national economy, subculture).

The person’s own biology is considered part of the microsystem; thus the theory has recently sometimes been called Bio-Ecological Systems Theory. Each system contains roles, norms and rules that can powerfully shape development.

It has been said that before Bronfenbrenner, child psychologists studied the child, sociologists examined the family, anthropologists the society, economists the economic framework of the times and political scientists the structure.

As a result of Bronfenbrenner's groundbreaking work in "human ecology," these environments - from the family to economic and political structures - are viewed as part of the life course from childhood to adulthood. It is through this lens that the following sections examining recreation in middle childhood are considered.

### **Defining Recreation**

While recreation is often referred to in relation to sport and physical activity-based pursuits, for the purposes of this document recreation will reflect a broader viewpoint to include various activities that allow a child to "play".

Specifically it will refer to any non-school activity that has elements of choice, leads to satisfaction, and encourages progressive learning and enjoyment. Activities can include - but are not limited to - sport, physical activity, arts, drama, dance, outdoor leisure, and leadership.

### **Delivering Recreation**

While it is important to recognize the various forms of recreation, it is equally important to understand the ways and means in which it is delivered. Delivery can occur through municipal recreation departments, community clubs such as the YMCAs or Boys and Girls Clubs, rotary clubs, arts and drama clubs, faith communities, community sport leagues, private facilities and programs, camps, post-secondary institutions, etc. It is important to note that a good deal of this delivery is conducted through a voluntary system, one which is frequently over-taxed and without adequate training and support.

It is equally important to recognize the need for places, spaces and a supportive environment that promote unstructured recreational play opportunities such as parks and playgrounds, trails/paths, family outings/activities, peer gatherings, etc. As Karen Pittman, vice president and director of International Youth Foundation in the United States, asserts, "People don't grow up in programs, they grow up in communities."<sup>4</sup>

In both cases, societal and infrastructural issues and challenges must be considered and will be further discussed in the section addressing barriers.

### **The Role of Recreation in Healthy Development for Middle Childhood**

The value of recreation for children is recognized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, to ensure the well-being and healthy development of children. The CRC states that play and leisure are essential to healthy child development and encourages all governments to support recreation programs for children.

Those involved in the delivery of recreation have integrated healthy child development principles into their work. Examples include the YMCA's use of the "40 Developmental Assets" as defined by the Search Institute<sup>5</sup>.

The Developmental Asset framework is categorized into two groups of 20 assets. External assets are the positive experiences young people receive from the world around them. These 20 assets are about supporting and empowering young people, about setting boundaries and expectations, and about positive and constructive use of young people's time. External assets identify important roles that families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, and youth organizations can play in promoting healthy development.

The twenty internal assets identify those characteristics and behaviors that reflect positive internal growth and development of young people. These assets are about positive values and identities, social competencies, and commitment to learning. The internal Developmental Assets

will help these young people make thoughtful and positive choices and, in turn, be better prepared for situations in life that challenge their inner strength and confidence.

The 1996 *Quality Assurance in Children's Recreation Final Report*<sup>6</sup>, commissioned by Parks and Recreation Ontario, examined research on the developmental needs of children and determinants of healthy development, summarizing the following findings:

#### Determinants of Healthy Child Development<sup>7</sup>

- Adult Relationships
- Peer Relationships
- Physical Activity
- Competence and Achievement
- Meaningful Participation
- Opportunity for Self Definition

#### Developmentally Appropriate Practices in School Aged Childcare<sup>8</sup>

- Provision of resourceful caring staff who understand their role in children's lives
- Recognize increasing importance of peers
- Use of mixed age and same age groupings
- Self-selection of activities and experiences – flexible schedules
- Positive guidance and discipline techniques
- Environments arranged to accommodate individuals, small groups and large groups

These findings support the assertions of Bronfenbrenner previously stated, and were used to develop the *High Five Quality Assurance Program for Recreation*<sup>9</sup> which is focused on the 6-12 year old child and is based in the following principles of healthy child development:

#### **Participation**

Children need to make choices, have a voice and do things by and for themselves. The literature confirms that quality programs possess this orientation.

#### **Play**

Stresses fun, creativity and cooperation. Play allows children to shape their environment, use their imaginations and enjoy the activities they are involved in.

#### **Mastery**

Providing children with activities and tasks that make them feel they are special, important and succeeding.

#### **Friends**

Introduce children to the bigger world beyond their family, share in humour, test loyalty, form their first audience and offer support and criticism.

#### **A Caring Adult**

Caring, positive and supportive relationships with adults help children six to twelve years develop positive social skills, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Further research has been explored taking an emphasis on *relationship-based programming*<sup>10</sup>. Traditionally recreation takes an activity-based approach where the activity is central to the program's design. This can place to great an emphasis on facilities and activities, when it is the relationships that recreation professionals, teachers, instructors, coaches and other professional and volunteer have with children that tends to yield more powerful results.

The relationship-based approach to programming, also in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's perspectives, places emphasis on the ability to build and solidify and healthy relationship between

leaders and participants, using the program or activity as a medium. It is multi-faceted and flexible, fosters connections, and is consistent, empathetic and patient. This approach has been shown to be effective in reaching those who are uninvolved and disillusioned with services in their communities. It does however require more dedication and time on the part of staff, and a commitment by policymakers to move away from short term programs that define success by the number of children served.

Involvement in play opportunities through recreation has also indicated positive benefits for learning outcomes. Findings from the *Learning Through the Arts*<sup>11</sup> report suggest that involvement in the arts contributed to engagement in learning. Students, teachers, parents, artists, and administrators talked about how the arts motivated children, referring to the emotional, physical, cognitive, and social benefits of learning in and through the arts. Activities outside of school had an impact on student achievement in math and language and 90% of parents reported that the arts motivated their children to learn.

Similar results have been reported for physical activity and sport involvement. There is growing scientific evidence that physical activity not only keeps the body healthy, but also affects the mind. According to various studies, physical activity affects brain structures and brain chemicals and thus influences higher cognitive processes like attention, learning and memory. Specifically, studies have shown that physical activity has a positive effect on executive processes, i.e. on processes concerning attention, planning, decision making, coping with stress, correcting mistakes – all processes that are highly relevant for daily life, and are also required at school<sup>12</sup>.

In an effort to address literacy and health education needs, recent work has suggested linking health curriculum expectations to language arts curriculum expectations by using high-quality literature as a means of utilizing limited time resources to teach health in a meaningful way. Addressing health expectations through literature also provided a means to help students develop resiliency skills. This approach can also be considered in out-of-school recreation activities.<sup>13</sup>

Finally the role of recreation on the development of children in marginalized communities cannot be ignored. As stated by the Aboriginal Sport Circle<sup>14</sup>, "There is a direct connection between sport and recreation and Aboriginal peoples. It is a journey to whole health, which fills the mind, body, emotions and spirit. Aboriginal peoples feel that sport and recreation should not be separated from Aboriginal culture and the physical environment."

In an assessment of recreational needs of children with chronic illness it was found that summer camps provide the opportunity for children to develop social and physical skills in varied environments, together with independence and self-reliance<sup>15</sup>. Natural environments serve as settings that enable all people to experience aesthetic, spiritual, psychological, social, physical, and educational outcomes that add quality to their lives. This is also true for persons who have disabilities. Writers and researchers have suggested that personal growth in self-esteem, trust, skill development, and health of participants who have disabilities result from their engagements in outdoor recreation experiences<sup>16</sup>. Positive findings for children and youth with disabilities have also been stated for arts-based activities<sup>17</sup>.

Despite an internationally recognized directive, ample supportive research, and the existence of quality programs, the role of recreation in middle childhood is frequently marginalized. While play-based learning opportunities are widely recognized in the work of early child development, education, and care, as children enter middle childhood alarming trends emerge regarding the value of learning through play and recreation.

The Canadian Council on Social Development examines recreation as part of its *Progress on Canada's Children Report*<sup>18</sup> which over time demonstrates a decreasing participation in sport and

arts programs, particularly among low income families. Regardless of the type of activity, children in the lowest-income families participate less than do children in the highest-income families. Challenges also abound for aboriginal communities and children with disabilities.

Considering that within schools there is also inconsistent delivery of physical education, arts, and music education, it seems evident that middle childhood marks a decline in exposure and opportunity for participation in play as key element of child development.

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## **Benefits of Positive Participation in Recreation**

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association has provided an outline of the value of recreation to individuals and communities based on a variety of literature<sup>19</sup>. Many of these benefits are particularly relevant to children and youth living in low-income families. These benefits have been further validated by other research and are captured below.

### **Developmental Benefits Associated with Positive Recreation Experiences**

Individual developmental benefits can include:

- healthy physical and psychological development
- positive stress management
- skill and/or talent development
- improved learning readiness and learning outcomes – fosters multiple intelligences
- improved self-esteem and positive self-image
- positive lifestyle choices and sometimes prevention of self-destructive behaviour
- development of leadership skills that benefit the community
- reduced alienation, loneliness and antisocial behaviour
- improved quality of life for those with disabilities and disadvantaged individuals

### **Societal Benefits Associated with Positive Recreation Delivery**

Community benefits can include:

- promote ethnic and cultural harmony
- build community involvement and pride
- promotion of artistic and cultural values
- increased community partnerships that ensure provision of secure after-school activities for children

Economic benefits can include:

- contribution to a healthy, productive workforce
- reduction in vandalism and criminal activity
- business relocation and expansion in communities
- increased property values by making green space and recreation opportunities more accessible
- catalyst for tourism
- reduced health care costs
- reduced costs in association with incarceration, social service and welfare<sup>20, 21</sup>

Environmental benefits include:

- contribution to the environmental health of communities – e.g. reduced air pollution
- encouragement of environmental stewardship – respect for the environment and its future protection

When recreation is delivered in a manner that is accessible and equitable, with social inclusion and quality assurance measures in place, these are the benefits that can be derived by children, families and communities.

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## Barriers to Positive Participation in Recreation

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association also identifies a number of barriers<sup>22</sup> in relation to both participation in, and delivery of recreation, which have also been examined in other research and are detailed below.

### Barriers for Participants

Over time, CPRA and others have looked at a variety of barriers to participation<sup>23</sup> that are regularly updated. These include:

1. Cost of programs – user fees have increased over time. Additional equipment and supply costs are often not included in program costs.
2. Limited programming:
  - Inflexible program schedules do not consider the other responsibilities that parents have which may prevent them from having time to put a child into an activity.
  - Unavailability of programs because classes are full.
  - Children with learning and behavioural disabilities require different programs and a higher fee to participate. Access to program offerings is also limited.
3. Transportation:
  - Recreation activities are located to far away and are difficult to access as a result.
  - Cost of public transportation and length of time required to use it deny access to activities.
4. Other barriers:
  - Discomfort applying for a subsidy.
  - Poor treatment by recreation staff; for example, when a parent is embarrassed by a staff member who assumes she cannot afford certain activities.
  - Need for a computer and a credit card to register for programs.
  - Parental health issues prevent them from taking children to recreation programs.
  - Racism experienced within recreation participation.
  - Fewer opportunities to fundraise for recreation activities in low-income neighborhoods.
  - Family situations and issues may not allow youth access to full participation throughout an entire recreation program.
  - New policies restrict recreation in the natural environment
  - Information about recreational opportunities may not reach desired audience (lack of Web access, programs not advertised in communities where they live or in media that reach them)
  - Gender barriers—there is a bias in favour of boys, especially in sports
  - Harassment or abuse in the recreation environment

Although the 2005 Physical Activity Monitor<sup>24</sup> indicates an increase in the number of municipalities that support programming for low income families, and some program areas have been developed in relation to these barriers, many of the barriers are still pervasive.

## Barriers for those who Deliver Recreation

Based on consultations with recreation providers across the country<sup>25 26</sup> the following barriers have been identified:

- Facilities and infrastructure - Data contained in facility inventory and physical assessment studies by several provinces suggest that community recreation infrastructure is deteriorating and in need of immediate attention. The current estimate of this "infrastructure deficit" for Canada as a whole is \$14B. This does not take into account other needs such as equipment, arts supplies, musical instruments, etc.
- Recreational practitioners lack community and political support and understanding. Acquiring the resources in order to promote access to recreation relies on lobbying at various government levels.
- Recreational practitioners lack human resource support - they typically run an operation by themselves, from performing general maintenance to programming for the community.
- Recreation practitioners, particularly in rural and northern communities, are often isolated and under a lot of stress.
- There is a high turnover rate of recreation practitioners.
- The voluntary based delivery of much of recreation also yields turnover as well as providing challenges for effective training and quality assurance.
- Recreational staff are often dealing with a lack of flexibility in regulations and procedures found within recreational departments and social service agencies.
- Recreation is considered a luxury and not a necessity. Many communities feel that local budgets are better spent on roads and safety rather than recreation.
- Challenges in keeping programming current and engaging - activities, formats and logistics related to programs offered often rest on outdated notions, while society and its needs continue to evolve.
- Ability to offer accessible programming is difficult – there is a lack of resources to add more free programs, while at the same time free programs are usually always full.
- Lack of partnerships and access to other community spaces – e.g. schools not as open for community-based recreation as they once were.

To fully engage children in play opportunities through recreation, strategies to address these barriers must be implemented. There is a need to better assess and address the infrastructural, human resource and outreach challenges faced by recreation providers.

One opportunity to increase opportunity is through partnership-based approaches. CPRA's research with recreation providers in various communities<sup>24</sup> found that partner groups included health authorities, housing authorities, schools, community family centres, police, Neighborhood Watch Associations, and Aboriginal groups. Referral services by certain partners helped link low income families with city staff (e.g. health authorities, housing authorities).

Partnership development was highly valued, municipalities initiated these partnerships in order to develop recreation programs that can be accessed by all.

Some additional partnership examples are referenced in the following section.

### **Cross-Sectoral Partnerships and Recreation Delivery**

One key consideration to enhance the capacity to support play opportunities through recreation is to forge closer partnerships between the school and community. Many models are emerging which seek to re-establish the linkages between learning and play in these settings. Karen Pittman states, "There is growing evidence that educators, policy makers, planners, philanthropists and the public understand the need to push beyond the traditional boundaries of the school day, the school building and the school agenda"<sup>27</sup>.

She indicates that the pressure for rapid improvements in academic performance may challenge many educators' abilities to expand the indicators of school success beyond core academics. Yet she also indicates that this pressure to educate all at high levels has redoubled many educators' efforts to embrace innovative strategies and find new partners. Simultaneously, it has reinforced communities' efforts to articulate their role as partners in defining goals, monitoring resources and providing learning opportunities. She describes some of the ways in which this transpires:

- **Schools are reorganizing within** — creating small learning communities, revamping curricula, rethinking instruction, rebuilding relationships with students and parents through efforts to personalize instruction and redefining the roles of non-classroom personnel.
- **Schools are staying open** — moving above and beyond traditional commitments to provide extracurricular activities and summer school to house, if not provide, formal after-school programs for elementary and middle school students.
- **Schools are reaching out** — strengthening partnerships with funders, businesses, colleges and universities, artists, health and social service agencies, and community-based organizations to bring additional expertise and services into the school building; offer students off-campus opportunities for formal learning, work and service; and, in some cases, assume primary responsibility for academic education.
- **Nonprofits are stepping up** — youth-serving organizations, civic and human services Non-profits, faith-based organizations, recreation departments, libraries, museums and businesses are increasing their capacity to offer formal and informal learning opportunities that supplement and complement school (including reaching young people who have left the formal K–12 system) and expressing a commitment to be held accountable for certain academic and non-academic outcomes.

Collective energy of this nature across schools and communities can provide one means to support recreation in middle childhood by providing a more seamless system of access and opportunity. The role of school-aged child care should not be ignored as a key component of this partnership matrix.

In addition, there is a call for private sector engagement along with government resources and NGO support to bolster the investment in, and effective delivery of, recreation. Cross-sectoral and multi-level government engagement is also a key element of partnership as the government ministries in sport, recreation, health, culture, environment, education, tourism, and municipal affairs all have a role to play in the issue.

Successful recreation initiatives have typically identified such cross-sectoral engagement in their approach<sup>28</sup>.

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## Research, Policy, Public Awareness and Program Implications

### Research Needs

In the spring of 2005 the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association underwent a process that involved the development of a synthesized list of key priority areas for recreation research<sup>29</sup>. The following priority areas were identified:

1. Leisure Behaviour and Meaning
2. Social Challenges and Interventions
3. Benefits and Outcomes Measurement
4. Community Capacity Building
5. Management and Delivery Systems
6. Wellness and Active Living
7. Diverse and Changing Populations
8. Community Design and Infrastructure
9. Environment and Open Space
10. Leadership Development
11. Children and Youth

The specific considerations for children and youth relevant to this discussion were:

- Children and youth living in poverty
- Developing resilience
- Theoretical foundations of programming
- Making play fun – successful interventions
- Community youth development
- Media and technological influences
- Inclusion of youth with disabilities
- “Extreme” recreation
- Reaching inactive children and youth

These will be core considerations on the development of the CPRA National Research Agenda.

### Policy Development and Implementation

One of the first items implemented in the new federal Conservative government agenda has been the tax incentive in relation to recreational programs. A children’s fitness tax credit for up to \$500 in eligible fees for physical fitness programs for each child under age 16 was announced in the 2006 budget<sup>30</sup>. There is some criticism of this incentive in that it is only in relation to the physical activity and sport-oriented forms of recreation, and many in the arts community feel this is insufficient.

As this will be implemented in the 2007 tax year it is difficult at this time to determine the role this will play in fostering greater participation in recreation. A similar strategy has already been implemented in Nova Scotia, but the evaluation of the strategy is not clearly defined. It will be important to ensure that the federal incentive involves effective monitoring and evaluation in order to truly understand its success or need for improvement.

While this is one strategy to encourage such participation, those who struggle with the up front costs of program fees, equipment/supply costs, transportation issues, and insufficient program offerings are unlikely to be noticeably impacted by this policy.

Other promising policy areas include such initiatives as the Community Use of Schools work initiated by the Government of Ontario<sup>31</sup>. Community Use of Schools is a voluntary program that

will provide District School Boards with up to \$20 million to cover the incremental costs of community use of school facilities. In order to access the funds, District School Boards must sign Community Recreation and Use Agreements with the Ministry of Health Promotion then roll back published space, custodial and administration charges. The intent of the program is to encourage increased use of schools by not-for-profit groups at reduced rates. These changes to accessibility and costs will ultimately benefit the individual participants.

As noted in Pittman's discussions on effective school-community partnerships, this approach can bring a more streamlined approach to the mutually beneficial aspects of formal learning and play opportunities in out-of-school time. Again, it will be important to track the implementation of this work to learn how it can be enhanced and adopted in other jurisdictions.

Perhaps the most challenging and important area of policy work lies at the municipal level, where much of the on-the-ground activity occurs. Municipalities must have provincial and federal level support, and must also make recreation a priority item in relation to the growth and strength of communities. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities conducts annual reports on the quality of life in Canadian municipalities and could play a role in establishing recreation as a priority item for consideration.

### **Public Awareness and Engagement**

There is a need to incorporate effective public awareness and engagement regarding the inherent value of play opportunities through recreation for children. There is a good deal of focus on academic achievement in our society. This must be balanced with a whole child development approach, which has not only been demonstrated to support academic achievement, but also provides other learning opportunities that develop skills in children to be more adaptable and resilient, to develop multiple intelligences and the ability to take multiple perspectives, and to work with peers.

It is important that the recognition of value for play through recreation not simply be focused on formal programming opportunities, but also on the unstructured opportunities children should engage in with their families and peers. In addition, with the growing focus on childhood obesity, many campaigns, announcements and initiatives in relation to recreation have been focused only on physical activity messages.

The recreation message should support a full spectrum of play opportunities in the arts, physical activity/sport, outdoor pursuits and leadership development. Awareness initiatives must be supported by the provision of suggested strategies for community members to engage in action that can have an impact on increasing play opportunities through recreation for children in those communities.

### **Program Implementation**

The implications for program implementation are in relation to the delivery of accessible recreation opportunities of quality. Initiatives such as *KidsSport* and CPRA's *Everybody gets to play* (focused on inclusion and outreach to low income and marginalized groups) and *Making All Recreation Safe* (focused on eliminating harassment and abuse in recreation settings, and Parks and Recreation Ontario's *HIGH FIVE* (focused on quality assurance based in healthy child development principles) are good examples in this regard.

Multi-sectoral investment in existing programs is needed. Corporate sector support should not only focus on financial investment but on the community volunteer infrastructure corporations can provide. Professional development and support to paid and volunteer practitioners is important to maintain program quality and community engagement. Finally, programs should

involve evaluation strategies to grow understanding and evidence through the documentation and distribution of program outcomes and learnings.

In summary, play experiences through recreation are a fundamental developmental need for children, essential for emotional, social and physical well being. These experiences provide enhanced quality of life by developing new skills, and increasing physical and mental health, as well as a context for peer interactions, along with the opportunity for participation in activities promoting pro-social values and the development of life skills.

As such, the delivery of play opportunities through recreation needs to be widely valued and considered an **essential service** that is available to all children, and as such supported through policies, public engagement, and programs and services that are well developed, implemented and evaluated.

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